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ABSTRACT

FEARLESS LEADERS: A CASE STUDY OF DEMOCRATIC DISTRICT LEADERSHIP IN AN ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY

by

Cynthia D. Sanders

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) passed in 2002 was the "most extraordinary expansion of federal power over public schools in American history" (Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). NCLB had two major impacts on educational policy. First, it legitimized and strengthened the federal government's role in both influencing and regulating state and local compliance with educational policy mandates. Second, it codified student performance on content-specific standardized tests as the most reliable and valid measure of how well those who lead and teach in public schools are preparing students for the workforce (Bracey, 2009; Pinar, 2012; Schneider, 2017; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). Without much public debate, and no longer questioned, performance metrics reduce the purpose of schooling to raising test scores and preparing students for the workforce (Eisner, 2001; Pinar, 2012; McDermott, 2011; Schneider, 2017). NCLB also set in motion market-based reforms expanding school choice options which threaten the very sustainability of public education (Bracey, 2009; Manna, 2007; Pinar 2012; Schneider, 2017). Anderson and Cohen (2018) have suggested that we are a pivotal moment where it is possible to move into a post-reform era which should be led by educators to reclaim their professional agency and the legitimacy of public schooling by decentering performance accountability as the primary driver of educational policy. This interpretivist, case study was comprised of five district superintendents from central Ohio who participate in a collaborative group called the Hart County Design Team (HCDT). The study found that participating in the HCDT collaborative facilitated the ability of the superintendents to engage in leadership practices to counter, not just resist, the impacts of performance accountability on their professional agency, the districts they lead, and the

communities they serve. The HCDT functioned as an alliance that created a space where the group could discuss shared values and beliefs about instructional goals and aims for schooling not tied to performance metrics. This created a support network for their aspirations to pursue democratic leadership practices for changing the systems and cultures in their districts that allowed them to shift from prioritizing compliance with performance accountability mandates to prioritizing being responsible for and to the communities they serve.

FEARLESS LEADERS: A CASE STUDY OF DEMOCRATIC DISTRICT LEADERSHIP IN AN ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my students.
Always endeavor to transform the world.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Street Level Bureaucrats

I began my career in education in the early 2000s. My work as a teacher, instructional coach, and district administrator has always been shadowed by educational policies crafted by political actors who want to reform America's supposedly failing public schools (Bracey, 2009; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Manna, 2007; Henig, 2013; McDermott, 2011). The reform policies shaping my experiences as an educator are rooted in the rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk* (*ANAR*), the report published in 1983 by then President Ronald Regan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. In no uncertain terms, *ANAR* cast public schools as the bureaucratic villain in a story of the country's impending fall from superiority as an economic and political superpower. Framing the purpose of school in purely economic terms for both students and society, *ANAR* planted the seeds of the persistent and false narrative that public schools are failing to prepare young people for the nation's workforce and, therefore, need to be "reformed" and held "accountable" to society for their ineptitude (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 2009; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Henig, 2013; McDermott, 2011; Tienken & Mullen, 2016). Belief in this narrative about a "dire crisis in public education" (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 4) culminated in the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002.

Sunderman and Orfield (2006) called the NCLB Act the "most extraordinary expansion of federal power over public schools in American history" (p. 526). NCLB had two major impacts on educational policy aimed at school reform. First, it legitimized and strengthened the federal government's role in both influencing and regulating state and local compliance with educational policy mandates. Second, it codified student performance on content-specific standardized tests as the most reliable and valid measure of how well those who lead and teach in public schools are preparing students for the workforce. Subsequently, mandated student proficiency testing, public reporting of student scores to gauge school effectiveness, and the threat of closure should public schools fail to meet proficiency targets dominated America's school improvement initiatives (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Henig, 2013; Schneider, 2017; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). Performance accountability requirements under NCLB made increasing quantifiable *outputs*—primarily student's test scores—the main goal of school improvement and reform policy while *inputs*—disparities in resources and funding—were

downplayed or assumed to be inconsequential (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Henig, 2013; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). This shift in focus from inputs to outputs and the relentless pursuit of performance accountability metrics under NCLB had a profound influence on how I viewed the purpose of my role as a teacher and district leader as well as my identity as a public sector professional.

A few years after NCLB was passed, I was a middle school English teacher at a midsized rural-turning-suburban school district in Southwest Ohio. One of the key goals of NCLB was that 100% of the nation's public-school students (students in private schools were exempt from the law) would test "proficient" by the year 2014 in Reading and Math as measured by state-level testing to be administered annually in grades 3–8 and once in high school (United States Department of Education [USDE], 2002). As a beginning teacher, I participated with the rest of the 7th grade team in reviewing our district's student performance data from the Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) in Reading and Writing. The test results were disaggregated by each question or writing task's alignment with the learning standards set by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). We painstakingly mapped student scores to the standards to our course of study assuming this was a reliable measure of how well our curriculum succeeded in preparing students to meet NCLB yearly proficiency targets. In addition, our district administration and our building principal made it clear they expected us to use the data to inform our instruction in concrete ways. Based on the data mapping, the team decided that a creative writing unit where students crafted an original short story needed to be significantly shortened to allow more time for nonfiction-based argumentative writing instruction. The OAT data rationalized this curriculum choice, since our students scored lower on the nonfiction and argumentative writing question types, but in the back of my mind, I was painfully aware that some of the best writing and student engagement for the year in my classroom was produced during the creative story unit.

Later, I attended training to be the District Value Added Specialist (DVAS) for our building. This primarily happened because my background as a market researcher (prior to my career in education I earned my MBA and worked in banking) meant I understood the statistics of the student growth and value-added reports coming from ODE that were used to determine if the teachers and our school were positively impacting student learning from year to year. Value Added (VA) was an additional requirement of NCLB, which mandated that schools compare

testing data for students from year to year to measure if teachers were having a positive net effect on each student's learning as based on a statistic called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (USDE, 2002). The VA and AYP measures were also used to gauge if the district was closing the gap between subgroups of students based on data showing low-income, minority students scored lower than their white, middle-class peers. The disparity in scores between student subgroups, mostly from minority and poor student populations and that of well-resourced white students, was labeled the "achievement gap," and schools were charged with closing it (USDE, 2002). As in many districts, VA was taken very seriously in the district where I was teaching. It was required by ODE that part of our yearly teaching evaluation included an in-depth discussion with our administrator of our yearly ratings and results. Student performance and VA measures impacted our evaluation ratings and could factor into being placed on an improvement plan as a teacher. While the importance of VA in teacher evaluation did vary by state and district, it was a key part of the push to hold schools and teachers accountable for student test results (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Manna, 2007; McDermott, 2011; Tienken & Mullen, 2016).

Although NCLB did not mandate national standards or curriculum, the law did have an impact on local district's choices about what to teach and resource. It was clear to me that my employment was dependent on my giving serious time and effort in my classroom instruction to hitting the scores the district needed to avoid state sanctions if AYP targets were not met. This influenced my decisions about what to give time to in my classroom. The short story unit was curtailed to give more time to practicing nonfiction skills. As Horsford et al. (2019) observed, educational professionals coming of age after NCLB was passed in 2002 are being "socialized into a very different workplace with different conceptions of teaching and leading. While teachers increasingly teach to the test, leaders are expected to lead to the test" (pp.151–152). I understood why my administrators focused on students' test scores because in the culture created by NCLB it was hard for us not to see the purpose of instruction, the purpose of school even, as being held accountable for OAT student test scores to the ODE. As a teacher, it was difficult to resist the pull to make curriculum decisions that seemed likely to increase student scores on the OAT.

The narrowing of curricula in this way under NCLB often worked to the detriment of the very students many politicians had hoped the law would benefit as curriculum became more scripted and districts turned to emphasizing and purchasing materials for rote skill drill of tested

subjects (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Pinar, 2012). This trend toward pre-packaged, test-aligned curriculum also reduced professionals in classrooms and school leadership to mere enactors, not creators, of curriculum (Poetter, 2019). As those of us in schools were conditioned to accept being accountable to the state/federal government for student test scores, we lost our agency to design instruction that was democratic and culturally relevant. Teachers were being de-skilled and de-professionalized as our work became driven by "data" that reinforced the idea that our teaching was only valuable if it positively improved a student's test score (McDermott, 2011; Poetter, 2019).

In the early 2010s, I left teaching and took a position as a School Improvement Coach in a large urban district in Ohio. My work centered on helping English Language Arts (ELA) teachers across the district with instructional practice. By that time, NCLB had been in place for nearly a decade. A billion-dollar industry had grown up to support performance accountability. For example, the British company Pearson was making about $4 billion a year from its North American Education division primarily selling test-aligned pre-packaged curricular products to American public schools desperate to raise scores and avoid sanctions for missing AYP targets under NCLB (Simon, 2015). My new job as an Instructional Coach was an example of this juggernaut in action. Part of the approved funding under NCLB to schools serving low-income students was for teacher and administrator professional development. As part of Title I federal funding, districts could hire instructional coaches to provide embedded instructional support for teachers and principals (USDE, 2020). The goals for this support were to improve student performance data and close the supposed achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers (USDE, 2020).

Like I had done as a teacher and DVAS for my former district, I aided teachers and building principals in creating data rooms. Student scores on the district benchmark assessments were tracked, coded, and used to predict a student's likelihood of achieving a proficient score on the annual state assessment. Charts were posted in the data rooms, so everyone could see the progress towards increasing the number of students hitting proficiency. Just like my principal had done before with me, I pushed the importance of using this data to inform instructional practice, i.e., align the data by standards to classroom practice and make changes to increase instructional time on weak data points. In some schools, there were actual wall hangings colored red, yellow, and green in which we would place cards listing a student's name and benchmark

test score as a visual for teachers and administrators of where students ranked. Red students were unlikely to score proficient, yellow students were those "on the bubble" who could probably hit the proficiency target with remediation, and green students were on track to hit proficiency with little or no additional instruction. Instructional focus was placed mostly on the yellow students' needs. The more "on the bubble" students we could get to proficient the better the district's ratings on the ODE report card.

This scenario played out in other states and districts as public schools fought to close achievement gaps for all students and to receive the proficiency rankings they needed to avoid sanctions. Booher-Jennings (2005), who studied the impact of sorting students by likely success on state-mandated testing in Texas, referred to this as "educational triage" (p. 241). Educators know they cannot serve the needs of all students in a system beholden to proficiency targets, so they focus their efforts on students most likely to improve the district's and the teacher's ratings (Booher-Jennings, 2005). The curriculum was narrowed to give priority to math and reading, since they were the only subjects tested, and test-taking skills rather than authentic content knowledge preempted other foci for the learning process. The driving end-goal under NCLB was 100% proficiency in reading and math by 2014 (USDE, 2002). This pursuit separated the purpose of school from larger societal needs. If education is about performance on subject area skills, then there is no incentive to engage in broader democratic goals. Performance accountability drove American education to what Freire (1970/2018) called a "banking" model of education where students receive "deposits" of knowledge to be displayed on the standardized assessments that are often disconnected from their ability to synthesize and make meaning in broader ways (pp. 24–25).

Further complicating matters, performance accountability created a culture where it was rational and reasonable to classify schools based only on outputs that could be measured— test scores, graduation rates, attendance— while ignoring factors outside the schools' control that impact student learning and performance—poverty, the opioid epidemic, economic globalization (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Rothstein, 2004). Market-based school reformers see public schools as an inefficient monopoly that should be subjected to free market competition (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Henig, 2013; Schneider, 2017). Families and students become consumers of a product called school and simply choose a provider (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Eisner, 2001; Henig, 2013; Schneider, 2017). According to this consumer market-based model of thinking, if a school was

"failing," then families should have the option to leave the local public school and have the public funding allocated to educate their student follow them wherever they went (Bracey, 2009; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). In urban districts like the one where I was coaching, school choice negatively impacted how communities viewed their neighborhood public schools, disrupting funding, and causing flux in student enrollment, all of which further stressed the importance of focusing on test score gains for those of us working in classrooms.

In 2014, I took a central office position, English Language Arts Curriculum Manager, in the same urban district. For that year's opening address, our superintendent announced the district's intention to focus on "more than test scores" as an indicator of success for both students and the schools. Hanging in the air was the promise of fostering inquiry-based student learning experiences, the development of each child's sense of agency, and a stronger connection between the schools and the community in terms of curricula and goal setting. I was excited and hopeful our district leadership team would be able to move away from the practice of using data rooms as the main driver of instructional planning. I felt the superintendent's desire to focus more on the inputs for the schools, like technology access, curriculum resources, and nutrition programs, over an emphasis on the single output of student proficiency scores.

But the reality of being a large urban district evaluated based on student proficiency scores under Ohio's District Report Card (ODRC) system proved too powerful to overcome to any meaningful degree (ODE, 2019b). In the schools, instructional decisions based on raising student proficiency scores still ruled the day because the ratings the district received on the ODRC were powerful, codified measures of school quality in the eyes of the public, the Board of Education, and those working in the schools directly with students. My decision making was overwhelmingly driven by external political forces tied to accountability metrics for federal Title I funding under NCLB (USDE, 2019). While I held power over many facets of the district policy in terms of curriculum development, teacher professional development, and the planning of district-wide improvement initiatives, my ability to enact meaningful change was bounded by state and federal policy mandates. Just as when I had been a teacher, as a district leader it was difficult, if not impossible, to push back against the expectation that I was primarily accountable to the ODE for raising student test scores.

Cohen and Moffitt (2009) described this disconnect between policy and practice as one of control and compliance. I had control in some ways at the local level, but as a central office worker I was relegated to working as a "street level" bureaucrat "trying to influence those for whom [I] make policy while also trying to cope with those who make policy for [me]" (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009, p. 20). I was attempting to influence principals, teachers, and instructional coaches in terms of implementing curricula addressing broader goals than proficiency scores while also responding to pressure from my superintendent and the state to meet proficiency targets for the district. For school district leaders like me under NCLB, the ability to create and resource curricula relevant to community and student needs was possible, but not valued or rewarded by the law's reporting system, which was tied to performance accountability metrics (Bracey, 2009; McDermott, 2011; Schneider, 2017). In this way, performance accountability works to de-professionalize school leaders as our decision making is divorced from our training, skill, and knowledge of students, learning, and subject area knowledge. Authority to set the goals of schooling and measures of success are driven by external entities tied to the state and federal testing apparatus, not those of us doing the work on the ground in classrooms and schools (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Eisner, 2001).

I continued to work as a district leader over the next several years. In that time, the reauthorization of NCLB, called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), was passed in 2015 and curbed some of the power the federal government exerted over state-level educational policy making (Hess & Eden, 2017; Saultz et al., 2017). ESSA eliminated the 100% reading and math proficiency requirement from NCLB and gave states more leeway in establishing school evaluation systems and school improvement systems (USDE, 2019). States were also given authority to decide the nature of the standards used to set student performance targets and the types of assessments used to measure progress (USDE, 2019). Even so, ESSA still mandated performance accountability as a predominant measure of school quality, and local districts still do not have the option to completely opt out of state mandated testing and public reporting of the results (Hess & Eden, 2017; USDE, 2019).

As a district leader, I did not experience a major difference between NCLB and ESSA in terms of the accountability culture happening on the ground in the schools where I was working. For one thing, even though ESSA was passed in 2015, it was not fully implemented until the 2017–18 school year (USDE, 2020). For another, just as required under NCLB, ESSA still

mandated that the ODE use performance testing to generate the Ohio District Report Cards (ODRC). District grades were still assigned based on student performance data. The scores, in turn, were still used by districts to evaluate teacher and school leader effectiveness in preparing students for the workforce (ODE, 2019b). ESSA allowed for a non-academic indicator to be added to the state report card, but Ohio, like many other states, chose attendance statistics as this metric rather than a qualitative metric such as the addition of the arts in the curriculum or a school's offering of a vision clinic to the community (Jochim, 2017; ODE, 2020). As of my writing, ESSA remains in force and the reauthorization of the law has not yet been taken up by Congress. Quantifiable performance metrics remain a driving factor in the decisions local school district leaders make about curriculum development and implementation, principal and teacher evaluations, and what it means to serve student needs. The educational policy status quo in Ohio, like many other states, is still solidly focused on raising and maintaining performance test scores as the most important measure of school quality and effectiveness (Barone, 2017; ODE, 2019b; Schneider, 2017; Saultz et al., 2019).

Performance accountability turned me into a quasi-corporate manager stripped of power to make decisions about the purpose and goals of my work, forced me to treat students and families like clients, and created an environment where I was competing against other educators for favorable rankings and "customers" in the educational "marketplace" (Horsford et al., 2019). This changed how I saw myself and my work. I left a career in the private sector to pursue one in public education believing in what Anderson and Cohen (2018) described as "the purpose and professional ethos of public service" (p. 9) associated with the public sector. However, I came to realize my dedication and expertise had been supplanted by deference to actors outside my profession—politicians and rich educational philanthropists— who view the purpose of education in purely economic terms and have more power over educational policy decisions and leadership roles in schools than actual educators do (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019; Pinar, 2012; Ravitch, 2010; Russakoff, 2015).

Like many education professionals, I struggle with the way the audit culture of performance accountability has turned raising test scores into an end in and of itself for schooling. Equally troubling is the way the system is using this data to categorize public schools as failing in order to push an agenda of privatization through school choice reforms. Parker (2017) observed how free-market, school policies are being "sold to the public, just as products

are packaged and sold to consumers" (p. 44). As a former market researcher, I see this maneuvering in the political rhetoric and how the rationality argument of performance data conflates accountability with school quality and centers economic gain as the main purpose for education. But why should this version of the purpose for schools and how the work in them should be gauged be the only story that gets told? What if we centered a narrative for education that prioritizes a sense of mutual responsibility between schools and communities (Parker, 2017; Stitzlein, 2017)? What if our national discourse about education moved performance accountability off center stage in our policy decisions and made room for democratic, inclusive, and socially just goals for schooling? These questions are what motivated me to engage in this case study of a group of district leaders who are seeking ways to counter the impacts of performance accountability-based school reform on their professional agency, the schools they lead, and the communities they serve. I wanted to explore the possibilities for district leaders to reclaim a public sector professional ethos of being responsible for and answerable to their communities, families, and students, rather than mere compliance officers for federal and state accountability, audit-culture mandates.

Problem Statement

My experiences as a teacher, instructional coach, and district leader highlight the ways American educational policy is intricately linked with broader neoliberal beliefs in the superiority of market-based competition to foster innovation and efficiency as well as the idea that economic gain for both the country and individuals should always be prioritized (Weiner, 2005). Our current school reform policies reflect growing federal and state oversight of public schools through standardization of curriculum and increasing centralization of school governance away from local school boards and school leaders (Bracey, 2009; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Henig, 2013; Manna, 2007; Pinar, 2012; Tienken & Mullen, 2016). The federal government's power and influence over how schools are evaluated and held accountable for student learning began with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (EASA) in 1965 and was solidified with the passage of NCLB in 2002 (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Pinar, 2012; Tinken & Mullen, 2016). Educational policy makers have set a national school reform agenda that assumes the purpose of education is individual and societal economic gain where the primary purpose of schools is to prepare students for the workforce (Bracey, 2009;

Endacott et al., 2015; Labaree, 2005). This view necessitates the need for a system of measuring academic outcomes in an "objective" way so that students, teachers, schools, and districts can be held accountable for student learning related to college and career readiness (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Endacott et al. 2015; Henig, 2013; Manna, 2007). To enforce accountability for student performance aligned to college and career readiness standards, NCLB mandated annual standardized testing of students to measure student, teacher, school, and district performance and that the results of these annual assessments be publicly reported each year (USDE, 2002).

One of the enduring legacies of NCLB is how the law codified the use of market-oriented neoliberal language in our national discourse about the purpose of school and how we define school effectiveness (Horsford et al., 2019; Schneider, 2017). Under NCLB, students in underperforming districts had to be offered an "exit strategy" to leave their "failing" public school (Sunderman & Kim, 2007; USDE, 2002). Often referred to as school choice, this mandate allowed students in districts rated as failing by the performance accountability system to choose to leave the district to attend a charter school, another public school district, and, in some states, a private school (Sunderman & Kim, 2007; USDE, 2002). In addition, the public monies allocated for the education of these students were syphoned from the public school and followed the student to their school of choice (Sunderman & Kim, 2007; USDE, 2002). Sunderman and Kim (2007) explain the school choice exit strategies in NCLB were based on the belief in the market principle of competition to incentivize innovation and improvement in schools failing to meet the testing targets. Under this view, education is seen a private good used for individual gain, rather than as a public good which benefits the individual and society by preparing students to participate in the community and civic/political life (Henig, 2013; Labaree, 2005; Stitzlein, 2017). The school choice mandates under NCLB have continued, are proliferating, and are still in force under ESSA the latest reauthorization of the federal law (USDE, 2020).

Market-based school reform grounded in performance accountability metrics in public education is part of larger, global neoliberal movement called *New Public Management* (NPM) that seeks to privatize and profitize the public sector (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019; McDermott, 2011). Refined by Christopher Hood, a British public administration researcher in the early 1990s, NPM is a framework referring to the transfer of corporate managerial and market principles of the private sector to the public sector (Funck & Karlsson, 2020; Hood, 1991). The major guiding principles for the NPM framework include offering

private options for traditionally public services, contracting out internal functions of public sector institutions to private providers, marketization of services still residing inside the public sector, and stronger performance management and managerialization of public sector professionals (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Funck & Karlsson, 2020).

In my work as a district administrator, it was the performance management and managerialization of my profession by NPM practices I felt most deeply as a street-level bureaucrat in terms of my lack of autonomy and agency as a leader. As Anderson and Cohen (2018) explained, "managerialism…changes how we think about things like accountability which used to be known as professional *responsibility* and being *answerable to* our stakeholders and the public" (p. 9, emphasis added). Historically, accountability in education, whose professionals held an ethos of public service, meant being responsible and answerable to stakeholders and society writ large not just compliance to a state or federal agency for testing mandates (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Herr, 2015; Horsford et al., 2019). Being *responsible for* and *answerable to* are not the same thing as being *accountabl*e in an "auditable" sense (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 9, emphasis added), but performance accountability has blurred this line and makes the two concepts interchangeable. Rationalizing responsibility as auditability then makes those who oppose audit culture seem as if they want to be irrational and irresponsible (Anderson & Cohen, 2018).

In this way, the rhetoric of NPM shapes how we view the world and defines what is of most value. Performance management and managerialism become not only a set of practices but also the accepted way of conceptualizing how schools should be structured and governed. It prioritizes a leadership structure in education where supposedly "objective" managers who embrace the corporate mindset of efficiency and profit maximization should have centralized control and reinforces a culture in which using data to make "informed" decisions about the purpose of school and classroom instruction is prioritized (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 91). This justifies reducing students to names and test scores on cards as I experienced and categorizing them only in terms of the value they add to better performance accountability measures for the school and district. Under this system, for educational leaders, the central focus of their work is not on addressing student and community needs or to prepare engaged citizens, but rather to improve test score ratings (Horsford et al., 2019). Educational leaders have ended up acting like middle level corporate managers who get "results" by improving test score numbers. For the

superintendency, this mindset has promulgated the image of the superintendent as a corporate CEO whose main leadership goal is efficiency and cost effectiveness (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019)

The influence of NPM practices justifies using performance accountability as the proxy for workforce preparation and have become so ubiquitous over the last several decades it is now the accepted logic for how we should develop curriculum and measure progress of students, teachers, and schools (Eisner, 2001; Schneider, 2017; Schneider et al. 2018). The possibility for alternative or even concurrent purposes to workforce preparation as the main role for America's public schools has become difficult, if not impossible, to realize (Bracey, 2009; Pinar 2012; Schneider, 2017). Those of us working in classrooms and leadership positions in education find our agency and professional roles reduced to being "auditable" (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 9) for individual quantifiable outputs, like test scores and graduation rates, rather than being responsible for outcomes that benefit society or the common good more broadly and were foundational to the establishment of the country's common schools in the first place, such as "preparing an educated citizenry to participate in democratic governance" (Glickman & Mette, 2020, p. 5).

Market-based or school choice reform also pushes educators into an entrepreneurial mindset where they view their work in individualistic terms. Resources are moved around in the system to enhance individual teacher, school, and administrator performance (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019). Since schools can maximize system incentives by maximizing test score performance, it follows that recruiting the best teachers and students is a desirable goal for educational leaders. However, public schools were instituted to serve and advocate for the common good of all families and children not just individuals and certain communities. While it is certainly true that this lofty goal has never been perfectly achieved, there was still the promise that it could be (Horsford, 2019; Meier & Gasoi, 2017). As a result, educational leaders now face a wide disconnect between the traditional ethos of a being a public sector professional who advocates and works for common good and the new entrepreneurial ethos demanded by market-based reform and rhetoric (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019).

New Democratic Professionals

Mounting a resistance to the current market-based reform system and the influences of NPM will need to be more than just a refusal or working around of current practices; it will require building trust in new ways of seeing and framing the purposes of education that change the system altogether (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). A fundamental shift will need to occur to change the current accountability culture focus on compliance that dominates how educational leaders should prioritize goals for their districts. Moving forward, we will need to enter a "post-reform era" where the entire performance accountability system is transformed "from the bottom up by educators, students, parents, and communities" forcing politicians to follow suit (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 12). Horsford et al. (2019) contended that "grass roots movements and educational leaders who lead against the grain, and the ways that leadership often comes from below by organizing to build alliances to challenge those who have amassed inordinate levels of political and economic influence" are the mechanism by which "historically, …significant change has usually occurred" (p. 12). In other words, if we want systemic change moving away from performance metrics, then the impetus for this shift will need to be driven from the bottom up by educators and public-school community members.

District leaders, especially superintendents, can be a powerful voice for changing the narrative about the aims and goals of schooling as they are the primary leaders who set the rules of the game for principals and teachers by defining what the district's priorities and resourcing will be. Spillane (2004) noted that researchers and policy analysts often focus their work on how federal and state agencies function as policy makers while failing to consider the school district as a policy making entity. Street level bureaucrats, such as I was, can play a key role in building a different culture for deciding the purposes and effectiveness of schools designed to run to the current performance accountability culture of auditability and compliance. However, as I experienced first-hand as a practitioner, this is a difficult shift since prevailing systems and rhetoric actively suppress any efforts to break with the status quo belief in the rationality of performance accountability. In addition, we now have a generation of teachers, administrators, and district leaders who have grown up in the new managerialism culture of centralized "from without" control of their profession based on embracing entrepreneurial competitive models of leadership, so they have never experienced an alternative leadership model (Anderson & Cohen, 2018).

Exploring how district superintendents can "lead against the grain" (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 12) to counter the negative impacts of performance accountability on the professional legitimacy and authority of public-school leaders is the central focus of this dissertation. This form of leadership creates space for district leaders to reclaim a public sector professional ethos of being responsible for and answerable to their communities, families, and students rather than mere compliance officers for federal and state accountability, audit-culture, mandates. In this study, I sought to identify the kinds of practices and supports that could be implemented to break the cycle of "leading to the test" (Horsford et al., 2019, p.152). Gaining momentum to make systemic change in district leadership will require alliance building and wider discourse among educational leaders as they seek to resist the current market-based reform system driving privatization of the public sector and move toward building support for a new system grounded in the renewal of public sector education based in the democratic principles of inclusion, responsibility, and advocacy (Anderson & Cohen, 2018).

Anderson and Cohen (2018) proposed an "overarching strategy of resistance" to new managerialism under NPM grounded in collective action to foster "*productive* resistance, productive in the sense that it would generate a new model of educator professionalism, one based on the democratic values of public education" (p. 109, emphasis in the original). This type of professionalism "promote[s] democratic values, that place the public good at its center, and cannot be created in isolation from communities" (p. 109). Educational leaders embracing this model are called to practice participatory governance meaning they seek participation in setting social and educational policies that result in a public education system "designed by educators and the people it is intended to serve" (p. 113). Moving from an audit-culture to a responsibility-based culture will depend in large part on educational leaders working within and with their communities to reclaim legitimacy, trust, and support.

Calling their model for leadership New Democratic Professionalism (NDP), Anderson and Cohen (2018) argued that interrupting and shifting the rhetoric of marketization and managerialism in education will require more than pushing back or refusing to comply with current policies. Systems change requires educators to understand how powerful interests have shaped the definition and practice of schooling over the last several decades, so that they may participate in crafting a new narrative for countering prevailing market-based rhetoric about public school reform, and actively engage in the crafting of policies that support democratic and

socially just purposes for public education (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). While they acknowledge there has been significant resistance to NPM by many educators already, Anderson and Cohen (2018) suggested it has been mostly characterized by strategies to "work *around* NPM" which has "a limited and short-term impact" (p. 97, emphasis in the original).

Anderson and Cohen (2018) argued that a shift to models like NDP by educational leaders will be instrumental to building a new alliance for changing educational policy currently grounded in performance accountability and NPM managerialism. They outline three dimensions for the NDP model of democratic professionalism: inclusion, responsibility, and advocacy. I will describe the NDP dimensions in detail in Chapter 2, but the main concepts of the model are that schools and their leaders must prioritize a democratic focus for serving and being responsible to the local community over compliance with external accountability metrics (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). Superintendents adopting the NDP model stive to include all members of the school community—teachers, principals, students, the board of education, local business owners, other citizens—in defining the mission and values of the district as well as the structure of learning for students. In doing so, superintendents following the principles of the NDP model become advocates for local school governance and public education in general (Anderson & Cohen, 2018).

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this interpretivist case study was to explore how district leaders can counter the impacts of NPM and accountability-based school reform on their professional agency, the schools they lead, and the communities they serve. The study sought to identify the kinds of practices and supports that could be implemented to break the cycle of "leading to the test" (Horsford et al., 2018, p. 152) by school leaders—in place for decades now—and move toward leadership practices that center the school community through inclusion, responsibility, and advocacy. The case study was comprised of a group of five school district superintendents from Hart (pseudonym) county in central Ohio. At first, I thought the case study would focus on how they were developing local school report cards as a counter narrative to the performance metrics in the annual district reports from ODE. I quickly discovered there was much more to the case than the development of local report card criteria and stories. They had also created a collaborative county-wide team for mutual support of their community-based leadership

practices, the development of a shared systematic approach to teaching and learning, and community alliance building. Called the Hart County Design Team (HCDT), this group included the superintendents, school administrators, and teachers from each district. The development of this collaborative team and its functions became the primary focal point of the case study.

The HCDT group functions on many levels: as a support system for the superintendents themselves, as a creative team for crafting shared beliefs and values for student learning with teachers and school administrators, and as a collaborative space to strategize for the inclusion of board of education members, students, families, business leaders, and other community members in school governance. Participating in the HCDT seems to support each superintendent in their efforts counter the entrepreneurial model of school leadership encouraged by NPM by giving them a space to step outside the expectations of current performance accountability rhetoric and consider alternative goals and aims for education. My main research question was: *How does the Hart County Design Team collaboration support the participating superintendents in countering the impacts of performance accountability on themselves as leaders, the schools in their districts, and the communities they serve?*

Significance of the Study

Performance accountability and NPM managerialism have created a compliance and audit culture where district and school leaders are pressured into "leading to the test" (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 152) in order to meet performance accountability targets. The majority of research examining the influences of this compliance culture on educational leaders has focused on building level administrators (Marzano et al., 2005; Tomal et al., 2013; Shields, 2017). Scholarship tends to focus on identifying how school leaders are functioning within successful or failing schools as label by performance metrics and then offering lessons to be learned from their practices (Fullan, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005; Tomal et al., 2013; Shields, 2017). The impact of educational policy, such as federal mandates like ESSA, are also often studied in terms of how they are enacted at the school level with the implications for teacher and principal practices being the research focus (Ball et al., 2012; Endacott et al, 2015). These studies center what can be learned from "good and bad" schools within the existing system (Shields, 2017) rather than on how the current performance-based accountability system could be changed or transformed to de-center performance accountability and compliance culture altogether.

When district leadership is studied, the research tends to focus on financial management of resources under accountability pressures and unfunded mandates (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007). Studies of superintendents tend to foreground the managerial role they hold rather than how they function as a moral and instructional leader (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Shields, 2017; Spillane, 2004). However, there is growing research interest in studying how superintendents and other district leaders can take a more active role in leading to counter the impacts of performance accountability (Anderson & Cohen, 2015: Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019; Shields, 2017). This study can contribute to the discourse of how superintendents can act as change agents and local policy makers to decenter performance accountability as the primary driver for the mission and vision of their districts.

Superintendents have the power to set the priorities for their districts, as Björk et al. (2014) have acknowledged performance accountability school reforms since *ANAR* have "increased the awareness of the importance of superintendents in leading large-scale, systemic reforms" (p. 448). The pivotal issue is to what degree they will choose as district leaders to enforce the rhetoric of testing on their students, teachers, and building principals (Björk et al., 2014). With the rise of NPM and privatization of public schooling well underway, more research is needed about how superintendents can challenge the status quo of performance accountability by creating systems within their districts that prioritize serving the community through inclusion, responsibility, and advocacy over compliance with external policies and mandates. Exploring how district leaders can work towards this kind of systems change was one of my main goals for engaging in the case study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Complex and overlapping economic, cultural, educational, and political forces impact the work of superintendents in America's public schools. These forces are not linear in the sense that one thing led to another. Rather, they reflect the ways in which larger economic, societal, and political narratives influence the people, systems, and structures of America's public schools. To illuminate the history and current contexts under which the participants in this case study operate, this literature review will explore the history and functions of performance accountability in American educational policy and the impact of these polices on how school leaders view themselves and the purpose of their work. The review is divided into sections reflecting four thematic areas.

The review begins with how neoliberalism and the shift from Keynesian to Friedmannian economic models has impacted the public's view of the purpose and legitimacy of public sector institutions in general and public education specifically. Next, the evolution of performance accountability polices and how the shift to market-based school reforms of the last several decades has shaped the way the purposes of schooling are defined and measured is examined. Then the role corporate models for managerialism have played in efforts to privatize the public sector is unpacked, including their impact on how public sector leaders, like school superintendents, come to view their work and the purpose of the organizations they lead. The review concludes with a look at a model for school leadership that could empower district leaders to prioritize democratic and community-based goals over compliance with state and federal accountability mandates.

Milton Friedman's and the Neoliberal Agenda

The year 2020 marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of economist Milton Friedman's (1970) seminal essay *The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits* in the New York Times Magazine. In it, Friedman (1970) asserted that "there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits" (p. 6). I first read the piece in 1990 while pursuing my MBA. While the essay is one of Friedmann's most famous publications, it is part of his larger work on monetary economic theory associated with economists at the University of Chicago. The focus on

corporate profit maximization by Friedman stems from his belief in monetary policy anchored in managing the monetary supply over government spending or fiscal policies during economic cycles and downturns. Fiscal spending is often associated with British economist John Maynard Keynes who believed that the state (government) should intervene for the good of the public welfare to provide relief from the downturns in economic cycles of capitalism that often disproportionately affect those in the lower classes. Today, the 1970 essay by Friedman is often regarded as marking the paradigm shift in domestic American economic policy from Keynesian to Friedmannian views and practices.

This is a dissertation on education not economic theory, but I must acknowledge that there is much debate about how and to what degree Keynes and Friedman differed on economic theory, since in many ways, they agreed on fundamental objectives for monetary policy. To simplify and clarify the contrasts between the two economic theorists that are relevant to my discussion here, I offer Dostaler's (1998) summary of the debate. Keynesian economics asserts that business cycles of capitalism need to be offset by deficit spending in times of recession. This is often achieved through public works programs, unemployment benefits, social security, and the like. These interventions are often called welfare state economics in capitalist society since the state intervenes in the form of social policy, programs, as well as enforcing standards and regulations on corporations. To Keynesians, social justice in the form of government intervention is healthy for the state and necessary to correct for the inevitable unequal distribution of economic power, which is beneficial as it enhances economic efficiency for the good of all. In contrast, in Friedmannian economics, social justice is replaced by a belief that political freedom, economic efficiency, and equality of economic power can be gained through the competition of an unfettered free market. Dostaler (1998) explained, "For Friedman … public action is contrary to economic efficiency, which results from the free play of market forces" (p. 322). As a result, Friedman believed economic policy should be based in adherence to Adam Smith's concept of the "invisible hand" of the market since individuals pursuing their private interests create the best market outcomes through competition, and this competition functions as the sole regulation needed for the capitalist state (Dostaler, 1998, p. 322).

In the United States over the last 50 years, we have pursued a primarily Friedmannian approach to economic and social policy. Consolidated during the Reagan presidency of the 1980s, there has been an embrace of corporate deregulation, tax breaks for the rich and

corporations, a reliance on trickle down economic theory to uplift the poor, an unrelenting attack on social welfare programs, and a divestment in public sector institutions, including education (Horsford et al., 2019; Perlstein, 2020). Belief in the superiority of market-based competition to foster innovation and efficiency, as well as the idea that economic gain for both the country and individuals should always be prioritized, has won our political and popular imagination (Weiner, 2005).

The Friedmannian focus on free market competition and profit as the only goal that matters has influenced our collective beliefs about how government should function and the role public sector institutions should play in our society. We value the corporate management rhetoric to focus on short term profits over calls for stability and long-term investment, and we celebrate those who achieve success in this way (Horsford et al, 2019). Americans idolize the image of the handsome, white, businessman as the epitome of the American Dream. This is reflected in the enduring popularity of fictional characters of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby and Oliver Stone's Gordon Gecko and in our collective fascination with CEOs like Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Steve Jobs. White men have also dominated the field of educational leadership (Horsford et al., 2019). Anderson and Cohen (2018) deftly pointed out that "Anyone who reads histories of U.S. education should be struck by the extent to which White men were the architects of education not for White students, but also for women and people of color" (p. 12).

This is also reflected in the demographics of our government officials since it is mostly rich and connected men who are able to get elected in American politics. Many politicians are funded by large corporations and rich private donors, so they emphasize deregulation, tax breaks for the rich, and dismantling of public sector institutions for profit (Horsford et al., 2019). In educational policy, we now have businessmen, like Bill Gates, leading and financing private school reform options at the expense of public education (Russakoff, 2015). There are few public sector professionals in the popular imagination who are our heroes or even just respected members of our communal imagination.

Neoliberalism and the Rise of New Public Management

Friedman's free market model fits into a larger global policy model called neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a troubling term with much debate around its usage and connotations (Malin et al., 2019). Neoliberalism can refer to an economic system and policy, but it also has been used to

describe a political agenda and cultural system (Weiner, 2005). I am using the term neoliberalism to connotate an economic system in which the belief in and the principles of free market competition are extended to every part of our public and personal worlds (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al. 2019). Anderson and Cohen (2018) suggested this happens "in such a way that we may not recognize how we are normalized into a new 'common sense,'" which changes "what we believe, what we value and what we don't value" (p. 91). The "common sense" rhetoric of neoliberalism seeps into our consciousness as we experience life in a society where Friedmannian economic policy changes the laws we live under to favor free market competition, elevates the private sector to mythical status as the cradle of innovation and efficiency, and villainizes efforts to provide for the public good. Neoliberal thought transforms the state from a provider of public welfare to a promoter of markets and competition (Horsford et al., 2019; Weiner, 2005).

Globally, the neoliberal agenda to privatize and profitize the public sector is referred to as New Public Management (NPM) (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019; McDermott, 2011). The term NPM was first introduced by Christopher Hood, a British public administration researcher in the early 1990s, to refer to public sector reforms that had been in place since the 1980s in America, Europe, and Australia (Lægreid, 2015). NPM is a framework referring to the transfer of corporate managerial and market principles of the private sector to the public sector (Hood, 1991; Lægreid, 2015; Funck & Karlsson, 2020). The major guiding principles for the NPM framework include offering private options for traditionally public services, contracting out internal functions of public sector institutions to private providers, marketization of services still residing inside the public sector, and stronger performance management and managerialization of public sector professionals (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Funck & Karlsson, 2020; Hood, 1991; Lægreid, 2015).

NPM also challenges the legitimacy of public sector institutions by insinuating that because they lack a for-profit, corporate organizational structure, they are inherently bureaucratic, inefficient, and incapable of innovation (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey 2009; Knight Abowitz, 2019). NPM rhetoric thrives in a public that is largely unaware of the influence on their belief systems of political narratives, such a Friedmannian economics, that motivate a preference for the private over the public sector (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). The more society is comprised by those who accept the ideals of free-market competition and devalue the common

good in the public sphere, the less support there will be for an open, public education system that challenges this mindset. Giroux (1991 as cited in Weiner, 2005) warned,

> As a society is defined through the culture and values of neoliberalism, the relationship between critical education, public morality, and civic responsibility as conditions for creating thoughtful and engaged citizens are sacrificed all too willingly to the interest of financial capital and the logic of profit making. (p. 20)

Once this sacrificial mindset is ingrained it will allow NPM to enter "a new phase in which the public sector is largely viewed as an obstacle to the privatization and marketization of education" (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 22), that is, if we are not in this phase already.

Market-Based School Reform: What are Schools For?

In 1979, John Goodlad, a long-time advocate for renewing American public education and preserving the role of schools in fostering democracy, published *What Schools are For.* In the work, Goodlad explored three main questions: What are schools expected or asked to do? What do schools do? What should schools do? In the afterward for the 2006 Signature Edition, Goodlad reflected on the on-going timeliness of his central questions given that the debate over what schools are for had not reached any resolution in the intervening quarter century. Goodlad (1979/2006) ominously observed,

> The school crisis today is not the performance of students on achievement test. It is the failure of education writ large to develop in our citizens the wisdom necessary to sustain in good health the delicate and political ecology of the complex, moral community that is the United States of America. (p. 153)

Goodlad's questions and reflections sadly have even more relevance today.

As I write, the second impeachment trial of Trump is in progress. The images of the storming of the capitol by insurrectionists, the blatant disregard for the legal process by Josh Hawley and other Republicans, disturbing polls showing a large section of the citizenry believe the fraudulent claims of election tampering are on full display in the daily coverage of the senate hearings. Goodlad's (1979/2006) words haunt me as I watch the political spectacle unfold. How can educators today reclaim the legitimacy and power to contribute to sustaining "in good health" our nation's democratic "ecology?" (p. 153).

The question of *what schools are for* has never had an easy answer in the United States. Education is a reserved power of the states, not the federal government. Even so, providing for a system of public education is indelibly linked with our national identification as a democracy. Public education in the United States emerged in part from the goals of democratic society: to prepare people to become responsible citizens; to improve social conditions; to promote cultural unity; to help people become economically self-sufficient; and to enhance individual happiness and enrich individual lives (Glickman & Mette, 2020). In the spirit of such goals, public schools were widely established in the late 1800s with access to public education advancing through to today. Although the quality and inclusiveness of such schools have varied since their creation, public schools originated as the necessary expression of sustaining a democratic society (Stitzlein, 2017).

NPM rhetoric and practices entered into policy decisions and governance of public education through "a combination of discourses of excellence and equity," and this has shifted the primary goal of American education to that of a purely economic one for both society and individuals (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 23). This shift began with more federal involvement in educational policy and governance. Based in neoliberalism and NPM practices, this federal involvement codified the standards and efficiency movement allowing for school reformers to center economic purposes for schooling at the expense of civic education for democracy.

The Rise of Performance Accountability

When President George W. Bush signed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) into law in 2002, he made the promise that "as of this hour, America's schools will be on a new path of reform, a new path of results" (Strauss, 2015). The implication being that the "old path" the nation's public schools were on needed to be reformed and lacked results. The passage of NCLB heralded a dramatic shift of power to the federal government in shaping how public schools were perceived, received funding, and were regulated. Using both mandates and inducements for Title I funding, the federal government enacted far reaching performance accountability policies and pushed state governments into the role of enforcing and monitoring local school district compliance with these policies (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Manna, 2007; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). As state departments of education embraced their role as monitors of compliance, the autonomy of local

school districts to decide how best to serve their students further diminished (Manna, 2007; McDermott, 2011; Schneider, 2017).

The influence the federal government needed to pass NCLB took over a decade to build. It was accomplished largely through convincing Americans to believe in a story that depicted their public schools as inept, failing institutions that threatened the very security of the nation (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 2009). The stories we weave and choose to believe matter. As Stone (2012) explained, narratives have powerful symbolic significance in politics to define policy problems because the stories we tell "hold a powerful grip on our imaginations and our psyches because they offer the promise of resolution for scary problems" (p. 158). One type of narrative defined by Stone (2012), the "narrative of decline," is especially compelling when it comes to public schools because it insinuates "that things were once better than they are now, and the change for the worse causes or will soon cause suffering" (p. 160).

The federal government tapped into fear using a "narrative of decline" to advance its control over public school policy initiatives. Planting the seeds of fear that America was losing its competitive edge and status as a major economic and military superpower, the federal government then placed the blame for this loss at the feet of public schools (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 2009; Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Horsford et al., 2019). Policy makers continue to spin this narrative, which makes a scapegoat of America's public schools for failing to effectively educate the nation's young people in order to maintain the nation's economic growth (Horsford et al., 2019; Manna, 2007; Pinar, 2012). Understanding how this story was developed and enhanced over the last few decades is useful to explain how educational policy is structured to favor evaluating school performance based on student proficiency scores (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Hess & Eden, 2017; Schneider, 2017).

Setting the Stage for Federal Involvement

Education is a "reserved power" of the states not the federal government in America. For much of the early decades in the development of public schools, local communities and district leaders were the primary educational policy decision makers (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Manna, 2007). Henig (2013) emphasized that this local control was a matter of both a "deference to the idea of localism" and also a belief "that education decisions should be made by educators, who themselves were primarily situated at the district level" (p. 5). Additionally, state education

departments did not have the capacity to be involved in micromanaging local decision-making. The departments were small, and most state oversight centered on expanding public education access, passing compulsory attendance laws, determining who was qualified to teach, and setting graduation requirements (Henig, 2013; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). States did not overtly exercise their power over local school district decision-making until federal legislation to equalize funding and access across districts required them to do so in the 1960s and 70s. The passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 marked a turning point in federal involvement in education. For the first time, ESEA enticed states to comply with federal education policy mandates in exchange for funding to serve minority student populations (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006).

President Lyndon Johnson, a former teacher, conceived of the ESEA and its so-called Title programs as fulfilling the "fierce commitment to the ideal of education for everyone" and declared the Act represented "a major new commitment of the federal government to quality and equality in the schooling that we offer our young people" (Johnson, 1965). The funding under ESEA and its subsequent reauthorizations are a compensatory policy of funding grants based only on incidences of student poverty in a state (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). The resulting policy was not designed to offer guidance and tools for changing instructional methods in schools, but rather was intended to provide services and resources to students in poverty to ensure their academic success (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009). The continuing federal government commitment to Title funding has been extensive. From 1965 to the present day, Title I funding remains the largest USDE K-12 program in terms of money spent and student participation, with about 20 to 23 million children served each year at a cost of about $14.5 billion over the past decade (Sousa & Armor, 2016).

The passage of ESEA in 1965 and its reauthorization in 1981 as the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA) are major legislative markers of federal involvement in education. The resulting policies required an increased presence of state education departments in monitoring implementation at the district level (Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). But even then, the state involvement centered on access and funding rather than control over curriculum and teaching practice at the local level (Henig, 2013; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). To justify an increase of power and influence over local decision-making about teaching,

curriculum, and the very nature of schooling to the American public, the federal government would need a far more compelling reason than equity and funding issues.

Prior to the mid-1980s, Americans held a positive view of the nation's public schools and the quality of education students were receiving. Americans proudly presumed their schools were among the best in the world (Bracey, 2009; Henig, 2013). To gain visibility for the need of education reform, the federal government first needed to convince the American public there was a problem with their schools. The publication of the *A Nation at Risk* (*ANAR*) report prepared by President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983 did just that. The report also "signaled the growing readiness on the part of state and national leaders to get more directly involved in the mechanics of school reform" (Henig, 2013, p. 7). This propensity for centralized, external involvement of the state and federal government in local policy and education reform has not abated since. But perhaps most damaging to local control of school decision-making, the report also set in motion a narrative of failure about American schools. This rhetoric is still used today to justify an ever-increasing array of federal and state government mandated accountability measures on local school districts (Bracey, 2009; Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Pinar, 2012).

ANAR declared America's schools were failing to prepare students for their roles as productive workers and citizens. The report's impact, however, was not only due to *what* the Commission had to say about this failure on the part of public schools, but also due to *how* it chose to say it. In the alarming opening declaration that "our nation is at risk," the report ominously suggested that

> if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. … We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral education disarmament. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)

The implications of the military language were clear; America was under a self-inflicted attack on the economic, intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths that had previously defined our nation as a world leader. We were losing the "battle" to remain a superpower, and the culprit was our education system because it had "laid down the arms" needed to defend this position (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The framing of the need for education reform in the schools as a national security issue also made it appear there was a dire crisis point and need for immediate action. Plank and Boyd (1994) proposed,

> The bellicose nationalism adopted by the authors of *A Nation at Risk*, for example, asserts that educational achievement is analogous to military preparedness in the maintenance of national security. The clear implication is that the governance of schools should only be entrusted to those who are qualified by allegiance and training to advance the national interest. (p. 267)

We had entrusted our schools to those who were not "qualified" and "trained" to "advance the national interests," and they had put the nation at risk. Under the watch of school leaders and teachers, the *ANAR* report stressed that mediocrity and low expectations had been allowed to erode learning to the point that American children would no longer achieve the educational skill levels of their parent's generation, which threatened both individual and national economic prosperity (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

This rhetoric linking the need for reform of the education system to national security and economic success clearly intended to make scapegoats of local school leaders and teachers, and it also diminished the American public's faith in their schools in ways that remain to this day (Henig, 2013; Pinar, 2012; Plank & Boyd, 1994). The report sowed the seeds of discontent with district level decision-making and local school governance structures and created a perception of lack of accountability for student achievement. As standardization and testing grew in prominence, the ability to set policy initiatives, define curricular goals, and manage teaching shifted from the local school boards and superintendents to state departments of education (Björk et al., 2014). Increasingly the evaluation of teachers, school leaders, and school quality was tied to models based in standardization and centralization at the state level to allow for auditability and accountability from outside the local district (Björk et al., 2014; Henig, 2013; Pinar, 2012).

In politics and policy making, stories matter. Stone (2012) describes narrative stories in politics as symbols that are a "principle means for defining and contesting policy problems" (p. 158). Although *ANAR* was a report not a policy making document in and of itself, the report's impact set the stage for the federal government to expand its role in educational policy at the state and local levels. Not only did the public story being told and believed about American education shift after the publication of *ANAR*, but so did the importance of education reform on

federal and state political agendas. Portz (1996) in his study of educational agenda setting observed that problem definitions that are highly visible to the public, have powerful political sponsorship, and have solutions that are viable are more likely to get on the policy agenda of politicians. The language of the *ANAR* report made "failing" schools a top policy agenda item because the problem became highly visible (media attention), got a lot of political sponsorship (governors, presidents, and congress), and politicians could offer a viable solution (standards and accountability measures).

In his review of the policy decisions and attitudes about American education from *ANAR* and NCLB, Pinar (2012) emphasized that they both "displaced federal government policy failures onto the public schools, and specifically onto teachers. Each position schools symbolically as the site wherein the future of the nation unfolds" (p. 202). *ANAR* also centered the chief purpose of schools as producing human capital for the nation's economy, which shifted focus of public education policy to standards-based reforms and high stakes accountability (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). Making schools the scapegoat for national security and economic competitive advantage failures, the federal government was able to convince the public that centralized intervention was needed and was, thereby, able to gain significant control and influence over the regulation of public schools as well as the ability to advance market-driven alternatives.

While the boldest federal legislation policies for addressing the narrative of failure around America's education system were still to come, concern about the state of schools and the need for more oversight of schooling had already gained traction among politicians in the 1980s and 1990s. The National Governors Association began to push for education to receive more attention on the national agenda through increased focus on standards and accountability measures. Governors found talking about education reform was an issue sure to get political attention for them even if they lacked the ability to enact actual change (Henig, 2013). Presidents also saw the importance of education as policy agenda item. Clinton capitalized on education being a high-ranking issue in the 1992 election against George H. Bush and continued to emphasize education issue during his presidency (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Henig, 2013).

It is not surprising then that standards-based reform efforts gained further prominence with the passage of the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) in 1994 under the Clinton Administration. Building on the momentum for measuring school quality following the

publication of *ANAR* from a decade earlier, IASA charged states to develop common standards for all students and a system to measure their achievement through assessments aligned with the content standards administered "at some time" between grades 3 and 5, again between grades 6 and 9, and yet again between grades 10 and 12 (Riley, 1995). IASA also called for teachers who were better trained to teach to the higher standards and earmarked monies for math and science teacher professional development (Riley, 1995). However, IASA was not strongly enforced at the federal level, and many states never reached full compliance with the law without suffering any significant sanctions. This weak enforcement allowed the federal government to avoid open debate about its growing influence in education reform (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Sunderman & Orfield, 2006).

NCLB and Federal Oversight

This weak stance on the part of the federal government regarding regulation of implementation of federal mandates changed when the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act was signed into law by George W. Bush on January 8, 2002. Sunderman and Orfield (2006) called NCLB "the most extraordinary expansion of federal power over public schools in American history" (p. 526). Developed with little input from education experts, NCLB was passed with bipartisan congressional support at the behest of a president determined to drive school improvement through federal mandates for results-oriented testing (Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). Sunderman and Kim (2007) explained that the bipartisan support stemmed from the law's requirement for states to develop testing systems and report this data by subgroups, which would then be used to determine Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for all students. Republicans, usually hesitant to expand federal reach, saw this provision as a means to increase test-based accountability, which would open a door to market-driven alternatives to public schools, while Democrats saw identifying gaps in educational achievement as an opportunity to increase equity and access for all students to a high-quality education (Sunderman & Kim, 2007).

There was also the matter of funding for the mandates in NCLB. Since conservatives kept federal funding at a minimum the bulk of the monies needed for establishing the testing apparatus and reporting for the law's requirements would fall to state and district resourcing (Björk et al., 2014; Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Henig, 2013). The law also fundamentally altered the relationship between the federal and state departments of education by making the latter a

regulator or implementor of federal requirements rather than a collaborator in determining the distribution of federal and state resources (Sunderman & Kim, 2007). In Ohio, the cost to administer the testing and reporting system for the 2018–19 school year were projected to be approximately $66 million with an additional $10 million in federal funds supporting this mandate (Ohio Office of Budget and Management, 2017). Supporters of the system often argue that the spending is minimal when considered in the larger picture of educational costs. For example, there are about 1.7 million school children in Ohio, so testing and reporting costs about $40 per child annually. However, the impact of the standardized testing, reporting the results publicly, and using this data as the primary means of judging school effectiveness has far greater ramifications than the cost in terms of how schools and teachers are viewed by the communities they serve.

Even though yearly testing, reporting, and teacher quality measures were already a part of IASA, the requirements under NCLB dictated the terms and sanctions for failing to meet these measures, which under IASA had been left to the states. Now, state departments of education had to monitor implementation of federal policy, which included the following requirements:

- Development of state standards with 4 defined levels of proficiency for reading, math, and science,
- Annual assessments for reading and math in grades 3-8 and once in high school, and 3 science assessments in same time period,
- 100% proficiency required by 2014 for reading and math with all students making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward this goal, and
- Annual Report Cards to be published each year with student achievement data from assessments disaggregated by subgroup, an assessment of district performance based on state created achievement goals, percentage of students tested, graduation rates, and teacher quality measures. (ODE, 2019b; USDE, 2019)

NCLB tied Title I program services to the goal of closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students, particularly black and white students, as measured by standardized testing for proficiency (Sousa & Armor, 2016). The NCLB Act operated on an assumption that standards-based reforms and standardized proficiency testing were strong enough policy levers to drive changes in curriculum and instruction at the school level to close the achievement gap (Moffitt & Cohen, 2015). Many districts would ultimately fail

to achieve the AYP goals for proficiency for all students by the 2014 deadline. As a result, the interpretation of the failing grades for districts on the required report cards would continue to reinforce the narrative that American schools, teachers, and students were failures in the public eye. The legacy of a reliance on standardized test scores as the sole measure of school performance from NCLB remains to this day despite the later opposition to the law from the states and subsequent waivers granted for much of the law's requirements (Saultz et al., 2016; Sunderman & Kim, 2007).

Performance Accountability: Same Data, Different Act

Tensions began to mount between the states and the USDE over enforcement of NCLB proficiency targets as the 2014 deadline for 100% proficiency approached. In the mid-2000s, not one state was poised to meet the highly qualified teacher provision in the law, and only 19 states were prepared to publish the mandated school performance report cards (Henig et al., 2017). Even more concerning, for the 2007–2008 school year, 35 percent of the nation's districts, including a significant number in affluent suburban areas, were failing to meet AYP benchmarks (Henig et al., 2017). As a result, a policy window opened for the Obama administration. Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education (2009–2015), wanted to advance federal oversight of local education through performance-based evaluations of teachers and principals, adoption of common standards, enhancing state data collection systems, and fewer restrictions on school choice options (Saultz et al., 2016).

Block grant monies were created called Race to the Top (RTTT) and funded as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (USDE, 2019). RTTT granted waivers for proficiency requirements under NCLB favoring states that adopted the policies supported by Secretary Duncan. Saultz et al. (2016) contended that RTTT became the cudgel the Obama administration used to push state-level policy reforms without a major reauthorization of NCLB by Congress. This eventually led to backlash on the grounds of "executive overreach" from both Democrats and Republicans (Henig et al., 2017). Subsequently, Congress began work on a reauthorization of NCLB that would curb federal authority to drive state-level educational policy decisions.

In 2015, congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reversed many of the NCLB mandates. The power to set requirements for teacher and principal evaluation

systems tied to student achievement testing, mandated learning standards, and school improvement plans was returned to the states. As a result, ESSA opened the door for evaluation systems not tied to metrics for measuring school quality based on proficiency testing of students (Hess & Eden, 2017). In summary, ESSA includes the following requirements for states to set performance goals and monitor compliance:

- States must adopt standards with 3 levels of proficiency in reading, math, and science that are "challenging and college-and-career aligned,"
- Annual assessments must be given for reading and math in grades 3–8 and once in high school, and 3 science assessments in same time period,
- States must establish "ambitious long-term goals" for academic achievement, graduation rates, and ELL proficiency,
- States create their own index to measure progress in meeting their goals. The index must include 4 academic indicators and 1 non-academic measure of school quality,
- Annual Report Cards are to be published each year with student achievement data from assessments disaggregated by subgroup, an assessment of district performance based on state created achievement goals, percentage of students tested, graduation rates, and teacher quality measures just as required under NCLB,
- Reporting must be provided on: NAEP results, performance of ELLs, data from the Civil Rights Data Collection survey, teacher qualifications, per pupil expenditures by local, state, and federal levels, and post-secondary enrollment, and
- States are required to define their state accountability system and describe how schools are identified for improvement. (Duff & Wohlstetter, 2019; USDE, 2019)

The most significant change from NCLB was that the state departments of education, not the USDE, were put in charge of setting goals for student achievement and measuring progress toward them (Barone, 2017). Furthermore, the states can decide the types of assessments that will be used to measure student progress and establish intervention plans for districts not hitting the state-determined goals for achievement (Barone, 2017). The annual testing provisions remain constant, but ESSA limits the federal government's power to define how states must address schools that fail to meet the testing targets (West, 2017).

ESSA does not eliminate the requirement for states to develop standards, which must now be "college and career readiness" aligned and students' mastery of which must be assessed

on a yearly basis (USDE, 2019). States still need to test students in grades 3–8 and once in high school for math and reading achievement, but these assessments are no longer required to be a single end-of-year assessment format (USDE, 2019). This means states have more freedom to determine how they measure student success as well as the ability to design and support their own improvement programs for underperforming schools and districts.

With ESSA, Congress has moved to limit federal control and greatly expand state discretion for the first time in several decades. However, it is concerning that the federal government no longer has "definite equity provisions tied to Title I funding, no demands for specific student achievement measures, and no real enforcement mechanism to enjoin states to pursue equity or equality in defining student achievement" (Black, 2017, p. 1312). Essentially, this means there is no focus either on inputs (resources) or outputs (achievement) in terms of federal policy for tracking Title I funding. It is left to the discretion of the states to determine eligibility, allocate the funds, and determine whether the state-determined provisions for student achievement are enforced (Black, 2017). It is perhaps a bit ironic that ESSA has moved the accountability line back to where it was before the passage of NCLB, putting the onus of serving all students equitably and equally on the states. This could be a blessing or a curse.

Beyond Test Scores: ESSA Opportunities and Challenges

There are tremendous opportunities for states and districts to expand the criteria used to judge school quality under ESSA. As Jochim (2017) observed, "the most promising element in all of ESSA is that it enables states to experiment with more nuanced methods of assessing school quality" (p. 128). This provision could help address some of the undesirable impacts of accountability under NCLB, including narrowing of the curriculum and focus on test preparation over higher level learning. For example, for the non-academic indicator, a state might choose to measure students' access to a well-rounded curriculum providing schools an incentive to expand their offerings in arts, music, and physical education (Jochim, 2017). This would at least expand the factors by which schools are evaluated to include a metric other than test scores and allow for local measure that community stakeholders care about to be included (Schneider, 2017).

Another opportunity under ESSA is the option for states to use a variety of assessments in determining student progress. Barone (2017) describes this "new wrinkle" as the ability of states to allow districts to use assessments that are "partially delivered in the form of portfolios,

projects, or extended performance tasks" (p. 65). This would allow districts, like the ones in this case study of Hart county, to match student learning and outcomes to locally relevant issues. For example, in one Hart county district, students develop and market mulch products to the community. Under ESSA, this could be classified as an extended performance assessment. While standardized tests "given to all students" are still mandatory, at least the law is creating space to balance the assessment system with classroom-based measure closely tied to teacher created experiences (Barone, 2017).

ESSA also allows states to pilot new assessment formats in a select group of districts with the goal of larger implementation later under the Innovative Assessment Pilot Program (USDE, 2019). Up to seven states can apply for this pilot program, and it could have a major impact on future assessment metrics. A note of caution, though. The program does have boundaries on the types of assessments that can be piloted since they must "meet professional psychometric guidelines, be challenging and aligned with state academic standards, reflect what's required for enrollment in credit-bearing college coursework" (Barone, 2017). Nevertheless, it does at least open a door to investigating different testing metrics than those used under NCLB. So far, only two states are taking advantage of the Innovative Assessment Pilot Program. Louisiana and New Hampshire have approved plans and two other states, Georgia and North Carolina, have applied (Klein, 2016).

Despite the opportunities for states to significantly change the nature of their reporting systems, Ohio's performance accountability system changed very little after the passage of the ESSA. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) still requires each public-school district to conduct proficiency testing using standardized assessments and report the results by grade and student sub-groups (ODE, 2019b). Ohio requires 22 standardized tests be administered each year, even though the ESSA allows for fewer tests (ODE, 2019b). For the non-academic indicator of school quality required under ESSA, Ohio chose to track student attendance, even though the law allows for great flexibility in this area. For example, a state could use student access to a well-rounded curriculum offering arts and music for this indicator (Jochim, 2017).

Just as required under NCLB, Ohio uses its testing to generate Ohio District Report Cards (ODRC). Grades are assigned to districts and schools based on student testing performance data. The scores, in turn, are still used by districts to evaluate teacher and school leader effectiveness (ODE, 2019b). As a result, test score metrics are still a driving factor in the decisions local

school district superintendents make about curriculum development and implementation, principal and teacher evaluations, what it means to serve student needs, and what counts as a valid measure of student progress. The educational policy status quo in Ohio, like many other states, is still solidly a focus on raising and maintaining test scores as the most important measure of school effectiveness and performance (Barone, 2017; ODE, 2019b; Schneider, 2017).

Kelly McManus of the Education Trust (as cited in Jochim, 2017) captured the opportunity and challenges of ESSA well, "Instead of playing in one section of the yard, [states] can play in the whole yard. But [the yard is] still fenced" (p. 125). A larger yard provides states with more freedom of action to try new measures of school quality out in theory, but the fence of federal regulations will continue to dictate and restrain innovation at the state level in terms of educational policy mandates. State-level mandates are still tied to student data collected through annual testing. How these tests are aligned with classroom curriculum will continue to be a factor of how stringently states decide to enforce centralized standards versus allowing for locally created goals for learning (Shober, 2017).

To return to the ideas of Stone (2012), the extent to which Americans believe their public schools are successful or not will depend on the narrative created from state and local districts' implementation of ESSA's policy provisions. Louisiana State Superintendent John White explained,

> You have to start with essential facts, a set of essential facts, and tell a story with them to support a vision for change in education. The worst things will happen with ESSA if it becomes an exercise in box checking. You have to have data-driven leadership. (Shober, 2017)

The contrasts in his statement illustrate the challenges of implementing ESSA for school district leaders. They must be aware of and help generate data for "facts" but also the tell a "story" about those facts to state policy leaders and their communities. How could school leaders change the "story" to broaden the discourse about the value of education beyond private and national economic gain? There is an opportunity for this to occur under ESSA, but it will require a shift in the collective understanding and beliefs about education currently tied to market-based reform rhetoric.

NPM and Privatizing Public Education

One of the enduring legacies of NCLB is how the law codified the use of market-oriented neoliberal language in our national discourse about the purpose of school and how we define school quality (Schneider, 2017). The idea of using performance metrics to determine if a school was effective was achieved by the requirement under NCLB, and continued under ESSA, for "exit strategies" for students in underperforming districts (Sunderman & Kim, 2007; USDE, 2002). Often referred to as school choice, this mandate allowed students in districts rated as failing by the performance accountability system to choose to leave the district to attend a charter school, another public school district, and, in some states, a private school (Sunderman & Kim, 2007; USDE, 2002). In addition, the public monies allocated for the education of these students were syphoned from the public school and followed the student to their school of choice (Sunderman & Kim, 2007; USDE, 2002). Sunderman and Kim (2007) explained that the school choice exit strategies in NCLB were based on the belief in the market principle of competition to incentivize innovation and improvement in schools that failed to meet the testing targets. This was a major shift from using Title I funding to improve resources for schools that served marginalized communities to simply encouraging individual students to exit the system altogether (Sunderman & Kim, 2007).

While both political parties supported the passage of NCLB, the ability to open the education system to free market competition was a primary goal for Republicans. The push for free market competition into public education was not a new focus for the GOP, as the party was interested in expanding private v. public access to schooling as far back as the Reagan administration (Henig, 2013). Milton Friedman, the same economist whose economic policies drive the neoliberal agenda to privatize the public sector, was also a vocal critic of public education. He felt that public schools were a government run "monopoly" and that "the only solution is to break the monopoly, introduce competition and give the customers alternatives" (Friedman, 1983, para. 7). The conservative movement for expanding school choice on the part of individual students, usually in the form of charters and vouchers for private school tuition, gained momentum under NCLB as more and more schools joined the ranks of the failing under the law's testing regime.

This push has continued under ESSA and especially under the Trump Administration. In his State of the Union address in February 2020, Trump (as cited in Strauss, 2020a) declared

"For too long, countless American children have been trapped in failing government schools" (para. 2). Trump made the statement to garner support for Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos's plan to offer a $5 billion tax credit for a private school voucher program (Strauss, 2020a). Trump and DeVos were echoing Friedman's calls to privatize education based on the belief that the competition inherent in free market school choice options will ensure a better education for all students. Those who follow this logic believe that the goals of schooling are purely private and do not see the need for an element of promoting the common good to the purposes for offering education.

Public or Private Good?

Capitalizing on the wider shifts toward neoliberal polices supporting NPM in the public sector, the market-based school choice requirements under NCLB shifted the public perception of education as a public good to being a private one. This is certainly not a completely new phenomena or debate in American schooling, but it is one that has grown and received more political attention "since the passage of NCLB and its influence in moving education delivery from public to private venues" (Henig, 2013, p. 9). Labaree (1997) described how the public v. private good perception of schooling influenced the competing goals for education in America. The competing goals for education fall into three broad categories: democratic equality (focused on preparing youth for citizenship), social efficiency (focused on preparing youth to carry out useful economic roles), and social mobility (focused on education as a commodity providing competitive advantage to individual students for securing social position) (Labaree, 1997).

Labaree (1997) contended that these goals compete with one another and create tension because "for the democratic equality goal, education is a purely public good; for the social efficiency, it is a public good in service to the private sector; and for social mobility, it is a private good for personal consumption" (p. 43). Therefore, depending on which of these goals for education you prefer, you will support different values and interests in how schools should function in terms of teaching and learning and in terms of who should control the structure and systems governing the education system. NCLB with its focus on test score metrics as the sole measure of school performance has driven the view that schools should provide a simple, quantifiable benefit (a score, a diploma) which can be traded for other benefits (a job, college admittance). Rather than asking "what is my educational experience," students and their families

are reduced to consumers who seek to gain an "output" they can trade for another commodity or social position. As a result, the social mobility goal where education is used to foster individual competitive advantage has come to dominate the political and popular conception of the purposes of schooling, how it should be managed, and the benefits it should offer (Labaree, 1997, p. 43).

Under NCLB, and continuing under ESSA, school reformers successfully tied the purpose of schooling to preparation for work as the primary function of public schooling. Furthermore, only what can be measured by the testing instrument is valued and resourced, leaving larger aims for schooling, such as civic engagement, largely ignored in the educational process. Educational policy makers have set a national school reform agenda that assumes the purpose of education is individual and societal economic gain where the primary purpose of schools is to prepare students for the workforce (Endacott et al., 2015; Labaree, 2005). In summary, under this view, education is seen a private good used for individual gain, rather than as a public good that benefits the individual and society by preparing students to participate in the community and civic/political life (Endacott et al. 2015; Henig, 2013; Stitzlein, 2017).

This justifies the "public schools are failing" rhetoric of school choice advocates. The narrative of decline or the "manufactured crisis" about the failure of American's public schools is deeply entrenched in our national discourse and has been the guiding belief for the last several decades of school reform (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 2009). It is true that there are real equity and access problems in the public education system that need to be addressed, and there has never been a utopian moment where equality, equity, and excellence were present in public schools. However, there is at least the possibility and promise for the promotion of the common good for education as a public sector institution, a goal that will be harder to achieve in a free-market, consumer based one where families are seen as "consumers" who are left to compete in a system of "educational" providers (Eisner, 2001; Endacott et al., 2015; Parker, 2017)

Neoliberalism and NPM also work to uphold power inequalities across American society, which manifest in inequitable resources allocation when it comes to education. White, middle class Americans have consistently rejected efforts to equalize school funding and achieve real racial integration in public schools (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). NPM's call to offer private options for education is appealing to many since it nullifies the need to address the blatant disparities in school funding, the consequences of decades of divestment in public sector

institutions, the impact of wealth inequality on individual families, and the lack of authentic racial integration (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). NPM advocates argue that we can ignore these underlying causes of disparity in the educational system and achieve educational equity for every child by relying on "a more efficient use of resources, replacing political democracy with that of the marketplace, and using a top-down 'get tough' approach to holding teachers and schools accountable" (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 52).

This sanitizes the system by making students into data points. We do not have to acknowledge the differences in resources and power inequities between suburban, rural, and urban communities if we can objectively measure performance. If there is "school choice," then everyone within the system can get what they need, which supports the belief in the meritocracy of the marketized system. This then means we have a "supposed equitable system in which people get what they deserve" (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, pp. 66–67). In this way, a consumer driven model in education works to decrease, not increase, the power of stakeholders since your only option for addressing your desires, wants, and needs is to find another provider. And this rhetoric with its underlying message of meritocracy impacts the legitimacy and function of all public schools, even those in areas where there are not physical charter or private schools (Horsford et al., 2019). The report card system in Ohio is required of all types of public schools, like the rural districts in this case study. So, all schools in the state are beholden to the narratives communicated about their "performance" from this performance accountability system.

For all the bluster about school choice, the majority of Americans hold a favorable view of their public schools. In 2020, the National School Boards Action Center (NSBAC) poll found that 72% of likely voters hold a favorable view of the public schools in their community, including 34% who say their view is very favorable (NSBAC, 2020). In the same poll, 64% think funding for public schools should be increased, and eight out of ten would support an increase in funding even if it meant they would pay more in taxes. There are about 61 million school age children in the U.S. (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2020). About 51 million or 80% of them attend public schools (NCES, 2020). About 5.7 million attend private schools, 3.1 million are enrolled in charter schools, and 1.6 million are homeschooled (NCES, 2020).

The overwhelming majority of U.S. school age children attend traditional public schools. Which begs the question, if school reform is really about serving students and their families, then why is policy and funding being directed into options that serve only 14% of the students in our

educational system? The next era of educational leaders will be tasked with finding ways to (re)claim authority for contributing to the development of educational policy that is equitable and serves the common good of all families and children. A fundamental shift will need to occur moving us from the current accountability culture and the focus on compliance to the empowerment of educational leaders to prioritize democratic goals for inclusion, responsibility, and advocacy for their districts.

Superintendents Not CEOs

In 2015, DeVos (as cited in Strauss, 2020b) made clear her position on traditional public schools: She called them "a dead end" during a speech at the SXSW EDU conference in Austin that year. She said:

> We are the beneficiaries of start-ups, ventures, and innovation in every other area of life, but we don't have that in education because it's a closed system, a closed industry, a closed market. It's a monopoly, a dead end. And the best and brightest innovators and risk-takers steer way clear of it. As long as education remains a closed system, we will never see the education equivalents of Google, Facebook, Amazon, PayPal, Wikipedia or Uber. We won't see any real innovation that benefits more than a handful of students. (p. para. 9)

This kind of neoliberal language becomes infused into how school leaders view their work and the very purpose of education. Based on the former Secretary of Education's quote, those of us working in education are left to question: Is public education a dead end? If I am a public-school leader, then I must not be one of the "best and brightest"? As an educational leader, I should view my work like that of a venture capitalist where the goal is maximizing private gain? And, for me, I also question: Do we really want our school leaders to act like Amazon's Jeff Bezos in terms of how those who work for them are treated? The sentiments expressed by Devos in this quote echo a larger erosion of a trust in a public and professional ethos to serve the common good. Under the ideas of neoliberalism and NPM, if you are truly talented and capable, then you would be working in the private not the public sector. This rhetoric and the policies supporting it have a profound impact on how school leaders view their professional agency and the nature of their work (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019).

Cuban (1998) in describing the role of superintendents in enacting school reform noted that "conflict is in the DNA of the superintendency" (p. 56). This conflict is the result of competing identities inherent in the role—as a manager, a politician, an instructional leader—and how these identities influence the decisions superintendents make about how to implement, or not, educational policy and mandates in their districts (Cuban, 1998). The roles of superintendents have shifted and expanded over time. There has always been a managerial, or CEO, aspect to the work of superintendents in terms of maintaining staff, managing budgets, and determine resource allocations (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Björk et al., 2014; Cuban, 1998). The political role is in many ways unavoidable as superintendents are the head of the district tasked with building alliances and working with boards of education, teacher unions, the state, and community members to advance their strategic initiatives (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Björk et al., 2014; Cuban, 1998).

But when it comes to school reform, the role of superintendents as instructional leaders has become the most fraught with conflict. As performance accountability became the stick to drive school reform under NCLB, superintendents shifted the role of instructional leadership form the district office to building principals under what were known as "site-based models" (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007). The premise was that allowing building leaders and teachers to make instructional decisions tied to increasing test scores was the most efficient means to hit performance accountability targets (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Björk et al., 2014). Educational research also shifted to an emphasis on how school leaders and teachers were meeting the challenge of hitting proficiency targets (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007). Björk et al. (2014) contended that the performance accountability school reforms since *ANAR* have "increased the awareness of the importance of superintendents in leading large-scale, systemic reforms (p. 448), which is centered on the degree to which district leaders enforce the rhetoric of testing. The role of superintendents as instructional leaders beyond that of driving accountability rhetoric and compliance at the building level has been largely ignored (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Björk et al., 2014; Shields, 2017). NPM managerialism practices further complicate how superintendents view the roles of their work. As the corporate management rhetoric of NPM is applied to the superintendency, it conflates the managerial role with the instructional leader role.

New Managerialism and the Superintendency

Anderson and Cohen (2018) explained, "managerialism … changes how we think about things like accountability which used to be known as professional *responsibility* and being *answerable to* our stakeholders and the public" (p. 9, emphasis added). Historically, accountability in education, whose professionals held an ethos of public service, meant being responsible and answerable to stakeholders and society writ large, not just compliance to a state or federal agency for testing mandates (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Herr, 2015; Horsford et al., 2019). Being *responsible for* and *answerable to* are not the same thing as being *accountabl*e in an "auditable" sense (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 9), but performance accountability has blurred this line and makes the two concepts interchangeable. Rationalizing responsibility as auditability makes those who oppose audit culture seem as if they want to be irrational and irresponsible (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). This switch in meaning also supports the political narrative pushed by school reformers entrenched in performance accountability that teacher unions that oppose value added measures for evaluations, progressive principals and district administrators who support resources for non-tested subjects and programs, and community members who want more say in the governance of their local schools are irrational and irresponsible (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019).

In corporate culture, managerialization creates an additional layer of leadership between those doing the work and corporate owners and stockholders who are primarily interested in profits (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). There are several repercussions for this type of organizational structure. First, it allows for a shift in authority from professionals in the occupation doing the work, which is defined as *occupational professionalism* or professionalism "from within," to external managers who are most concerned with efficiency and profit, which is defined as *organizational professionalism* or professionalism "from without" (Evetts, 2011, as cited in Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 13, emphasis in the original). In an educational setting, this manifests as teachers and administrators being "put in a position in which they must look to market- and test-based forms of accountability for direction rather than their professional instincts, training, associations, or unions" (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 152).

Historically, public professionals, like teachers and school leaders, did not have this additional layer of "from without" professional interference. Educators were viewed as "professional workers" who could manage "from within" and should be given the autonomy to

manage their own levels of performance and to facilitate their integrity, motivation, and creativity (Herr, 2015, p. 4). Herr (2015) explained that this traditional view of professionals who choose a career in education "assumed an ethical commitment and dedication reflective of a sense of calling" (p. 4); therefore, these professionals were viewed as trustworthy public servants who possessed legitimate expertise. The shift to organizational professionalism under NPM has eroded the legitimacy of public service professionals in the eyes of the public and has mandated professional control "from without" of public schools by policy reforms created by actors external to the schools where they are implemented (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; McDermott, 2011).

Second, managerialism removes control, judgment, and autonomy from the hands of those closest to the work—teachers, building principals, district leaders—and centralizes it in the hands of those outside the organization—politicians, corporate leaders, educational philanthropists— creating what is known as "steering from a distance" usually in the form of standardization of practice and accountability metrics (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 14). The assumption is that doing or being able to do the work of those being managed is not necessary, and there is a deference given to corporate culture styles of leadership as always being superior to public sector bureaucratic professional leadership (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019). Managerialism codifies the belief that educational leaders do not need a deep understanding of teaching and learning or what it feels like to be a teacher in order to make decisions about instructional practice or for setting district priorities (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 57). Under NPM, professionals in the public sector experience this shift in thinking as *new managerialism*, where any person who is trained in basic accounting and financial principles that maximize efficiency and return-on-investment can run any organization, including schools, no matter what the core purpose or practices of the organization may be (Horsford et al., 2019, p. 57).

In this way, NPM shapes how we view the world and defines what is of most value. Managerialism becomes not only a set of practices, but also the accepted way of conceptualizing how schools should be structured. It prioritizes leadership structure in education where supposedly "objective" managers who embrace the corporate mindset of efficiency and profit maximization should have centralized control and where using data to make "informed" decisions about the purpose of school and classroom instruction is prioritized (Anderson &

Cohen, 2018, p. 91). This justifies reducing students to names and test scores on cards and categorizing them only in terms of the value they add to better performance accountability measures for the school and district. Under this system, for educational leaders, the push is not to address student and community needs, but rather to improve test score ratings. Educational leaders have ended up acting like middle level corporate managers who get "results" by improving test score numbers**.** This type of professionalism is centered in market-based reforms; high stakes, outcome-based measures of performance; entrepreneurialism; decentralization; and discourses of professional "autonomy" and fiscal expediency (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 2).

Finally, in addition to being steered from a distance by data, educational professionals' agency is further "disciplined by the market, as they are forced to compete with their colleagues both within and without their units of organization" (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 14). This manifests through the rhetoric of performance accountability at all levels of the educational leadership arc (Bracey, 2009; Eisner, 2001; Horsford et al., 2017; Tienken & Mullen, 2016). Which is why as a teacher and district leader I found myself asking: Is my classroom doing better than the teacher's down the hall? Is our school performing better than the other one in the district? Is our district better than the similar one across the state? This culture of competition also supports neoliberal, market-based school reform since the assumption becomes that competition in the public sector will be a driver of innovation and improvement in the same way it is assumed to be in the private sector (Bracey, 2009; Eisner, 2001; Horsford et al., 2017; Tienken & Mullen, 2016).

Market-based or school choice reform pushes educators into an entrepreneurial mindset, where they view their work in individualistic terms. Resources are moved around in the system to enhance individual teacher, school, and administrator performance (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019). Since schools can maximize system incentives by maximizing test score performance, it follows that recruiting the best teachers and students is a desirable goal for educational leaders. However, public schools were instituted to serve and advocate for the common good of all families and children, not just individuals and certain communities. While it is certainly true that this lofty goal has never been perfectly achieved, there was still the promise that it could be (Horsford, 2019). As a result of NPM, educational leaders face a wide disconnect between the traditional ethos of a being a public sector professional who advocates and works for

the common good and the new entrepreneurial ethos demanded by market-based reform and rhetoric (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019).

Superintendents, as the most powerful leaders in a district, will need to lead in ways that move away from the entrepreneurial model of competition that currently pervades education and embrace a professional model grounded in democratic leadership practices that foster inclusion, responsibility, and advocacy. Developing dialogues and practices to counter the impacts of NPM and new managerialism on public schools which now prioritizes the goal of producing human capital for the workforce will require a significant shift in the assumptions underlying our collective beliefs regarding the purpose of schooling and our expectations for those who work in schools (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019; McDermott, 2011). This kind of systemic change cannot be realized if superintendents are not actively involved in prioritizing it.

Conclusion: (Re)claiming Public Education

Mounting a resistance to the current market-based reform system will need to be more than just a refusal or working around of current practices, instead, it will require building trust in new ways of seeing and framing the purposes of education that change the system altogether (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). For example, a group of teachers may be able to appropriate some NPM language to successfully convince their principal to allow the use of a teacher created assessment to use as a benchmark for measuring student progress toward standards mastery rather than a pre-packaged curriculum product. The principal may even use the language of NPM to support using this assessment with district administration by arguing the locally created instrument is still measuring progress toward the standards. The teachers in that particular school may have managed to carve out more space to develop their own curriculum and instructional practices than possible when their goals were centralized around alignment with external standards and testing. However, this only benefits this set of teachers in this particular school and does not change the overall system of NPM operating on a larger level.

Another example of working around NPM is the addition of criteria to current evaluation models for districts. The push to expand the criteria by which public schools are evaluated has gained momentum as performance accountability policies have been used to support school choice options that allow public school funds to be diverted to charter and private schools (Lubienski & Malin, 2020: Schneider, 2017; Schneider et al., 2018). In Georgia, educators are

leading a True Accountability for Georgia Schools (TAGS) movement that seeks to develop a "holistic performance measure" of school quality beyond high stakes testing results (Professional Association of Georgia Educators, 2020). In Texas, the Frisco Independent School District is undertaking an initiative to supplement the state-issued accountability ratings with a self-reported annual holistic review with community input (Frisco ISD, 2020). The Alliance for High Quality Education in Ohio supports efforts of 60 districts in the state to develop alternative reports for school quality measurement (Alliance for High Quality Education, 2020; Evans, Owens, & Ranly, in process). And while this work is important to expanding the definitions and criteria for accountability, it still centers the concept of being accountable to performance metrics.

Anderson and Cohen (2018) proposed an "overarching strategy of resistance" to new managerialism under NPM grounded in collective action to foster "*productive* resistance, productive in the sense that it would generate a new model of educator professionalism, one based on the democratic values of public education" (p. 109, emphasis in the original). This type of professionalism "promote[s] democratic values, that place the public good at its center, and cannot be created in isolation from communities" (p. 109). Educational leaders embracing this model are called to practice participatory governance, meaning they seek participation in setting social and educational policies that result in a public education system "designed by educators and the people it is intended to serve" (p. 113). Moving from an audit-culture to a responsibility-based culture will depend in large part on educational leaders working within and with their communities to reclaim legitimacy, trust, and support.

Understanding how individual teachers, principals, and district administrators are resisting NPM is valuable and can help us understand what will be needed as a foundation for more comprehensive systems change, which will require the building of "a larger education movement, based on a new alliance of educators, students, parents and communities" (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 97). Calling their model for leadership New Democratic Professionalism (NDP), Anderson and Cohen (2018) argued that interrupting and shifting the rhetoric of marketization and managerialism in education will require more than pushing back or refusing to comply with current policies. Systems change requires educators to understand how powerful interests have shaped the definition and practice of schooling over the last several decades so that they may participate in crafting a new narrative for countering prevailing market-based rhetoric

about public school reform and new policies that support democratic and socially just purposes for public education (Anderson & Cohen, 2018).

The characteristics of the NDP model has much in common with other leadership models that call for systemic change in education that de-center performance accountability in favor of equity, local governance, and advocacy for public education in general. For example, Shields (2017) has referred to this as *transformative* leadership, Anderson (2009) has defined it as *advocacy* leadership, and it is apparent in Sergiovanni's (1992) classic and enduring concept of *moral* leadership. I have chosen to use the NDP model as the lens for viewing the case study as I agree with Anderson and Cohen (2018) that "NPM and market-based school reform [are] threatening the very public sphere that is necessary for democracy to be meaningfully exercised" (p. 115). The ability for local communities to sustain public schools will largely be linked to the ability of the schools to connect with and be a vibrant part of the social fabric or public space for everyone not just families with kids in the classrooms.

Anderson and Cohen (2018) argued that a shift to NDP by educational leaders will be instrumental to building a new alliance for changing educational policy currently grounded in the new managerialism of NPM. They outlined three dimensions for the NDP model of democratic professionalism: inclusion, responsibility, and advocacy (p. 115). The first dimension, inclusion, has three focus areas: inclusion in governance, inclusion in opportunity, and inclusion in the public sphere. Inclusion in governance means democratic professionals must empower collaborative school governance for themselves, teachers, principals, the community, and the public in general. The second focus area, inclusion in opportunity, calls on democratic professionals to not just confirm access to education for all, but to ensure all students are receiving an equitable, appropriate, and quality education. Democratic professionals must address human and civil rights needs in education, gaps in opportunities, and diversification of the teaching force (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 117). The last focus area for inclusion is situating schooling within the public sphere. This means democratic professionals embrace a "strong public ethos and commitment to a social common good" where educators approach their work in schools and with families as fellow citizens, not as entrepreneurs competing for customers (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 118).

The second dimension of the NDP model is responsibility. This dimension of the model represents a shift in mindset for educational leaders from one of compliance with the audit

culture of performance accountability to one of being responsible and answerable to a school and larger social community. Anderson and Cohen (2018) explained, "teachers and leaders who view themselves as democratic professionals consistently ask questions like: To whom am I responsible? For whom am I responsible? What are the democratic implications of my actions?" (p. 120, emphasis in the original). Asking these types of questions allows leaders to center people as the subject for educators—the "to whom" and "for whom" of defining the work in schools. Educational leaders using this lens center the people—teachers, students, families, community members—who will be impacted as they make decisions. This is in sharp contrast to the corporate leadership model under NPM that centers outcomes or what I call the "to whats" and "for whats" where the "to what" is the state and the "for what" is test score metrics. Using the Anderson and Cohen (2018) model, professional responsibility toward the public creates space for engaging in curriculum development and defining purposes for schools that are democratic and create a public school that is truly "public" (p. 121).

The third, and last, dimension of the NDP is advocacy. Anderson and Cohen (2018) include this dimension to stress the need for educators to actively participate in building networks for public-sector democratic professionals aimed at forming social movements locally, nationally, and globally to counter the impacts of NPM. NPM is a larger neoliberal movement that seeks to privatize and profitize the public sector in general. The views and practices of NPM are not taking place in a vacuum; they are part of larger neoliberal polices that have driven competitive, individual gain to the forefront of the purpose for any business, institution, organization, or school in our American imagination. Creating space for a counter discourse and a focus on the value of a common good for determining the goals and organization of our public schools will need broad consensus and support. Anderson and Cohen (2018) stressed that educators must participate at the aggregate, not just the individual, level to change the current system and regain our professional status and legitimacy.

I will be using the three dimensions of Anderson and Cohen's (2018) NDP framework to explore how school leaders, especially superintendents, can move toward a culture of leadership that is driven by responsibility over auditability. Leading for the common good of society, communities, and schools rather than exclusively individual gains. No model can perfectly describe the leadership that happens in communities and schools, but NDP does address my desire to include democratic and advocacy elements in my study of school leadership. When the

idea of democratic processes and public sphere aims for public education are advanced, they are too often easily dismissed as irrational in our current market-driven policy climate because they prioritize goals that are in some sense ineffable, as they are not easy to quantify or objectively measure. In using the NDP framework, it is my goal to expand the scope of defining what constitutes capable and effective school leadership beyond the efficiency and standardization rhetoric of NPM.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this interpretivist case study was to explore how district leaders can counter the impacts of NPM and performance-based school reform on their professional agency, the schools they lead, and the communities they serve. The study sought to identify the kinds of practices and supports that could be implemented to break the cycle of "leading to the test" (Horsford et al., 2018, p. 152) by school leaders—in place for decades now—and move toward leadership practices that center the school community through inclusion, responsibility, and advocacy. The case study was comprised of a group of five school district superintendents from Hart county in central Ohio. At first, I thought the case study would focus on how they were developing local school report cards as a counter narrative to the performance metrics in the annual district reports from ODE. I quickly discovered there was much more to the case than the development of local report card criteria and stories. They had also created a common, county-wide team for mutual support of their community-based leadership practices, the development of a shared systematic approach to teaching and learning, and community alliance building. Called the Hart County Design Team (HCDT), this group included superintendents, school administrators, and teachers from each district. The development of this collaborative team and its functions became the primary focal point of the case study.

The HCDT group functions on many levels: as a support system for the superintendents themselves, as a team for crafting shared beliefs and values for student learning, with their teacher and school administrators, and as a collaborative space to strategize for the inclusion of board of education members, students, families, business leaders, and other community members in school governance. Participating in the HCDT seems to support each superintendent in their efforts to counter the entrepreneurial model of school leadership encouraged by NPM by giving them a space to step outside the expectations of current performance accountability rhetoric and consider alternative goals and aims for education. My main research question was: *How does the Hart County Design Team collaboration support the participating superintendents in countering the impacts of performance accountability on themselves as leaders, the schools in their districts, and the communities they serve?*

Qualitative Research Interpretivist Case Study

My research question sought to understand the practices and meaning making of a group. As such, I was not developing a hypothesis about educational leadership that could be proven correct or rejected. Therefore, my research was qualitative in nature and grounded in the assumption that "reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social world" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). My primary purpose was to "explore, describe, and explain" (Leavy, 2017, p. 9). I wanted to understand and describe this group's dynamics in ways that may be meaningful to the larger debate about setting educational policies, leading in schools, and defining the goals of schooling in a democratic society. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described four defining characteristics of qualitative research:

1. The overall purpose is to achieve an understanding of how people make meaning out of their lived experience, delineate their meaning-making process, and describe their interpretations;
2. The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis;
3. It primarily uses inductive research strategy where the researcher builds concepts, theories, or hypotheses from observations, interviews, documents, and intuitions gained in the field; and
4. The product of qualitative research is descriptive in nature based in words and pictures, rather than in results from statistics and numbers. (pp. 14–18)

The research I conducted fits all of these defining characteristics.

In conducting a qualitative study, I had several goals in mind for the project. First, I wanted to gain insight into how the superintendents supported each other in countering the pressure to prioritize raising test scores as the main determinant of effectiveness in the schools they lead. With the pervasiveness of performance accountability rhetoric, breaking the grip this policy has on setting goals for instruction, learning, and the purpose of education seems overwhelming and was something I was unable to do as a district leader myself. Second, I was interested in why the individual superintendents decided to collaborate for the good of the whole county's education system rather than focusing only on the reputation and success of their individual districts. And finally, I wondered what about their work was relevant to (re)claiming the legitimacy and relevance of public education in general, given the daunting prevalence of calls for school choice and privatization in national discourse about educational policy.

Glesne (2016) described qualitative research as the process of "translating life into text" (p. iv). In this sense, researchers are inspired by the observations made in the settings they have chosen to study, and they use this inspiration to gather data that allows a picture of the meanings of the data to form. Researchers then craft narratives to relate these lived and meaning-making experiences to the wider world (Glesne, 2016). Within qualitative studies, the Interpretivist paradigm ontologically calls on researchers to understand reality as a social construction that requires knowledge production be based upon building a mutual understanding between the researcher, the participants, and the readers of the findings (Glesne, 2016; Lincoln et al., 2018). The Interpretivist tradition embraces the relativity of reality and views research as an attempt to interpret perception in order to get at truth/reality (Lincoln et al., 2018). This view of the central purpose of research as reaching mutual understanding captures my goals and intentions for studying this group of superintendents and the way I planned to communicate my findings. The Interpretivist paradigm also allows room for my positionality as a former district leader to be a valid component of the research process since meaning is co-created as the researcher interacts with and observes the participants to interpret their reasoning and decision-making processes (Lincoln et al., 2018). As Guba (1990, as cited in Lincoln et al., 2018) suggested "inquirer and inquired into are fused into a single entity. Findings are literally the creation of the process of interaction between the two" (p. 115)

A case study design was the best fit for investigating my research question: *How does the Hart County Design Team collaboration support the participating superintendents in countering the impacts of performance accountability on themselves as leaders, the schools in their districts, and the communities they serve?* Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined a case study as the "in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 37). The HCDT is a bounded system that I have described in-depth in order to understand how school leaders can resist the impacts of performance accountability. The case was an example of a unique context that is what Creswell and Poth (2018) defined as "an intrinsic case study" as it is of "unusual interest in and of itself and needs to be described and detailed" (p. 98). The case study was descriptive in nature and followed the interpretivist orientation to case study of Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998), as they both hold to the philosophical assumption of knowledge and reality being constructed rather than discovered by the researcher (Yazan, 2015). The case was descriptive and exploratory in nature, and the primary goal was to determine what about the nature and work of the group in the study

could be of value to larger efforts to resist the impact of performance accountability on school leaders and reclaim democratic, inclusive, and socially just goals for school leadership (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998).

Research Context

Hart county is located in central Ohio and has about 32,000 residents (Ohio Developmental Services Agency, Office of Research, 2020). The county is named after a Revolutionary War hero and maintains a strong commitment to and recognition of military service. The county is overwhelming white with 96.2% of the population identifying as white with all subgroups at less than 1% with the exception of those identifying as mixed race and Hispanic at 1.9 and 1.6% of the population respectively. The average median income in the county is $48,733, which is well above the federal income poverty level of $26,200 for a family of 4 (Ohio Developmental Services Agency, Office of Research, 2020). However, averages can be deceiving; 51.6% reported household incomes of less than $49,999. The county has a child living in poverty rate of 18%, which is nearly even with the state average of 19% (University of Wisconsin, 2020). Of children living in poverty in the county, 23% are children identified as white, and 20% are Hispanic. In terms of health outcomes, substance abuse and the opioid epidemic have hit this area of Ohio quite hard. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation ranks Hart county 54th out of the 88 counties in Ohio in terms of health outcomes (University of Wisconsin, 2020). This low ranking is due to many factors including the high number of alcohol and drug related deaths each year.

Mostly comprised of small, rural farming communities, the county also has some light industrial and technology-based industry. The land is rolling with corn and soybean fields in abundance. As one drives the main highway bisecting the county, there is a sense of open sky and independence. Many farms have signs out for selling eggs, butter, and locally raised beef. These are communities that historically support themselves from the land as farmers in America's Breadbasket. Agriculture is still a large industry in Hart county with over 700 farms in the county that are over 300 acres in size (Ohio Developmental Services Agency, Office of Research, 2020). The local industrial sector employs about 6,800 workers with an average weekly wage of $695 (Ohio Developmental Services Agency, Office of Research, 2020). In terms of trends, there is some cause for concern. Manufacturing and service industry jobs have

been declining since 2013, and the effects of the last years in terms of the Trump Administration's tariffs on agricultural goods exported to China and the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on local business and industry have yet to be felt. The overall impression of the county is one of rural communities facing the challenge of a participating in an increasingly global economy in terms of maintaining population and sustaining economic viability.

Schlechty Center Resources

The five districts for this case study all participate in a collaborative group called the Hart County Design Team. The origins of this team began in 2013 when four of the districts in the case study applied for a Straight A Cohort grant from ODE. As part of the grant funding, the districts wanted to establish a county team for "strategic transformation," which would be supported and facilitated by a team from the Schlechty Center (SC) and the local Educational Resource Center (ESC). I will describe how the work of the HCDT evolved a result of grant application process in detail in Chapter 4. For now, it is important to note that the superintendents in the case study have attended SC trainings and conferences to varying degrees. They also use the language and resources of the SC in their work with teachers and principals at the district and school level as well as their collaborations at the county level. For the context of the case, I need to explain what the SC is and the types of resources they offer.

The Schlechty Center (SC) is a private, non-profit organization founded by Dr. Phillip Schlechty in 1988. Dr. Schlechty, who died in 2016, was a teacher in K-12 and post-secondary education and worked in the district office of North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg public school system. He also received numerous awards including the Horace Mann League's 2010 Outstanding Public Educator award; the American Federation of Teachers Quest Citation; the American Educational Research Association's Professional Service Award; and the Ohio State University's College of Education and Human Ecology Hall of Fame Award (Schlechty Center, 2020). The SC offers professional development, leadership coaching, and support network teams, as well as conferences and workshops for school leaders and practitioners. The superintendents in the case study have attended SC trainings and conferences to varying degrees. They also use the language and resources of the SC in their work at the district and school level as well as their collaborations at the county level.

One of the guiding premises for the work of the SC is that public schools today need "leaders of transformation" who have a clear image of what is happening in their schools and how to change the systems and structures of their schools to foster innovation and center students as the focus for all decisions made about schools and learning (Schlechty Center, 2016). The SC is critical of the current school accountability system in the many of same ways I have described. The SC advocates for

> a different kind of accountability system, one that is focused on improving performance as opposed to ranking and punishing people and institutions. We support an accountability system that fosters rewarding innovation, not regulating it; that fosters creativity, not simply narrow courses; that fosters flexibility, not rigidity. Indeed, we support an accountability system that is built on trust. Our interest is in saving public education, not destroying it. (Schlechty Center, 2016, p. 1)

To create the different kind of accountability system the SC believes that "schools and school systems need to be transformed from organizations that are bureaucratic institutions into organizations that are more like learning organizations" (Schlechty Center, 2016, p. 1). Using the Images of School Matrix developed by Dr. Schlechty in 2005 (see Figure 1), the Center works with school district leaders to create systems that foster a learning organization as the guiding metaphor for their work based on a shared set of beliefs, visions, and values for the community. This contrasts with a bureaucratic structure where procedures are 'based on commitments to rationality and efficiency at the expense of human values and personal growth" (Schlechty, 2009, p. 117).

In learning organizations, shared beliefs, visions, and values drive decisions about resource allocation, classroom practice, and curricula. For this to happen, the school leader must shift from leading with systems for "compliance and attendance" to systems that "nurture attention and commitment" (Schlechty Center, 2013, p. 8). The SC grounds this work in the concept of transformation of the school system rather than reform. Schlechty (2009) explained:

> Transformation by necessity includes altering the beliefs, values, and meanings—the culture—in which programs are embedded, as well as changing the current system of rules, roles, and relationships—social structure—so that the innovations needed will be supported. Reform, in contrast, means only installing innovations that will work with the context of the existing structure and culture of schools. (p. 3)

Figure 1

Schlechty Center, Images of School Matrix

Images of School

Core Business	Student as:	Parent as:	Teacher as:	Principal as:	Supt. & CO as:	School Board as:	Likely Classroom Profiles	Level of Student Learning Bloom's Taxonomy	Guiding Metaphor
Designing Engaging Academic Work for Students & Leading Them to Success in That Work	Volunteer & Knowledge Worker	Partner & Member of the School Community	Leader, Designer, & Guide to Instruction	Leader of Leaders	Moral and Intellectual Leader & Capacity Builders	Community Builders & Advocates for Schools	Highly Engaged	Create, Evaluate, Analyze, Apply, Understand, Remember	Learning Organization
Diagnosis, Prescription, & Treatment	Client	Guarantor & Questionable Ally	Professional Performer & Presenter, or Clinician & Diagnostician	Chief of Staff	CEO & Technicians and Support Staff	Board of Directors	Well Managed	Analyze, Apply, Understand, & Sometimes Remember Long Term	Professional Service Delivery Organization
Testing, Remediation, & Reporting	Raw Material & Product	Supply Source & Determinant of Product Quality	Skilled Worker	Shop Foreman	Plant Manager & Inspectors and Supervisors	Owners & Advocates	Passive Congenial	Understand, but Unlikely to Remember Long Term	Factory
Labeling, Categorizing, Placement, & Recording	Excess Inventory	Primary Shipper & Receiver	Clerk & Keeper of Records	Midlevel Bureaucrat & Keeper of the Keys	Property Manager & Directors of Maintenance, Shipping, and Personnel	Safety Inspectors & Fire Marshals	Threatened	Learn Little	Warehouse
Containment, Monitoring, Corrective Action, & Punishment	Inmate	Distrusted Visitor	Guard	Warden	Bureau Chief & Department Directors, Hearing Officers, and Parole Officers	Hearing Officers & Parole Board	Conflict Habituated	Students Develop Negative Attitudes Toward Disciplined Learning	Prison

One of the key resources the SC uses to guide this shift is the establishment of Design Teams (see Appendix A). These teams can be district and school based with the primary goal being their members are the "change agents" who focus their work on systems change to support the school's and district's transformation toward being a learning organization (Schlechty Center, 2016). The Design Teams also facilitate the creation of future focused beliefs, vision, and mission and support the development of a common language for applying these values to the daily work and decisions of the school or district. Teachers, principals, central office staff, the board of education, the community and the superintendent then share this common understanding of the commitments and direction that has been set for the school district. This common language is captured in a Directional System document and is used as a reference guide

for all members of the school and district community (Schlechty Center, 2016). See Appendix B for examples of Directional System documents for the districts participating in the case study.

This case study is about the role of district leaders. Under the SC guiding metaphor of a learning organization, the role of the superintendent is as "a moral and intellectual leader and capacity builder" (Schlechty, 2009, p. 132). The superintendent takes a central role in creating and articulating a clear, future-focused direction for the district that can be enacted at the school level. Schlechty (2009) asserted that "what the superintendent values, and the style of operation supported by the superintendent, will be manifest throughout the whole system" (p. 132). Learning communities are held together by commitments to common beliefs, traditions, and values. The office of the superintendent embodies the moral authority represented by these beliefs, traditions, and values, and this authority cannot be delegated (Schlechty, 2009). This means not controlling or limiting the building of capacity to be future-focused, maintaining the directional system, and acting strategically. The superintendent's role is to design systems that support this process, not just implementing programs and problem-solving actions.

Schlechty (2009) referred to this as transformational leadership. For school transformation to occur, the top-level leader, the superintendent, must be resolute that the transformation is needed and that they are prepared to undertake leading the effort. Transformational leadership cannot be delegated in this sense. Superintendents are also to be a source of inspiration through the way they act in their leadership and the way they speak about the district. In this sense, superintendents embrace the role of a reader and storyteller (Schlechty, 2009). Superintendents must be willing to be scholars, as transforming systems is an intellectual endeavor. This means they are engaged in finding out all they can about what it means to lead with transformation in mind. Additionally, much of the work of a transformational leader is being a storyteller. By this, Schlechty (2009) means the superintendent acts as the chief narrator, using images and metaphors to describe the work being done for systems change rather than relying only on statistics and numbers to do so.

Finally, transformational leaders should be actively involved with other leaders who share these aims. The SC provides this support by offering network groups for participating districts. There is a national SC Superintendent Leadership network and some regional networks. Participation in these networks gives the district access to "premium resources" from the SC and support by interacting with other leaders using the SC frameworks (Schlechty Center, 2020).

There are also teams from the SC assigned to each network. The Hart County superintendents participate in the NE Ohio Schlechty Network.

Participants

There are five school district superintendents who were members of the HCDT when I began observing the group in the late fall of 2018. Three districts, Maintown City Schools, Fielding Schools, and Fairwind Schools, actively participated in the study. I was able to observe these superintendents at the HCDT meeting, conduct interviews with them, and gather artifacts from their districts for the study. The other two districts were part of my HCDT planning meeting observations, but I did not obtain rich data from them. The following are brief descriptions of each superintendent, their district, and their level of involvement in the case study, along with three additional participants, two who work for the Schlechty Center, and myself as researcher/participant. I have used pseudonyms for the superintendents and the districts in the study. Each participant had the option of choosing their pseudonym. The two members from the Schlechty Center opted to have their actual names used in the dissertation.

Dianna Prince, Maintown City Schools. Maintown City is the largest of the districts in the case study. The district serves about 1,500 students and has separate buildings for the high school, middle, and elementary grades. There is a separate Board of Education office as well, and Superintendent Prince has an office in this space. Dianna has been with the district for ten years. She was one of the founding members of the HCDT group and was a leader in writing the grant that started the team. She regularly attends Schlechty Center trainings and conferences. Dianna is a leader for the work. She often serves as the facilitator when the superintendents meet to plan for the HCDT meetings. Dianna was also how I connected with the group for the case study. We were both students in Miami University's doctoral program and my advisor, Dr. Tom Poetter, recommended I contact her about doing a study of the group as it seemed a good fit with my research interests. Dianna and I talked at length on multiple occasions.

Debra Meyer & Carol Glickmon, Fielding Schools. Fielding Schools serves about 400 total students in a state-of-the-art K-12 building. The superintendent's office is in this same space. The district is known for its award-winning Agricultural program, which is source of pride for the entire community. The district is also known for the STEM focus in grades K-8. The former superintendent, Carol Glickmon, was a member of the founding team for the HCDT. The

current superintendent, Debra Meyer, was a principal during this time and worked closely with Carol to implement the SC Design Team and other frameworks at Fielding Schools. She also participated in the book study as part of the HCDT. Debra is highly invested in the work of the HCDT and supports the systems in Fielding now that she is superintendent. I spoke with both Carol and Debra at length about the formation of the HCDT and their involvement in the work.

James Bond, Fairwind Schools. Fairwind Schools serves about 307 students also in a K-12 building. Superintendent Bond's office is in this same building. James is long time resident of Hart county and wants the county to prosper since his grandchildren are growing up there. James was retired but returned to the superintendency. His wife is also an educator working at Fairwind. Previously, the high school principal from Fairwind was attending the HCDT meetings, but the superintendent was not. James has become an active member of the HCDT group and sees it as a valuable tool for promoting economic and educational sustainability in the county. I was able to interview James at length, and he provided several key artifacts for how he incorporates the HCDT work into his district leadership.

Idina Mensol & Maxine Grow, Solomontown Schools. Solomontown Schools serves about 715 students. The district's demographics are greatly influenced by the presence of a mid-size private university in the town. Maxine Grow, the former superintendent, was a major influence in the establishment of the HCDT. Solomontown Schools was implementing the SC frameworks even prior to the formation of the HCDT. I was able to interview Maxine about her involvement with the formation of the HCDT. Maxine retired about two years ago. Her successor is Idina Mensol. While she did not know Maxine well, Idina knew several of the other superintendents in the HCDT, especially Carol Glickmon, the former superintendent of Fielding Schools who was her mentor. Idina attended several of the early HCDT planning meetings I observed but later stopped coming. There seem to be several reasons for her taking a step back from the group, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

John Smith. Readerville Schools. Readerville Schools serves about 362 students in a K-12 complex. John Smith is new to the group. When I began my observations in the late fall of 2018, he had just taken the position as superintendent after being a district principal. He attended the HCDT meetings, but it was clear he was still wrapping his head around the ideas and work of the group. Several of the other leaders who have been involved in the work for years observed that John was a new superintendent and still learning the ropes, so to speak, for the role in

general and trying to survive in a system that is very individual-district-task-oriented. So suddenly being involved in a county wide group probably seemed very foreign to him. To his credit, John was engaged in all of the meetings I observed and seemed interested in finding out more about how to implement the design team frameworks in his district. However, for the case study, I was not able to meet with John for an interview, so I am not sure what his thoughts were about the way the HCDT functioned and how he planned to pursue involvement with the team in the future. I believe John was simply getting adjusted to the superintendency and had many demands on his time as well as learning himself what the roles and goals of the HCDT were.

Sandy Jenkins and Annissa Roland, Schlechty Center Network Team. The SC operates district leader support networks across the country. The participants in the study are part of the NE Ohio Network group. I interviewed these two members of the SC NE Ohio Network team who work directly with the Hart County superintendents. These interviews primarily served for me to clarify that I understood the SC frameworks and how the HCDT used the resources. Sandy and Annissa were not members of the case in the sense that they attended the HCDT meetings, but their input lent reliability and validity to my descriptive analysis.

Cynthia Sanders, Researcher and Participant. It is important for me to acknowledge that my role as the researcher in this study was influenced by my lived experience as a district leader. There was a constant play of the emic and etic views for me as I observed the group. I found myself fluctuating along the participant/researcher continuum as the study progressed (Glesne, 2016). At times I was strictly an observer when attending meetings, but during interviews with the some of the participants, my shared background as a district leader led to led to interactions that were more like colleagues having a conversation rather than like the typical interactions of a traditional, qualitative case study researcher, who might be more detached. This was an asset in some ways, as it allowed me to gain acceptance and trust to better understand the whole group, the nuances of each district site, and the perspective of each participant on motivations for the HCDT collaboration and work. However, I also recognized the possibility this could bias my interpretations of the data, so I engaged in regular member checks and self-reflection along the way.

I also brought my interest in how district leaders can reclaim space to center the connection between public schooling and sustaining democracy to my observations of their work. I am heavily influenced by John Dewey's (1918/2018) philosophy of education as an

institution that promotes democracy. I am also a follower of Paulo Freire (1970/2018) and his calls for conscientization (approximate English translation of conscientização) or consciousness raising as a purpose of education so that students are empowered to critically question the economic, social, and political systems in which they live. I bring these lenses to my interpretation of the case study. I see elements of these philosophies in the work for the HCDT members. However, the participants in the case study may not share these views of educational philosophy and educational purposes.

Boundaries of the Case

By nature, a case study is a bounded phenomenon. These superintendents are serving in rural, racially homogenous school districts in central Ohio. In keeping with the goal to explore how district leaders can resist/push back against new managerialism under NPM and the competitive entrepreneurial leadership expectations, I only studied the superintendents and their view of the work they are engaging in for systems change. Since I chose to focus on the district leaders only, I did not collect data from other stakeholders such as teachers, principals, students, or other community members. While this would certainly be interesting and worthwhile, I needed to limit the scope of the project.

Reliability and Validity

Typically, qualitative, interpretivist, case study researchers have sought to triangulate their data collection to argue for and support the validity of their research conclusions. Glesne (2016) suggested that more recent approaches to validity seek to deepen the interpretation and understanding from more than the three sources triangulation implies. This is referred to as crystallization of data (Glesne, 2016, p. 45). I incorporated multiple sources of data in this study including artifact gathering, document collection, multiple interviews, and observations. However, the Coronavirus pandemic did impact my study. I was not able to hold a final focus group to review my case description with all the participants. Also, some members of the group did not respond to member checking emails in the fall. No doubt they were entrenched in the intricacies of handling the pandemic response in schools. However, I did member checks along the way with the data collection after each observed meeting and interview.

Ethics

I followed all the standards for research established by Miami University and obtained IRB approval for my study. All observations and data recordings for the study were kept secure throughout the process. I have also used pseudonyms for all participant names and school districts. I obtained informed consent form each participant prior to capturing or using any data for the study, see Appendix E for a copy of informed consent document. I routinely conducted member checks to ensure my interpretations of observations, conversations, and artifacts were accurate. In addition, I made sure the participants knew their participation was voluntary and respected their time and ability to meet with me for interviews.

Data Collection

Data collection began with IRB approval for a pilot study in the Fall of 2018. After approval of the research proposal in the spring of 2020, I applied for and was granted an amendment to continue the work of the pilot study as dissertation research. Data collection continued through the spring, summer, and early fall of 2020. I was able to experience what Glesne (2016) described as a "long-term immersion in the field" (p. 21), collecting data through observation of the HCDT planning meetings, interviews with current and past members of the HCDT, as well as the review of artifacts and historical documentation. While my research design was a case study, there were elements of ethnography, as I sought to provide what Geertz (1973, as cited in Glesne, 2016) terms a thick description of how the group defined the purpose of the HCDT, the collaborative culture of the team, and their understanding of what it means to be a school leader who prioritizes community-based goals over compliance with performance accountability metrics.

I observed HCDT planning meetings in the fall of 2018, the spring and fall of 2019, and in early spring of 2020. I attended several of these meetings in person as well as via conference call. With permission, I recorded these meetings and took field notes. I was able to conduct member checks with participants after these meetings to clarify the discussions and confirm my understanding of the group's interactions. However, the Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent abrupt closure of school buildings interrupted the work of the team in the late spring of 2020 as the superintendents dealt with the abrupt move to remote learning. This continued into the fall of 2020. The work of the HCDT was suspended during this time. This was a major disruption to my

research, as I had planned to continue collecting observational data of HCDT planning meetings into the fall of 2020. Despite this interruption, I am confident I collected enough observational data from the pilot study and for the school year I was in the field to offer an accurate account of how the team functioned and viewed the nature of the work.

In addition to observing the HCDT planning meetings, I also conducted interviews with four of the five superintendents in the study. While I was able to meet John Smith of Readerville Schools in person during the HCDT planning meetings, we were not able to schedule a one-on-one interview during the research process. I met in person, at length, with James Bond of Fairwind Schools and Idina Mensol of Solomontown Schools once during the research process. Dianna Prince of Maintown City Schools and Debra Meyer of Fielding Schools met with me for in-depth interviews and conversations multiple times over the course of the case study, both in-person and over the phone. I also interviewed the former superintendents who helped found the HCDT, Maxine Grow and Carol Glickmon. I also interviewed the team from the Schlechty Center who work closely with the participating superintendents at conferences and as part of the local network supporting districts using the Schlechty Center resources in Ohio.

Kvale (2007) suggested that researchers can use interviews in the sense of conversation, which is the "basic mode of human interaction (p. 2). The nature of the interview instrument can range from highly structured questions to purely conversational. Kvale (2007) proposed that the "research interview is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee" (p. 2). In preparing for the interviews with the superintendents, former superintendents, and the Schlechty Network Team, I opted for a semi-structured approach. I had a basic list of questions for gathering background data but allowed for the dialogue and interactions we had to guide the remainder of the time we spoke, so the majority of the interviews became unstructured or conversational (Glesne, 2016, p. 96). I recorded each interview and took field notes for later reference during each session. I approached the interview process with the study participants as a journey, like I was a traveler to their country with the hope I would have an intriguing tale to tell when I returned. I use the *traveler metaphor* for my approach to collecting data from the interviews since I viewed "interviewing and analysis as intertwined phases of knowledge construction with an emphasis on the narrative to be told to an audience" when my research was completed (Kvale, 2007. p. 21).

I collected a wide range of artifacts as well for the study, including historical documentation about the founding of the HCDT, district profiles, information about the Schlechty Center materials and framework the team uses, and examples of the HCDT's work during their larger county meetings. I was able to secure a copy and review the original grant application, which was the historical basis for the group coming together. I also read Schlechty's (2009) *Leading for Learning*, which was the text used for the book study that solidified the formation of the HCDT and is still used by several of the superintendents with their boards of education and new team members for on-boarding. The language of the Schlechty Center and frameworks was both foundational and still used by the group, so understanding its context and how the group has agreed upon an interpretation of these materials was critical to understanding their work. Reviewing these historical documents enabled me to understand the basis and defining language for the current work of the group. Other historical documents collected for analysis included copies of two of the district's local quality reports, the minutes of early HCDT meetings, press releases, and other public communications the group has released to the general public. These historical artifacts were used to contextualize the current work of the group and for determining how the group's views have changed as the work has progressed and grown over time.

Data Analysis

> Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described data analysis as
>
> the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning. (p. 202)

Throughout my data collection, I used Saldaña's (2016) concept of analytic memos to record reflections and themes. Working from my field notes, recordings, and artifacts I used these analytic memos to form descriptions of recurring shared themes the members used to describe the purpose and function of the HCDT. I also found areas where the individual members had differing opinions about the main goals for the work and how they applied the HCDT concepts in their districts. I primarily used in vivo coding for this purpose, which allowed me to identify themes in the data terms used by participants themselves (Saldaña, 2016). The case was descriptive and exploratory in nature, so using this method of data analysis worked well for me.

Since case study is "an intensive holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit, conveying an understanding of the case is the paramount consideration in analyzing the data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 233). I have chosen to present the findings as narrative reflections on how the HCDT team functions as a collaborative support group for the participating superintendents by describing how they interacted as a group and the materials they created for the HCDT members. I also reflect on how membership in the larger HCDT supports system change in the individual districts by highlighting some examples. As I have pondered the nature of storytelling and its central role in the rhetoric of performance accountability to control the political narrative about how America's public schools are "failing" (Bracey, 2009; Stone, 2012), I wanted this case study to capture how the HCDT has a different narrative to offer about how schools can serve and be responsible to their communities.

I did identify patterns and themes to describe the ways in which this group of school leaders are defining how they want the quality and performance of their schools to be measured. But my larger effort was to craft a mutual meaning-making process with the participants allowing space for the experiences and viewpoints of these leaders to be understood and felt by the reader in ways that fall outside the traditional coding for themes. I sought to tell a story about how it is possible to center community-based goals for district leadership that deemphasize accountability. Therefore, rather than grouping my findings into the thematic categories I generated, I have chosen to discuss the themes and patterns in how the group describes the purpose and function of the HCDT by using the mission statement categories the group created (see Figure 2 in Chapter 4). I embedded these categorical references into the narratives of how the group's work is carried out collectively at the county level and in the individual districts. In my effort to "translate life into text," as Glesne (2016) so elegantly described qualitative research (p. iv), my goal was for the case study to be useful not only to scholars, but also to practitioners and others engaged in the work of cultivating democratic leadership, expanding definitions of the purpose of schooling, and reclaiming public education's role in our democratic society.

Chapter 4: Dreaming and Doing

It is my first meeting with Superintendent Dianna Prince. We are sitting in her office, and she is looking for a copy of district materials to share with me. As she rummages, I take in her office. The walls are covered in photos of her with students and teachers and with inspirational quotes about teaching and learning. A large fish aquarium lines the back wall behind her desk. Various small animals are in cages along the floor. Holdouts from her years as a science teacher she tells me.

"Got it," Dianna says, returning to the large conference table where we are sitting. "So, using the framework, the team was able to create common language around the work," she says.

We have been talking about her efforts to create public communication pieces for the district that highlight narratives about the success of the local schools, teachers, and students. She calls it a "district report" and explains that it offers a counternarrative to the state report card "grades," which are often low in some categories, making the district appear less successful than she believes is accurate. Dianna emphasizes that she feels this is because the state primarily focuses on standardized proficiency testing of students using a state mandated assessment to determine if schools are effective. The district report, in contrast, includes measures beyond "one test on one day," such as data from teacher-chosen assessments given throughout the year and narrative highlights about service-learning projects that link students with the community.

I look over the papers on the table including a copy of the latest district report with pictures of smiling students and teachers on the cover. Just what I need, I am thinking, an example of what the district and community values beyond test score data. There are local awards listed and a description of an internship program with local businesses. I ask her if it creates tension having a district report that uses different metrics for measuring school, teacher, and student success from the state's depiction of the district using performance accountability metrics.

"It can," she admits, "but mostly it's the press who call, not my families. And our answer is 'if you want to talk about the state report card, we can't speak to that. We don't understand their [ODE's] metrics. We have a district report card if you want to ask questions about it.'"

She then offers that her district is not the only one crafting a district report. There are four other superintendents in the county doing similar work. The superintendents support one another

in many ways, Dianna explains, including banding together to send out a unified message when the state report cards are released.

"When the press starts calling, all of us give the same answer 'Look at our district reports not the state's.'" She pauses and smiles, "Hart County is special, and that's how we can push back!"

I take this in for a moment. As a former teacher and district manager, I am struggling to understand how a superintendent, or even a group of them, can dismiss the state report card system and the threat of state interventions that can fall on districts who fail to meet test score expectations. I ask her if she worries about the state interventions and the general public's reactions if her district does not hit the targets required under Ohio's current performance accountability system.

She looks me in the eye over the table, "At some point, you just can't be afraid of it anymore."

I am not sure what to think. The simplicity of "just be fearless" in her statement rings true, but I also know how incredibly difficult it is to do when you have the audit-culture pressure of performance metrics hanging over your head as a district administrator. How do you get to that point I wonder—the point where you decide to be a fearless leader?

It Started with a Grant Application

In 2010, Dianna Prince and Carol Glickmon became superintendents in Hart County. The two women knew each other well and grew up together in a sense as school leaders. They were both familiar with Solomontown Schools, another district in the County, and its reputation as an innovative district that did unique things in terms of community involvement and literacy programs. The superintendent of Solomontown, Maxine Grow, had been involved with and using the SC resources for a while. Prior to her taking the superintendency at Solomontown, she had been part of a leadership team implementing the SC systems and frameworks at another district. Dianna described Maxine as the "big guru" in terms of introducing the SC ideas and practices to other school leaders in the county.

I had the opportunity to interview Maxine in the summer of 2020. Her experience in teaching and leadership was extensive. She had been a teacher working with students from Pre-kindergarten to college in her career. She also had been a principal and school head in Tennessee

then working in school and district administration in Ohio. As if that were not impressive enough, Maxine also served as president of the Ohio Association of Administrators of State and Federal Education Programs (OAASFEP), which is an organization that supports school and district administrators in understanding and complying with state and federal programs/mandates. In short, she is a veteran educator who understands the complexity and conflict inherent in wanting to serve local students, schools, and communities while still meeting external compliance pressures.

When I asked Maxine to describe the SC framework to me, she stressed the importance of allowing time for "opening up great thinking" that empowers school leaders to "move away from compliance motivators for leadership." Given her background with OAASFEP, I asked her about the conflict between compliance and creativity, how *exactly* do the SC frameworks work to make the shift possible? Maxine laughed a bit at that. She described it as creating space to "think beyond the structures in place." In a word, she said it is "liberating." But she stressed that leaders have to mentally accept being liberated, to let go of the fear of compliance and move forward with centering their community and students in their leadership decisions and culture building. Things were getting a little metacognitive for me as we talked. So, the "secret sauce" of becoming a fearless leader is entering the headspace or simply deciding to be a fearless leader? Well, basically, yes, according to Maxine. She remembered when the group was deciding how to move forward at the county level in 2010; there was this shared belief that, while there was a conflict between meeting state and federal mandates and centering community needs, as a collective body they could find a way to "intertwine" the two and build something special. They were convinced they could fundamentally change the system.

As Maxine guided the group in understanding the SC resources, especially the ideas of creating design teams for systems change, the idea of writing a grant to get funding for implementation took shape. Dianna said that the energy around the collective grant grew as she, Carol, and the woman leading the local Educational Service Center (ESC), Jean Wood, realized that the SC resources and frameworks were all the things they had dreamed about doing as school leaders in terms of not just working within the current systems and structures of schooling, but changing and transforming them. Rather than writing individual grants for funding, the group decided to write a collective grant, which was also a good fit with the push to fund educational collaboratives in Northwest Ohio by the governor at the time. The four

superintendents, Dianna Prince of Maintown Schools, Carol Glickmon of Fielding Schools, Maxine Grow of Solomontown Schools, and Bob Ross, the superintendent of Fairwind Schools at the time, decided to write the grant. They were joined by the local ESC superintendent, Jean Wood, who was also heavily invested in the ideas of the SC. The ESC would work to help with implementation and trainings as part of the grant.

Dianna explained, "So four women and Bob Ross set off to write a grant to make a difference and work together to change the world," but they weren't sure how to explain this in the grant proposal. They knew they wanted to share resources and create a way for the districts to work together. They also wanted to build support networks that extended to the building principals and teachers, not just the superintendents. They held a meeting that included the superintendents, some building principals, and other stakeholders to discuss the wording for the grant that would describe what they were trying to achieve. After several hours, nothing was gelling, and everyone was getting tired. Finally, a principal from Solomontown Schools said, "What if we created a county level Design Team? Then we can embed all the other stuff we want to do. We are already playing with SC design teams in our districts already."

Dianna said this was the light bulb moment. They expanded the grant description to include county-level supports, like training from the SC for coaches to work with teachers in the buildings, but the focus of the grant became creating a county level design team, the HCDT. This was unusual for the SC model in that the group would be for the whole county rather than an individual district. Also that night, Dianna said the districts agreed that even if the grant was denied, the HCDT "was the thing we're going to cultivate and grow; we don't need the grant money to do it." In the grant application, the four districts proposed the basic framework for the collaborative HCDT:

> Strategic Transformation: Schlechty Center will facilitate Hart County Design Team (board members, leaders, teachers, business/community stakeholders—all districts) to transform environments and improve outcomes for students, families, and Hart County at large. Districts will redesign systems—across districts and across sectors—to enhance districts & community capacity to support & sustain innovations at the building and classroom levels; to redesign schools, so they are more clearly focused on providing quality work for children; ensure the true focus of all decisions are to help teachers, parents, & partners is to understand the characteristics of quality student work, ensure

> teachers have tools & support to design & deliver the highest quality work for students; and increase efficiencies/decrease long term costs.

In this wording, it is clear the group wanted to do more than simply increase test scores or put more resources into high-stakes test preparation. The first sentences stressed that their ambition was to use the capacity of the districts to benefit the community and "Hart County at large." ODE denied the grant.

As they had pledged, the districts decided to move forward with the work of creating a county-wide design team anyway. In the summer of 2014, the superintendents of the districts, building principals, and groups of teachers attended a three-day professional development Schlechty Center seminar in Florida. Upon their return, for the 2014–2015 school year, these same teams engaged in a year-long book study of Schlechty's (2009) *Leading for Learning.* This book study was facilitated by the local Educational Service Center (ESC) in whole group meetings to discuss the book and the SC language around school transformation and systems change, particularly the differences between being a bureaucracy and a learning organization. The decision to begin with a book study allowed the group to really dig in to understanding what adopting the SC frameworks would entail and the level of commitment from all involved that would be required to make it happen. The book study was key to creating a common language around transformation and systems change. It also ensured that each district was on the same page about what it means to be a learning organization not a bureaucracy, which empowered the work.

After the book study, in 2015–2016, the group began working through the Images of School matrix to define where each district was positioned in terms of achieving the guiding metaphor of being a learning organization as well as where the collective education system for county resided on the chart. There are two layers of how the HCDT functions. On one level, the superintendents meet to plan the meeting agenda and activities for the larger group of principals and teachers. For the case study, I observed the planning meetings with just the HCDT superintendents, the first layer. The extended HCDT group is made up of about 35 people, including principals, teachers, and superintendents. This larger group meets and takes the ideas and discussions about system change concepts back to the other teachers and staff in their buildings.

In this way, the work spiraled outward in nature. The superintendents with the ESC met to plan content and activities for the HCDT meetings. The building principals and teachers who attended the HCDT group meetings would take the ideas, concepts, and Directional System ideas back to the individual schools in each district. There was some connection and thinking about defining what it means to be a student in Hart County, and the group also did some work developing county-wide collaborative systems to share resources, but at this point, the HCDT was serving mainly as a space where the district teams could support one another in developing their individual district materials, rather than creating a county-wide set of values, beliefs, and practices.

In 2016–2017, the HCDT began developing a common language for practices, programs, personnel, and policy to define what it means to be a student in Hart County. The group wanted to develop this common statement into visible artifacts and messages that could be shared with the wider community of students, parents, community members, boards of education, the county chamber, and beyond. A fifth district, Readerville Schools, joined the group. HCDT started developing a common vision/slogan and mission statement. The group was gaining momentum to bring their individual work together to create goals for the county at large (see Figure 2).

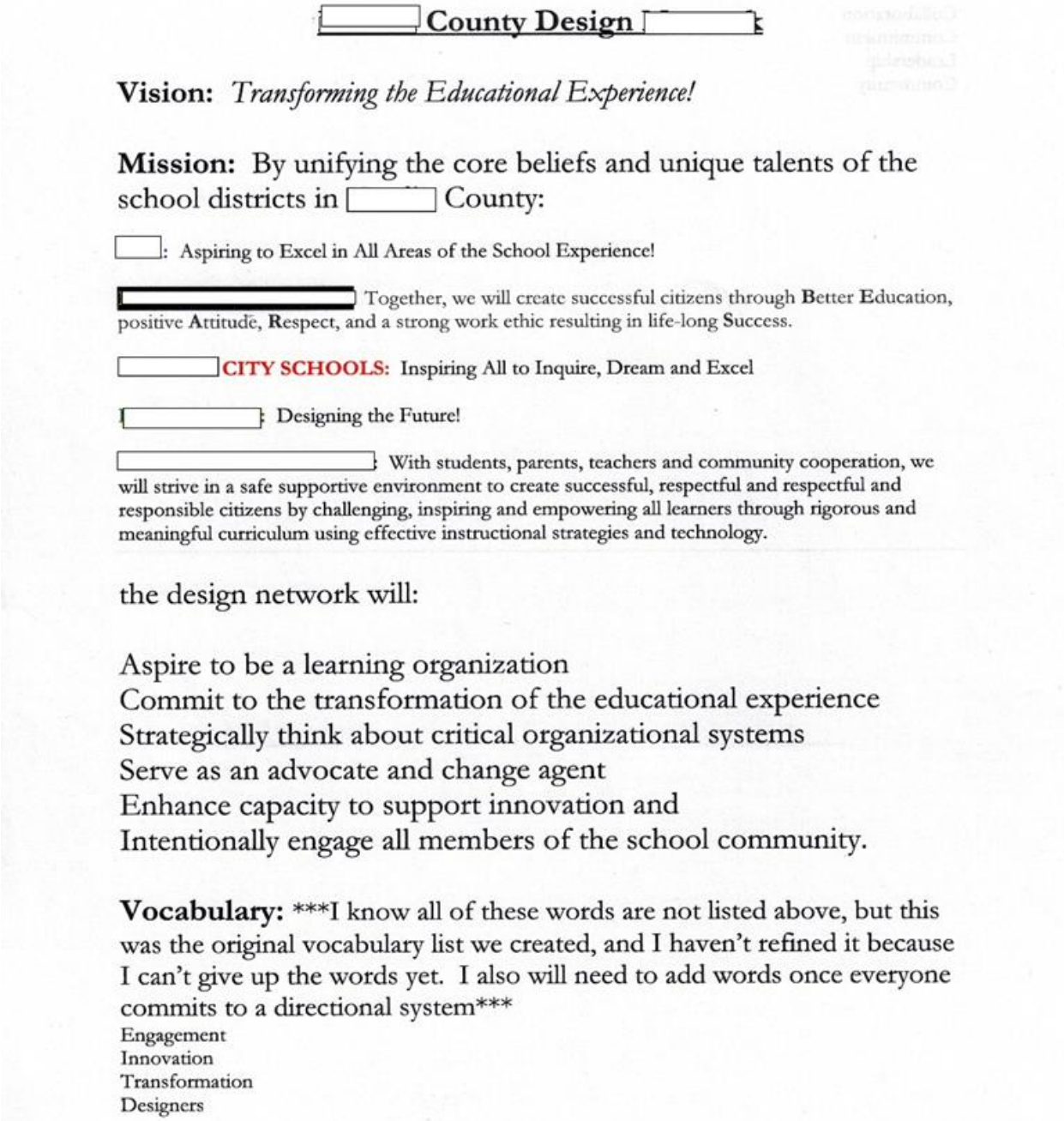
Over the remainder of the 2016–2017 school year and into 2017–2018, the group continued working on their individual district Directional Systems and coming together as a larger team to discuss possibilities for county-wide systems and practices. However, there was a lag in the work during this time. There was some turnover in membership as new board members were elected in several districts, and two of the districts hired new superintendents. This necessitated a bit of regrouping as the new members were on-boarded. Several of the participants described this period as “taking stock” and revisiting the work on the components of the SC frameworks in the individual districts.

In year five, the 2018–2019 school year, I began observing the group. I first met with Dianna Prince, the superintendent of Maintown City Schools. I have described some of this meeting already. That day, she also expressed that the HCDT would once again focus on the work of creating a county-wide Directional System document for the upcoming year. Two of the districts in the HCDT, Maintown City Schools and Fairwind Schools, had also developed school district annual reports as counter narratives to ODE’s state report card system. Dianna was

hoping that the group would take up creating a county level school report as well in the coming year.

Figure 2

HCDT Preliminary Vision and Mission Statement



[ ] County Design [ ]

Vision: *Transforming the Educational Experience!*

Mission: By unifying the core beliefs and unique talents of the school districts in [ ] County:

[ ]: Aspiring to Excel in All Areas of the School Experience!

[ ] Together, we will create successful citizens through **B**etter **E**ducation, positive **A**ttitude, **R**espect, and a strong work ethic resulting in life-long **S**uccess.

[ ] **CITY SCHOOLS:** Inspiring All to Inquire, Dream and Excel

[ ]: Designing the Future!

[ ]: With students, parents, teachers and community cooperation, we will strive in a safe supportive environment to create successful, respectful and respectful and responsible citizens by challenging, inspiring and empowering all learners through rigorous and meaningful curriculum using effective instructional strategies and technology.

the design network will:

Aspire to be a learning organization
Commit to the transformation of the educational experience
Strategically think about critical organizational systems
Serve as an advocate and change agent
Enhance capacity to support innovation and
Intentionally engage all members of the school community.

Vocabulary: ***I know all of these words are not listed above, but this was the original vocabulary list we created, and I haven't refined it because I can't give up the words yet. I also will need to add words once everyone commits to a directional system***

Engagement
Innovation
Transformation
Designers

Messy Message Houses

A few weeks after my initial meeting with Dianna, I returned to Maintown's Board of Education office to observe my first HCDT planning meeting. I was just beginning to understand how the two layers of the HCDT fit together. The smaller group, the five current district superintendents, functioned as a support system that discussed leadership practices, challenges, and ideas. It was also a planning committee, where the superintendents would set the agenda for when the second layer of the HCDT, the larger group which included building principals and teachers, would meet. I was still not quite sure at this point about the purpose of this larger group. I also still thought that my primary research interest would be the development of the local district annual reports as well as a county level district annual report, with the main goal of identifying how the individual districts decided on criteria to include and how this was communicated to stakeholders being the bulk of my data collection efforts. I had no idea how complicated and messy things were about to get for my research plans.

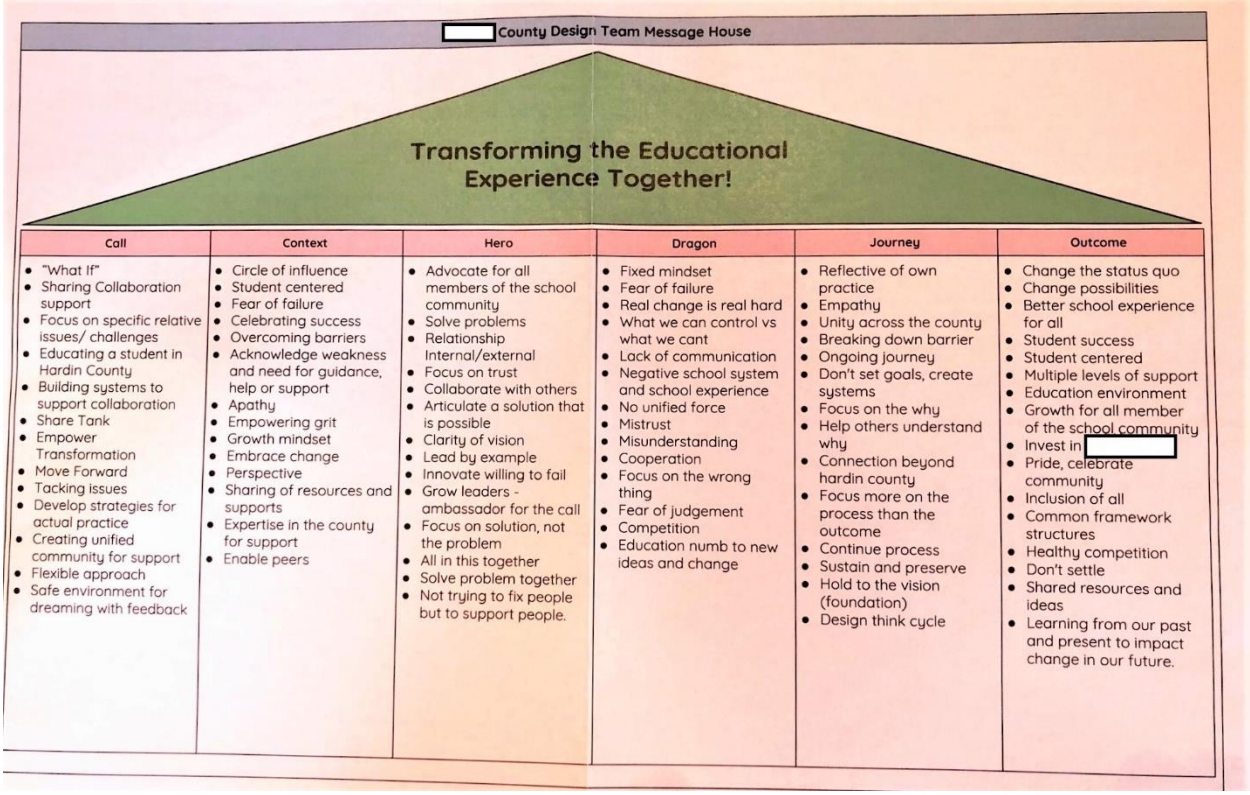
On this day, the superintendents had already been together in an insurance consortium meeting for most of the morning. Dianna had ordered everyone, including me, lunch. The group was friendly and comfortable with one another. Most of them had known each other for years and were from the area. I was prepared to do a lot of explaining about who I was and why I was there, but it was not necessary. I got the feeling that Dianna had given them some background on me in advance as well as explained to them that, like her, I was in the doctoral program at Miami University. My sense was that, if Dianna was fine with me at the table, then so were they.

The plan for the meeting, Dianna told me on the way into the conference room, was to follow up with work on a county level "message house" from the previous meeting of the larger group. I was familiar with the use of message houses from my experience working in marketing and PR. A message house is a graphic device used to help develop marketing messaging and positioning by taking a vision or mission statement (represented by the roof) and then developing key ideas and core beliefs that support it (the structure and walls). The same exercise was being used by the superintendents to help the larger team define the nature of the HCDT and its goals (see Figure 3). The overall vision statement the group had already created was "Transforming the Educational Experience Together!" The supports for this vision included identifying a call or meaning for the work, defining the context within which the work would take place, knowing

what can facilitate (Hero) or hinder (Dragon) the attainment of the vision, what the group will need to do to get to the vision (Journey), and what it would look like when they do (Outcome).

Figure 3

Hart County Message House



Everyone was finishing up their lunch, so Dianna opened her laptop which was the signal that they were going to get started. I got the sense that she was often the facilitator for opening the planning team meetings and getting the ball rolling.

Dianna: What are our thoughts based on what each school team came up with in last meeting for message houses?

Lots of discussion ensued around how the groups could share their individual message houses from the last meeting and then work together to take ownership of deciding what was common among them. The goal would be to build an HCDT message house to create a common understanding for the purpose of the team moving forward. This led into a discussion about how to decide the make-up of the breakout groups for the next meeting.

Dianna: We have a lot of "newbies" so do we need to be sure we have a mix of Design Team veterans with them? Or we could have an "all newbies" group and one of us could be sure to facilitate this group?

Idina: It was inspiring for my school team to work with the other school teams. This kept my team engaged. So, we should mix up the school teams again.

At this point, there was detailed discussion about how to physically set up the workstations. Chatter commenced about creating a rubric to guide the teams' thinking as they created a common call statement. Details such as making copies of the message house drafts from the last meeting, having highlighters and markers at each table were discussed. Should they conclude the meeting with a gallery walk to showcase each breakout group's ideas? They bantered back and forth about this minutia until James broke the flow with a jarring question.

James: Where do we (the superintendents) want this work to go?

Debra: You mean is it control of the outcome or giving time to the process itself?

James: Well, there is a difference between being strategic versus manipulating the process. So, what is the outcome, the bottom line, that we want as superintendents?

Idina: We should focus on the outcome, not sure how important the message houses even are, maybe they are just a vehicle?

Debra: Oh, you mean to get the groups on the same page?

James: What page is that? The (HCDT) group can't force concrete things; we can't be the doers…

Complete silence descended in the room, that kind of silence that happens in meetings where you work with people you really like and trust, but it becomes apparent all of you do not agree on how something should be done or even if it should be undertaken. James spokes again in an apologetic tone.

James: I'm talking too much.

Dianna: No, I think you are just getting started, keep talking.

Everyone relaxed a bit. I could tell this was not the first time the "bottom line" had been brought up for discussion. They went back in forth in conversation around what the overall goals

should be for the work of the HCDT as a county wide endeavor. It was clear that the nature of work becomes confusing sometimes for them. I was also confused at that point. The two competing ideas in the room for what the main purpose of the HCDT should be appeared to be a pull between thinking about processes and systems versus creating products or practices. I was having trouble making sense of the friction.

Eventually, their conversation circled around to offering a county level professional development (PD) day for teachers and building principals. This PD day had obviously been a topic of conversation in the past for them. The districts are small, so there may only be one grade level teacher in a building. The ability to meet with a larger group of teachers from the other districts would be beneficial to individual teachers by giving them a place to discuss pedagogy and practice with other grade level peers. This sounded great to me, and as a former district manager, I also started thinking about how it would be more cost efficient for the individual districts if they could pool funding for the PD day.

I thought the disconnect must just be that some of the superintendents were worried about who would be responsible for the planning and delivery of the PD ideas that the HCDT developed. I felt like I was beginning to "get it" in terms of what this group "does." I even started making an analytic memo for myself next to my field notes documenting that the group "creates economies of scale by working together to get resources and plan common training for teachers." Really, I smugly thought to myself, these smaller districts are just trying to "scale up" and do the kinds of things that larger urban districts, like the one I had worked for, do with district leadership teams by combining small neighborhood schools together for training. Then I looked up and saw Debra deep in thought and clearly not so comfortable with the discussion of the common PD day as a goal for the HCDT efforts. I tuned back into the larger conversation, which had shifted from the PD day discussion to what it meant to be guiding visionaries for the HCDT work as superintendents rather than implementation coordinators of specific programs or ideas.

Debra: But the work or outcomes from the message houses would still drive the work for us, the superintendents, that is still our whys, whats, and hows.

Idina: Like common professional development and planning.

James: Right, but if common PD is something they all want, we can't get down in weeds planning all that…we'd become implementers not thinkers then.

Debra: (clearly concerned) People don't *think* that's the problem; that's what the design team is *for*.

Idina: (also clearly concerned) But we still create *products*, like the directional system, the houses.

So, it was not as simple as a concern about implementation, I realized. There was a larger disagreement in the group about what it means to be a *thinker* versus a *doer*. At this point, with time growing short, Dianna brought the group's conversation back around to making the agenda for the next larger Design Team meeting. Where did the group want to pick up the work of creating the county level messages house? They agreed to do some review of the Schlechty Design Team readings and materials to remind everyone as well as on-board the newbies about the goals and functions of design teamwork. The meeting concluded with an agenda in place, but there was not a resolution to the debate about defining the larger purpose of the HCDT.

As I reflected on the meeting later, I refined my thoughts about the debate as a pull between their ideas of being visionary thinkers versus feeling like they are merely implementers of ideas or products (like planning PD for teachers). I was not sure yet what "visionary thinkers" even meant to them or me, but the word I wrote in the margins of my field notes several times was "messy." I had thought I was walking into a much more resolved situation in that the group had already agreed upon its foundational purpose. The exchange in this first meeting observation made it apparent this was far from true. I felt it was a good messy though, in that there was something creative and meaningful at hand, but I did not yet have the clarity to fully understand and describe it. The Message Houses meeting indicated that there were many interesting and intriguing layers to explore in the work the group was trying to undertake. I looked forward to untangling and understanding it as my research with the group continued. I was also sure after this first meeting that creating local district reports was the least of what was happening in Hart County around district leadership to counter performance accountability pressure from state and federal mandates.

We Come Here to Dream

Trying to answer the question *What exactly does the HCDT do?* is complicated. Partly this complication stems from the fact that the HCDT is not intended to "do" anything in the sense that the group was not created as a problem-solving entity. They are not creating professional development training for teachers or making scope and sequence curriculum documents or coming up with student positive behavior reward plans. The purpose of the group is to make and take space to think without the pressure of producing a product. Dianna described it to me this way:

> The design team is about Big Ideas, about dreaming and thinking, and as a result of this time spent collaboratively dreaming and thinking. We will get to things, or products, like a classroom tool or a service-learning project, but that will happen after the thinking and dreaming. The group's goal is not to collaboratively produce products; it's about collaboratively thinking about processes and systems that allow us to transform how things are done to get to products and solutions that are innovative and suit the needs of the people who they are for in the schools and our communities. It's about the thinking; it's a very hard thing to do to sit around the table and think for an hour or two because we really don't do that. We're very time oriented, especially in education, to produce a product, or a result, or something that can be scoreable. Right?

Very right. The other superintendents echoed Dianna's assessment of the group's function. They all agreed that they are not trying to problem solve within the current system but are looking for ways to ways to change—to transform—the system. James Bond of Fairwind looks at the HCDT planning and larger group meetings this way, "As a professional you have to 'give' to the process; you are not just going to HCDT meetings to 'get' something. If you only want to get something, then you miss out on the 'giving.'"

So, what do they do? Maxine Grow, the former superintendent of Solomontown Schools, summarized it like this, "The idea is for us as leaders to make a space where we think about how to better serve the children who attend our schools, how to help build better communities, how to build better people." The group uses the metaphoric language of the SC frameworks that schools should be learning communities to guide their collaborative thinking process. There are products that eventually get made from this process, such as the Directional Systems that are the future

focused beliefs, visions, and values applied to the daily work and decisions of the school or district. The HCDT is "doing" something.

However, instead of starting with a *problem* that needs to be solved for the creation or "doing" process, the HCDT starts with a *dream*. Rather than looking at the current reality of accountability-based school reform and asking, "How do we make this experience more tolerable," the HCDT group asks what could be different that would make life in the world of the schools we work in better, more joyful, more engaging for students, more connected to the community? Once they have a shared vision for this future idea or concept in place, then they go about figuring out the how of making it happen, usually outside of the HCDT meeting time. This is hard work—making space for dreaming. Dreaming gets a bad rap in our results-oriented culture. We tend to think of dreaming as nonproductive. How many times, as educators, do we say to students, "Stop daydreaming and get to work"? But dreaming *is* work and even more so when you are trying to dream up ways of changing the status quo of a school reform system that has been in place for decades and school cultures steeped in maintaining it. The SC framework emphasizes that cultures are built from shared dreams and beliefs. The HCDT offers the space for the superintendents, principals, and teachers to come together and do the hard work of dreaming about how they envision the work and daily life in their districts could be, not just how it is.

The work of the HCDT is messy in the sense that it is not grounded in "producing" a solution to a problem. There is not a clear resolution or end point in mind. We have become so habituated to getting a score or result, as Dianna pointed out, that often the ability to craft, refine, dream a different way is not given any time. As Maxine said, this is "liberating," but it can also become ineffable quickly in terms of trying to pin down a concrete operational definition. I wonder, even now, how best to explain what it was specifically that empowered this group of superintendents to take this step. Perhaps following the old writing axiom of "show don't tell" may be the best way to approach defining what "happened" that allowed the superintendents to de-emphasize performance accountability and focus on community needs in their leadership. To that end, I offer multiple examples in the next section for how the work was enacted in the individual districts and at the county level.

What It Looks Like on the Ground

Taking the time to imagine a different way that the structures and systems of schools could operate is how the transformation occurs. As Dianne described it, this time invested in dreaming about system change "is how to get to products and solutions that are innovative and suit the needs of the people who they are for in the schools and our communities." This is reflected in the vision statement for the HCDT of "Transforming the educational experience!" It's not just to "ensure all students learn," which is common wording in district vision statements, but to "transform" the experience of schooling and learning altogether. To explain what this looked like "on the ground," I decided to use the mission statement elements the group created to describe the work of the HCDT and provide examples of how the group's efforts are enacted in the schools and wider community. The group created a guiding mission statement with six action areas:

> Mission: By unifying the core beliefs and unique talents of the school districts in Hart County, the design network will:
>
> - Aspire to be a learning organization,
> - Commit to the transformation of the educational experience,
> - Strategically think about critical organizational systems,
> - Serve as an advocate and change agent,
> - Enhance capacity to support innovation, and
> - Intentionally engage all members of the school community.

Since there was overlap in many areas, I chose to group some of the elements of the six areas together for clarity and for better flow for presenting the descriptive categories or themes in my data. This created four sections: Aspirations and Commitments, Advocates and Change Agents, Systems and Innovative Capacity, and Intentional Engagement.

Aspirations and Commitments

Knowing as a leader what you believe and making sure the whole system is moving in that direction is the starting point for the SC frameworks of leadership. Under the guiding metaphor of a learning organization in the SC framework, the superintendent is the "moral and intellectual leader and capacity builder" (Schlechty, 2018). The definition of being "a moral" leader seemed to still be evolving for each of the superintendents. Debra Meyer of Fielding

Schools captured this when she very candidly admitted, “I’m the moral or intellectual leader, and I’m still trying to figure that out, you know.” However, all three superintendents made it clear they feel they have a moral obligation in their role as district leaders to be responsible for sustaining their districts, local communities, and Hart County. In some sense then, there is a personality element to their willingness to take up this work. Additionally, since they hold the sustainability of the entire county as a part of their responsibilities, it is not enough for one district to be successful; the goal is for the whole system of education in the county to be successful.

James Bond, who referenced the work of Sergiovanni (1992) on moral leadership several times when I spoke with him, explained that he sees the schools as taking the lead in the community to set the tone and raise expectations, not just making do with what they have. He feels that the HCDT is “on a mission here to create something special.” Dianna Prince of Maintown Schools used similar wording when we first met to describe the group when she asserted that the group resists the ODE report cards system saying, “Hart County is special, and that’s how we can push back!” The idea of specialness seems to be connected with the superintendents’ commitment to systems change and their being leaders who are going to walk their talk in terms of not prioritizing test scores or preparation in their leadership visioning. Their aspiration is to foster the learning organization mentality of the SC framework in how they communicate the goals for schooling in their communities and with their staff.

The manifestation of these leadership aspirations and commitments are embodied in the Directional Systems documents created by each district. The directional systems give all stakeholders a clear articulation of the values and beliefs that guide the work of the district leadership, the school sites, and the students’ learning. The superintendents use these documents often. Dianna Prince explained that, when she meets with her BOE, she refers to the Directional System wording when discussing district goals and performance. Additionally, when the BOE is making suggestions or evaluating funding requests, she is sure they also use the language from the Directional System. Dianna and Debra also told me they do a book study of Schlechty’s (2009) *Leading for Learning* with their BOEs so that the language and metaphor of being a learning organization is shared. As new board members are elected, they both told me, they circle back and do another book study. Dianna said this ensures everyone is “on the same page with how the strategic plan for the district is determined and how resources are deployed.”

A summary of each district's Directional System is presented in Table 1, and Appendix A has copies of Maintown Schools and Fielding Schools Directional System one-page summaries.

Table 1

Summary of District Vision and Mission Wording

District	Vision Wording	Mission Statement Wording
Fairwind Schools	Shaping our Future Together Core values: Work Ethic; Respect; Civic Responsibility; Responsible, Accountable, Life-Long Learners	Mission Statement: Together, we will create successful citizens through **B**alanced **E**ducation, local **A**ccountability, mutual **R**espect, and a **S**trong work ethic resulting in life-long achievement. (spells out Bears, the district mascot)
Fielding Schools	Designing the Future	In designing the future, Fielding Schools will create partnerships with our families and community which broaden minds to learn and serve through collaboration, innovation, and rigorous academics for life's learning journey.
Maintown	Inspiring all to Inquire, Dream, and Excel	In partnership with students, parents, and community, Maintown Schools will cultivate curiosity, encourage innovation, and utilize unique talents to inspire a spirit of service and life-long learning.

All three Directional Systems emphasize developing partnerships and working together with students, teachers, building principals, and the local community to create a shared experience in and of the schools. The following sections give detailed examples of the ways this wording on creating and sharing learning is enacted. The Systems also emphasize that the partnerships between the schools and the community will be future oriented. Additionally, all of the Directional Systems include the value of learning in the schools for students that is geared toward preparing them for life. I particularly like the wording of Fielding's Directional System for this aspect of the mission of the schools being the aim to "broaden minds to learn and serve through collaboration, innovation, and rigorous academics for life's learning journey." It is also important to note that all of the Directional systems include a focus on high quality learning for students. The superintendents all stressed to me that they did not see setting common academic standards at the state or even national level as an issue for grounding curricular goals. However, designing the learning experiences to achieve those standards should be made at the local level to

reflect the wants and needs of the community as well as to foster high levels of student engagement.

At first, I did not see the significance of the Directional System wording. After all, many districts reference the words life-long learning, respect, curiosity, and collaboration in their vision and mission statements but then focus on test scores and performance metrics that work against realizing those very values for students. My experience as a teacher, coach, and district leader made me a bit cynical about these sorts of statements. I can remember starting every fall with ideas for service-learning projects and other curricula to encourage curiosity and challenge students' critical thinking skills, only to have it all come to a screeching halt in the early spring when test preparation packets would arrive from the district office with dedicated skill and drill exercises designed to, hopefully, drive student performance up enough for us to meet the targets set by ODE for the year. Talk is cheap as they say.

However, I came to realize the superintendents in the group are following through on the promises made in their Directional Systems in tangible ways. One example of how the superintendents demonstrate this is their continued commitment to fostering the systems and processes of being a learning organization, even when there is not a short-term gain in test score performance data from the state. While the graduation rate in the county is high—94.3% exceeding the state rate of 85.9%—the districts in the study have remained mostly flat in terms of improving the Achievement component index scores on the state report card from ODE (ODE, 2020). Fielding schools is an example of how this plays out in the case study districts. See report card snapshots in Figures 4 and 5.

The ODE report card Achievement Index component is generated by student scores on the annual state mandated assessment and is described by the state in terms of skills mastery and attendance as follows:

> The Achievement component of the report card represents the number of students who passed the state tests and how well they performed on them. It also includes an indicator that measures the percentage of students who miss too much school. (ODE, 2019a, p. 4)

Figure 4

Fielding Schools ODE Report Card Data 2015–2016

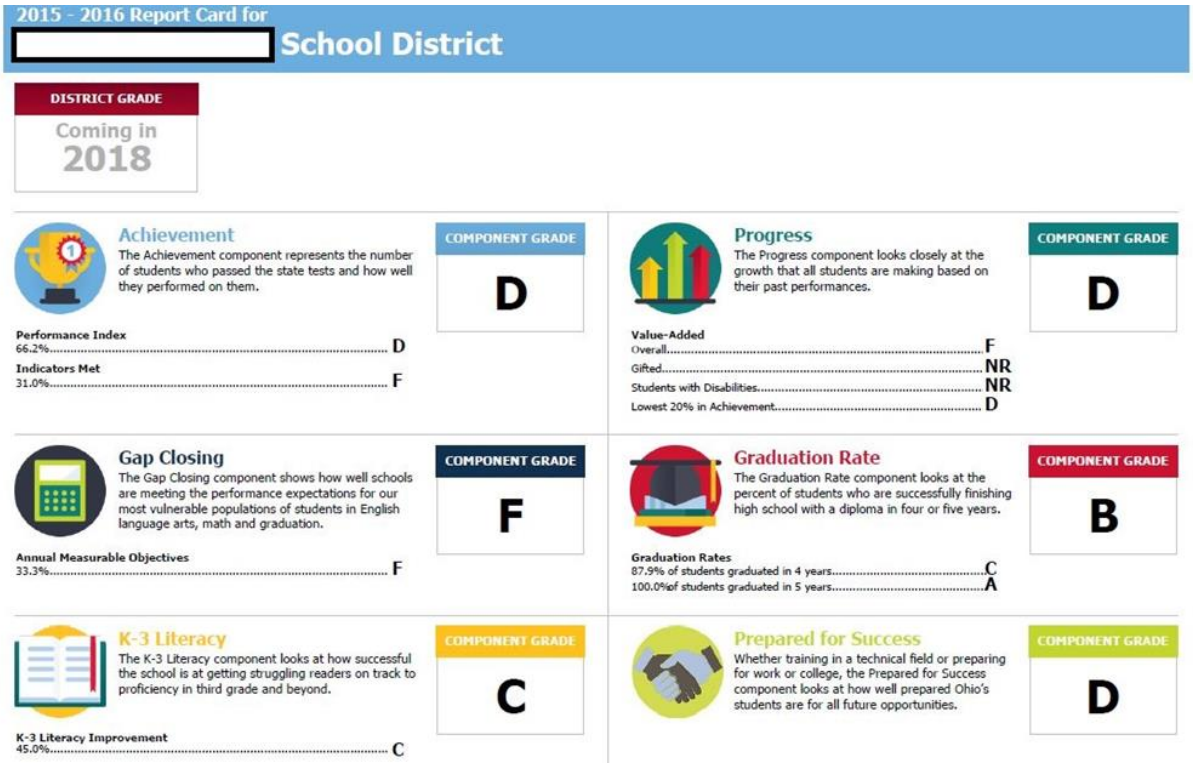
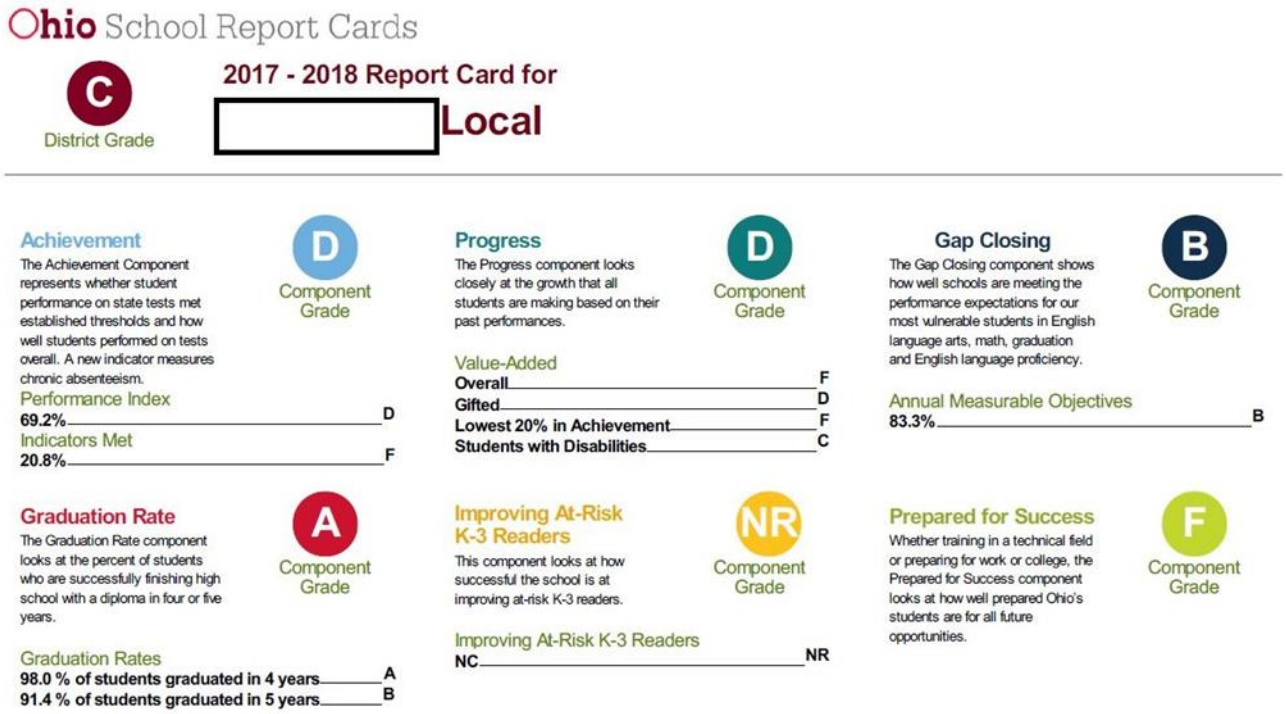


Figure 5

Fielding Schools Report Card Data 2017–2018



For the Prepared for Success component, the state uses these metrics to generate the letter grade a district receives: the number of students earning a remediation-free score on a college entrance exam (ACT/SAT), or earning an honors diploma, or earning an industry-recognized credential or group of credentials. Additional bonus measures that can boost a district's score in this area are students earning Advanced Placement test scores (these tests are offered by the College Board, the same company that runs the ACT/SAT), or students participating in and earning International Baccalaureate test scores, or students earning College Credit Plus credits (a program run by the state that allows high school students to take college level courses) (ODE, 2019a). Notice that all of these measures are heavily favored toward external measures, such the ACT/SAT tests or the offering of AP courses and having students take AP course exams, rather than how a local district's curricula are engaging students and the community.

The ODE Report card data shows some interesting trends for Fielding Schools from the 2015–2016 school year to the 2017–2018 school year. First, the Achievement Component based on test scores and attendance remained the same at a grade of D. The performance index stayed around the mid to high 60% range. Progress, which is a measure of the supposed Value Added to student learning based on test scores by teachers from year to year, remained a D. Gap Closing, which is the component that measures to what degree students in vulnerable subgroups, like those living in poverty, are catching up to their more affluent peers in terms of test scores, increased from an F to a B. This is often referred to as "closing the achievement gap." The graduation rate component increased from a B to an A, with 98% of students at Fielding successfully completing high school in four years, which is a phenomenal graduation rate.

But the component grade that is most interesting is Prepared for Success, which fell from a D to an F from 2015–16 to 2017–18. This is the component based on things like ACT/SAT scores or offering AP classes or earning work credentials. The mission statement of Fielding stresses that the district is committed to "life's learning journey," so having an F for this component might be grounds to claim that the district is not meeting this goal. However, what is not captured by this component grade from the state is an awarding winning Agricultural (AG) service-learning program at Fielding. Students from all grade levels benefit from this program that engages students and connects them to the community. It is one reason Debra Meyer believes the district achieves such a high graduation rate because students are engaged and want to be a part of the AG program. The AG program also connects student's academic learning with

the wider world in understanding the ecology of the planet, food production, and how you apply classroom learning to solving lived problems and issues.

ODE has prioritized earning yet another test score, the ACT/SAT, IB program, or AP Exams, as the best way to determine if schools are preparing students for success, but the Agricultural program at Fielding is connecting the students and their learning to their local community in a way that motivates them to persist in earning their high school diplomas. Debra Meyer could divert funding from the Agricultural program to offer AP classes or ACT/SAT test preparation to improve the district's ODE report card scores. However, she stresses that she will not allow the state metrics on the Performance Index or the Prepared for Success components to interfere with the commitment to engaging students for lifelong learning. She said,

> And by the way, the state does still knock on our door and say, "Hey, your test scores are low; you still have to work on all this junk." And yeah, we do. But I said, hey, we're going to do it my way because we have a design team, and we want to engage kids. We don't just want them to regurgitate information for test scores. Yeah, we could probably raise their test scores that way. But our kids are really learning and engaged. Now they're [she is referring to other students in schools that emphasize skill and drill test prep here] just acting like robots in classrooms, and that's not what we want. We want kids to become lifelong learners.

This commitment is also in keeping with the shared values and beliefs of the Directional System of the district to work with families and the community to "design the future," not with outside partners. Carol Glickmon, the former superintendent of Fielding Schools, in talking about the holistic nature of the service learning that happens in the AG program explained the disconnect between the ODE report card metrics and the local school community this way:

> How can you measure the impact of Kindergarten to third grade involvement in a composting program and how that later relates to a student's ability for higher level thinking in the high school science and social studies programs? If we could do that, then we would rock the report card! But having kids from poverty reading at a certain grade level at a certain time, well, that is never going to reflect our work.

All three superintendents embrace this feeling that the state metrics will never be able to accurately capture the work of and service to students happening in their districts. All of them expressed that they simply made the decision not to center the ODE Report components with

their principals and teachers in their role as an instructional leader. As Dianna alluded to in my first meeting with her, they have committed to "just not being afraid of it anymore," and this is evident in their "walking" the talk of their Directional Systems, even when the state index numbers and grades may be low.

Advocacy and Change Agents

Superintendents wield a lot of power in crafting how the work in the schools will be viewed by the local community. They can use this power to either reinforce the status quo or use it to be change agents. For the rural school districts in the case study, all three of the superintendents expressed their belief that these small districts could not remain viable without the financial support and commitment of the local communities. James Bond of Fairwind Schools stressed this point several times when I spoke with him. He sees the College and Career Readiness rhetoric of performance accountability pushing a "get out" mentality where local kids can only see leaving the community as an option for their future. For Hart County and the local districts to survive, the work in the schools cannot be just for families with children in the schools. There must be something in it for the wider community. James believes, "We have to give people a reason to stay in the community, a common purpose, and that can't just be test scores."

To create this connection between the communities and the schools, the superintendents are advocates for the schools, and they also act as change agents by allowing for curricula and other avenues for involvement by the community members in the schools. Carol Glickmon held several focus groups with school staff, parents, and community members when she was superintendent of Fielding Schools around defining what they collectively wanted for students. She said that, over and over in the focus groups, the responses went like this:

> The participants would say this sentence: I want my kids (students) to have a good academic experience and be prepared for college or going to work, and then the next 30 minutes would be talking about the following: I want them to be honest; I want them to respect themselves and others; I want them to go away to college, but then come back to our small town and keep us alive, help build the community; I want them to be contributing members of society; I want them to be a good human being.

In the focus groups, what Carol was seeing was the desire in her local community for education to reflect both private and public benefits for the students and families. This was also true for the other districts in the study. The curricula and learning experiences in the schools were centered in community renewal, as well as academics.

One of the ways the superintendents advocate for this kind of view of the schools is to create shared stories of values and success. In Fielding Schools, this work is linked with the AG program, which has strong ties within the community. Maintown and Fairwind Schools ground this work in the creation of District Annual Reports. While they can be described as Local or Alternative Report Cards to the ODE District Report cards, they offer more than just testing or financial data. Much of the content is made up of narratives about how the schools are serving students outside of tested subjects and student learning experiences that are not centered on academic subjects only (See Appendix C for examples of the narratives in the District Annual Reports for Fairwind and Maintown City Schools).

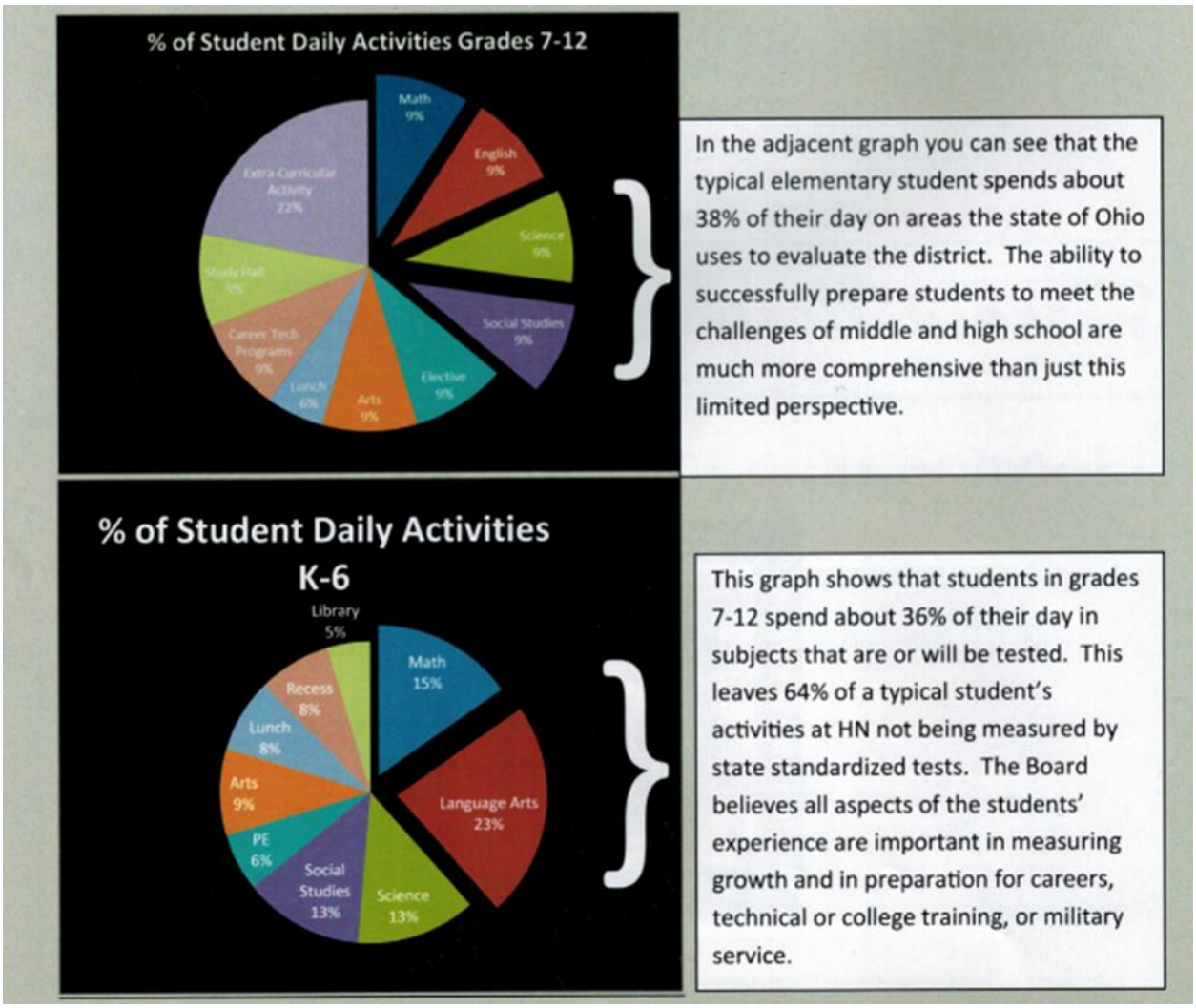
In Fairwind's District Annual Report, James Bond stresses the importance of the district not only focusing on "tested areas from the state of Ohio," since that comprises just 37% of what "the district does to prepare students for life after high school." See Figure 6 for how this is illustrated in the report by using a graph of "student daily activities." The graph for grades K-6 has slices for recess and lunch. At the 7-12 level, the graph has a slice for extracurricular activities. The District Report stress how much of what the school does in a typical day is not captured by the data reported by ODE report card grades. Fairwind's Annual Report also has data tables for local assessments and reports for fiscal spending, a page of pictures of student activities, and sections for alumni awards and for acknowledging students for things such as band competitions, being Hart County Fair Queen, and for athletics.

Maintown also produces a District Annual Report. Dianna explains that she includes academic and fiscal measures, but the main part of the report is the stories and news from the school buildings. Each building has its own highlights section in the Report, see Figure 7 for a sample page spotlighting the elementary building. In particular, the section on Family Nights is a compelling example of how the district is connecting with the community. During these nights there was a music performance, an art show, and other activities, including petting a llama. Families also received a book and a math game to take home. And fourth graders went to a

professional hockey game after learning about different types of strategies and game dynamics in their academic classes.

Figure 6

Fairwind Sample District Annual Report Page



Both District Annual Reports draw the community into the schools and highlight how student learning can take place in a variety of settings, not just the classroom. For now, the District Annual Reports are only happening at the individual district level at Maintown and Fairwind. However, the HCDT is planning to work on creating a county level report that could be shared through the Hart County Chamber Alliance, a county level organization of business and community members who are working to grow and sustain the local economy and communities. In the first HCDT planning meeting I observed, the superintendents were working on an agenda for the group to define what it means to be a "student in Hart County." Dianna also indicated that the HCDT works with the Chamber Alliance in terms of communicating about and fostering economic development. However, I was not able to get a clear picture of exactly what this work entailed or how the group planned to move forward with creating the county level District Profile and Report Card.

Figure 7

Maintown Schools District Annual Report Sample Page

[redacted] City Schools Share Fair

[redacted] holds its annual Gifted Share Fair in May. Students in grades 3 - 6 are invited to share a presentation on one of the Gifted projects they have worked on throughout the school year. Families are invited and refreshments are served. Students are awarded prizes voted on by their peers for Best Presentation, Most Creative and Most Knowledgeable presentations. A teacher's award is also given for the student(s) that give a great amount of effort.

3rd Grade Winners

Best Presentation- [redacted]
Most Knowledgeable - [redacted]
Most Creative - [redacted]
Teacher Award - [redacted]

4th Grade Winners

Best Presentation - [redacted]
Most Knowledgeable - [redacted]
Most Creative - [redacted]
Teacher award - [redacted]

5th Grade Winners

Best Presentation - [redacted]
Most Knowledgeable - [redacted]
Most Creative - [redacted]
Teacher Award - [redacted]

6th Grade Winners

Best Presentation - [redacted]
Most Knowledgeable - [redacted]
Most Creative - [redacted]
Teacher Award - [redacted]

[redacted] FAMILY NIGHTS

[redacted] Elementary School held grade level family nights during the 2017-2018 school year. Each family night was held in conjunction with the grade level music performance and art show. During each evening event, families were engaged in fun activities revolving around math and literacy. Families also had the opportunity to take home a new book and a new math game to play at home. Family nights were a huge success this year and we look forward to having them again during the 2018-2019 school year.

[redacted] TEACHER WINS AWARD

[redacted] Elementary School, thanks to fourth grade teacher [redacted] has partnered with AEP to bring energy education to students through the e3smart energy efficiency program.

Through this program, which partners with AEP and the Ohio Energy Project, students not only increased their awareness of energy-conserving methods, they also made a positive impact on the community and the environment. In addition, each student also received a free Home Energy Efficiency Kit.

Because of this, [redacted] has been awarded the AEP Ohio Energy Efficiency Teacher of the Year.

OHIO energy PROJECT

AEP ENERGY

Toledo Walleye Hockey Game:

By far, the favorite fourth grade trip was to the Huntington Center in Toledo. Students got to see a minor league hockey game played by the Toledo Walleye. Before we went, students learned the basic hockey terms such as power plays, face offs, and what constitutes a penalty. Once at the game, the students were so excited to see the players in action and

Systems and Innovative Capacity

One of the key roles of the superintendent in the SC metaphor of schools as learning organizations is that of empowering systems change by building the capacity for innovation in the way building level staff view their work. This means the superintendents look critically at organizational systems that limit building principals' and teachers' abilities to view themselves as having the power to be change agents as well. Rather than a top-down approach typical of accountability that seeks to drive reform by compliance to external pressures like test performance, the superintendent in the case study sought to build a culture where the building-level staff truly felt they had the agency and responsibility to implement the Directional System beliefs and values.

To facilitate this mindset, the superintendents decided to take the larger HCDT group on a field trip to a local hospital that had been working to transform their culture as well. The group had already visited an innovative local hardware company in the past. I observed the planning meeting before the group was set to visit the hospital site. In this HCDT planning meeting, the superintendents, Dianna, James, Debra, and John, talked about what they wanted the group to gain from the experience. The team had already formed a set of Driving Questions for visiting the "partner organizations" as they called the hospital, to guide the thinking about how to structure the visit and desired experiences. This included learning about:

1. The history of the organization and industry
2. Looking at transformation of the industry
    a. Ways to keep current.
    b. Trends—how do you monitor change?
3. Overcoming fear of failure…
4. Learning within the organization
    a. How do problems get solved in your organization?
    b. What types of teams do you use for learning? Growth? Problem solving?
5. Developing partnerships
    a. How do you maintain both internal and external communication—reduction of misunderstandings/building trust?
    b. What are your desired outcomes? How do you know/celebrate milestones and arrival?

The team also decided that prior to visiting the site the group would do some pre-reading to remind themselves of the capacity building frameworks from the SC and what it means to serve a community. These were materials the groups had read in the past, but the superintendents wanted to be sure they were fresh in everyone's minds before the site visit.

As the superintendents talked about the trip, several key ideas kept coming up. They wanted the principals and teachers to get a sense of how accountability and responsibility are not just "top-down" but are "all over." Everyone must take the initiative to enact the shared beliefs and values of the Directional Systems in the schools. They also wanted the group to think about how the "induction system works" in a culture that values innovation and systems change—how to get new people "on board" and how to create a common "philosophy" for how work gets done in an organization. The group wanted the teachers and principals to see how the employees of the Hospital were "living" the change in their systems and culture. As a result of this discussion, the groups created an agenda or guiding document for the hospital visit (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Ohio Health Hospital Guiding Questions

Ohio Health Hospital Professional Learning Experience
February 20, 2020
4:15 P.M.-5:15 P.M.

Purpose:
Explore and experience Ohio Health Hospital in order to deepen our understanding of the organizational transformation and explore how Ohio Health Hospital utilizes the recruitment and induction system to build capacity around their vision, mission, beliefs, and values.

Vision/Mission/Beliefs/Values (Directional System)
Recruitment, Induction and Retention of Staff
Response to Change (Transformation)
Community Engagement

Guiding Questions:

What does our school district have in common with Ohio Health Hospital?

How might administrators borrow Ohio Health Hospital's strategies such as leadership development, engagement, innovation, service model and communication plan to improve our school district?

What are the essential components of Ohio Health Hospital's recruitment, induction, and retention system for new employees? How do these strategies compare to those of our school district?

Why does this hospital matter to the community? How do the community and hospital support each other to make Hart county a better place? How does this apply to our school district and the work we are doing to improve Hart county?

How can we use what we have learned to collaborate in new ways with our internal (employees) and external (parents, grandparents, business leaders, stakeholders, etc.) community to ultimately serve the children of our school district better?

The core purpose of the visit was defined as to "explore and experience Ohio Health Hospital in order to deepen our understanding of the organizational transformation and explore how Ohio Health Hospital utilizes the recruitment and induction system to build capacity around their vision, mission, beliefs, and values." James Bond felt one of the most important take-aways for the building principals and teachers was the understanding that "transformation is a process not a product." Debra agreed, she felt the "mentality of teachers/principals is that transformation is product-driven. So, it would be good for them to see this wasn't how it works at the hospital." The superintendents' conversation did turn to using "corporate" language in terms of referring to families are our "customers;" however, this was tempered with discussion of viewing families as "customers" in the sense of being answerable to the whole community rather than accountable for scores. Debra clarified this by saying, "The 'guiding principle' is that teachers need to understand they are answerable to the whole community, not just the students in their classrooms." The site visit was a fascinating example of the districts partnering with local businesses to learn from them about how a business model of management and system change could be implemented from within the schools rather than applying generic corporate models to school systems in an abstract way as an external push in.

It also was an example of how the superintendents support the growth of the culture in schools to foster even more transformation and innovation in the way the schools operate—getting teachers and principals to see themselves as valued professionals who have the power to enact systems change. Dianna had talked about this kind of "professional development" for staff with me in an earlier interview. The idea of offering a county wide PD day for teachers had finally crystalized into reality, but there was a staunch commitment to make sure it had a "Schlechty flavor" in that it would be grounded in getting teachers thinking about how systems can work differently in the schools. She stressed that the HCDT was not intended to be a place where teachers and principals "walk away with something like a classroom tool. It's about you

walking out of the meeting and thinking differently about something—how can I keep you up at night after you walk out the door?" I was unable to debrief with the superintendents about the field trip to the hospital since the next opportunity for them to meet was disrupted by the Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent school building closures.

Intentional Engagement

One of the most important shared values of the HCDT is that schools are accountable to their communities, not to the state, and that the schools should be a source of sustainability for the community. For this to be realized, the superintendents intentionally strive to involve community members in the schools and the schools in the community. How this is realized is apparent in many of the examples I have already shared and has been a part of the HCDT superintendents' leadership style for some time. For example, when Fielding Schools was planning to build a new K-12 building, they took parents and other community members on trips to existing buildings to garner support and get the community's input on what should be included in the floor plan. In Fairwind Schools, students regularly participate in community service days where they go into the community to participate in food delivery projects, local clean up initiatives, and hosting soup nights at the school cafeteria.

For the spring of 2021, Maintown Schools has an initiative to create a "Portrait of a Graduate" (POG) document with input from the community. This will serve as a collective vision that articulates the community's aspirations for their students taken from community-wide conversations and survey as to what an MS graduate should be able to accomplish, what they should know, and what character traits they will need to succeed in life. The district will collect feedback from the community through a survey and community meetings. This is in conjunction with an on-going initiative of the schools in the community called the Wildcat Community Connectors where Junior and Senior level students can participate in an internship program with local business leaders. The students learn about how the leaders make hiring decisions, what the educational/training requirements are for careers of interest and develop job skills that will help them qualify for future employment opportunities.

At the HCDT level, the group decided to get students involved in the thinking and dreaming process directly. For their closing meeting of the 2018–2019 school year, each district brought two high school students to the HCDT meeting, one student who was planning for

college after graduation and one student who was planning to pursue employment or technical education after graduation. The plan was for the students to meet with the Design Teams from the schools for table rotations with each district's team. The table rotations were facilitated by question prompts for the students and district teams. The questions included ideas like these:

1. Describe an assignment that was really fun and from which you know you learned a great deal. This can be from any grade level.
2. Tell me how you know when you do quality work.
3. If I am your teacher and I am designing an assignment for you, what would I have to build into the assignment to make it worth doing?
4. Sometimes you retain what you learn; sometimes you remember it long enough to take a test. What causes you to retain and remember information and be able to transfer it from one context to another? What is it about the work the teacher provides that makes you able to do this?
5. Let's imagine it is June and you are looking back at this year. What will have made this year a good experience for you?

The meeting with the students was a great success, as I was told by Debra Meyer. She emailed after the meeting to say the group found the students' feedback useful for understanding how the HCDT's goals and Directional Systems for the schools align with what students value. After the student meetings, the HCDT school teams compared what the students said with their developing ideas for what it means to be a student in Hart County. The plan is for the group to keep expanding on the work to develop a county level Directional System for the HCDT participating districts, schools, and students.

Keeping the Dream Alive

The work in Hart County is exciting and encouraging for how public schools can prioritize serving students and communities over performance accountability mandates. But it is also hard work and difficult to sustain. During the case study, one of the districts left the group, Solomontown Schools. Maxine Grow, the former superintendent at Solomontown, was one of the founding members of the HCDT and was the "guru" about the SC frameworks. She introduced the other members of the HCDT to the frameworks and concept of schools as learning organizations. The district was known throughout the county for its innovation based on

the SC guiding metaphor of schools as learning organizations as well. So, it was a surprise when I learned that Solomontown was stepping back from the county design group, although maybe it should not have been.

Idina Mensol, who took over from Maxine a little over two years ago when I started observing the group in fall of 2018, was not new to the superintendency, as she had been in the role for three years at another district. While she did not know Maxine Grow, Idina did know Carol Glickmon, the former superintendent at Fielding Schools and was interested in the HCDT collaborative when she became superintendent at Solomontown. I interviewed Idina in the summer of 2019. She had been attending meetings for the HCDT planning session with the other superintendents when I first started observing the group in the fall of 2018 but had not been coming more recently in the spring of 2019. When I asked her about why she had stopped coming, she said she felt like her team at Solomontown was "weary" of the work in the HCDT. She indicated that her team were "doers" and felt the HCDT focus on "intellectual work" did not have a clear purpose. In particular, she mentioned that her high school administrator was very resistant to continuing with the county level HCDT meetings. She did indicate that she felt the idea of being a learning organization and not a bureaucracy was still important. She said other members of the district level design team were continuing to use the directional system as a framework for creating lessons. I did not get a copy of their directional system, and it was not available on the district's web site.

Despite this, her principals and teachers were not to going to continue with design team work at the county level and would not be coming to the HCDT meetings moving forward. She decided to commit professional development funding in "a different direction." Idina did say she saw the value of the "intellectual work" of the SC and the HCDT, but in the district, "problem solving" was the priority for her team. She said her high school administrator in particular thought the HCDT work was "too ethereal" and did not see how it could be used to "put things into practice and that the problem-solving mentality here is the priority." I remembered that in the first HCDT planning meeting I observed—the Message Houses discussion—Idina brought up these same concerns several times. In the larger disagreement in the group that day about what it means to be a *thinker* versus a *doer*, Idina was leaning towards being a *doer*. I was not able to get a clear understanding of what exactly "problem solving" meant to her and to the team during our interview, but I have a sense it was focusing on implementing solutions over thinking about

systems change. I also could not ascertain if it were just the high school administrator who felt this way or other team members as well.

Ultimately, Idina decided to take a step back and stop attending the HCDT planning meetings with the other superintendents in the 2019–2020 school year as well. She was unsure if she would continue with membership in the HCDT in the 2021–2022 school year. I was not able to follow up with Idina to ask her if she would be re-joining the group, as the Coronavirus pandemic interrupted the work of the HCDT overall in late spring of 2020. The other members of the HCDT were reluctant to discuss Idina's stepping back from the group. They indicated in February of 2020 that they were hopeful she would return and were reaching out to her still about upcoming plans for the work.

Idina's decision to leave the group speaks to the difficulty of holding space for system change thinking or "intellectual" work. I do not judge her harshly, nor am I suggesting she is not an effective district leader. Transformation can be difficult with the pressure to problem solve and "do" under the audit-culture of accountability. It is unresolved and messy to engage in thinking just to think—to dream—rather than finding problems and implementing solutions. I also wonder if there could have been an element of a new leader wanting to break with the past and set her own agenda, but I felt her use of the "problem solving" wording spoke more to the pressures of meeting performance accountability mandates.

She is also leading a district that has a private university in town. Since the Prepared for Success component for the ODE District Report card is linked to offering AP classes with students taking the corresponding exams as well as ACT/SAT scores, I wonder if emphasizing these metrics may be attractive to her and her high school administrator, especially if the local community is asking for these as focus areas. On the 2017–2018 ODE District Report Card, Solomontown Schools received a component grade of D for Prepared for Success. Increasing the number of AP classes and increasing ACT/SAT scores would be a way to improve this component grade. And of all the districts in the study, Solomontown is the only one with large numbers of students listed as taking an AP exam, 22/140 students, so that does appear to be an important focus for the district. I need to be clear, however, that this is only my hypothesizing. I was not able to interview Idina to get a definitive answer from her about why she stepped back from the group.

In addition to Solomontown leaving the group, the Coronavirus pandemic suspended the HCDT work at all levels for the rest of spring in 2020 and the entire school year for 2020–2021. I reached out to the five superintendents in fall of 2020 but only heard back from Debra. Obviously, this was concerning to me. However, Debra Meyer told me in September of 2020 that she felt the work as a HCDT team and having the Directional Systems at the school level that support innovative thinking made the abrupt shift to remote learning much easier for her teachers in the late spring of 2020. Meeting the needs of offering both remote and in-person instruction were straining the capacity of her staff and teachers, but so far, they had managed to stay committed to their shared Directional System beliefs and values in doing so. She also said the HCDT superintendents had met in preparation for fall of 2020 to craft a joint school opening statement for the school year. She felt the HCDT team was still connected and committed to supporting one another and that the group would return to their collaborative work in the upcoming 2021–2022 school year. I certainly hope the dreaming will continue.

Chapter 5: Implications and Possibilities

My purpose for this interpretivist case study was to explore how district leaders can counter the impacts of school reform based on performance accountability on their professional agency, the schools they lead, and the communities they serve. The case study was comprised of district superintendents from central Ohio who participate in a collaborative group called the Hart County Design Team (HCDT). The study found that participating in the HCDT collaborative facilitated the ability of the superintendents to engage in leadership practices to counter, not just resist, the impacts of performance accountability. The HCDT functioned as an alliance that created a space where the group could discuss shared values and beliefs about instructional goals and aims for schooling not tied to performance metrics. This created a support network for their aspirations to pursue democratic leadership practices for changing the systems and cultures in their districts, allowing them to shift from prioritizing compliance with performance accountability mandates to prioritizing being responsible for and to the communities they serve.

Through the HCDT collaboration, the group was able to engage in what Anderson and Cohen (2018) referred to as "productive resistance" (p. 109) to performance accountability in ways that were not merely a "working around" of the current system but a transformation of it altogether. The group cultivated many of the aspects of a new model of school leadership and educator professionalism that Anderson and Cohen (2018) referred to as New Democratic Professionalism (NDP). The NDP model is grounded in building trust in new ways of seeing and framing the purposes of education that are democratic in nature and center schools in their communities. There are three dimensions of the NDP model: inclusion, responsibility, advocacy. In the sections that follow, I will be using the three dimensions of the NDP model to ground a discussion of the findings and implications from the case study.

Dimension 1: Inclusion

Neoliberal polices supporting New Public Management (NPM) in the public sector have contributed to the growth of market-based school choice requirements and shifted the public perception of education from that of a public good to being a private one (Henig, 2013; Labaree, 1997). In conjunction with the centralization and standardization of performance accountability,

this shift in the perceived value of education as a purely private one has limited the ability of local communities to be included in school governance in meaningful and authentic ways as goals for schooling have been standardized and centralized by the state and federal government (Horsford et al., 2019). The first dimension of Anderson and Cohen's (2018) NDP model, inclusion, addresses the need for crafting school systems that allow for all community and school members to participate in decision making about the beliefs, values, and priorities for education. There are three focus areas for this dimension: inclusion in governance, inclusion in opportunity, and inclusion in the public sphere.

Democratic professionals must empower collaborative school governance for themselves, teachers, principals, the community, and the public in general (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Anderson & Cohen, 2015). The superintendents in the case study place an emphasis on creating partnerships and working together with the school community. This includes students, teachers, building principals, and the wider local community. One of the main components of the HCDT's mission statement is to "intentionally engage all members of the school community." This manifested in different ways in each district. However, all of the districts' vision and mission documents, called Directional Systems, were created with input from across the community, including principals, teachers, families, and students. The Directional Systems reflect a commitment on behalf of the superintendents to prioritize the community's needs and interests over externally imposed mandates.

The superintendents also use their district level Directional Systems with their Boards of Education to ground decision making in resource allocation and instructional priorities. This ensures resourcing and other decisions are made in alignment with the values and commitments adopted by the district. Individually, there are multiple examples of the districts seeking input from the community for developing priorities for educational content and processes. Maintown School District's initiative to create a "Portrait of a Graduate" (POG) document with input from the community is one such example. Fielding Schools conducting focus group sessions and including families on visits to example sites before undertaking construction on a new building is another example how the district leaders seek input from the community Fielding Schools focus group sessions and inclusion of families in visiting school sites is another.

The superintendents sought input directly from students by including them in a HCDT group meeting to get feedback on the types of work and learning that the students value and want

to do. This allowed the HCDT to see to what extent their goals and beliefs about what it means to be a student in Hart County are aligned with how students view their schooling needs and experiences. Rather than simply looking at student test scores to gauge how well the schools are meeting student needs as performance accountability assumes, they asked students directly for feedback. This also allowed the HCDT to consider student needs that fall outside of academic experiences considered easy to measure with standardized testing.

The last focus area for the inclusion dimension is situating schooling within the public sphere. The superintendents in the study embraced the "strong public ethos and commitment to a social common good" called for under this dimension of the NDP model (Anderson & Cohen, 2018, p. 118). All of the HCDT participants expressed their belief that education is not simply about College and Career Readiness. For Hart County and the local districts to survive, the work in the schools cannot be just for families with children in the schools, nor can what students take away from their education be a piece of paper they plan to use to obtain a job or go to college. There must be something in it for the wider community—a public as well as a private good. The AG program at Fielding Schools is a powerful example of this kind of community to school connection. It is a source of pride and feeds into the entire town's narrative about why they are proud of where they live. Since the HCDT superintendents view their work as sustaining the educational and economic viability of the county writ large, their leadership work is also tied to providing people a reason to stay in the community, a common purpose, and, as James Bond put it, "that can't just be test scores."

The centering of community inclusion in making decisions about strategic planning, resource allocation, and school programing by the HCDT has several implications for further research. I focused my exploration for this case study on the work of superintendents at the district level. This limitation of the study leaves open questions regarding how teachers, students, board of education members perceived the work and its effectiveness. Future research will be needed to determine how different members of school communities view their inclusion and agency as districts adopt democratic models of leadership like NDP. The elements that contribute to how inclusion initiatives succeed or fail in the wider community would be an important area of focus. That the impetus and energy for this work was steered by mostly female superintendents was intriguing, though not a focus for this study. It suggests the potential

importance of the influence of matriarchal versus patriarchal archetypes on leadership practices, which could also be a useful focus for future study.

Dimension 2: Responsibility

The second dimension of the NDP model is responsibility. This dimension of the model represents a shift in mindset for educational leaders from one of compliance with the audit culture of performance accountability to one of being responsible and answerable to a school and larger social community. Anderson and Cohen (2018) explained, "teachers and leaders who view themselves as democratic professionals consistently ask questions like: *To whom* am I responsible? *For whom* am I responsible? What are the democratic implications of my actions?" (p. 120, emphasis in the original). Asking these types of questions allows leaders to center people as the subject for educators—the "to whom" and "for whom" of defining the work in schools. Educational leaders using this lens center the people—teachers, students, families, community members—who will be impacted as they make decisions. Viewing their leadership as responsibility to the schools and community rather than compliance with audit mandates is paramount to the work of the superintendents in the HCDT collaborative. One of the most important shared values of the HCDT group is that schools are responsible to their communities, not federal and state mandates. As such, they prioritize responsibility to their schools and communities first and foremost.

The superintendents in this case study chose to center people over accountability mandates in this way. They simply refuse to operate in fear of mandates tied to performance metrics. Not operating out of fear of being auditable opens the space and mental energy for dreaming and thinking about how to change the educational system, rather than being caught up in the "doing" of performance accountability metrics. It is one thing to say, "we are focused on student learning and school success beyond performance test scores," but unless there is a real shift in culture behind the words, they remain just words. In creating the HCDT, the superintendents in this case study allowed themselves the time and resources to dream about doing things differently. Because the superintendents have de-emphasized the importance of performance metrics, they have created space for building principals and teachers to view their work from a lens of responsibility as well.

Much of this emphasis is grounded in the fact that the HCDT districts were trained in the use of the Schlechty Center (SC) resources and frameworks that establish the guiding metaphor

that schools should be learning organizations. The learning organization metaphor reinforces community members, school leaders, teachers, students, and staff have the potential to be change agents and can self-govern to move in alignment with the core values and beliefs the districts have defined in their Directional Systems. There is a commitment to making the structures of the educational system fit the values and beliefs of the school community rather than vice versa. And the superintendents are willing to dedicate time and resources for their teachers and principals to have the space to dream up ways to do this—that is to transform the system. The most compelling example of this in the case study was Debra Meyer's commitment to the AG program at Fielding Schools despite ODE Report card metrics that suggested she should resource other programs, like AP and ACT/SAT preparation, to increase the District's Prepared for Success component score.

This case study was conducted in small, rural districts with homogenous community and student populations. The smaller student populations and staffing requirements mean capacity and resources can be scaled in ways larger districts would have trouble emulating. For example, two of the superintendents in this study have offices in the same K-12 building with their students, teachers, staff, and principals, which makes them accessible in ways superintendents simply are not in larger districts. Additionally, because of the small size of the surrounding communities charter and private school options are less lucrative, and, therefore, are not a major factor or concern in terms of brick-and-mortar competition for enrollment from these options with the local public schools. Also at play, is a long history in rural school districts and communities to a pride in their sense of place and commitment to local governance (Brown & Schafft, 2011). The ability of the case superintendents to de-center the state report card metrics and "not be afraid of it anymore" was perhaps made easier because of these factors.

However, the need for a commitment by superintendents to allow for bottom-up systems transformation holds true no matter the size of the district if we are to enter the "post-reform era" described by Horsford et al. (2019). For system transformation, superintendents of all school typographies will need to have the courage to stop implementing reforms aimed at better report card metrics if they do not reflect student and community preferences and needs, like Debra Meyer did at her small rural school. Further research into how larger districts might handle this would be needed, as federal funding is more crucial and school choice options are more impactful on school enrollments in these types of districts.

Dimension 3: Advocacy

Since NPM is working to privatize the public sector, public education is under threat from school choice and voucher programs. Advocating for public schools as part of the ecology of a healthy, functioning democracy should not be overlooked as an important role for district leaders. Anderson and Cohen (2018) captured this element in the advocacy dimension of the model to stress the need for educators to actively participate in building networks. These networks of public-sector democratic professionals are aimed at forming social movements locally, nationally, and globally to counter the impacts of performance accountability and NPM. Creating space for a counter discourse and a focus on the value of a common good for determining the goals and organization of our public schools will need broad consensus and support (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). This begins in individual districts but must snowball to have a greater impact and be heard at the national level. Anderson and Cohen (2018) stressed that educators must participate at the aggregate, not just the individual, level to change the current system and regain professional status and legitimacy.

The districts participating in the HCDT created the collaborative to share resources and support each other in systems change in their individual districts and to look for ways to develop a collective voice for sustaining public education in the county. While it was not a focus of their work during the case study, the HCDT has plans to develop a county level district annual report and a vision for what it means to be a student in Hart County. They are also actively engaged with other superintendents at state and national level. The superintendents meet nationally with other leaders using the SC frameworks at conferences and as part of the NE Ohio Schlechty network. Coming together in community with other like-minded leaders who value public education and community focused leadership supports and strengthens their commitment to the work.

The local communities appear to value and respect the superintendents' leadership and strategic direction. The districts regularly pass school levies. Dianna Prince was confident in telling me that "the community likes what I do with their money." They seem to be respected members of their communities and are able to bring new Board of Education members on board in continuing with the initiatives for systems change already in place. Much of this is in no small part due to their use of the SC frameworks and materials. After all, Dianna and Debra both told

me that a book study of Schlechty (2009*) Leading for Learning* was still the main vehicle they use to initiate new BOE members and teachers into "how we do things here."

While there are certainly other means for establishing a common language and purpose for community-based school leadership, the case study participants were heavily invested in the SC resources. Research looking at other avenues for establishing a common language and fostering a culture of system transformation is needed. There must certainly be other ways in which superintendents can establish support networks and alliances to empower system change. For example, the district where I was a curriculum manager belonged to a coalition called the Big 8 which were the eight largest urban districts in the state. I wonder what power they could wield if they decided to create alternate district annual reports using a common format which purposefully de-centered metrics from the state as the main measure of their work as the smaller districts in the case study have done. Social network theories for building alliances and cross sector collaborations (Burt, 2005; Daly, 2010) were not a focus for this case study, but there are elements of these models at work in the HCDT dynamics and would be a useful extension of the case study observations. Overall, the main implication for further research from the case study is how working together in alliance, collaborative networks can empower education leaders to (re)claim their professional autonomy and legitimacy and embrace centering a democratic focus for their work as public sector professionals.

Final Thoughts

As I write, the Coronavirus pandemic has forced the closure of all K-12 school buildings in Ohio (ODE, 2020). Mandated performance accountability testing was also suspended for the 2019–20 school year. The ODE has announced that the state has applied for and received a one-year waiver from the District Report Card requirements under ESSA (ODE, 2020). As a result, the A-F grading of districts and schools by ODE based on standardized testing will not be issued. Additionally, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test has been cancelled for the year. The assessment cancellations coincide with a renewed focus on the myriad of contributions schools make to communities beyond academics as school districts continue to provide food and other support services to students and their families during the pandemic in ways that are now more visible to the general public (Dunn et al., 2020). The pandemic has also made inequalities in access and opportunity across schools hard to deny as options for remote or

small-scale learning, like private pandemic pods, are increasingly segregated based on financial means, along with the inequities of device availability and lack of broadband internet access for engaging in remote learning that are receiving growing media attention (Camera, 2020).

Greene (2020), a noted education blogger, senior education contributor for Forbes, and former teacher, captured the energy aimed at questioning the viability of continuing with the performance accountability movement sparked by the cancelation of this year's assessments:

> Any system that could offer true accountability in education requires long, complicated conversations (involving more than policy wonks, lobbyists and politicians) about what exactly we want to measure, how it can be measured, and how we want to use the data. The high stakes testing model was slammed into place without any such conversation. (para. 13)

Greene's quote reminds me of Pinar's (2012) description of curriculum development as "complicated conversation" (p. xiii). Perhaps the space for these complicated conversations for informing our decisions about what we want the purpose of our schools to be can finally be made as concerns about the quality of schooling and access to remote learning opportunities in both public and private schools become more widespread among the American public due to the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic (Domaleski, 2020; Greene, 2020). There are tremendous opportunities for states and districts to expand the criteria used to judge school quality under ESSA. As Jochim (2017) observed, "the most promising element in all of ESSA is that it enables states to experiment with more nuanced methods of assessing school quality" (p. 128). This provision could help address some of the undesirable impacts of performance accountability under NCLB, including narrowing of the curriculum to tested subjects and focus on test preparation over higher level learning.

Another opportunity under ESSA is the option for states to use a variety of assessments in determining student progress. Barone (2017) described this "new wrinkle" as the ability of states to allow districts to use assessments that are "partially delivered in the form of portfolios, projects, or extended performance tasks" (p. 65). This would allow districts, like the ones in this case study of Hart county, to match student learning and outcomes to locally relevant issues. For example, in one Hart county district, students develop and market mulch products to the community. Under ESSA, this could be classified as an extended performance assessment. While standardized tests "given to all students" are still mandatory, at least the law is creating space to

balance the assessment system with classroom-based measures closely tied to teacher-created experiences (Barone, 2017).

Beyond the disruptions to the performance accountability system caused by the pandemic, the momentum for policies that allow public sector institutions to reclaim their power and legitimacy has grown as the political spectacle and social unrest of the election year has brought the importance of an educated citizenry to the sustainability of our nation's democracy sharply into focus. The protests in the wake of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others continue to highlight our failure to deal with the historical and on-going systemic racism and violence in our society's systems and structures. In addition, the images of the storming of the Capitol Building by insurrectionists, the blatant disregard for the legal process of Trump's second impeachment trial by Josh Hawley and other Republicans, and disturbing polls showing a large section of the citizenry believe the fraudulent claims of election tampering are on full display in daily media coverage.

There is an opportunity in this moment, when the testing apparatus has been interrupted by the global pandemic and political and social unrest are empowering questioning of the status quo, to (re)imagine what the purposes of schools are and should be, as well as the value of continuing our nation's historical commitment to public education. Understanding the ways in which educational leaders were already resisting performance accountability measures will be useful for framing new possibilities. But even more important, we may be at the end of an era now for school reform rooted in performance accountability. Entering this post-school reform era, we have the opportunity to move beyond the central purpose of schooling as a private, economic one and expand the aims for education to include democratic models for school leadership, like NDP, that prioritize inclusion, responsibility, and advocacy.

As a former district leader, I would have appreciated the study of models of leadership that are grounded in democratic goals for education in my preparation and training. Much of my experience in becoming an administrator was dominated by understanding how to implement and comply with state and federal mandates. There was a heavy emphasis on "data driven" decision making that relied on student performance test score gains as the only measure of success. One thing I learned from the HCDT superintendents is that it is possible to be effective, even thrive, as a district leader without centering "data driven" measures for your success. As I considered how best to synthesize the findings from the case study, it was important to me that scholars and

practitioners engaged in the work of de-centering performance accountability and its use to de-skill and de-professionalize educational leaders would find the study compelling and useful. I can only hope my descriptions of the HCDT superintendents in shifting their focus from an audit-culture to a responsibility-based culture have done them justice. Their collaboration offers a compelling contrast to the competitive system cultivated under both NCLB and ESSA. In my time spent with these district leaders, they certainly appear to be engaging in what Boggs (2012) called grass roots "transformative energy," where the superintendents are the "leaders we've been looking for" (p. 161).

The moment in the case study that still resonates with me the most is Dianna Prince of Maintown Schools looking me in the eye over the table during our first meeting and declaring of ODE's performance accountability system, "At some point, you just can't be afraid of it anymore." Imagine—no more fear. Not operating out of fear opens the space and mental energy for dreaming and thinking about how to change the educational system, rather than being caught up in the "doing" of performance accountability metrics. The superintendents in this case study show that it is possible to step outside of the ways in which the current accountability school reform system functions to demand compliance. District leaders can foster new ways of thinking about and structuring how schools are governed and expand the opportunities for teachers to craft learning experiences for students that are not test score driven. In creating the HCDT, the superintendents in this case study allowed themselves the time, support, and resources to dream about doing things differently and to put those dreams into action in their schools and communities. We need more fearless leaders.

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Appendix A: Schlechty Center Design Teams

Schlechty Center

DESIGN TEAMS

Characteristics of Design Teams

- Act as change agents committed to making engagement central for all
- Have high credibility with students, staff, and community
- Are good communicators who listen more than talk and who pose reflective questions
- Volunteer their attention, commitment, and persistence to the work of the team
- Are continual learners, learning individually and collectively
- Understand and use a common language
- Are developed over time and often have a stable membership
- Are not focused on daily operations or routine management
- Work as a learning community

... Related to Systems Thinking

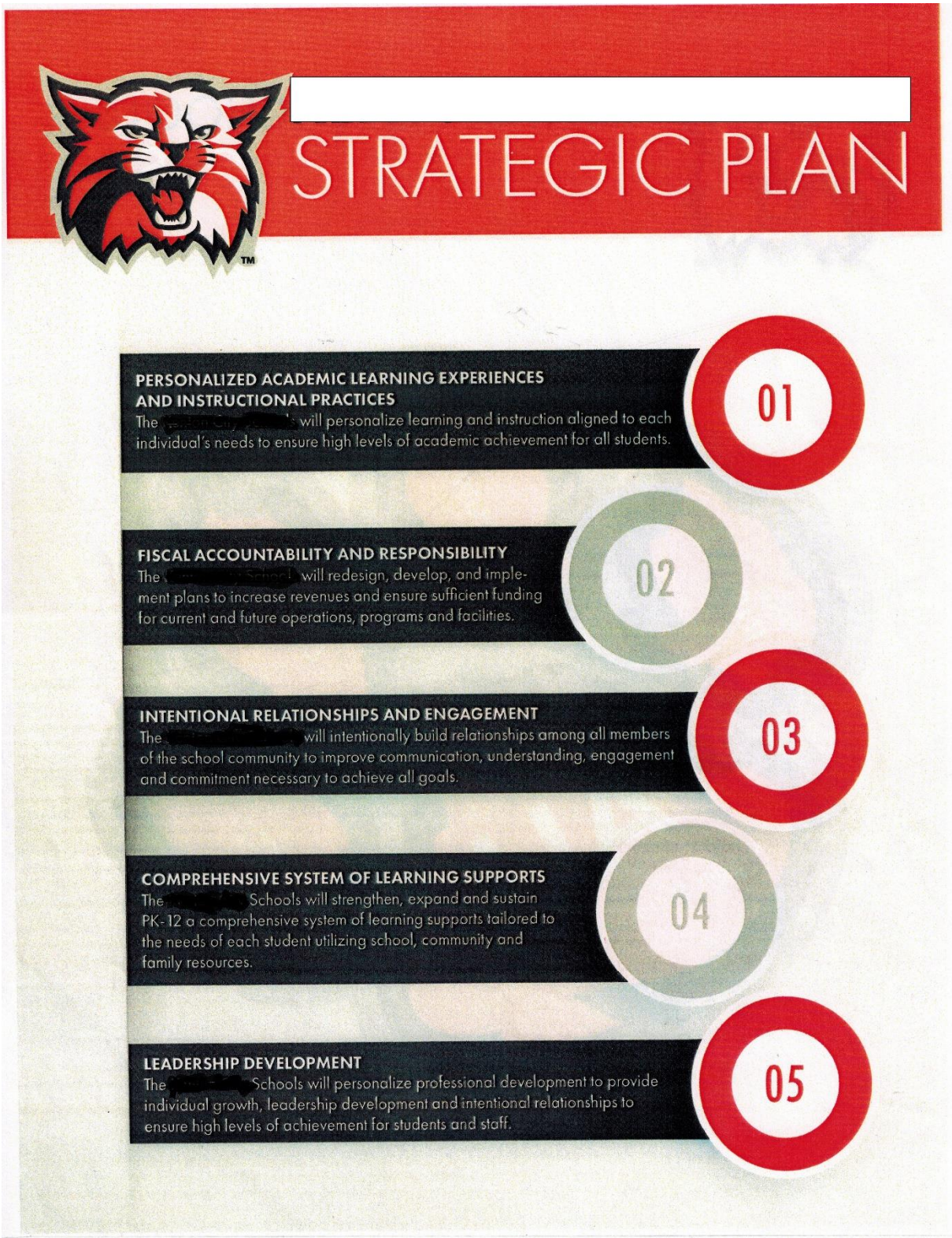
- Focus their efforts on transformation, not reform, to become more and more like a learning organization
- Focus their attention on enhancing capacity to support innovation; District Design Teams focus on the entire district, while School Design Teams focus on the school
- Fasten attention on designing systems that support the design of engaging work for students
- Attend to system properties and the changes needed in these systems to encourage and support continuous innovation
- Facilitate the development of a clear set of beliefs, vision, and mission and use them in their daily work, including the constant inducting of others
- Think strategically and form goals about accomplishment
- Measure progress in various ways, such as through the use of the School Standards, Classroom Standards, System Capacity Standards, and Six Critical Systems
- Spend time in research and development and in creating prototypes of organizational changes that enhance the capacity of districts or schools to support engaging work for students

... Related to Working on the Work Framework

- Are committed to the Working on the Work framework and use it as the lens through which initiatives, programs, and resources are viewed and evaluated
- Get others involved in the core business of schools
- Understand the need for engagement
- Believe teachers are leaders, designers, and guides to instruction
- Use the discipline of design to be attentive to the characteristics of work likely to increase the power of work to engage others
- Model, share, and facilitate protocols

Appendix B: District Directional System Samples

Maintown City Schools Directional System Graphic


STRATEGIC PLAN
PERSONALIZED ACADEMIC LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES
The [redacted] will personalize learning and instruction aligned to each individual's needs to ensure high levels of academic achievement for all students.
01
FISCAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY
The [redacted] will redesign, develop, and implement plans to increase revenues and ensure sufficient funding for current and future operations, programs and facilities.
02
INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND ENGAGEMENT
The [redacted] will intentionally build relationships among all members of the school community to improve communication, understanding, engagement and commitment necessary to achieve all goals.
03
COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM OF LEARNING SUPPORTS
The [redacted] Schools will strengthen, expand and sustain PK-12 a comprehensive system of learning supports tailored to the needs of each student utilizing school, community and family resources.
04
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
The [redacted] Schools will personalize professional development to provide individual growth, leadership development and intentional relationships to ensure high levels of achievement for students and staff.
05

[redacted] SCHOOLS - *How We Do Business:*

Beliefs Inspire Vision:

Our core business is engaging students in real life experiences, as such:

We believe:

- the learning experience should be centered on student voice, passion, and ownership.

- collaboration among partners empowers, challenges, supports, guides, and makes us unafraid to innovate.

- in the freedom to fail and grow as we explore new ways to think and do.

- service is our tool to instill a productive connection with community and meaningful life experiences for our staff and students.

- rigorous academics are foundational to collaboration, innovation, and service which cause us to explore boundaries and redefine them.

- our staff and students bring value to the world and should always be treated with the highest integrity.

Vision: DESIGNING THE FUTURE

Mission: In designing the future, [redacted] Schools will create partnerships with our families and community which broaden minds to learn and serve through collaboration, innovation, and rigorous academics for life's learning journey.

Principles: We are moving from a bureaucratic institution to a learning organization. We have designed a 21st century learning facility in our new PreK-12 building. Both our building and our instructional designs are founded on these principles. At Ridgemont, we believe in:

1. Service and project based learning which addresses real world problems for real world audiences.
2. Customized student learning based on student need and readiness which uses technology as a primary tool.
3. Deeper, amplified learning which makes principles one and two purposeful and engaging to students.

Gopher Traits Support and are a Result of our Principles:

1. **Determination** - the grit to persevere in a task or belief and see it through to completion
2. **Empathy** - sharing in the feelings of others even when they are different from ours; demonstrating compassion and understanding
3. **Cognitive Flexibility** - able to change one's perspective based on receptivity to new ideas as well as thinking about multiple concepts simultaneously.
4. **Innovation** - using creative and critical thinking skills to problem solve with original ideas, devices, or methods
5. **Humor** - a positiveness that is able to laugh at one's self and find joy in unexpected situations

Instructional Strategies to Support our Principles:

1. Service-Learning
2. Project Based Learning
3. Co-teaching - across disciplines and grade levels
4. Differentiation
5. Subject Integration
6. Technology Integration
7. engaging work

Partnerships Make Our Mission Possible:

Students are creators of innovative and engaging products that demonstrate depth of understanding.

Parents are partners with the school and community to support individual student success.

Staff members are designers of irresistible environments where students are engaged to create and are motivated to become lifelong learners.

Teachers are designers of irresistible learning opportunities where students are engaged to create and are motivated to become lifelong learners.

Principals are creators of irresistible climates where staff take risks to innovate strategies that engage students.

The **Superintendent** is the moral and intellectual leader of leaders who establishes and maintains a unified direction for the school district focused on staff and student engagement.

Board Members are advocates for the integrity, ability and character of the learning organization.

Community Members are a collective group of advocates who contribute to the elevation of the local society by supporting authentic learning opportunities to engage all students.

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Sample

Superintendent Interviews -Preliminary Data

District:

Superintendent:

Signed Consent Form:

Chosen Pseudonym:

Basic Overview points/ideas:

- Research interest in how district leaders balance accountability pressures from state and federal policies with needs of local community and students
- Interest in researching district's place-based curriculum and assessment options
- How HCDT work fits in with district goals

General Background:
Have discussed previously but need to be sure enough detail for my notes.

1. What brought you to the district? /How did you get into district leadership?
2. What are the opportunities/challenges in the area?
3. Any other points to share?

Leadership Style/ Thoughts:

1. How do you describe your leadership style?
2. What is most important to you about being a district leader?
3. Your top three or so priorities for the district?
4. What are you most proud of so far with the work you have done?

HCDT Work:

1. How did you get involved with the work of the Design Team?
2. What is the most beneficial aspect of the collaboration for your district? You as a leader?
3. What is something you wish the team was doing?
4. Is there anything you would change about the Design teamwork?

Appendix D: Informed Consent

Research Consent: Innovative School District Leadership Study

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Cynthia Sanders from Miami University. The purpose of this research is to examine how district leaders create and communicate messages about how they are meeting the needs of their communities and students beyond the data driven measures which are reported on Ohio State Report Card each year. Participation in this research is restricted to persons 18 years of age or older.

The study will include individual interviews and observations of team meetings. Your participation is voluntary, you may skip questions you do not want to answer during the interviews and choose not to have notes on your participation from observations of team meetings included, and, as the researcher, I will not observe any portion of team meetings not directly related to the study. Additionally, you may stop participating in the study at any time.

Notes or recordings accompanying any part of the study will not include information about your identity or your school district. I will be using pseudonyms for all references to persons and places. On some occasions, with your permission, I will digitally record interviews to ensure accuracy. Later, I will take notes based on the recording and delete the recording. If you inadvertently include identifying information, such information will be removed from any stored data. I am the only person who will have access to individual responses.

Results of the research will be presented in a research project for my doctoral program course work. I will provide a copy of my final project to all participants.

If you have any questions about this research or you feel you need more information to determine whether you would like to volunteer, you can contact me at 513.236.7745 or by email at daviscc@miamioh.edu. If you have questions or concerns about the rights of research subjects, you may contact our reviewing body: Research Ethics and Integrity Office at Miami University at (513) 529-3600 or humansubjects@miamioh.edu.

Participant Printed Name:_____

Participant Signature: _____Date:_____