RESULTS FOR ALL: IDENTIFYING PROMISING LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

THAT SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS BELIEVE IMPACT STUDENT

PERFORMANCE IN PENNSYLVANIA

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DEDICATION

To all those who choose the career of educator
and make differences in the lives of individuals
throughout the world and throughout time.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express my deepest appreciation and gratitude to my family, friends, and colleagues who helped to make this dissertation a final reality. First, I thank the inspiring and brilliant members of my dissertation committee: My chair, John DeFlaminis, Executive Director of the Penn Center for Educational Leadership; Michael Johanek, Senior Fellow and Director of the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership; and Gerald Zahorchak, former Pennsylvania Secretary of Education. I also thank my previous chair, Rebecca Maynard, Trustee Professor of Education and Social Policy. The committee’s patience, support, and wisdom were critical for the publication of this dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

RESULTS FOR ALL: IDENTIFYING PROMISING LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS BELIEVE IMPACT STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN PENNSYLVANIA

Mary I. Ramírez
John A. DeFlaminis

Student achievement is one of the most challenging issues confronting the educational community. Educators explore this theme hands-on throughout their careers, politicians and policymakers invest in initiatives they think will make a difference, and communities often struggle to define themselves through the successes or failures of their schools. Whether it is looking at graduation rates, test scores, report card grades, attendance, safety issues, or behavioral health, student performance is analyzed and discussed from research journals to the media. Presently, with federal and state requirements in place for standards-based systems, there is an intense focus on accountability for high academic achievement for all children. Schools are struggling under tight timelines and limited budgets to assess student needs and implement policy changes that address, in particular, the need to improve outcomes among diverse student groups. The concept of “achievement gaps” has been emphasized as one of the major challenges existing today in PreK-12 education.

This dissertation study investigated the relationship of school leadership and student achievement. Using a mixed-method design, two questions of inquiry were explored: (1) How are schools that demonstrate significant achievement in 8th grade
reading with diverse student populations identified? (2) How do school and district leaders believe they influence student performance in these schools? The goal was to identify schools where diverse student populations were making significant progress in reading on eighth grade state assessments, and then learn from the administrators of those schools what leadership practices they believed were most effective.

This research examined the 8th grade reading performance of one state’s schools with an emphasis on students who are racially and ethnically diverse, economically disadvantaged, who have disabilities, or who do not speak English as a first language. This study analyzed pre-existing test score data through value-added analysis and data reduction and selection efforts. The semi-structured interviews offered thoughtful perspectives from school leaders who had experienced successful student results. The research literature points out that multiple factors contribute to achievement, and this dissertation study validates that therefore multiple solutions may be required. This study provides promising leadership practices school leaders can use to impact student performance. It is anticipated the findings from this research will provide useful insights into leadership practices and teaching and learning efforts for special populations.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Overview

Creating and sustaining high-performing education systems to support societal and economic success is a priority across our nation and the world. A major goal in the United States is educating students to high levels of achievement. Politicians and policymakers invest in initiatives they think will make a positive difference, and communities define themselves through the successes or failures of their schools. Whether it is reviewing graduation rates, state test scores, report card grades, attendance, safety issues, or behavioral health, student performance is analyzed and discussed from research journals to the media. Federal and state requirements in place for standards-based systems have increased the focus on accountability for strong academic results for all children. Yet many schools, especially in high-poverty urban areas, struggle to appropriately evaluate student needs and implement meaningful changes in practice to improve outcomes.

School performance is greatly affected by policies and resources provided from federal, state and local authorities, which in turn influence what goes on within classrooms. Educators are being urged and even mandated to implement reform efforts under the federal elementary and secondary education law of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The federal government, through its Institute of Education Sciences, is addressing disparities in student performance by promoting the use of evidence-based programs that demonstrate improved results. However, there still exists practice in classrooms that is grounded in tradition more than research, so there is a real need to
create stronger links among theory, evidence, and implementation. District and building leadership decisions can also significantly influence school results.

**Student Diversity and Achievement Gaps**

Effective instructional practices and student support services are complicated by the increasing diversity of the student population in the United States. Based on U.S. 2000 Census data, the current Pre-K-16 student population in the United States is 63% White or Caucasian, 15% African American, 15% Hispanic or Latino, 4% Asian, and 3% other racial/ethnic groups (Day & Jamieson, 2003). These proportions differ across states, districts and schools. Additional challenges include growing numbers of other traditionally underperforming student groups such as students with disabilities, students who are English language learners, and those who are economically disadvantaged.

The concept of “achievement gaps” has been emphasized as one of the major equity issues existing today in PreK-12 education. Achievement gaps are usually defined as performance differences on diverse educational measures between groups of students, especially indicated by race/ethnicity, ability and socio-economic status (Barton & Coley, 2009, 2010; Gordon, 2004; Kettering Foundation, 2010; Nutter, 2010). The National Assessment of Educational Progress has been the major measure of overall American academic performance, but data are tracked on state assessments as well. These historical differences in performance have a significant impact on educational attainment for youth, such as high school and college graduation, and thus affect future income and career opportunities.

However, across the nation, as monitored by national groups such as Education Trust, there exist important examples of schools that are overcoming challenges and
achieving unexpected results with their diverse student populations. These schools are measuring high in performance in comparison to other schools with similarly diverse student bodies, and may even be outperforming mainstream schools. For example, Arizona has produced a report detailing successful “beat-the-odd” schools that could be used as models nationwide (Center for the Future of Arizona, 2006). Borrowing from the business language of Jim Collins, the concept of “great” schools has now become prevalent in the education world. There exists a “Great Schools” electronic network funded by major foundations that encourages parents to publicly rate and review their schools online. The Great Schools Partnership at the Mitchell Institute (2007) has published school redesign rubrics that allow for rating of schools across critical dimensions. Can schools that have produced these unexpected, yet important and much-needed results be clearly identified? And how do school leaders believe they influence the success of these schools?

**The Role of Leadership**

The impact of leadership to improve school performance may not be completely understood yet cannot be underestimated. High quality leadership has become a key area of research for educational improvement. Some policymakers propose that leadership is the second most important influence on student learning after classroom teaching (Education Policy and Leadership Center, 2006). The Wallace Foundation recently supported a comprehensive, multi-year investigation of leadership practices that generate significant student results (Louis et al., 2010). Strong school leadership is recognized to be even more critical in urban and high poverty schools (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). Many districts now use expert “turn-around” principals who are assigned to the highest
need schools and expected to produce improvements. Do the leadership abilities develop from experience, or from studying research, or from having an effective approach with students, staff and community, or from a combination of all of these factors? Do school leaders monitor their own knowledge and skills effectively and seek to improve or change practice for the benefit of their students? Leaders themselves may never have fully examined these questions and education research does not yet provide comprehensive guidance.

Leadership is defined by a number of action verbs—guide, direct, escort, influence, entice, command (Davies, 1971)—but it is the results of those activities which are judged, sometimes as noteworthy and other times as failures. Leadership in the educational universe can encompass many complex responsibilities. For the purposes of this study, educational leadership was characterized as the actions and decisions of school principals and superintendents that had a positive impact on learning for diverse student groups. “Leadership can be described by reference to two core functions. One function is providing direction; the other is exercising influence” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 9).

Another recognized definition of educational leadership is “the work of mobilizing and influencing others to articulate and achieve the school’s shared intentions and goals” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005, p. 14). This second definition seems to emphasize intention while the first definition is focused on results. An effective leader integrates both concepts into positive action for the school community. An educational leader who is highly knowledgeable of student learning needs, pedagogy, content, school context and potential implications for practice, may be more assured of bringing success to his/her school or district for all student groups.
Study Framework and Questions

This dissertation study investigated how Pennsylvania education leaders in schools with strong subgroup performance believe they positively affect student results on the eighth grade state assessment in reading. Reading comprehension is recognized as a critical ability needed by employers (Education Trust, 2010), and was therefore selected as the key area for monitoring of student performance. Eighth grade is the transition year to high school and summarizes the student’s elementary learning experiences. The research was constructed using a state model to study the comprehensive impact of reform measures at the school level. Using a mixed-method design, two key questions of inquiry were explored:

1. How are schools that demonstrate significant achievement in eighth grade reading with diverse student populations identified?

2. How do school and district leaders believe they influence student performance in these schools?

The goal was to first categorize schools where the diverse student groups were making significant progress such that achievement gaps were being reduced or eliminated. The next part of the study examined the understandings and actions of the superintendents and principals in achieving those results.

This study advances knowledge of how school leadership decisions may positively affect student performance—findings that have relevance to practitioners at the school, district and state levels, as well as to higher education and community partners. This research also provides useful insights regarding strategies to counter the achievement gap crisis in our nation. The potential results of this study could also inform
policy, professional development and resource allocation decisions at the state, district and school levels.

**Context**

Public involvement in education is a driving force in the United States, and the diversity of the populace has had a major historical impact on the existence of today’s system. Educational policies and practices have come into being for a number of reasons, beginning with the transmittal of religious, moral and civic values; incorporating academic improvement, and moving more toward career preparation, personal gain and now global economic competitiveness (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). In many cases it has been the advocacy of American citizenry that has led to critical education policy changes, such as increased rights for students with disabilities and those learning English as a new language. A recent rallying cry has been that education in America may be the “new civil right.” This concept is especially meaningful as the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. the Board of Education was celebrated. Yet the ability to equitably involve all children in high quality teaching and learning experiences continues to elude our nation.

**Student Performance**

The current NCLB law places great responsibilities on states to produce high student outcomes and ensure that districts and schools are held accountable for results. By the year 2014 all students are expected to meet proficiency in core content areas in the state assessment system, which must be aligned to the state standards. These requirements can be compared to the federal Goals 2000 legislation, which also demanded increasing performance levels of student attainment. Concerns regarding achievement gaps were instrumental in the original bipartisan political support of NCLB,
but the law has also been criticized as being underfunded and overly mandated. As they move toward proficiency, schools are monitored and measured for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in their states, and must demonstrate that all subgroups are meeting academic standards in key areas such as reading, mathematics and science. As requirements for overall student achievement levels continue to increase, the new demands create more pressure on educators to find solutions for performance disparities. Across the nation and in Pennsylvania, Hispanic and African American children are not mirroring the growth of their Caucasian peers on state assessments (Cronin, Kingsbury, McCall, & Bowe, 2005). The same is also true for students from families of low socioeconomic status, students with disabilities, and those with limited English proficiency. Data from the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading demonstrate the achievement differences between student groups at the eighth grade (Table 1; Nation’s Report Card, 2009b).

Table 1

2009 National Public Reading Composite Grade 8 Average Scale Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Low Socioec</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>LEP/ELL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: National average is 271

Student performance on state assessments is one measure; who is actually participating in that testing in the classrooms is another. Data for 2002 high school graduation rates demonstrate that although the United States has a national average graduation rate of 71%, rates for White students are at 78%, and Asian students are at 79%, while the rate for African Americans is 56%, and for Hispanics is 52% (Greene &
Winters, 2005). A large number of students of color are not “marching in their caps and gowns.” Approximately half of all minorities do not graduate, which has long-term negative economic and social effects for society as well as for the individuals who drop out (Orfield, 2004). Additionally, as demographic numbers for minority groups such as Latinos continue to grow, the challenge for the education system to grant diplomas will also proportionally increase, especially in the high-risk urban and metro areas (Education Week, 2010).

The consequences of inequitable educational opportunities in our nation is made even more urgent now as economic competition from rising superpowers, China and India, challenges the United States dominance in the world economy (National Intelligence Council, 2000). Politicians and other national leaders are prompted to continue to push for stronger literacy, math and science outcomes as a result of the increasing technology skills of youth in other countries. Although the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) results of 2003 showed improvements in performance of American students that exceeded the international average in both math and science in the eighth grade, there are still other countries that ably outperform our schools and students. There is also a growing movement, led by groups such as the Asia Society, to have children in American schools become more linguistically and culturally adept through international/global education initiatives, as the next generation will seek their careers in a worldwide economy.

Alignment Issues and Leadership

The imposition of Adequate Yearly Progress requirements in underperforming schools has raised the importance of aligning assessments with standards. Yet, it is
recognized that alignment must also extend to significant areas such as instruction, student interventions, community involvement, professional development and resources, all elements in the education system (La Marca, Redfield, Winter, Bailey, & Despriet 2000; Tucker & Codding, 2002). Businesses and industry have long recognized that implementing an aligned systems approach provides a strong framework for focusing on critical goals and creating synergy to achieve results. States have now been called upon to increase alignment, coherence, transparency and ownership, so that educational policies merit engagement by schools and their constituencies (Fullan, 2003). Therefore, it becomes critically important that all decision-making be based on evidence and data, and that those decisions also be accompanied by appropriate technical assistance and communication to schools to promote better student results.

In order to address all of these complex challenges, educational leaders must take on many responsibilities and carefully consider the impact of their actions. Leaders need to make decisions at the local level that address state and national policies, and are also responsive to the needs of the students in their schools. Leadership is demonstrated across a variety of fronts--school boards, superintendent and central offices, principals, teachers, parents, students and community constituencies. Leadership requires vigilance: leaders stay abreast of new research on the effectiveness of policies and practices, interventions or pedagogies. Public educational leaders such as superintendents and principals recognize that additional teacher professional development is frequently required, which must be integrated into constrained school budgets. School board policies and school funding levels often challenge the concept of equal opportunity and
demand of leaders strategic, collaborative and transformational thinking and actions (Jossey-Bass, 2000).

Today educational leaders must be able to understand and implement effective policies, monitor the quality of program implementation, instruction, interventions, assessment, professional development; advocate for sufficient funding, and garner community support, among many other responsibilities. All of these elements can be viewed as strategies as part of the overall system of education (La Marca et al., 2000). School leaders must understand the continuum of vision and focus from the federal government, to the state department of education (SEA), the district or local education agency (LEA), the school, and ultimately the classroom, in an effort to promote effective practices and replicate success, or address deficiencies. Superintendents and principals are being asked to reexamine their practices and ensure that they are able to meet leadership expectations, such as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) leadership behaviors (Education Policy and Leadership Center, 2006), the Great Schools criteria, the National Institute for School Leadership framework (2005), as well as new state requirements and even district mandates, such as the New York City Leadership Academy (De Leon, 2006).

Education system leaders have a dual role of making system coherence more evident and accessible while fostering interactions horizontally and vertically that promote system thinking in others (Fullan, 2005). Understanding and effectively managing an ‘aligned system approach’ means that the educational leader recognizes all
the diverse components that could have an impact educational results, and she is able to ensure that they are all supporting a common goal of positive student outcomes.

**Background on Pennsylvania**

The primary setting for the study was the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the sixth largest state in the country (Worldatlas, 2009). The Pennsylvania state and county population estimates indicate that 19% of the population is minority and these numbers continue to rise as the state becomes more diverse (Pennsylvania State Data Center, personal communication via email, June 10, 2010). The state enrolls over 1.8 million students in its 3250 public schools (Pennsylvania Department of Education [PDE], 2005). In 2003, 77.1% of students were white, 15.5% African American, 5.2% Hispanic, and 2.3% Asian; 29% were economically disadvantaged; and 13.4% were classified as having a disability (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2005). In Pennsylvania, only 2% of superintendents and 11% of principals are minority status (Education Policy and Leadership Center, 2006). The commonwealth operates 500 districts, some very rural and small, others that are large, urban and poor, and still others that are suburban and wealthy. The district communities contribute to the per pupil education allocations, and these amounts vary significantly. Therefore, there exists a range of expenditures across districts, with per pupil operational cost differing by thousands of dollars. In Pennsylvania, public education is a “fundamental right” and discrimination is prohibited; attending neighborhood schools is a “cornerstone” of the state structure (Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, 2009).

In 2003, a new governor, Edward Rendell, took office with education as one of his primary platform and budget agendas. In his first 3 years of office, he appointed three
different secretaries of education, but the overall vision remained and most efforts continued on course. States had just gained increased responsibilities under the federal education law changes in No Child Left Behind. States now had to ensure they had comprehensive content and performance standards in place, redesigned testing systems and data collection processes, and plans to provide technical assistance as well as measures for school improvement.

The governor believed that the state’s financial contribution was not significant enough for student success. From 2003-2010 the governor increased the average operational expenditures education spending per child statewide from $8,997 to more than $10,000 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2006). The expenses are calculated to include instruction, support services, administration and management costs, and transportation and food services. The Pennsylvania Board of Education released a “costing out study” which cited the average annual amount per pupil for a quality education in Pennsylvania should be approximately $12,000 (Pennsylvania Board of Education, 2005). However, this figure does not address the additional expenditures that could be associated with the educational needs of special student populations.

**Pennsylvania Performance**

Pennsylvania has had a long history of achievement gaps, demonstrated on both national and state content tests. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (Nation’s Report Card, 2009a), the barometer of student performance across states and subgroups based on race, ethnicity, poverty and other factors, indicated that gaps in student performance in Pennsylvania were similar to national data for reading results for eighth grade students (Table 2).
Performance by diverse groups is rigorously tracked on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), a standards-based criterion-referenced assessment. Student performance is described as advanced, proficient, basic and below basic. The proficient and the advanced categories are the key levels for acceptable and accelerated student performance; below basic and basic categories indicate struggling populations. Adequate Yearly Progress is the requirement that schools must meet state standards annually for population subgroups and for the school as a whole. The percentages must continue to increase to reflect state growth toward AYP requirements and the final goal of all students reaching proficiency in state standards demonstrated through state assessments. In Pennsylvania, AYP is measured through three indicators: attendance or graduation rate, academic performance and test participation (PDE, 2010a). Practically all subgroups have shown steady growth in the multi-year administration time span from 2003-2010, yet gaps across groups persist. In 2011, the targets will be 67% proficiency for mathematics and 72% proficiency in reading for all students.

See Table 3 for the disaggregated results for 2009-10 school year for eighth graders in reading (PDE, 2010d).
Table 3

Percent of Subgroup Students at Each Performance Level for PSSA 2009-2010 Grade 8 Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Below basic</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP (disabilities)</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEP (ELL)</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econom. disadv.</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>34.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>59.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These PSSA data demonstrate the difficulty in moving the diverse subgroups from below basic to proficient/advanced levels, and the historic persistence of the large achievement gaps in Pennsylvania for these groups as compared to White and students without economic disadvantages. The state has introduced a value added assessment system, PVAAS, which allows closer analysis of both school achievement and progress.

The high school graduation rates for Pennsylvania students also demonstrate these differences: White students have an 84% graduation rate as compared to 49% for African American, and 50% for Hispanic (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). The Schott State Report on Public Education and Black Males (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2008) posted graduation rates for Pennsylvania Black males at 58% as compared to White males at 84%. Other indicators include participation in Advanced Placement courses; in Pennsylvania, African American students have the lowest passing rates as compared to other ethnic groups in the three areas of social sciences, humanities, and math and sciences (PDE, 2010b). Although the state was now able to offer districts comprehensive data on student performance, the PDE also
has come to understand that it can recognize a district’s reading scores as low, but it cannot tell a district how to remedy the problem. It can, however, build a district’s capacity and give it tools to undertake a robust analysis and develop strategies. (Tanney, 2009, p. 4)

Pennsylvania Leadership Efforts

Because Pennsylvania recognized the importance that school and district leaders have in promoting student achievement, under the Rendell administration the state approved revised requirements for continuous learning for superintendents, principals and other education leaders to maintain their state credentials. Higher education institutions were also expected to redesign their programs for preparation and certification programs to meet the new leadership standards (Tanney, 2009). The Act 45 Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership (PIL) framework (PDE, 2007) courses are based on the following three core standards and six corollary standards:

1. The leader has the knowledge and skills to think and plan strategically, creating an organizational vision around personalized student success.

2. The leader is grounded in standards-based systems theory and design and is able to transfer that knowledge to his/her job as the architect of standards-based reform in the school.

3. The leader knows how to access and use appropriate data to inform decision-making at all levels of the system.

The education leader:

1. Creates a culture of teaching and learning with an emphasis on learning.

2. Manages resources for effective results.
3. **Collaborates, communicates, engages, and empowers others** inside and outside of the organization to pursue excellence in learning.

4. **Operates** in a *fair and equitable* manner with personal and professional dignity.

5. **Advocates** for *children and public education* to the larger political, social, economic, legal and cultural context.

6. **Supports** professional growth of self and others through practice and inquiry.

The state is using this leadership initiative to especially encourage school principals to grow or sustain their abilities and use high quality principles in an ongoing learning experience, building on the National Institute for School Leadership model (NISL; 2005).

The PDE Standards Aligned System model (Figure 1) consists of leaders fully understanding how to implement six elements: standards, assessment, curriculum, instruction, materials and resources, and interventions, which are known as the academic system. School superintendents and principals examine their own practices in terms of creating a vision, using data and aligning the standards-based instructional system, reviewing effective instructional practices, creating a professional learning community in their schools and promoting sustained improvement (NISL, 2005).

The education system integrates many areas, but it must always have a center focus, which should be student achievement. Here is where the arrow of effort must hit accurately. This concept is also found in business literature, as keeping our eye on the prize, or the hedgehog model Collins (2001) promoted. School results are strongly
affected by the leadership of the principal and the district administration--what decisions are made to improve teaching and learning and have a positive impact on student results?

Figure 1. *PDE Standards Aligned System.*

In Pennsylvania, socio-emotional supports for students are also part of that system, and may include extra efforts to address student needs, such as providing academic interventions, fostering student resiliency, and offering more counseling services, mentoring programs, and behavioral health supports. Schools may vary greatly in the services they offer, especially due to variability in the size and nature of their diverse student populations. Therefore, using an aligned systems approach in Pennsylvania means that school leaders must understand and implement both academic and support efforts to improve student success.

Pennsylvania is a state with many schools of excellence as well as many in great need. There are also far too many schools that remain at status quo and do not progress
in reducing or eliminating achievement gaps. The NCLB requirement of disaggregated performance data for diverse subgroups has brought much more attention to the needs of all children. This study attempted to identify the schools making higher than expected progress specifically for diverse student populations. The research employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches by examining state testing data results and integrating a sample of interview data from principals and superintendents. By examining school processes and leadership actions it was hoped to identify characteristics and ways for improving the potential for higher levels of both student and school performance.

**Purpose of the Study**

Doing and reporting research is a social activity with an ethical dimension . . . Research is hard work, but like any challenging job done well, both the process and the results can bring real personal satisfaction. No small part of that satisfaction comes from knowing that your work supports and sustains the fabric of your community. That sense of contributing to a community is never more rewarding than when you discover something that you believe can improve your readers’ lives by changing what and how they think. (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2003, p. 8)

This study was conducted from a statewide perspective, with the goal to identify schools with eighth grade students that are making significant gains in reading with traditionally underperforming student populations, and then inquiring how school and district leaders in those overperforming schools believe they influence and support student achievement. Eighth grade student performance was specifically examined because it is the culminating grade of the elementary school experience. Students must now transition to high school and are then expected to work towards career readiness and higher learning opportunities to become future productive citizens. Middle year students
are moving into adolescence and require developmentally appropriate pedagogy as well as meaningful social-emotional support. Middle school has often been viewed as a challenging assignment for many educators. To address the importance of education at these middle years, Pennsylvania has created middle level (grades 7-9) teaching certifications for English, Math, Science and Social Studies. Research in Philadelphia middle schools demonstrated there are issues of over-representation of new teachers, high turnover rates and lack of certification, all of which have a negative effect on student achievement (Neild, Useem, & Farley, 2005).

The study also concentrated only on state assessment results in reading, due to the critical importance of this content area and to reduce the data sets. Reading proficiency is a critical skill that should be fully developed during the elementary education experience. Students entering into the high school years are expected to then apply their literacy ability across distinct content areas. Literacy proficiency involves mastery of key skills such as decoding, morphology, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension and is affected by student motivation and the needs of diverse learners (National Institute for Literacy, 2007). As literacy ability dominates professional and personal experiences, all educators must take responsibility to support student learning in these skills.

As stated above, the key research questions were: (1) How are schools that demonstrate significant achievement in eighth grade reading with diverse student populations identified? (2) How do school and district leaders believe they influence student performance in these schools?

In considering the first question of inquiry, the goal was to use data that effectively demonstrated the performance of diverse student populations on a school-by-
school basis statewide. The standardized results from the state assessment system allowed for clear and valid disaggregated analysis. For the second question the study explored what kinds of actions leaders believe helped to shape their schools into strong learning organizations where children are supported and have the opportunity to achieve well. The framework of the dissertation research is illustrated in the Logic Model depicted in Figure 2. The Logic Model begins with an overview of the research questions, and then activities are briefly described with corresponding short and long-term outcomes. Key results include recommended practices to potentially reduce the achievement gap, strategies for effective leadership and ideas for professional development and technical assistance. The model concludes with a listing of the stakeholders who could be affected by this research.

**Study Components**

As discussed, this study proceeded in two key stages. To address research question one, current achievement gaps that existed in the state were analyzed by identifying the performance levels across eighth grade student groups on the state test in reading. The goal was to identify schools that exhibited unusually favorable results for populations that normally underperform. Although this was a whole state study, the data and unit of study were limited to public schools. Customized reports using the Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System allowed for a comparison of schools both achieving and making progress. The study used data from multiple administration years of the test. Given the geographic diversity of the state, it was also important to differentiate across school categories of rural, urban, or suburban.
In the second stage of the study, interviews were conducted in a sample of schools that exhibited exceptional patterns of student achievement to analyze the perspectives of administrators. Although it was not possible in the scope of this study to demonstrate actual cause and effect correlations between the actions of the leaders and the school results, the hypothesis that leadership can positively affect student achievement meant
that there was great value in exploring the perspectives of these school administrators with high performing diverse populations. What are the leadership decisions in these Pennsylvania schools that are having a positive impact on student performance? How do school administrators believe they achieve successful results? What practices do leaders put in place, and are their similarities and/or differences across schools? The results of those interviews were examined using the educational leadership research and great school leadership criteria discussed in the literature review. The interviews allowed for more focus on possible leadership strategies to reduce or eliminate achievement gaps. The interviews examined in more detail how local leadership functions may affect student performance, and how leaders interpret policy and implement practice to improve student learning.

The goal of this study is to provide guidance for administrators of schools with diverse student populations in order to more strongly develop effective leadership practices, improve educational experiences for high-need student populations, and eliminate differences in student performance. This research can offer possible guidance as well for future education policies. All of these issues will be explored in greater detail in the literature review.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Framework

This literature review encompasses the key areas of research that are addressed in the dissertation study. The research questions are: How are schools that demonstrate significant achievement in eighth grade reading with diverse student populations identified? How do school and district leaders believe they influence student performance in these schools? These two questions of inquiry focus on the importance of examining efforts that are reducing or eliminating student performance differences and the effect that education leaders may have in accomplishing those results. The first critical issue discussed in the literature review is that of achievement gaps. This section explores possible causes and solutions for student performance differences, and incorporates a brief discussion of policy efforts to support educational progress in the United States. The next major topic is educational leadership, particularly as it pertains to student achievement. This section also reviews practices that could potentially create high performing schools and discusses the systems approach.

The major pieces of literature were selected because they are recognized as significant in the field and incorporate broad research reviews. Although large-scale efforts (federal, state, and district) were emphasized more than smaller projects, a diversity of settings and perspectives are included. This preliminary framework of topics is reflective of issues that have been emphasized in educational policy and research over the past decade. Resources were chosen that appeared most useful for both reflective and implementation practices.
The literature on these topics is complemented by personal experience, which includes years of district, state and school administration and teaching, attendance in various graduate programs to receive the continuum of certifications, discussions with other professional colleagues, and membership in professional organizations (Maxwell, 1996). The goal has been to review research that provides both a broad and a deep understanding of the issues, as well as offers recommendations for high quality student and school success.

**Achievement Gaps**

It is important that public policy doesn’t define equity as merely closing the gap between the low performers and the middle. That’s why public policy should place more emphasis on closing gaps in growth among students than gaps in achievement. While closing the gap between low performers and the middle would be a step in the direction of greater equity, the product of true equity would not be equal student outcomes. (Cronin et al., 2005, p. 59)

**Overview**

This first literature area reviews achievement gaps and discusses what is known about their causes, policy efforts that have been put in place to address the challenges of differences in student performance, and what educational practices may help to eliminate gaps. Our country is becoming increasingly diverse, and the issues educators face in helping all children succeed academically continue to become more complex. When federal and state governments discuss education policy and resource allocation decisions, one question now dominates, “How can we support our nation’s schoolchildren in being successful?” Although there is much attention to the issue of student achievement and school accountability due to No Child Left Behind, these are not new issues in education. The United States has a rich history of educational polices and practices that have sought
to improve educational experiences since the founding of the country. As Dewey (1916) noted, democratic societies have a special obligation to education, not only to involve the citizens in their government, but also to deepen their understanding of the diversity of their shared concerns. In this country, the educational needs of African Americans, diverse immigrant groups, and youth with special needs have been addressed by policy, practice and litigation. With the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Americans began to hear more about the concept of equality of opportunity, as President Johnson promoted this responsibility by following the example set by Martin Luther King, Jr. (Pole, 1993). National reports such as Coleman’s 1966 Equality of Educational Opportunity and the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education America at Risk report inspired increased emphasis on improving schooling (Eberstadt, 2001; Hirsch, 2001). However, the achievement gaps among racial, ethnic and special student subgroups in the United States have continued to exist even with ongoing education policy and practice changes.

**Possible Causes for Differences in Student Performance**

There are varied explanations for why achievement gaps continue to be present in our country. Poverty has long been understood to have a measurable impact on student performance, and persistent poverty has a cumulative effect, which leads to worse adult outcomes (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010). Children of color in this country are more than twice as likely to experience poverty as compared to their white classmates (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010). Unfortunately, as the poverty and diversity of students increase at a school, “teachers’ perceptions of the contexts in which they work become more negative” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 94).
Nonschool factors. Coleman’s report of 1966 first promoted the concept of family background as the key indicator for academic success (Hirsch, 2001). Key nonschool factors that may affect achievement are described as socioeconomic and family characteristics and include highest level of parent education attained, occupational status of parents, number of books in the home, native language spoken at home, immigrant status, and family structure (Hampden-Thompson & Johnston, 2006). Parent involvement, early literacy experiences, birth weight, and hunger and nutrition have all been studied as contributing to achievement gaps (Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 2009). Social class, cultural influences, health, housing, student mobility and extra learning experiences have been proposed as key components that have a critical effect on student performance (Rothstein, 2004). In other words, families that lack these resources or opportunities are in at-risk situations and the children’s education could subsequently suffer. Other factors that may be negatively affecting minority student performance include parental availability, television viewing, and peer influence (Evans, 2005). African American families have been especially challenged by “high-disadvantaged neighborhoods and downward mobility (p. 36),” as well as structural changes in the traditional family unit and historical cultural dynamics (Barton & Coley, 2010).

Schooling inequities. Asa Hilliard (2004) maintained that society has minimal expectations for students of low socioeconomic status and/or from minority ethnic backgrounds. In his perspective, too often educational scholars focus only on the effectiveness of a “program” rather than fully understanding the nurturing environments that youth in at-risk situations may need. There is a belief by some researchers that the United States has not taken enough responsibility for having created the historical context
for sociocultural and sociopolitical injustices and inequities in student learning (Nieto, 1999). Issues such as student self-image, peer groups, lack of mentors and limited opportunity may contribute to student underachievement (Kuykendall, 2004). The inequitable distribution of resources could be based in the nation’s history of racism, and carries over to decisions regarding classroom curricula, student tracking, and pedagogical practices (Kuykendall, 2004).

Disparities in student performance by race, ethnicity, disability and poverty have already been identified in Head Start and kindergarten studies involving school readiness (Haskins & Rouse, 2005). The impact of desegregation, the limited access to minority teachers as role models, and lack of diverse culturally-centered instruction are issues that have dominated discussions for decades (Foster, 1997). Other challenges for the education system include students who are immigrant, refugee, migrant or do not speak English as a first language. There may be long-term educational effects for these newly arrived populations that go beyond simply learning English. Students may have health issues, different value systems, or lack legal immigration status. It has been noted that sometimes the second and third generations of newcomer students display many more problems in educational achievement than first generation students (Suarez-Orozco, 2003). District and school leaders need to be aware of the research findings on acculturation and how personal family experiences may affect student results. Latino students, although heterogeneous in many ways, face “a range of social, economic and educational disparities that put . . . [them] . . . at a competitive disadvantage from the time they enter school, and hamper the success of even those who work hard and achieve at higher levels” (S. Weiss, 2004, p. 1).
Mathematics data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study was analyzed for Latino, African American and White students and revealed that there are many differences both within and between groups (Ramírez & Carpenter, 2005). This study determined that socioeconomic status and the English language learner label were the most significant predictors of low achievement, but there are multiple variations of student need and thus, “multiple [types of] gaps” (p. 602). The Latino population, now the second-largest student group in the country, counts 40% of its children as English language learners (Dolan, 2009). Minority populations have also been overly identified as students with disabilities, or placed in disciplinary school settings. Research has also addressed a number of areas of impact from the schooling experience, such as curriculum rigor, teacher quality, class size and safety (Barton, 2003), that can potentially have either a positive or negative role in children’s academic performance. The next two sections focus on the role of the education system in addressing student achievement.

**Policy Efforts to Support Achievement**

**Historical legislation.** There exists a long history in this nation of putting policies in place to positively affect outcomes for all children. “The prospects of our students depend heavily on the kind of education policy we adopt” (Evers, Izumi, & Riley, 2001, p. xiv). One of the major federal funding initiatives for supporting at-risk students was the implementation of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965. Title I created an opportunity for supplemental services through additional funding to be provided to high-poverty, struggling students. Because Title I funds were allocated to increase the achievement of eligible students, schools and districts had to put in place evaluation measures and monitor student performance.
Although the program continues, the overall effectiveness of the impact of the Title I policy may be difficult to ascertain, as issues of quality of implementation of programs, diversity of funding use and choice of evaluation model all affected the impact at the local level, and were not necessarily able to be aggregated nationwide (Borman, 2002).

Research on effective practice was also having an effect on policy decision-making. Howard Gardner’s ideas on multiple intelligences was redefining pedagogical practice as constructivist, and student-centered teaching became seen as the most effective means to reach all young learners (Eberstadt, 2001). Literacy research called for the mandated inclusion of phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension and vocabulary to be added to all curricula to help students read and write better (National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). A vision was being proposed in which education would become more responsive to the needs of the learner, and therefore student achievement would continue to improve.

Another federal approach, Goals 2000, begun under the Clinton administration, promoted standards-based achievement, systemic reform, and more targeted resources to high-poverty schools. As the federal government demanded more evidence of results from states, states then expanded their own authority with districts and schools and created more policies; this in turn, was having a “multiplier” effect on local districts, which also then created more local policies to address new state and federal requirements (Fuhrman, 1994).

The standards movement was seen as the major effort to clarify requirements for content learning in public education by highlighting what students should know and be able to do. Establishing content standards also promoted the concept that all students
should be able to “meet” those standards upon graduation from high school. States across the nation developed their own content and performance standards, and Pennsylvania engaged in this process in the early 1990s. Districts and schools had to reexamine their curriculum and their materials to ensure that the required content was being effectively addressed. Presently the movement has swung toward national core content standards to be used by all states and supported by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010).

**Assessment efforts.** The appearance of the myriad of content standards and pedagogical initiatives led to movements to develop quality assessments to measure and compare student learning. Federal requirements called for schools and states to monitor progress more carefully by mandating state testing and disaggregating student performance. Designers of assessment systems began to promulgate policies and practices that addressed testing accommodations, alternate assessments, multiple measures, performance standards, and bias reviews, all efforts to increase validity and reliability of the measurement of student achievement. States and districts initiated processes to promote alignment among curriculum, content standards and assessments, and deepened their understanding of the benefits of conducting technical, qualitative and statistical reviews in order to move toward higher quality along with more public transparency (La Marca et al., 2000). Therefore, with all of these enhancements, there was an expectation that state assessments would be true barometers of student learning in schools.
As the focus of this research was on performance on the state reading test, a measure of student literacy learning, it should be noted that

Most reading assessments taken by adolescents are summative and include quizzes, end-of-chapter tests, district and statewide tests, and standardized measures of reading. These assessments provide important information about adolescents’ reading and subject-area achievement. Summative assessments inform teachers whether classroom-level instruction has had the desired impact . . . Although summative assessments provide important data to assess the overall academic achievements of students in a class, school, district, or state, both formative and diagnostic assessments provide data that can help classroom teachers make more informed decisions about which readers can successfully undertake which activities with which texts. (National Institute for Literacy, 2007, p. 27)

Thus, the state reading tests provide a summative perspective on student performance; it is at the local level that instructional decisions must be made to allow students to develop and grow their literacy skills.

Although many schools are having their overall performance judged by a yearly test score, there exists criticism that the approach may be unfair and inappropriate. Test scores in current accountability requirements are used to calculate success, progress, or failure, but as information is constantly changing, can one snapshot truly be representational of overall school performance (O’Day, 2002)? Interestingly enough, although there may exist negative perspectives regarding the demands of AYP and other rules, external policy/accountability requirements from federal and state offices have been shown to make a difference in student achievement at the school or classroom level, so just the increased expectation affects student performance and adult response (O’Day, 2002). So although some may view using a summative test score to measure student performance as unfair, the demand for that test score can lead to increased performance.
Another complexity is the multitude of content standards that must be covered during the schooling experience. We also know that many kinds of learning are occurring in schools beyond simply what the test can capture. “It is improbable that a single assessment instrument will provide the breadth of coverage necessary for an aligned system” (La Marca et al., 2000, p. 11). Many states are now turning to a value-added or growth model in their accountability systems for measurement of student progress (Olson, 2004). Individual student data are available and the effectiveness of instruction in classrooms can be examined more closely. Pennsylvania has updated its data collection through the implementation of individualized student and professional staff identifiers in its Performance Information Management System (PIMS; Tanney, 2009). These approaches should allow for closer examination of diverse student population performance. It is also expected that there will be an increased discussion regarding the issue of teacher quality as measured by classroom-based results.

No Child Left Behind. The legacy of educational policy change to improve achievement continues and has expanded with the Bush administration reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), referred to as No Child Left Behind. Some key new features in this version of federal education law are more required testing, accountability formulas for results, and highly qualified teacher definitions, all decisions made at the state level. Reaction across the country had been that many of the requirements left districts struggling to fulfill “unfunded mandates.”

The Education Commission of the States (ECS; 2004), under a U.S. Department of Education contract, has been tracking and analyzing the implementation of NCLB across states by looking at final enacted state policy activity (in which they include
statutes, regulations, laws, rules, directives and practices). However, this organization also looks at overall state actions and impacts as related to several major recommendations, such as improving student performance, analyzing progress, building capacity and view. The ECS lists a number of actions they believe states should undertake, including addressing issues for diverse populations, using longitudinal data for students, increasing early childhood programs, and strengthening information systems, strategic planning and financial practices (ECS, 2004). Pennsylvania is listed as one of the five states in the country on track to have met or partially met all of the 40 NCLB elements that ECS has identified that are associated with NCLB.

**Evidence-based research.** There has also been a movement to turn to more scientific or evidence-based research as the potential solution to improve academic results. The U.S. Department of Education established a new office, the Institute for Educational Sciences, developed a comprehensive tool called the *What Works Clearinghouse* website, and began requiring the use of evidence-based programs for many of their grant programs and offered guidance for the field to use (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Pennsylvania also has a number of tools that can be used by schools and districts for strategic planning, school improvement and test preparation (PDE, 2009a). However, simply promoting these priorities and providing tools is not sufficient to guarantee results. The challenge to using evidence-based programs and practices is that although educational leaders may want to follow this directive, many practitioners do not have the deep understanding of how to make thoughtful decisions about the research for implementation (Corcoran, 2003). The behavioral health profession is also wrestling
with this challenge, and calls for the adoption of “evidence-based thinking,” which is an
innovative model for educators to reflect upon:

Reduced to its simplest conceptualization, evidence–based thinking reflects an
approach that attempts to make sure the treatment works. To achieve that goal, providers have to understand the individual as well as possible (not only by
assessing the present “problem,” but culture, language, gender, sexual orientation,
etnicity, age, and integration into community activities--all of the factors that
interact to create the personhood of the consumer). Then, providers have to think
systematically about what known interventions provide the best match for that
individual and the outcomes they want to achieve. (Hyde, Falls, Morris, &
Schoenwald, 2003, p. 4)

These policy efforts provide the authority baseline for educational leaders to make
decisions at the local level that keep schools on track to demonstrate progress for
accountability requirements. However, an administrator who wishes to improve the
learning experience for all children requires more than simply authority—the leader must
also know how to successfully implement effective practices.

Potential Solutions

Educational researchers continue to promote different theories on solutions for the
differences in student achievement. As discussed, it is recognized that there are many
factors that may cause differences in student performance. Access to various types of
capital, such as financial, health, social, pedagogical, and cultural, affect the opportunities
for students to learn and succeed (Gordon, 2004). Yet it has been argued that critical
knowledge and school performance have more correlation than achievement and family
income (Hirsch, 2001)--in other words, an effective educational system can overcome the
challenges for learning that poverty produces. Our society expects all young citizens to
meet state standards and graduate. Therefore, in order for schools to successfully address
student needs, educational leaders must understand and be able to implement the research
on reducing achievement gaps. This section will briefly highlight recommended areas for potential implementation, such as teacher quality, promising interventions, support services, family engagement, and innovative proposals.

Teacher quality. Linda Darling Hammond was one of the key researchers to propose teacher expertise as the greatest indicator of student achievement (Nieto, 1999). The issue that teacher quality, which includes knowledge and skills, can have a strong impact on student performance was then highlighted in NCLB requirements. Students who attend middle schools may be especially at risk, even more so in large urban school districts, and the risk is higher for low-income students, due to the quality of their teachers. Teachers present a hidden curriculum of social values to their students, and teachers’ fears of being held accountable for student performance and their feelings of disempowerment by using standardized curricula may have a negative effect on their attitudes and their efforts in the profession (Ingersoll, 2003). Critical issues for teacher quality include providing ongoing professional development to build knowledge of content and pedagogy, motivating teachers to work toward being part of a learning community rather than being autonomous instructors, and expanding the use of evidence in teacher practice (Elmore, 2003b; O’Day, 2002). Some recent research also recommends that teacher biases toward minority students should be assessed so teachers can become more aware of the impact of their own negative expectations and attitudes (Van den Bergh, Denessesn, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010).

Promising interventions. Interventions such as high quality early childhood programs are showing potentially promising results in reducing gaps (Evans, 2005; Haskins & Rouse, 2005), but access to these supports remains elusive for many young
children due to funding and limited availability. Decisions such as abolishing tracking and heterogeneously grouping all students in highly accelerated learning experiences have shown strong results for minority student achievement (Burris & Weiner, 2005). Encouraging high school students to enroll in academically rigorous courses as well as building student reading and mathematics skills at the same time has demonstrated that minority students can academically achieve at high levels (Bridgeman & Wendler, 2005).

Achievement differences among diverse student populations have been found not only in large, poor districts, but also in middle class suburban districts. Issues of teacher expectations, multicultural understanding, culturally relevant curriculum and materials and differentiated instruction are all found to be areas of possible improvement (Evans, 2005). Minority students who were surveyed on their ideas to increase student performance offered such recommendations as more mentoring, teacher training, parent programs, multicultural programs, and building student skills along with high expectations (Sadowski, 2005). For Hispanic students, the opportunity for them to be engaged in school relationships or receive support programs may be what makes a critical difference in their achievement (Conchas, 2001; R. Weiss, 2004). Students with disabilities, who under law were receiving education in the least restrictive environment, could now expect increased instructional and intervention practices in their schools under the revised Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA; 2004). Research has shown that all students benefit from academic opportunities that stretch and expand their skills and knowledge (Quint, 2006).

**Support services.** Schools can provide more prevention programs and behavioral health services and build more environmental protective factors that could potentially
help youth develop more personal protective factors (Henderson, Benard, & Sharp-White, 2007; Henderson & Milstein, 2002; McNealley, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Pennsylvania’s resiliency framework asks schools to address the six areas of high expectations, meaningful student engagement, connectiveness and bonding, life skills, clear and consistent boundaries and unconditional support as part of their academic system. Additionally, Pennsylvania passed new regulations, Chapter 12, that require school districts to create student services plans aligned to strategic academic plans (Pennsylvania Board of Education, 2005). One major initiative, the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2006), promotes an enabling component added to instruction, which offers interventions and learning supports by emphasizing the role of the school team and accessing multiple resources. The growing obesity crisis in the nation among youth is reflective of a more sedentary lifestyle accompanied by unhealthy eating habits. The reaction has been that schools must be at the forefront of addressing health issues to better link academic achievement with health. School wellness policies and approaches are now being mandated nationwide, as part of the new food and nutrition guidelines for schools participating in the breakfast and lunch programs, and this is seen as a positive move to also promote student achievement, that is, healthy bodies develop healthy minds.

There are many examples of schools across the nation that demonstrate success at closing achievement gaps by providing a rigorous curriculum as well as accompanying student supports, such as high expectations and caring relationships (American Educational Research Association, 2004). Department of Defense Schools are recognized as strong examples of this model, and demonstrate through their student
achievement data that a comprehensive approach can indeed promote student success (American Educational Research Association, 2004). One well-regarded resource is the Asset Building Model by the Search Institute (Starkman, Scales, & Roberts, 1999) which lists categories to examine such as support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, time, learning commitment, positive values, social competency and positive identity. Across the country, the recognition that academics must be partnered with student supports to improve success has come from leading organizations such as the ASCD with their Whole Child Approach and the Coalition for Community Schools.

**Family engagement.** Schools may want to first look to the families of the children they serve, as parent involvement is often seen as a key component in student success. Studies of student outcomes with longitudinal data indicated that, in elementary, middle, and high schools, family involvement had positive effects on achievement in math, reading, and science, attendance, behavior, homework completion, course credits earned, parent-child discussions about postsecondary education plans, and other indicators of success in school (Epstein, 2005). Parent involvement can also promote language learning, literacy skills and school engagement for immigrant children (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Wiltz, 2004). However, research has also shown that families and educators frequently do not have the same perspectives regarding communication and focus areas in the educational experience and therefore may not collaborate as effectively as needed for youth success (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). The issue of family engagement is important for educational leaders as they engage in outreach with diverse cultural groups and focus on reducing gaps. Leaders who are most
successful seem to be able to build a broad consensus with diverse groups, while remaining true to their values (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995).

**Innovative proposals.** The issue of differences in student performance continues to challenge scholars from across the country. Noted researchers such as Edmund Gordon, Dennie Palmer-Wolf, Ron Ferguson, and many others have all presented their ideas about what must happen in our country to increase student success (Educational Testing Service, 2005). There is a call for school counselors to provide more time on college preparation programs so that youth focus on post-secondary enrollment (College Board, 2010). Some solutions look outside of the regular public school environment and include ideas such as offering more tutoring and mentoring services, and afterschool and summer programs (Educational Testing Service, 2010). The push to expand voucher programs and charter schools continues, as these models have strong family support, although academic results overall may only be comparable to regular public schools. Recently incentive programs that provide cash rewards to students to perform have become more popular in inner cities (Wilson, 2009).

Because research demonstrates that achievement gaps are influenced by multiple factors, potential solutions include a variety of approaches. Educational leaders who are committed to high results for all students must understand their own role in supporting student achievement. Are school leaders aware of these many rich ideas for school improvement, and do they put them into practice? The interview component of this study will provide some insight into which concepts Pennsylvania educational leaders value and use, and which ones are not mentioned at all. Additionally, are there differences across types of school (urban, suburban, rural) and for different student populations?
Although it may not be possible to fully answer those questions, it is expected that some insight into administrator beliefs about solutions for improving diverse student performance will be revealed in the interviews.

**Leadership Practices**

“When systems are complex and when the tendencies of such systems are toward overload and fragmentation, the need for leadership to forge synergy and coherence is paramount” (Jossey-Bass, 2000, p. xix).

**Overview**

This study emphasizes educational leadership as a potentially key element in schools that demonstrate success with special populations. Current research on educational leadership offers recommendations for improved practice and how leaders can impact student learning. Can effective leadership strategies that help all students achieve be clearly defined and demonstrated to produce results? Much of the research points out that being an educational leader means not only motivating oneself, but also supporting all those members of the educational system to mutually work towards the vision of success.

What is really the role of the leader? “Leadership is about change, about taking an organization or group of people from where they are to where they need to be” (Tichy, 2002, p. 219). Leaders are expected to have strong, unifying and appropriate ideas, learn from their past experiences, and motivate others by teaching values through stories. Results-oriented leaders should know how to use data effectively and incorporate many short-term wins toward long-term goals, so they gain momentum and inspire the overall system to achieve and change (Schmoker, 1999). This is a model of the tipping point in
action--manipulating receptivity to new ideas by spreading and building a positive context until change occurs (Gladwell, 2002). Other research says that how leaders think or the cognitive processes that produce actions provide insights into success. The most effective leaders seem to be able to use an integrative approach that synthesizes multiple diverse options into one positive common goal or outcome (Martin, 2007). Leadership in education is a broadly applied and widely discussed concept. As the focus of this dissertation study was to specifically examine the leadership efforts of district superintendents and school principals, the research section will emphasize studies that highlight the role of those positions.

**Leadership Frameworks**

In the PreK-12 education field, principals and superintendents are still viewed as the key entities of authority and responsibility for public schools. Yet across the country there are many more vacancies for superintendencies and principalships as fewer educators are attracted to the pressures of those higher-level positions (Jones, 2000). More school districts are linking superintendent raises to performance of schools in the district, and school boards are reviewing the previous track record of a potential leader before hiring (Mason, 2010). The focus, more than ever, is on results as compared simply to experience and community relationships. The growing movement to remove principals in schools that are underperforming has also placed extreme pressure on this school leadership position. Yet much of the policy conversation has been about removing the principal rather than creating recruitment or succession plans or figuring out the most effective skills sets needed for a particular school. Leadership organizations are demanding that funding for principal training be integrated into federal legislation so
that candidates will not be unwilling to take on the most challenging sites and can
become more successful in their settings (Aarons, 2010).

There are many different styles of leadership that have been described in schools:
bureaucratic/management; visionary/motivational and entrepreneurial/competitive
(Sergiovanni, 1998); yet most of those styles have not necessarily had a positive impact
on reducing the nation’s achievement gaps. A more effective approach may be
pedagogical or instructional leadership, which supports capacity building for staff and
students and therefore, develops human capital (Sergiovanni, 1998). More recent
descriptions include contingent leadership- matching style to the setting; participative
leadership-how leaders involve others; and transformational leadership--influencing the
school community with a compelling vision (Louis et al., 2010, p. 10). These styles have
been determined to promote more positive results for school performance.

Educational leaders should sustain vision, purpose, ownership capacity and
support in times of change (Schwahn & Spady, 2002). They need to manage domains in
themselves relating to authenticity, vision, culture, quality and service. Most importantly,
you must use those abilities to foster strategic planning and alignment so that their
organization can be more successful. Leadership should motivate others, which then
increases capacity and sustainability, and can focus on positive change and improvement
(Fullan, 2005).

Leadership Development

There are several recognized models of leadership development that have crossed
to the field of education. Leadership training from the National War College offers a
strong emphasis on decision making, and examining the roles of policy, power, politics,
and personalities (Hughes & Haney, 2002), somewhat of a more traditional leadership perspective, but the military model is still valued in many school settings. Collins’ (2001) popular business book highlighted companies that were successful because they used strategies such as discipline, innovative use of technology, ongoing effort toward progress, a single focus, and unassuming leaders who knew how to carefully select the right colleagues. As the business model of good to great moved into the education landscape, queries were raised about what types of behaviors and characteristics define superstar principals, or those who have been able to bring success to their schools. Due to the moral aspect of the schooling systems, this model may not be quite as transferable. Many businesses develop future leaders by focusing mainly on a company’s specific expertise or need, and often use multiple approaches, or what could be called a leadership systems approach (Eiter, 2002). This model promotes feedback, learning on the job, coaching, mentoring, and 360 degree assessments from all stakeholders, including themselves. The education field is more frequently examining the business world models for potential application.

The work education leaders undertake is challenging, so they must recognize the risks and rewards and nurture themselves and others (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Emotional intelligence research encourages leaders to be self-aware, to live with passion, and be knowledgeable about creating resonance and dissonance in the environment and with others (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Leaders need to learn how to reflect in action so that they can frame experiences, model inquiry, and connect research to practice (Schon, 1983). Educational leaders have political, bureaucratic, market,
professional and moral challenges and accountabilities (Firestone & Shipps, 2005), and their choices, interpretations and personal beliefs and values affect school outcomes.

States oversee the preparation, induction and licensure processes for superintendents and principals, and thus they have a critical role in developing and strengthening education leaders (National Association of State Boards of Education, personal communication via email, February 12, 2010). Many states are putting in place stronger criteria that integrate a performance-based approach. In Pennsylvania, after the previously discussed Act 45 Inspired Leadership requirements were established, state funds were used to offer innovative training models that are rigorously reviewed by a statewide leadership council (Zahorchak, 2008).

Leaders must be constantly aware of policy decisions and what they will mean to themselves, and their schools, communities and students (Hope, 2002). Educational leaders must understand that United States education policy continues to be part of the political and social process, built on community context, and can be effectively designed and/or analyzed through review of data, evidence, language and potential practices (Bardach, 2005). Leaders should become more knowledgeable of international education initiatives as well to see potential impacts or comparisons for practices in this country (Lanning, 1997; Rich, 2003). Finally, PreK-12 education leaders should form meaningful relationship with higher education partners, as there exists a growing “interdependence” between these entities (Stevenson & Goldenberg, 2001). The goal is for educational leaders to develop the knowledge and skills that will allow them to be successful.
Leadership and Student Learning

The federal education law No Child Left Behind provided more public opportunities to review school progress, and therefore created more focus on the belief that school leaders, especially principals, should be held responsible for student achievement results. In this environment of increased public pressure, diverse frameworks of effective school leadership were introduced and promoted as models for school leaders. In other words, educators who appropriately implement and exemplify the model factors should be successful in their roles and their schools should achieve. Do administrators strictly follow models and attempt to put the components into practice? Do they deliberately mix elements of models and determine what they believe to be most useful? Or do some leaders simply consider what has been most effective from their own experience, and refer only to the models as guidance. Although it will not be possible to answer all these questions in this study, it is useful to review some of the leadership frameworks to potentially compare the elements with the interview responses.

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC; 2000) published standards for school leaders that promoted student learning as the core of complex, evolving responsibilities. Leaders must not only demonstrate knowledge of concepts such as a vision of learning, a nurturing school culture, community collaboration, and ethical behavior, but must also demonstrate through performance that they are able to move from understandings to action. Although these standards may be viewed as more of a focus on craft and effective practices than specific behaviors that support school achievement (Gray & Streshly, 2008), they did highlight the importance of student outcomes as a responsibility of leadership. The McREL Balanced Leadership framework
offered a comprehensive checklist of responsibilities and practices that were
demonstrated to be significant for student achievement, including knowing the context of
the school, regularly sharing current education research, the ability to be a change agent,
incorporating teacher input, and promoting a positive school culture (Gray & Streshly,
2008).

The focus on the role of school leadership as a valuable influence has continued to intensify. Leadership is known to act “as a catalyst for change within schools” (A. Harris, 2008, p. 43). A recently published leadership research effort sponsored by the Wallace Foundation (Louis et al., 2010) had the goals of identifying practices that fostered educational improvement and student learning and attempted to determine the “will and the skill” (p. 7) that was needed by leaders, and how they supported others to acquire those same abilities. The goal of this major study was to clarify the educational leadership effect. The Wallace study proposed a leadership framework of ten interdependent variables that demonstrate that “leaders play critical roles in identifying and supporting learning, structuring the social settings and mediating the external demands” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 18).

The ten variables, with an emphasis on number four, school leadership, and number 10, student learning, include (Louis et al., 2010, p. 18):

1. State leadership, polices, and practices, e.g. standards, testing, funding
2. District leadership, policies, and practices, e.g. standards, curriculum alignment, use of data
3. Student /family background, e.g. family educational culture
4. School leadership
5. Other stakeholder e.g. unions, community groups, business, media
6. School conditions e.g. culture/community, school improvement, planning
7. Teachers, e.g. individuals’ capacity, professional community
8. Classroom conditions, e.g. content of instruction, nature of instruction, student assessment
9. Leaders’ professional learning experiences e.g. socialization, mentoring, formal preparation
10. Student learning

How does leadership translate to practice in schools? Increased research is focusing on the leadership efforts that are helping students to achieve and schools to improve, and more models of successful schools are being promoted for potential replication. In one study of a sample of successful schools reviewed by the National Principals Leadership Institute, nine exemplary traits exhibited across all the principals included being focused, visionary, change-sensitive, courageous, empowering, relational, strategic, and a learner and a communicator (L. Smith, 2008). These common themes not only seemed to define the leaders but were also admired and deemed what should expected of all leaders who take on the school improvement role.

School Models

In a study of successful schools in Arizona (Center for the Future of Arizona, 2006), leadership was described as effective because it created a new attitude for a can-do culture and people knowledge. In these schools learning was the emphasis, and the principal’s role was to be a leader of knowledge and link people with resources. The school leader set the practice of requiring regular data analysis, sharing effective practices, and supporting teacher development. However, the focus on improvement had to be a collaborative effort. The three areas of disciplined thought, people, and actions were seen as critical for success for these Arizona schools with high numbers of Latino students (Center for the Future of Arizona, 2006).
As successful school models continue to be more broadly shared, more attention is being paid to the specific functions and influences of the school leaders, and what and how educators should know and do in order to move toward achievement. The Great Schools organization (2010), which is supported by national foundations like Gates and Walton, has very clear descriptions of what makes a great principal or superintendent. The principal should take responsibility for school success, lead teaching and learning, hire, develop, and retain excellent teachers, and build a strong school community. Principals are expected to regularly visit classrooms and know good teaching. The “great” superintendent, who sets the district tone and is able to work towards board goals, should also be an instructional leader with a clear vision and effective management skills. The superintendent should be a good communicator but also a good listener, and be flexible and not afraid to take risks. The Great Schools (2010) organization posts models of educational leaders they believe are exemplars of practice, and also offers advice for parents and community members on how to address poor leadership practice. Although these elements are more reflective of a grass-roots approach, they do provide insight into expectations from the public and the business community.

Leading school improvement has now become a requirement for administrators. Superintendents who offer strong support for school improvement efforts have a positive impact on the success of the model (Quint, 2006). Many school improvement models offer structural changes, such as establishing a vision and mission, creating safe environments, increasing content area focus, and providing more interventions, yet research is showing that instructional improvement is critical. In schools, educational leaders can emphasize the focus on pedagogy and create opportunities for meaningful
teacher discussions (Quint, 2006). Instructional leadership must go beyond the school curriculum (Driscoll & Goldring, 2005).

Superintendents provide “essential leadership” (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010, p. 8) for student achievement when they make teaching and learning the focus of all central office staff and engage all of them in intentionally working with schools and forming partnerships with principals. Superintendents also have the responsibility to deepen principal instructional leadership practice and provide tools, models, supports and external resources as needed. It is essential that the district leaders take on this role, as professional development for principals across the nation is seen as fragmented (Samuels, 2010).

Exemplary school models take time and effort to create and success is a process that evolves long term (Gray & Streshly, 2008). It is important that principals remain in their schools for several years—a minimal amount recommended for success is four (Louis et al., 2010)—in order to give themselves time to build partnerships, put effective practices in place and support outcomes (Samuels, 2010). “Providing direction” and “exercising influence” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 9) were recognized as the crucial elements of leadership that would affect improvement.

**Leadership Actions**

It is essential to appropriately match a leader’s style with the educational setting (Louis et al., 2010). The educational leader should have strong knowledge of school context to understand how to take action (Reyes & Wagstaff, 2005). “What is critical is the interplay between the actions of leaders and the contextual conditions affecting their ability to make sustainable changes” (Useem, Christman, & Boyd, 2006, p. 15). Each
school context could potentially be considered as unique, as each school has developed its own culture from the personalities of its people, its history, and the community’s expectations. Principals have a strong effect on the school and classroom culture and conditions and can affect student success (Louis et al., 2010). For schools with diverse populations, it is even more valuable to create a culture of authentic caring (Reyes & Wagstaff, 2005). That can be a challenging process, however, as leaders must address multiple goals and values. Leaders should carefully consider context in relation to their own personal leadership style, as stylistic differences in leadership can significantly affect public impression as to effectiveness and accomplishments (Useem et al., 2006).

Developing strong, interpersonal skills to build relationships is seen as essential (Gray & Streshly, 2008). Leaders are expected to build trust and buy-in, and they should be passionate, ambitious and know their strengths. The key power and evidence of success of great schools principals is the persuasiveness they have in order to focus the school on student learning and outcomes. Efficacy was also a major factor—the leader’s personal belief in being able to positively accomplish change (Louis et al., 2010).

Education leadership involves more than the individual actions of the principal or the superintendent, and can also be described as collective leadership. Successful principals create the conditions for improvement and create partnerships with teachers, parents and others in the school community for school decisions (Samuels, 2010). There are many examples of underachieving schools that have become exemplary models when leadership teams built across from their authority to create more trust and work toward common goals. Schools must achieve and sustain their performance (Anderson, 2010).
Some of the key work superintendents and principals have to undertake is to build a professional learning community and create sustainable relationships so that the core work of student teaching and learning is always supported on a number of fronts (Blankstein, 2004). The goal should be to create an environment of professionalism and empowerment (Reyes & Wagstaff, 2005). The model of schools as professional learning communities that highlight student learning and school improvement depends upon the ability of school leaders to promote effective sharing of knowledge across administration and teachers, sustain effort and create school capacity for transformative action (Dufour, Eaker, & Dufour, 2005). In a professional learning community, leadership does not belong only to one individual or one group. The development of leadership capacity within schools also supports school success and sustains school improvement (A. Harris, 2008).

There has been a movement for more distributed leadership--creating a common culture of highly skilled and accountable individuals who are themselves, continuous learners (Elmore, 2000). Reducing achievement gaps, for example, would become a critical whole school approach, using the effective implementation of design principles for school improvement, with the context of urgency and support. Distributed leadership is an important model that has been proven to produce benefits for learning as it creates more shared ownership and interdependence for school efforts. Distributed leadership is most effective when it is consciously planned and encouraged (A. Harris, 2008). Superintendents and principals have the authority to share their power and encourage more collaboration from colleagues such as government officials, university professors, school
board members, teachers, students, parents, and community partners. As Fullan (2003) noted:

We need instead, leaders at many levels. Part and parcel of sustainability in organizations is the way in which they constantly spawn leadership and commitment in all quarters by fostering the flourishing of the intelligence, purpose and passion of all members of the organization. (p. 38)

District and school leaders must also interact more with state personnel, as state oversight and monitoring has increased under federal legislation. There are many categories of strategies of support and expertise that can be provided from the state level to build capacity for student achievement, such as teacher knowledge and skills, student motivation and readiness to learn, curriculum materials, quantity and types of persons supporting the classroom, quality and quantity of interaction within and among organizational levels, material resources, and organization and allocation of resources (Massell, 1998). For example, recent discussions held between the State Higher Education Executive Officers and the Council of Chief State School Officers were attempting to address the concern that many teacher preparation programs have too much focus on theory rather than practice, and do not develop subject matter expertise in educators (Kelderman, 2010). The two groups are proposing new draft teaching standards to address the growing cultural and economic diversity of American students. This initiative models the importance of district and school leaders having closer partnerships with local higher education entities. Because superintendents and principals are responsible for supporting the development of their staffs, they should become aware of current research and efforts to improve teacher quality.
The educator who takes on the leadership role has the responsibility to become more knowledgeable of the potential impact of all educational policy and research initiatives. It has been found that districts can use state policies to positively influence local goals, especially if the priority is on improved teaching and learning (Louis et al., 2010). The lasting success of leadership is in establishing the legitimacy of new governance structures, district and school reforms, and continuing gains long-term (Useem et al., 2006). Educational leaders must always remember that they are accountable for the success of all children, and thus they should ensure at every opportunity to address achievement gap challenges. One framework being proposed to better focus on student results is using an aligned systems approach. The next section provides an overview of this model.

**Education Leadership and the Systems Approach**

The concept of using a systems approach is moving throughout the educational field as an effective practice of leadership to promote student achievement. In Pennsylvania, the department of education adopted the systems approach model and integrated this concept across all curricular materials and leadership training. This idea of systems alignment and leadership, or systems thinking, was emphasized in the business world and described as the “fifth discipline” by Peter Senge (*Best Business Books Ever*, 2003). Senge promoted the importance of interrelationships and becoming involved in the process of a learning organization to truly see transformation. Using an aligned systems approach can be understood as the ability to take many diverse components and structure them into an integrated framework that focuses on critical outcomes and then produces high quality results. Yet how that conceptual understanding
translates into action is the challenge that all organizations face. Businesses are urged to keep the customer’s opinions on products and processes forefront as they learn how to self-assess current performance and move toward a more capable alignment (Human Capital Associates, 2005). This is a model for education to consider: are students’ needs and wants always incorporated into the schooling experience, and do educators view students as both unique client individuals and future citizens of that society?

**Models of system integration.** Other major initiatives for system integration come in the areas of health and social services. For example, a new focus on youth wellness calls on schools to implement coordinated school health models which integrate health education, physical education, nutrition, environment, staff health, counseling, and psychological services (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005). Much leadership around integration and alignment has come from human service programs, with large foundations like Rockefeller and Annie E. Casey promoting and supporting the concept (Ragan, 2003). The Casey Strategic Consulting Group presented a useful visual of a conceptual framework at the National Governors Association Policy Academy on Cross-Systems Innovations held in April, 2004. This design demonstrates that practice, administration and policy operate best when based on effective organizational systems, visionary leadership and an empowering organizational culture.

The aligned systems approach was being adopted in other agencies as well, as the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (2005) created new Integrated Children’s Services Guidelines that described their purpose as to:

Identify goals, strategies, and outcomes that counties, in their leadership role in serving vulnerable children, will be taking to assure a focus that supports the
healthy development of children and an integrated approach to meeting their needs. (p. 1)

**Education alignment efforts.** Educational leaders must effectively manage many diverse components and coordinate them together to have the strongest possible results for children. An educational leader using an aligned systems approach must understand that in order to impact student achievement she should demonstrate the connections across policy, resources, parent and community engagement, school leadership, teacher quality, student supports, and academic practices. Recent key efforts for educational systems alignment began with the standards movements and the need to ensure that the assessments were appropriately allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge and mastery of content. Webb promoted this concept of coordination of system components so that teaching and learning would be better supported (La Marca et al., 2000). Possible elements in an education system include standards, assessments, instruction, curriculum, philosophy, professional development, parent involvement, resources, learning readiness, school accountability, safety, and technology. The system should emphasize clear expectations and, if possible, models or exemplars, in order to more fully unite the education community toward clear goals (La Marca et al., 2000).

Ananda (2003), referencing Webb, explored the alignment issue by first defining it as agreement, and then noting that schools must integrate all components together effectively for student learning. He called on educational entities to conduct alignment studies to examine gaps and weaknesses, to run comparisons, to encourage restructuring, and to truly support a valid accountability system of integrated standards and assessments. However, Ananda went on to state, “Determining whether or not system
components are aligned is somewhat arbitrary” (p. 5). He noted the most important factors to be purpose, a complementary methodology, alignment criteria, evidence of results, the resources and approvals, and the need to consider putting alignment practices at the front while continuing ongoing monitoring (Ananda, 2003).

**Implementing systems alignment.** Researchers recognize the challenge of school leaders effectively using a systems-approach to impact improvement. The systemic reform efforts promoted in math and science education were studied to examine the relationships with strategic leadership, professional development and scaling up the efforts (Heck & Weiss, 2005). Results show that systemic alignment can be a complex process, and that politics plays a very strong role. In future efforts these authors recommended proactive planning and the study of alignment issues in advance at the policy level before beginning program implementation.

Alignment is also not the only factor in success, for there is also the need to have each component of the system of itself be of the highest quality. It is possible to use quantitative alignment analyses and measures for planning, program evaluation, prediction, performance modeling (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2005), and to create an index of alignment to correlate with achievement gains, or have alignment as an outcome measure. Reporting results is part of the system, and transparency is essential (La Marca et al., 2000). “Aligned systems will demand equally high learning standards for all students, while providing fair means for all students to achieve the performance standard” (La Marca et al., 2000, p. 13).

With the pressure of high stakes accountability and schools struggling to increase student learning, the focus on improving school system design and implementation
should be seen as an ongoing process which builds capacity for expectations and instructional practice, so schools can become more capable of self-diagnosing, seeking support, and transforming (Elmore, 2003a). Schools must move more toward the concept of ‘reform by design’ by identifying, integrating and redesigning all the elements that make up their systems (Hill, 2002). Systems, processes and resources should be combined in a design template that keeps student results at the forefront. Schools are seen as complex, adaptive systems, and their organizational strength comes from frequent and strong interactions within the system of all elements (O’Day, 2002).

The state role in supporting alignment requires setting of benchmarks and the ability to create strategies for continuous improvement at all levels. States are struggling to redefine their role from that of a compliance monitor to that of a capacity builder (Slotnick, 2005). The Council of Chief State School Officers (2002) created a self-assessment tool on service delivery for states, districts, and schools. In focusing on state system integration, there are reflective questions available that explore capacity, inclusion of diverse learners, coordination, and monitoring, which could be easily adapted to the school level. States are a key part of the teaching and learning system- their role must include promoting networked learning communities of schools and districts (Fullan, 2005) and considering how their policies build capacity while keeping the focus on the target of student results.

Another critical element of the system is engaging community stakeholders and partners. School districts face challenges such as the “ambitiousness of their plan, issues of funding, and the conflicting theories of action of public engagement, such as managerial, redistribution of resources, democratic revitalization, capacity building and
“market” (Christman, 2003, p. 220). Other critical areas, such as interpersonal relationships and trust, leadership and democratic participation, maintenance of a vision, and the development of strategies for addressing public policies (Blanc, Goldwasser, & Brown, 2003), must be addressed by the leader as well.

In order to better manage all the components of the education system, schools may want to use the high reliability organization model, which assures that multiple characteristics for high-level functioning without failure are in place, similar to the airline traffic control system or a nuclear power plant. Restructuring toward reliability indicators that will not tolerate gaps in performance should create a multiplicative effect to ensure long-term success (Stringfield & Datnow, 2002).

As the concept of implementing an aligned systems approach becomes a part of school leadership understanding, it is important to understand that the system is never closed. “Alignment should not be seen as an all-or-none proposition but as one existing on a continuum from less to more. The goals should be to increase alignment so that valid and effective data-driven decision-making can be accomplished” (La Marca et al., 2000, p. 21). Schools, districts, states and others all have a responsibility to develop the leadership capacity for the construction of learning systems (Fullan, 2005). Since systems may never be closed and other elements will always have to be incorporated, educators will never be finished with the alignment process, and therefore they should practice a continuing review cycle yet always keep their goals at the forefront. As the systems approach is now part of the Pennsylvania education leadership framework requirements, this study will include reference to that concept in the interview process.
schools must take on the responsibility of learning about all the system components—present and future—that could affect results and continuously monitor changes with data.

This literature review offered an overview of issues and research findings regarding achievement for diverse student populations. The literature demonstrates that although achievement gaps continue to be present in United States schools, there are proven strategies to implement that can reduce or eliminate those student performance differences. The challenge will be to determine what will be most effective based on context, resources, opportunity and leadership direction. The review also discussed the growing focus on administrative leadership and its potential effect on school results. There are many leadership frameworks offered to the field, and educational administrators must determine which model is most helpful, as the research is unclear as to the effectiveness of one framework as compared to another. These literature concepts provided the basis for the development of the questions on the interview protocol, and helped to frame the methodology process, which is discussed in Chapter 3. The literature also demonstrated that educational leaders can and should develop the knowledge and skills to create schools where every child can be successful.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

Overview

Two questions formed the basis of this dissertation research and helped to structure the research goals, tools and processes. (1) How are schools that demonstrate significant achievement in eighth grade reading with diverse student populations identified? (2) How do school and district leaders believe they influence student performance in these schools? It was critical to extract both the perspectives and actions of the local leadership while also using a standard measure of performance for comparison.

This study employed a mixed-methodology, which included analyzing data from semi-structured interviews, and analyzing pre-existing test score data in greater detail through data reduction and selection, using both the progress and achievement results from the PSSA value added assessment system. There was fairly equal priority in this inquiry for both the quantitative data analysis (test scores) and the qualitative component of the research (interviews). The quantitative component was critical for first setting the foundation of the research in terms of standardized data of student performance. The qualitative component attempted to provide insights into leadership decisions that could be positively affecting school performance results.

The study used two data sources: (a) the disaggregated state reading test results over a multi-year span with administrative data sets on every public school in Pennsylvania with an eighth grade, and (b) a partial case study component with interviews of principals and/or superintendents for key schools demonstrating high performance for student subgroups.
The challenge for many schools has been in supporting special population students to perform at proficient or advanced levels, and thus reducing or eliminating achievement gaps. Analyzing the state PSSA data, the first step in this study, would seek to answer the question about whether there were schools in the state making progress with diverse subgroups. Identifying those schools would then lead to an exploration on how to potentially share effective practices with similar yet lower-achieving schools.

This study could be classified as a meso-level theory as its focus was mainly on organizations (the school), but linked the micro-level focus of principal and superintendent leadership practices with diverse student groups, as well as the macro-level focus of schools responding to the complex demands of their societies (Creswell, 2003). The design is represented in Figure 3 (Creswell, 2003, p. 213).

![Figure 3. Research design.](image)

The sequential strategy allowed use of anticipated outliers (schools with higher or lower performance for subpopulations) from the quantitative data to inform the design of the subsequent qualitative analysis. The study looked to see how student subgroup performance differed across schools, and used administrative data to inform the analysis of the school geographic designation (suburban, urban, rural). In order to ensure the highest quality analysis as well as maintain the integrity of the work, current and retired
members of the PDE assessment office assisted in the quantitative data collection and analysis process.

Sample and Setting

The setting, as previously described, is the state of Pennsylvania and the unit of study is the school at the eighth grade level. As stated, the approach was to use pre-existing data for every school in the state, which included PSSA disaggregated subgroup results, general district costs per child, and district geographic designation (rural, urban, suburban). This research examined only PSSA reading data. Reading proficiency and skills cut across all content areas and are important as foundational skills gained from the elementary education experience. Reading proficiency is a critical ability for entrance and success in high school. Although the original data set included all schools that participated in the testing, the data were significantly reduced through selection strategies that are described in the data source section.

The final numbers of schools that met all performance and selection criteria from the quantitative analysis were 20 for minority, 51 for economically disadvantaged, 57 for students with disabilities (special education), and two for English learners. Those numbers represent the schools eligible to participate in the qualitative component of the study. However, the same school may appear in more than one category, so the numbers are not discrete. A total of 13 interviews were conducted with twelve school principals and one superintendent.

Analysis

In order to address the research questions, two data sets were analyzed, which included the PVAAS results, and the leadership interviews. Additional sources such as
the literature review, educational experiences and discussions with colleagues also helped to inform this study. The quantitative analysis was performed to identify high performing schools through test scores. The qualitative analysis employed interviews to ask educational leaders about their perspectives in influencing student performance. In terms of organizing the data, the research elements were coded to allow for more systematic organization of the distinct types of data sources (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Data collection activities and sources with abbreviation for coding materials were as follows:

- PVAAS Economically Disadvantaged analysis (EC)
- PVAAS Minority Race Analysis (MIN)
- PVAAS Limited English Proficient Analysis (LEP)
- PVAAS Special Education Analysis (SPE)
- Interviews with educational leaders (I)
- Research articles, books, reference materials (R)
- Discussion and or conference call notes (CC)
- Document reviews and notes (D)

It was important to summarize the research activities to create a more holistic picture and help design the questions to investigate (Janesick, 1994). Priority issues (Stringer, 1999) and major themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997) arose throughout the process as every effort was made to triangulate the data to be transparent and reaffirm findings (Mathison, 1988; Stake, 1998). In order to more easily and comprehensively review the data collections, partially processed and coded data were used to summarize the interviews, and data displays were also created (Huberman & Miles, 1994).
Data Sources

This study used two data sources: the eighth grade disaggregated value-added state reading test results for both achievement and growth, and leadership interviews for key schools demonstrating high performance for student subgroups.

PSSA Data

The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) consists of competency-based tests that link scores to prior established standards. The assessments are administered in math and reading to grades 3 through 8 and 11 on an annual basis, and the science test is given to grades 4, 8, and 11. The state standards in Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening for eighth grade are very comprehensive and emphasize student knowledge and skills, such as reading independently, interpreting and analyzing the author’s purpose, summarizing text, using context clues for vocabulary, understanding literary devices, writing with style, focus and correct use of conventions, and demonstrating technology literacy (PDE, 2009b). Schools can also consult the curriculum frameworks, which “unpack . . . the standards into anchors, big ideas, concepts, competencies, essential questions, academic vocabulary, and exemplars” (Tanney, 2009, p. 11). The assessment items are based on these standards and allow for display of student abilities through both multiple-choice and constructed response. It is expected that the PSSA tests will eventually be revised due to the state’s adoption of the national Common Core Standards.

PSSA Database

The current PSSA grade eight student database consists of annual disaggregated results for approximately 900 school sites, including regular public, charter, juvenile
corrections facilities, nonpublic schools and licensed private academic schools. The focus of this research was to use only schools that were classified as regular, comprehensive schools with no special admittance criteria or unique populations. The focus was to examine typical public schools and review those results, especially for youth that have traditionally under-performed. Some types of schools were excluded from this study such as the nonpublic and licensed private academic schools, as they were participating in the state tests by choice and have distinct operational differences as compared to public schools, nor are they bound by the same federal or state requirements. Juvenile corrections facilities were also excluded as the educational experience is more individualized and not all youth participate in state testing. Finally, the regular public school category includes special selection schools, such as magnet schools, which were eventually eliminated from this study as well. The rationale was that special selection schools had the advantage of limiting access to their schools based on predetermined criteria, including that students were often pre-identified as being high academic performers.

The school is the unit of analysis for this study, but at each school the data were disaggregated by diverse population percentage and their corresponding performance on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) in reading. The test features 175 different field descriptors, which can allow for multiple analyses of results (see Appendix A). This study used only the categories of Reading results, Number Advanced, Proficient, Basic and Below Basic and student designations of Individualized Education Plan (students with disabilities), English language learners, economically disadvantaged, and race/ethnicity. Other field descriptors not utilized, for example, could include the
Math results, the categories of migrant youth, youth receiving Title I resources and services, gender, and so forth.

The PSSA summary file lists those students who received instruction for an entire academic year. Students are identified as economically disadvantaged as categorized by their participation in Free and Reduced Lunch programs. Other student categories are either provided as student/family self-selection upon school enrollment (gender, race, ethnicity), or by student status determined through school evaluation (English language learner, special education).

The study also used state administrative data on the financial operating expenditures per child per school district. Originally these data were coded as above or below $10,000 per pupil, a fair and average per pupil cost during this time period. However, there began to be less of an extreme separation in funding as new state money filtered to districts and started to equalize budgets, and this indicator did not then carry the same weight as was originally envisioned. The per pupil student costs include instruction, instructional support, pupil support, general administration, school administration, operations and maintenance, transportation, food services, and other. Policy decisions at the local level were made regarding the inclusion of some or all of these functions and that also created a challenge for comparison (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2006).

**PA Value Added Assessment System (PVAAS).** The PA Value Added Assessment System (PVAAS) is “a statistical analysis of PSSA assessment data, and provides districts and their schools with progress data to add to achievement data” (PDE, 2010c, p. 1). Pennsylvania added this tool to assist educators in both looking forward and
backward to monitor student proficiency on the state tests, and in 2006 PVAAS reports were available for all schools (Lewald, 2008). The value-added model, originally created by William Sanders in Tennessee to measure farm productivity, was adapted to measure teacher and school effectiveness and allow for differences in student cohort performance (Rothman, 2009). Pennsylvania does use the Sanders Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS), but has renamed it PVAAS for application in this state (Lewald, 2008). This growth measure “evaluate[s] the status of a particular group of students against the prior performance of these same students” (Lewald, 2008, p. 18) through a sophisticated “mixed-model multivariate longitudinal analyses methodology” (Lewald, 2008, p. 20).

Complexities associated with using a value-added growth model include student control factors, fluctuating student growth trajectories, collections of multiple-year data, and uniform scaling of test items and tests (Rothman, 2009). In order to ensure valid results with growth models, the creators recommend that local tests have high quality psychometric properties and that there is accuracy in teacher-student linkages (Sanders, Wright, Rivers, & Leandro, 2009). Additionally, the authors refute criticisms by pointing out that the complexity of growth model analysis can allow adjustments for missing student data and more accurately determine student performance based on socioeconomic and demographic factors (Sanders et al., 2009).

Several states, including Pennsylvania, have received permission from the U.S. Department of Education to measure AYP for schools by using this value-added growth model and analyzing if all students are moving towards proficiency at a calculated projection rate (Rothman, 2009). In Pennsylvania, schools can receive PVAAS
diagnostic reports that show student cohort mean growth across the grade, by achievement quintile, and by subgroup (Lewald, 2008).

In order to answer the first research question and identify schools that were making progress with student subgroups, two custom PVAAS analyses were created to examine student growth and achievement in the categories of economically disadvantaged, minority race, limited English proficient, and special education. The custom analyses examined the differences in student progress and the variability in effectiveness among schools. Although all schools with eighth grades were originally included in the analysis, selection strategies and performance criteria significantly reduced the overall numbers, and those processes will be discussed in more detail in this chapter.

**PVAAS PSSA Data/Quantitative Analysis**

The goal of the first research question was to investigate if schools making significant progress with subgroup populations could be identified through quantitative data analysis using the state eighth grade test results. The first step was to examine whether higher levels of performance on the state reading test for diverse student populations who have traditionally been seen as part of the achievement gap demographics could be demonstrated by local school practice. Only schools that had consistently displayed high results for these special populations over a 2-year span of standardized state testing would be selected for possible follow-up with interviews.

**The Analysis Process**

Some of the questions for the statistical analysis of the PVAAS data included: Do performance differences exist for this special population in all Pennsylvania schools?
How can state test results be used to identify high performing schools based on subgroup results? What are the (data) implications for addressing achievement gaps?

From the PSSA, the school subgroups examined for this research are categorized using these descriptors in the PVAAS:

- EC—Economically Disadvantaged
- MIN—Minority race; Black, Hispanic, and other minority students are grouped together
- LEP—Limited English Proficiency, Students who are English learners
- SPE—Special Education, Students with an IEP (Individualized Educational Program)

Proficiency levels are categorized as below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced, as defined by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and previously discussed.

Selection strategies were employed throughout the course of this research effort to better focus analysis. As previously discussed the data were first reduced to focus only on public schools. Although both math and reading performance data were available, a decision was made to limit the study to reading performance results as literacy ability potentially affects student performance in multiple content areas. The study could potentially be expanded in the future to also examine mathematics test results on their own or to compare and contrast with reading results. Limiting the study to one content area also allowed for more manageable manipulation of the extremely large data sets.

The analysis process first included flagging all eligible category students and schools with a minimum of ten students and then extracting the PSSA reading test scores for the 2008-2009 and 2007-2008 school years. Only students who had prior reading test scores
were included in the analysis; the 2009 scores represent their performance in eighth grade and the 2008 scores indicate their performance in seventh grade (SAS Institute, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d). Schools also had to maintain a comparison group of at least ten non-category students. It is important to note that schools may appear in more than one category. Student and school PSSA participation data for grade 8 Reading are displayed in Table 4 (SAS Institute, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d).

Table 4

Grade 8 Student and School PSSA Participation by Subgroup

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>EC</th>
<th>MIN</th>
<th>LEP</th>
<th>SPE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36,614</td>
<td>20,272</td>
<td>1,720</td>
<td>18,388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>640</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be noted in Table 4, subgroups appeared across a large number of schools, with the highest number for economically disadvantaged and the lowest number for English learners.

**Custom Analyses**

At the request of this author, the state PVAAS office conducted two custom analyses using four subgroups to address the first dissertation research question and demonstrate if and how schools with overperforming special populations could be identified (SAS Institute, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d). The first analysis attempted to ascertain if the progress of the subgroup was “measurably different” from students not within the subgroup in a particular school (SAS Institute, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d). An analysis of covariance model was performed by grade and subject for each of the
four subgroups (SAS Institute, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d). The main methodological procedure used for this multivariate analysis was the SAS PROC GLM (Statistical Analysis System procedure of general linear models):

The GLM procedure uses the method of least squares to fit general linear models. Among the statistical methods available in PROC GLM are regression, analysis of variance, analysis of covariance, multivariate analysis of variance, and partial correlation. PROC GLM analyzes data within the framework of general linear models. PROC GLM handles models relating one or several continuous dependent variables to one or several independent variables. (SAS/STAT (R) 9.22 User’s Guide, 2011)

The analysis procedure provided an efficient process for organizing and analyzing the voluminous data. The second analysis examined “variability of effectiveness among schools” by using only the special student subgroup data and comparing student PSSA scores across schools for 2 years (SAS Institute, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d). A univariate mixed model was used to examine schools across tests, subjects and grades. The results of both of these analyses are described in the Findings chapter. Phase two of this research, the interviews, attempted to find causes for the school test performance based on the decisions and actions of the district and school leaders.

**Interviews**

Interview opportunities were conducted in the winter of 2010-2011 and were offered to a sample of school sites that demonstrated over-performance across the four different PVAAS student population databases (based on the analysis of the PSSA data). The interviews provided detailed data to answer the second question of inquiry concerning leadership practices that potentially influenced student achievement.
The 5W Education Leadership Framework

As discussed in the literature review, there are a number of leadership frameworks available for the educational administrator to review and possibly adopt. The research literature provides an overview of models such as the Wallace study findings (Louis et al., 2010), the Pennsylvania Act 45 PIL Framework (PDE, 2007), the ISLLC Standards (2000), the McREL framework (Gray & Streshly, 2008), the National Principals Institute findings (L. Smith, 2008), and the Great Schools criteria. Leaders are expected to display the various traits, demonstrate or implement the recommended knowledge or practices and act as a model of outstanding actions. Table 5 provides a summary version of the key elements of these models.

It is somewhat challenging to judge the merits of these models, or even compare one to another. Each offers useful ideas and some are more comprehensive, while others are more succinct yet very specific. It could be difficult to try to determine if an individual could be described as courageous, yet if that individual repeatedly spoke about risks that she had taken for her career, then the actions could potentially be classified as a demonstration of that trait. How do we know if a leader can effectively create a vision? If the leader clearly discusses that vision and the education community around her also articulates a similar perspective, then the action could be classified as being achieved.

Because this study was only going to examine leadership influence from the perspective of the administrator in an interview process, the leadership qualities that were demonstrated would need to be clear and able to be defined across individuals.
For purposes of this dissertation study, a new framework was developed that incorporated critical concepts proposed as the most important for educational leaders to have mastered. The framework attempted to incorporate key actions from all of the leadership models by synthesizing similar concepts. This new framework emphasizes five key categories for leadership success especially for schools with diverse populations. The five elements are structured in a straightforward model by representing the traditional components of writing and reporting known as the 5 Ws–who, what, where, why, and

### Table 5

Key Concepts of Leadership Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WALLACE</th>
<th>NATIONAL PRINCIPALS INSTITUTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. State leadership, policies, practices</td>
<td>1. Focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. District leadership, policies, practices</td>
<td>2. Visionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Student/family background</td>
<td>3. Change-sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. School leadership</td>
<td>4. Courageous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Other stakeholders</td>
<td>5. Empowering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. School conditions</td>
<td>6. Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Teachers</td>
<td>7. Strategic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Classroom conditions</td>
<td>8. Learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Leader’s professional learning</td>
<td>9. Communicator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Student learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ISLLC</th>
<th>MCREL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Nurturing school culture</td>
<td>2. Education research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Community collaboration</td>
<td>3. Change agent role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ethical behavior</td>
<td>4. Incorporate teacher input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Understanding to action</td>
<td>5. Positive school culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PIL</th>
<th>GREAT SCHOOLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Skills, think, plan, create vision</td>
<td>1. Take responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Stds-based theory/transfer knowledge</td>
<td>2. Lead teaching and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Access and use data</td>
<td>3. Hire and develop teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Build a strong school community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
how. For all cases, “when” is defined as the urgent present, and is therefore not specifically listed in the framework, but rather understood to be always included. The 5W Education Leadership Framework offers a clear and easily understandable model of critical actions that should be undertaken by education leaders in order to positively influence student and school performance. The five key areas emphasized as major leadership abilities in this dissertation research are:

1. Student achievement—leaders have high expectations for all, provide equitable opportunities and meet the needs of the whole child (WHO)

2. Academic excellence—leaders have a vision, focus, knowledge and plan for teaching and learning (WHAT)

3. Professional learning community—leaders create a multi-stakeholder approach with students, staff, parents and community members for the success of their school/district (WHERE)

4. Systems theory in action—leaders understand the complexity of the education system and know how to manage it for positive results (WHY)

5. Data, research and resources—leaders know how to access and wisely use and share data, tools, models, materials, and budgets (HOW)

Using this framework for the interview, the questions examined leaders’ administrative practices, school strengths and challenges, and school practices that represent multiple elements of the education system. Additionally, the interviews addressed leadership issues, student success and needs, policy changes, peer technical assistance and the definition of a great school (see Appendix B). The open-ended questions allowed for depth and detail in response.
Interview Models

The interview also included questions that focused on concepts extrapolated from site visit protocols. Since it was not feasible to conduct walk-throughs to gather data on general school impression and overview information, the interview protocol addressed these issues, drawing on the SchoolWorks School District of Philadelphia Guided Self-Study Handbook (2003) and the PDE Quality Review (2004). The interview questions also drew from instruments such as the National Institute for School Leadership (2005) survey and the Council of Chief State School Officers’ self-survey (2002). The critical activities associated with school walk-throughs and reflective surveys provided a broader perspective of the impact of school leadership and school results. The school leader had the opportunity to discuss actual administrative practices and school practices, and these responses could be classified and compared to the more open-ended reflective questions. All responses were carefully examined for classification under the 5W Framework, although they were not separated out by actual practice versus ideal practice.

In order to address the potential of interview responders to try to respond in a socially desirable manner, the interview used diverse approaches in gathering information, such as rank ordering, listing and open-ended responses (Fowler, 1995). The interview was peer reviewed for face and content validity (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997) and piloted with several retired administrators. The interview protocol was piloted with similar school sample educators to ensure that the instruments were valid, reliable, free of bias, and that they would generate useful responses. These final instruments were reviewed the University of Pennsylvania’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the

The interview asked broad overview questions, questions of decision, questions of priority, questions of clarification, hypothetical questions and summary questions (Preskill & Torres, 1999). For example, leaders were asked to consider the greatest strengths and needs of the school (decision), rank the importance of school practices (priority), and recommend policy and program changes (hypothetical). The instrument included standard and open-ended questions, yet also allowed for the participants to “define” the problem in their own ways and “describe” the issues in relation to their own work or experience, both of the key strategies recommended by Stringer (1999). Attention also was paid to issues of language and culture when designing protocols and to building trust and rapport with respondents when administering them (Fontana & Frey, 1994, Stringer, 1999).

**Interview Process**

Interviews were conducted with the superintendent and/or principal, as the focus of this research was on administrative leadership. Informed consent was required for final inclusion of the interview responses. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis by telephone and/or personal visit. Each interview was fully transcribed and included all question responses and additional comments, as well as notations regarding language or tone that was emphasized by the respondent. Responses were then coded based on theme or response perspective.

During the interviews, it was important to ensure that issues effective practices for qualitative research were in place. Efforts to address included maintaining an appropriate
stance of inquiry, regulating the interviewer participation, and monitoring note-writing, such as checking details, meanings, coding processes and themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Some participants did not want to respond to every question or wanted to discuss topics not listed on the protocol.

On a note of interest, several interview invitees contacted this researcher to state that they might be interested in participating but they did not consider their site “diverse.” It appears that this term is sometimes understood to refer only to race, and not necessarily additional factors such as socioeconomic status, English language learning and disabilities. The interviews allowed for individual expression by the school leaders although the same format and same questions were adhered to throughout the process. Yet the instrument also allowed for consistency in understanding and administration, adequacy of response and ability to elicit knowledgeable responses from participants (Fowler, 1995).

As part of the outreach process, an extensive search of every eligible school and district’s website and email communication was conducted as there exists no master data base of emails and principals and superintendents may change at any time, so the website information is usually the most current. A certain percentage of schools do not publicly release their administrators’ emails, including several of the largest urban districts. If email was not available, wherever possible, letters were sent directly to the administrator with the invitation printed out.

**Interviews/Qualitative Analysis**

The qualitative data collection process examined perspectives from the field from leaders holding principal and superintendent positions. The interview expressly targeted
those sites demonstrating high performance for subpopulations, and was designed to address the second research question, regarding how leaders in schools with high-performing diverse populations influence student achievement. It was critical to hear from the educational leaders their vision, contextual understanding, and the actions they were taking to produce promising results. It was also of interest to learn how educational leaders in general viewed their leadership experiences, and what strategies they would share with colleagues as all worked towards creating a great school.

For the interviews, it was first necessary to process the collected information, to allow for storage and retrieval as well as cross-referral (Huberman & Miles, 1994). The first analysis strategy used for the interviews was categorizing, as interview results were coded, and sorted by theme to be able to be compared and contrasted which is a strong analysis strategy as the analysis becomes visible and helps clarify relationships (Maxwell, 1996). The responses to each question were first reviewed to form a “general sense of the information” (Creswell, 2003, p. 191) and then were organized into similar topics and coded. Coding was based mainly on the specific theme but also reflected the way participants described their perspectives. In terms of representation, participant quotations were presented from the responses and overall summary interpretations of the responses were also provided when appropriate.

Although the categorizing strategy was first used with the interviews to separate question responses and issues, the main strategy used was a contextualizing analysis (Maxwell, 1996), which allowed for understanding of the data in context and the ability to maintain the holistic perspective of the responses and their relationship to the issue. The interview analysis encompassed grounded theory (Huberman & Miles, 1994) to a
certain extent, as field experience and understanding of school settings and leadership responsibilities helped to frame the interpretation. The analysis employed both issue-focused and case-focused approaches for the collected data (R. Weiss, 1994). In other words, each respondent was asked to respond from his/her perspective about school performance and leadership actions and the overall interview was summarized (case); additionally the responses were divided by specific topics such as definition of a great school (issue). The goal was to present the findings from an inclusive integration perspective (R. Weiss, 1994) so that the story of each school could be clearly described, yet the school experiences could be compared and contrasted. Regarding qualitative analysis, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) noted:

Analysis is not simply a matter of classifying, categorizing, coding, or collecting data. It is not simply a matter of identifying forms of speech or regularities of action. Most fundamentally, analysis is about the representation or reconstruction of social phenomena. We do not simply “collect” data; we fashion them out of our transactions with other men and women. Likewise, we do not merely report what we find; we create accounts of social life, and in doing so we construct versions of the social worlds and the social actors that we observe. It is, therefore, inescapable that analysis implies representation. (p 108)

The responses provided descriptions and explanations based on the perspectives of the respondents, and analyzing the interview responses individually and collectively attempted to provide causal explanation for the school results (R. Weiss, 1994). This cross-case analysis is known as interactive synthesis, where the themes are developed from each individual and summarized, and then the summarized version is compared back again to the individual responses (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Major interview coding categories included: student needs, teaching and learning practices, community partnerships, managing the education system, and use of data, research and resources.
These five major categories are the basis for the 5W Education Leadership Framework and correspond to the areas of who, what, where, why and how. The results of the interviews are discussed in the Findings chapter.

**Weaknesses in the Study Design**

There are several key issues that may impact the results of this research. First, the performance data from the state test demonstrated the ability of a particular student cohort, and it may be inappropriate to use these data as an indicator of school performance, although the 2-year analysis span was used to mitigate that concern. The PSSA school results may be interpreted as snapshot data showing only student achievement, but the long-term goal is for schools to demonstrate student growth as well. The use of PVAAS data and the selection decision to categorize schools as exemplary models because both achievement and growth were at the fourth and fifth quintile levels does increase the validity that the identified schools are demonstrating success as compared to other schools in the state. The small sizes of subgroups in some schools made it challenging to obtain reliable student achievement estimates for the analysis, such as the eighth grade English learner population.

It is recognized that there still exist concerns regarding the use of growth models and value-added analysis. Yet the approval of the federal government to Pennsylvania for use of this statistical approach to measure Adequate Yearly Progress indicates that growth analysis has become recognized and accepted as appropriate for states to use to review school performance. Additionally, states are required to undergo rigorous screening before approval, and Pennsylvania’s efforts met the criteria of federal review. These PVAAS analyses were performed by the same professional statisticians and
psychometricians who perform the regular state analysis. These special population analyses were simply more focused and more specific than the usual statewide processes. However, the same state school and student data for AYP were also used to create these custom analyses. These data were made available with the approval of former administrators of the state department of education and it is expected that upon request, and if the state budget allows, similar analyses could be performed. There should be minimal concerns regarding internal, external and statistical conclusion validity (Creswell, 2003) as both the Pennsylvania officials and the Tennessee contractors are accountable for the quality of the analyses.

Despite considerable effort made to obtain a high response rate on the interviews, the response rate is a representative sample rather than an all-inclusive study. Therefore, the scope of inquiry is limited and the qualitative findings may not be generalizable, and participation limitation raises questions of potential nonresponse bias in the findings. It was recommended to try to obtain between 16-24 total interviews in a purposeful rather than random sample, so that each of the categories would be represented (J. Supovitz, personal communication, April 21, 2011). However, some schools appeared in more than one category so the total school numbers were reduced. The final purposeful sample included all student populations, all school geographic designations, and emphasized schools with exemplary performance. A total of 13 interviews were conducted overall, with seven classified as exemplary performers. In terms of representation, including duplication, there were seven schools representing high minority performance, nine sites representing economically disadvantaged students, six for students with disabilities and one for English learners. For the interviews the actual participation rate based on special
population numbers was 35% for minority, 17.6% for economically disadvantaged, 50% for English learners, and 10.5% for students with disabilities. Superintendent participation was limited to one individual. Additionally, the analysis does not include any interview data from Pennsylvania charter schools.

Although “reliability and generalizability play a minor role in qualitative inquiry” (Creswell, 2003, p. 195), the issue of validity is most critical. This study did not employ any data analysis computer programs, which may mean decreased accuracy in identification and grouping of qualitative data. Certain strategies such as member-checking, peer debriefing and use of an external auditor (Creswell, 2003) were also not part of the analysis and could affect accuracy of the findings.

Regarding the analysis and the findings, the complexity of issues in any study will be affected by the interaction between research and social theory and history, for example, one’s relation to the world. This perspective of bricolage promulgates that all research in education is affected by human beings and their perceptions, assumptions, cultures, purposes, power and privilege relations (Kinchelow, 2004). The concept of ‘bricolage’ also demands that rigor in the research process is important, but the results of the process should be true reflections of reality. This issue may be of particular importance as this study emphasized student diversity and inequity in performance. The ways that schools support achievement for all populations and cultures may be based on the leaders’ understanding of students’ needs gained both through research and experience.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter will present the findings from the quantitative and qualitative analyses to address the two dissertation research questions: (1) How are schools that demonstrate significant achievement in eighth grade reading with diverse student populations identified? (2) How do school and district leaders believe they influence student performance in these schools? The collected data and the analysis processes used to investigate each question are presented in two major sections. First the PSSA and PVAAS results are presented, and then the qualitative findings from the interviews are reviewed. A summary of all findings will be presented at the end of this section as well. The next and final chapter will discuss the implications and offer recommendations.

School Identification/PSSA Data Collection

PVAAS Data Analysis

Progress comparison: Special populations to mainstream. The first PVAAS data analysis (SAS Institute, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d) examined the progress of special population students as compared to mainstream population students within the individual schools. The goal was to determine if there were measurable differences in the performance of subgroups with the total school population. The analysis process included comparing the adjusted mean score (using two prior PSSA scores) for the same students of the special population group with all other students, and then determining if a significant interaction of special population performance was present. As previously discussed, the data used were the 2009 test scores for eighth graders and the 2008 scores for those same students when they were in seventh grade. Using a significance level of 0.05, there was determined to be statistically significant interactions for all the subgroups.
in eighth grade reading except LEP (SAS Institute, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d). Table 6 presents the results of this component of the first analysis with the degrees of freedom and the variance and probability values.

**Table 6**

PVAAS PSSA Grade 8 Reading Special Populations Compared to All Other Populations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>p-VALUE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EC-Economic disadvantaged</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>.0120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIN-Minority Race</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.0130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEP- English learner</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>.0315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPE- Special Education</td>
<td>639</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>&lt;.0010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 6, the degrees of freedom represent the number of schools (minus one) that have more than ten students in the special student population that participated in the eighth grade reading testing and also had seventh grade results. The probability levels demonstrate statistically significant differences in comparing effectiveness of school results for this special population as compared to all other populations.

As a result of this first component, schools were then assigned to one of three categories in which the subgroup performance was either higher or lower than the overall population, or in which there was no detectable difference (SAS Institute, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d). Table 7 demonstrates those status distinctions.

The results of this first analysis demonstrate that the achievement gap for special population students as compared to mainstream students could certainly be detected within individual schools and across the state. It was gratifying to note that many schools were supporting the performance of the subgroups in that no detectable difference could
Table 7

School Set by Subgroup for Comparison with Mainstream Population for Performance Results in Grade 8 Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Overperform</th>
<th>Underperform</th>
<th>No performance difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>579</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIN</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPE</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

be determined for the subgroup as compared to the overall eighth grade school population, and interesting to note that some schools were able to demonstrate subgroup overperformance within that school. As can be seen by the data in the chart, the special education category seemed to be the most challenging for all schools. Although for eighth grade the LEP group did not indicate the same overall level of performance difference, the LEP group did have significance in all previous grades. The possible reasons for this difference could be that students had already been in their schools for multiple years and so had already achieved basic English proficiency, and arrivals of newcomer students were more limited in the eighth grade than in other elementary grades. Future analyses could determine whether schools maintain performance across grades and over time, whether there are specific grades where greater differences occur, or what local effects are allowing for overperformance or underperformance, such as teacher or course assignment, curricular rigor, supports, and so forth. As calculating accountability is limited to those students who received instruction for an entire academic year, individual school patterns should be examined as well for issues such as retention, and large increases or movements of students after the school year has begun.
School effectiveness. The second step of the PVAAS analysis (SAS Institute, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d) focused specifically on the performance of the subgroups and examined variability in effectiveness among schools based on a comparison of the students’ progress. The goal was to determine if there were statistically significant differences in performance in school effectiveness. “The school effect is a measure of how much the average student in the school scores, after accounting for prior achievement, higher/lower than an average student across all schools included in the analysis” (SAS Institute, 2009c, p. 9). In this dissertation research, schools were compared using the performance of each of the four subgroups so as to determine which schools were most successful with a specific subgroup. The analysis was conducted with two standard error classifications, one using +/-1.5 and the other with +/- 2.0 SE. Tables 8 and 9 display the school results.

Table 8

PVAAS PSSA 2009 Reading Grade 8 Variability for Subgroups With 1.5 SE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Overperform</th>
<th>Underperform</th>
<th>No performance difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIN</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPE</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The PVAAS PSSA data analysis addressed the first question of this study. Using available state data and value added analysis, and with standard error deviations to heed, objective statistical procedures do exist to identify schools that outperform for subgroup populations of students as compared to similar sites based. However, even though
Schools can be statistically identified by performance, there are additional more complex issues to consider regarding these results. Is it truly possible to judge one school as more successful with a subgroup when the schools are not truly comparable? For example, in the minority category of Table 9, the 26 schools that were identified as over-performers compared to schools with a similar subgroup differed greatly in the percentage of subgroup population students that were tested in that grade. The range was as low as 9% minority to as high as 84% minority, while student numbers in the tested minority group ranged from 18 to 213 in the over-performing schools. Additionally, the minority category used by PVAAS integrates all the ethnic and racial groups together, and does not allow for separation of major population categories such as Hispanic/Latino or African American, and thus may be providing insufficient data for a true comparison of performance. Also, as previously stated, schools should be individually examined to determine any issues of retention or large student movements in enrollment that could skew test participation and results data. Another issue is that schools that may have lower per pupil costs are doing very well with certain student subgroups, versus schools that may have a much higher per pupil costs, and the same student subgroups are performing more poorly. This study was unable to determine the true impact of factors such as school per pupil costs and geographic designation, although urban schools were underrepresented in the final performance data, even though they enroll the largest number of diverse subgroups.
Although data demonstrated that special education students in many suburban districts are doing exceptionally well, the concern is the exact classification of these students. Therefore, school comparisons would not be accurate or appropriate, as further data are needed regarding the individual students’ disability statuses. Another issue that has instructional implications is the categorization of schools as either middle schools or elementary K-8 schools, and the impact that structure may have upon performance. However, this issue of school configuration was not investigated in this study. Finally, although these data are comparing schools to each other, it is also important to remember that the individual school performance is being compared to a statewide standard, and thus these schools are demonstrating strong results regarding those requirements.

**Exemplary performance.** A further review was conducted of the high-performance schools to determine eligibility for the interview process. Using the schools listed in Table 9 (because the 2.0 SE allowed for the strictest interpretation), a selection decision was made to emphasize those schools that were in either the fourth or the fifth quintile of performance for both growth and achievement. In Pennsylvania, school assessment data are divided into five quartiles, with one being the lowest and five the highest, to measure the gain and the mean of school testing performance. A school may
be making strong progress in the gain quintile, but has not yet met achievement goals. Other schools may have high achievement scores, but growth has stagnated or is in decline. The critical issue is for schools to demonstrate high scores for both growth and achievement. The goal was thus to find exemplary models of schools that displayed these two high levels of performance.

In the LEP category, there were two schools identified as overperformers, but only one of those schools scored in the exemplary status. In the Minority category, 11 schools could be classified as exemplary models from the final list of 20. In Special Education, there were 13 schools from the total 57 and in Economically Disadvantaged there were 27 schools from the final list of 51. These exemplary models were the key schools and districts identified for follow-up with the qualitative analysis. Table 10 below displays the results for each student population.

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Both (exemplary)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIN</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL/LEP</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPE</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In almost all cases, schools with high performance were diverse individual sites within a district; it was very rare to find a single district with more than one high performing school. The implication is that in almost all cases high performance for special populations is site-specific and it appears to be a major challenge for districts to extend those effective practices to other locations. Although schools are listed under the
four separate categories, some schools did appear on more than one list. In other words, these sites were supporting the achievement of more than one special student population.

In order to probe more deeply into the test score analysis results, additional investigations could be conducted to determine if there were relationships across any of the student population groups. In other words, were overall student performance results for one group of students similar to results to another grouping? And were some schools (and districts) successful with more than one student subgroup? The key assertions proposed are that students who have traditionally under-performed on state tests may have similar needs and challenges as other groups, and that schools that produce successful results with one subgroup could potentially produce similar high outcomes for other subgroups. A previous correlation effort found links across the economically disadvantaged category and all subgroups while the LEP/ELL category correlated highly with Hispanic/Latino students (W. Murphy, Ramírez, & Elhadri, 2006). School successful with multiple high-need populations would be important resources for future investigations such as more detailed qualitative review of school pedagogical practices.

The findings for the PSSA analysis are significant because they do provide a strong sample of schools that exceed the state standards in performance for special populations, and, when compared to other schools in the state (recognizing the concerns previously discussed), offer indication of greater success with those diverse student groups. The PVAAS analysis provides the baseline answer for the first research question and then allows for deeper analysis of those individual schools. In this dissertation study, the selected schools were used to determine which educational leaders would be eligible to participate in the interview process.
Interview Data

Overview

The interview process allowed for a sample of educational leaders supporting high-performing schools to share their perspectives, thoughts, and rationales for decisions and actions. The interview responses provided feedback for the second research question, how do school and district leaders believe they influence student performance in schools with high achievement for special populations? The findings are presented in three major sections. First, the school overviews are presented to offer a brief individual snapshot of the school and the leader’s perspective. Next, the responses are summarized using the elements of the 5W Leadership Framework. Finally, the separate questions of the interview are discussed--administrative practices, school strengths and challenges, school practices, and open responses.

A total of 13 interviews were conducted, including 12 principals and one superintendent. Although efforts were made to obtain more superintendent participation, the response interest was low and the pool was more limited. Superintendents provide a broader perspective of leadership, especially for those districts with more than one school supporting high achievement of special populations. The participants included twelve males and one female and all possessed a Master’s degree, with four additionally holding doctorates. Regarding experience, the average time as educational leader at the site was approximately 10 years, with 1 year as the lowest and 35 years as the highest. The counties in Pennsylvania represented by interviews included: Allegheny, Armstrong, Berks, Bucks, Delaware, Erie, Franklin, Montgomery, Northampton, Philadelphia, Washington, Westmoreland, and York. The schools represented four urban locations,
five suburban sites and four rural sites. Interviews were conducted either on-site or by telephone. Seven schools included in the interviews were categorized as exemplary, which as defined previously, refers to the fact that these schools were demonstrating both high growth and achievement (at the fourth and fifth quintile levels) for special populations. Seven of the schools (not necessarily all the same as in the exemplary category) in the interviews were successful with more than one special student population, including four schools that achieved with two groups and three schools that displayed success with three different student populations. To clarify, successful schools are those that demonstrated higher performance for the special population as compared to all other schools in the state. In terms of overall representation of interviews for each special population category, for the Minority category, seven sites were represented, for Economically Disadvantaged, nine sites, for Special Education, six, and for English Learners, one. Table 11 displays the special populations in each school that participated in the interview. Exemplary schools are also identified. Again, it must be reiterated that the interview schools were a purposeful sample, and the data displayed below are not necessarily representative of the total sample.

As stated, the 5W Leadership Framework was used to categorize and integrate responses. All of the interview content was reviewed for references to the distinct components of the framework and classified accordingly. For coding purposes, the response had to include a specific mention of one or more of the items that defined the category.
Table 11

Special Populations of Schools Participating in Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>EC</th>
<th>MIN</th>
<th>LEP</th>
<th>SPE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UP1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UP2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UP3&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US1</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP1</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP3&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP4&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RP1&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RP2&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>RP3</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RP4&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Signifies school has met exemplary criteria of fourth and/or fifth quintile performance for both growth and achievement

1. Student achievement--leaders have high expectations for all, provide equitable opportunities and meet the needs of the whole child (WHO)

2. Academic excellence--leaders have a vision, focus, knowledge and plan for teaching and learning (WHAT)

3. Professional learning community--leaders create a multi-stakeholder approach with students, staff, parents and community members for the success of their school/district (WHERE)

4. Systems theory in action--leaders understand the complexity of the education system and know how to manage it for positive results (WHY)

5. Data, research and resources--leaders know how to access and wisely use and share data, tools, models, materials, and budgets (HOW)
School Overviews

The sites represented in the study were diverse in geographic location, type of building and structure, and school size. As stated previously, four sites represented urban areas, five were suburban and four were rural. School models included elementary structures of grades one-eight, middle schools with grades six-eight, and junior/senior high school models with grades seven-12. Data are provided to show the percentages of special population students in eighth grade that participated in testing and whose results were calculated to show high performance as compared to other schools. Principal seniority is also mentioned and this can be reviewed in the perspective that the Wallace study cited 4 years as a minimal time needed for leadership success. This concept was discussed in Chapter 2 of this study.

The major themes that were discovered during the interviews included: the importance of high quality staff, the necessity to have in place rigorous and comprehensive literacy teaching and learning experiences, the requirement of conducting data analysis, and the focus on the unique diversity of each child. The final theme emphasizes the importance of care and relationships and how to positively use all elements of the educational system to build success. This commitment to performance becomes an all encompassing lifestyle for the educational leader, and the final example offers a model of dedication for improvement by giving back to society, or the focus on school leadership as more than just a career. The following descriptions offer a holistic perspective as appropriate for the strategy of contextualizing analysis, with a focus on the case-focused approach of collected data. The principal comments are representative of the larger discussions that were held with each individual. Although the themes cut
across schools, it must be recalled that each school is unique and there will be differences in perspectives which may be difficult to compare across leaders. The entire interview was used for coding under the 5W Leadership Framework elements.

Principal Story One: The Learning Community

One critical theme that arose across the interviews was the importance of qualified staff and the positive effect skilled teachers can have on student performance. In many schools the principal has the direct authority to hire staff. The interview with rural principal one (RP1) is an example of how educational leaders believe staff play an essential role for school results. This principal also emphasized innovation for teaching and learning efforts. This large rural middle school achieved exemplary status with three student groups--minority (15% of eighth grade population), economically disadvantaged (17%) and students with disabilities (14%). The principal has been in the position for approximately 5 years. The principal is very people-oriented and emphasizes staff and community as reasons for the success of the school:

To establish relationships with individuals is critical . . . Through the value of relationships finding who your key inner circle should be and utilize that as a base of operations to expand ideas--plant seeds . . . Good people around you, so that’s where it goes back to my number one priority in hiring good people--that’s key. (RP1)

The leader is very pleased with the commitment of the staff to the students and is comfortable in developing leadership experiences for teachers.

With good people you can get good results . . . We have a tremendous staff that they’re advocates for our students. It’s rare, I think, to find a whole staff that really rallies behind middle level education, but the staff, they really value the middle child and take pride in putting some good works in place for kids and there’s opportunities . . . From a staff perspective we put a clear teacher leadership program in place including our subject area leaders as well with departments. (RP1)
The principal is pleased with the overall quality of staff and is proud to have been responsible for creating positions to improve student performance in reading. The principal would like to expand professional development opportunities for all staff to see increased skills and knowledge in place. Unfortunately, upcoming budget challenges will impact the staff allocations, and the principal is extremely concerned about the effect of those personnel changes on school results:

We have several positions that I have aligned in the past four and a half years that I’ve been here that I’ve created to support student achievement that now they’re starting to be peeled away slowly as a result of the budget . . . that creates a huge challenge for us to maintain our level of performance . . . Next year I’m losing my literacy coach, I’m losing my reading remediation teacher so this has a big impact on that [school performance]. (RP1)

However, the principal continues to consider how to support literacy instruction in the school even with staff cuts, and proposes:

If I had my way, too, I would enhance staff development opportunities for all staff in relationship to reading. We have all heard teachers trained in Reading Apprenticeship . . . but just finding time to provide quality staff development is a challenge with schedule[s]. (RP1)

The principal is active on district committees and maintains good relationships with parents and the community. This leader recognizes the importance of collaboration and broad support for the school. The leader also encourages students to participate in the community through service learning projects.

We have a community that has a very high expectation on student achievement and results. They value the rigor of our program . . . Having an open door policy when it comes to parents, community. When it comes to community participation a real push on service learning projects. Getting kids and community involved in our school. (RP1)
This educational leader, though pleased with the school performance, also thinks outside of the box. The principal would like to push the teaching and learning efforts in other directions that could potentially be more beneficial to students:

I would do away with the traditional grading ABCD scale. I think it would be more standards-based . . . I’d use the example with teachers if I didn’t pass my driver’s test the first time under your grading policy I’d never pass because either you pass or you fail. [In a] standardized system you have opportunities take that driver’s test again . . . Sometimes you get over it right away, other kids it takes a couple times. Going to a standards-based grading scale would make a big difference for us. (RP1)

Another recommendation that was proposed demonstrates how the principal would like to see more flexibility in access to course content:

There are a lot of hoops that we need to jump through sometimes in order to promote students to higher grades. I think certain protocols need to be in place but wit curriculum in place it’s very difficult to provide students, say, in seventh grade with a tenth grade exposure . . . Science, for instance. We have a seventh grade general science—I have students in seventh grade that I could provide chemistry and I think that they would benefit from some of the experiences at the high school level. (RP1)

Although the principal recognizes the importance of the administrative role, the focus on building a professional learning community overrides everything else:

My goal is to be worthless-in the sense that you have good people around you. They’re empowered to make decisions in the best interests of the kids. They’re not coming to me for every little approval process. The staff that we hire--the stakeholders-parents-community-the students self-regulate themselves--so that’s certainly my goal. You really shouldn’t need a principal in my opinion. (RP1)

In this interview, the 5W component of WHERE was most strongly emphasized, as demonstrated by the principal’s focus on the importance of staff and community. The principal also discussed innovative teaching and learning ideas to represent the WHAT category.
This similar issue of the importance of staff quality was also described in the following site of rural principal three (RP3). This school was successful with economically disadvantaged students (39% of eighth grade population) and students with disabilities (14%). The school is extremely rural and transportation issues can be a major challenge. The principal is new to middle school but served as the elementary school principal. The leader hopes to bring instructional strategies such as flexible grouping, literacy intervention programs and reading specialists to the school.

You need a clear plan and vision. You can put all down on paper you want but you must hold teachers and students accountable . . . For example, we have assessment portfolios. Every teacher must collect their assessments—every teacher—in a binder, in real time, in chronological order. We look at the rigor of the assessments and ensure that assessments are assessing the curriculum in place and standards-aligned . . . I want to see rigor and relevance . . . During PLC time they meet and talk about better assessments. If it is fantastic they explain why. It is collegial sharing . . . [to] constructively critique what you like and how to improve. We build the comfort level and trusting relationships. (RP3)

Rural principal two (RP2) also emphasizes the importance of staff collaboration. At this large middle school, the performance of economically disadvantaged students (11% of eighth grade population) and students with disabilities (12%) promoted the school to exemplary status. The principal is excited to be participating in the PLC (Professional Learning Community) model and has supported his staff to attend PLC institutes. Teachers are collaboratively designing common formative and summative assessments with the goal to have classrooms succeed by “picking brains, sharing strategies and stealing ideas.”

The principal of urban school two (UP2) was proud to recognize the efforts of teachers in making the school successful. This medium-sized one-eight elementary
school had strong performance for two student groups—minority (67% of eighth grade population) and economically disadvantaged (67%).

People in the building in front of the kids make it successful. The high school has tons of teachers and lots of adults, but they don’t perform due to relationships. Somehow we manage to be more successful even though we have the same kinds of kids. Teachers will not accept failure—it is the relationships teachers develop with kids. (UP2)

Urban principal two (UP2) had been able to personally hire all the school staff, and during the hiring process looked for those staff that would be “a good fit for the kids and the community and dedicated and do the right thing.”

In a similar vein, Urban principal three (UP3) noted, “If you find quality teachers you’ll have a quality school—I don’t care how impoverished it is.”

High quality staff and innovative teaching and learning efforts are also the focus in a large middle school in a wealthy suburban area that demonstrated high results for minority students (10% of eighth grade population) and students with disabilities (12%) and also met the exemplary criteria. In this district, says Suburban principal four (SP4), “it is cool to do well” and the families are motivated for success. The principal is a strong advocate for professional learning communities and also emphasizes use of the Middle School Standards Association and the Charlotte Danielson observation model. Regarding staff, “Hire the right people. Get people who are most effective. I can hire my own staff and they are loyal to me and the district. They believe in me and put out the effort to make the school great” (SP4).

Although the school is high performing, there are some tensions as public school parameters may not allow for all of the individualized instruction the parents in the
community seek for their children. The principal provided some thoughts for school performance:

We go back to setting goals, using best practice implementation such as setting learning targets every day for the students . . . retesting for mastery . . . You would need to make an outline where you see how much instruction you have in reading-how much instruction you have in math-and provide second chance opportunities for these kids. I think we need to focus on differentiation . . . Do you provide RTI for the kids who need help. (SP4)

Urban superintendent one (US1) also wanted to promote innovation in teaching and learning to improve results. The superintendent explained that the district was aware that “dropout rates and lack of academic success manifest in the ninth and 10th grades, yet metadata suggest kids disengage by sixth grade.” Therefore, in the past few years the district has implemented special sixth grade programs focusing on the sciences, technology, performing arts, and international business and language to better engage youth. Many of the regular teachers have become trained to learn more about English language acquisition. The superintendent was very aware of the diversity of the district and had put in place academic supports and teacher training based on research. The superintendent advised, “Think out of the box. Use efforts that are nontraditional and personal as can be while still insisting on systemic research” (US1).

The principal of Urban school one (UP1) also emphasized the importance of expanding the curriculum and going beyond textbooks by quoting research such as “habits of mind” and “dimensions of learning.” This administrator also introduced the social-emotional perspective by saying students needed “confidence and tenacity,” had to learn about their decisions by understanding metacognition, and needed to learn life skills through integration into the curriculum such as “the vehicle of literature.”
This first story explored the key theme of highly qualified staff and related to that, implementing innovative and effective teaching and learning practices. There was representation from urban, rural and suburban principals in these themes. The major findings included that educational leaders believed highly qualified staff could truly make a difference, and these administrators strongly relied upon and trusted the effectiveness of those teachers. The leaders recognized that the relationships staff established with students positively affected performance. Many of the leaders had the opportunity to select their own staff and they realized that they had created a highly functional team.

It is interesting to note that although these educational leaders did have a similar focus on the theme of valuing their staff and promoting high quality teaching and learning, there were some tensions within those ideas. For example, from one perspective a school leader is saying that teacher self-regulation is the way to go and the principal position is unnecessary; another leader states how important it is to hold staff accountable for their performance. Leaders expressed their confidence in staff abilities yet were also promoting professional development and innovation and encouraging staff to share more. The concept of “good people” or “the right people” was mentioned again and again, but it is not clear whether that means these staff were admired because of their advocacy for children, their effectiveness in the content area, or because they had established a positive and loyal relationship with the principal.

Overall, the leaders recognized that their role was to pursue new pedagogical strategies, motivate faculty, encourage professional development and promote innovative learning concepts to create even more opportunities for student success. These administrators also relied upon the support of parents and other members of the school
community. These interview anecdotes were most representative of the WHERE and WHAT components of the 5W Educational Leadership Framework.

Principal Story Two: The Student and Data

This large city middle school with a long-term principal achieved exemplary status for three student groups--minority (48% of eighth grade population), English learners (15%) and economically disadvantaged students (56%). This principal, Urban principal three (UP3) epitomizes another major theme that was found throughout the interviews--the importance of knowing your students and addressing their needs. The principal believes the quality of education is “phenomenal” and everyone wants to come to the school--teachers, parents, and students. “People will tell me--we want our child to go to your school because we saw the website--your numbers--so I get that from time-to time” (UP3). Knowing student strengths and weaknesses is discovered through careful analysis of data, such as the state PSSA data, but the principal also recognizes that special populations may have different challenges. This principal, more so than others, stressed in detail how to use data to identify student issues and improve performance in the school:

If you want to look at academic achievement the first you do is get your data . . . I have every section with every student’s name in that section and they have where they’re at on the PSSA. So you can see every kid who’s Basic or Below Basic in yellow. I give that to every teacher that [sic] has their data binders and interventions. Basically there’s a sheet of all the different interventions and you have to list all of the things that you’re going to do for that child to be successful in school. So looking at data is the most important thing. And it’s the current data for that classroom . . . The seventh grade is the eighth grade data--they’re eighth graders now. We are looking at their seventh grade PSSA results to see who we need to target for assistance. (UP3)
In this school, the performance of special population students is often the priority, but the leader wants to support and monitor every child through the use of data:

We were targeting Latino students and African American students because based on those numbers—you know you get your PA Grow Report—you have to look where you’re at. It’s the same with the special education, it’s the same with the ELL students. I go through each individual child and see where they’re at [sic] . . . and I meet with my teachers . . . and then I check back to see if they’re targeting these kids. And then we put them in the programs and then I monitor that . . . and I meet with the teachers and go over the results and see if the students are progressing. Progress monitoring is a big thing. You need it for special education, you need it for ELL students, you need it for every student in my opinion, not just those. (UP3)

These described data analysis processes seem to be mainly used by teachers to create instructional interventions that help children succeed in school, with the PSSA results as the starting point. Although the principal did not explicitly define the term progress monitoring, it appears to emphasize the need to ensure positive academic results for students.

The principal discussed a number of academic programs and supports available at the school and had a great deal of trust in staff abilities. This leader recognized the many challenges urban youth face and understood that teachers could build academic and personal relationships with students to help them achieve:

Now there’s [sic] certain teachers I know that I have to put kids with because they know how to talk to these kids—they know how to engage them. So I have certain teachers so if I identify the kid I’ll put them in that classroom because I know the problems they have will go away—it’s like a miracle. You put them with the right people and there’s [sic] no more disruptions, there’s no more issues. I’m not saying their home life is perfect—we have a lot of kids who face alcohol addiction, drug addiction, imprisonment, all of that. Unstable family life where they are moving from house to house, living in poverty. So I have teachers who can identify with the kids and engage them to get their best. They’re really good--the unsung heroes of the school. (UP3)
The principal is proud of the school diversity and the fact that the school is able to achieve at high levels both academically as well as in the social-emotional area:

The greatest strength is the diversity. We have 32 languages spoken in school. We have a very diverse population and they all get along—which is amazing. As you can see, there’s no conflict between races or ethnic groups. We have very few serious incident reports--very few fights--very few disruptions to the school day. The kids are courteous and kind and they get along real well so my faith is being restored in our youth. If you come here you’d be . . . shocked at how well the kids get along across racial and ethnic lines. It’s just an amazing building . . . Is it perfect? No, but it’s pretty darn good. (UP3)

Yet the diversity of the school can also be a challenge for teaching and learning:

Meeting the student needs because of that diversity--it’s difficult meeting everyone’s needs because of the levels you have. You have high functioning kids and you have low functioning kids--who are new. And that’s because of the language barrier--new immigrant students right off the plane or the boat or however they came to the country--hey don’t speak much English. We try to make sure we address their needs when they get here--so they can learn. (UP3)

The principal continued to emphasize the theme that knowing student needs was critical, but the challenges from outside of the school should not necessarily have an impact on educational services.

There’s reasons why kids are in special education--they have a learning disability and it prevents them from learning in a certain way. So we try to address their needs through the different programs. We look at the skill sets to address their needs. (UP3)

For this leader, students with multiple needs are also held to the same high performance expectations, and it is the school’s role to support those children academically:

When they’re here you take all those issues outside of the building and say here--the child is in front of me--what am I going to do for him when he is in my building from eight to three? Forget about all the issues outside the school. You have him from eight to three. How do we engage that kid to be successful? (UP3)
The perspective that the staff understand their students and work with them to create a positive school community and productive learning environment is reiterated again and again by this leader. The principal described the school:

Here it’s pretty good. If you walked out there right now you’d see teachers standing in their rooms engaging students, no one in the hallway and learning going on. And that’s how you’re going to improve the scores on the PSSA. If you don’t have the kids in the classrooms learning it’s not going to work. All the money in the world is not going to change that, too. It’s not like more money is going to make a difference . . . The bottom line is have a safe and orderly building where learning is going on and you’ll be fine. So my thing is to empower my teachers--make them all leaders within my building. I have to trust them . . . If I’m not there learning should still be going on. (UP3)

The principal, who has been the school administrator for 12 years, is comfortable with the leadership role, but would like the opportunity to have more flexibility to make decisions to address student needs:

Each school should have some autonomy in deciding what they want to do with their children, based on their own individual needs, because all schools are not the same. Each school has its own unique characteristics and you need to have some autonomy to decide what you will use and what you will do with these specific targeted populations. (UP3)

The principal wants to interact with students on a personal level to ensure that the school experience is productive:

I always tell kids if you have a problem see me before you go home. See me in the morning or see me in the afternoon if there’s something affecting you at school so that you can’t learn. I want to know about it . . . You make comments to kids, try to get to know their names. (UP3)

Finally, this principal gave an example of how the role of leader can personally affect the lives of the students, and how as leader it is important to interact with youth on a human basis:

I have Lunch Bunch with the kids--a luncheon once a month for all the kids who did well or we have a drawing. So we order out to the local luncheonette and they
come and eat with me here. And they get to know who you are as a person and they tell you about the school. I ask them what they like about it--what they don’t like--how can we make it better? Get to know your kids--they’ll tell you what’s working in your building and what’s not. They know. You may not think they know--they know. Student voices. (UP3)

As can be seen from this last example, this leader also recognized the power that student perspectives can have on school improvement. The principal strongly emphasized the WHO element, which is knowing your students and addressing their needs. The HOW element is illustrated by the emphasis on implementing comprehensive data analysis and special programming for struggling students. The principal also discussed some specific intervention programs the school uses which would be examples of the WHAT element of the 5W Framework.

The theme of knowing student needs was also emphasized in the interview with Urban principal one (UP1). The large middle school has high Hispanic/Latino enrollment yet demonstrated strong performance for minority youth (84% of eighth grade population). The principal discussed the impact of low socioeconomic status and how education research has demonstrated its “direct correlation with achievement.” The principal recognized that their home situations may not have allowed students to develop “core knowledge” and that there was “no ability to gain” due to lack of enrichment experiences such as “vacations.” The principal noted the high transience levels of students in the school and also issues such as the language barrier.

Know kids’ needs--get that information first. The data from testing is one avenue, but it should not just be academic. There are issues of bullying, for example. Build programming around kids’ needs and understand all the domains of the school. What can you afford or not afford to do? (UP1)
The principal believes that although there are many challenges and there may be achievement gaps the standards should not be lowered and no excuses should be made—it is just important for the schools to “accept what we have and move forward” and provide “lots of safety nets.”

The leader of Suburban school five (SP5) believes that not only should staff be aware of student individual needs but students must also take responsibility for their own performance. This educational leader believes in stopping students in the hallways and asking them about the essential questions discussed in the classrooms.

Students must own this themselves. Students should be able to tell me how were their PSSA scores. When I see students in the hall I ask them what was the lesson essential question for the day and what did you learn? Students must lead their own education . . . Some eighth graders are not at the point yet where they own it or where they believe that they can. Humans need to have a destination to envision and hope and belief that the resources within and outside are there so they can accomplish [it]. (SP5)

Suburban principal one (SP1) also understood the challenge of helping every child achieve high performance. This large and diverse suburban middle school had high achievement data for economically disadvantaged students (16% of eighth grade population). The principal was in the first year of leadership but had worked in a transition role with the retiring principal. The principal emphasized the importance of creating annual goals and “setting the tone at the beginning of the school year.” For this principal, student achievement is

A complex problem because not everybody has the same issues involving learning and achieving . . . there are a variety of different reasons. Social and emotional issues get in the way to focus on academics. There may be gaps in instruction from previous years or the transition from elementary to middle school. Also the achievement gap of African American and White students. (SP1)
This principal also recognized that student demographics may have an impact on school performance. The leader is considering the challenges in the school and seeking potential solutions. The principal is trying to promote more culturally responsive instruction while also using tools such as the PDE “Getting Results” to identify individual student needs and implement interventions.

Another issue for student needs involves adolescent development of the middle years child. Suburban principal two (SP2) principal focused on the fact that at the middle school age “their development is not all the same, including intellectually--some are ahead, some are behind, and there are environmental factors such as the home.” The principal was concerned about the preparation of skills for life with the youth, staff and families, by saying everybody “confuses happiness with success.” This mid-sized, suburban middle school was described by the Suburban principal two (SP2) as being located in a “very wealthy area with very good kids.” This school had demonstrated high performance with students with disabilities (9% of eighth grade population). This suburban school principal put student needs at the center of school efforts, and had a strong understanding of adolescent development.

This principal of Rural school two (RP2) notes how schools must now take on society’s needs and do much more than teach. The need to address individual student needs is caught in the political focus on monitoring school performance. In a time of vouchers and charter schools, this principal wants to convince the public that public education is a positive entity to be valued. Public education has become a punching bag . . . [Public schools] have to take on society’s needs such as health care, domestic violence, drug abuse, AIDS, prescription drug use, disease. [The public] expects much more than teaching math and English. We are human, not widgets . . . Kids carry lots of baggage in this nation. They have lots of weight on
their shoulders of unpretty things they don’t need to deal with. Schools are now more of a political pinball. (RP2)

In this second story, the themes of knowing student needs and using data to improve student results were highlighted across schools. The schools in this study were all selected due to the performance of their most diverse students. The leaders recognized the educational challenges posed by the different student groups, yet they were comfortable in addressing the students needs and proud of their results. There was representation from urban, rural and suburban principals in these themes. These principals also continued the theme of how effective staff can make a difference for student results, but they believed those staff had to first be aware of student needs by examining performance data. The principals relied on the data for direction to help create better teaching and learning experiences for the school.

In reviewing the comments of leaders in this second story, the theme of knowing your students and analyzing data to define their needs seems to be a broadly accepted concept, but the definition of “knowing” is not always clear. On one hand a principal discusses the state test results and the students in the Basic and Below Basic levels; on the other hand the same principal emphasizes poverty and language diversity as challenges for school performance. Principals in the suburban schools mentioned social-emotional issues, bullying and adolescent intellectual development as their challenges, and one rural principal emphasized how the schools must take on “society’s needs.” The leaders do not explain what data they use to determine how those areas are affecting their schools or how they categorize students as having needs in those areas. Clearly there is
frustration with the diversity of challenges young people present to the education system, and principals are struggling to fully understand all of these “needs.”

Yet for these leaders there was always a strong sense of hope and the confidence of meeting the challenge of knowing students as individuals. These academic leaders supported the uniqueness of their students and encouraged them to take responsibility for and provide feedback on their learning experiences. The issues of adolescent development and peer influence in the middle years were also recognized as potentially affecting student performance. The leaders displayed a sense of accomplishment and pride in the fact that their schools could show results with diverse students. The main themes discussed correspond to the WHO and HOW components of the 5W Educational Leadership Framework.

Principal Story Three: Creating a Caring School

This large middle school has a long history of high performance and scored exemplary for three student categories including minority (16% of eighth grade population), economically disadvantaged (24%) and students with disabilities (18%). The final theme emphasized throughout many of the interviews was the importance of caring, the importance of establishing relationships, and making a positive difference for both children and the society. The veteran principal, Suburban principal three (SP3), is a true example of an educational leader who had dedicated a lifetime to the career. With more than three decades of experience, the leader’s philosophy is clearly articulated:

I’m in the kid business . . . seeing if I can do anything to stimulate their teaching and learning opportunities. I’m a very visible principal—I’m in the cafeteria, I’m in the hallways, I’m all over the place. I think the kids know that I’m very anxious for them to do the very best they can because they’re so meaningful to me. (SP3)
For this principal, being visible to students as frequently as possible demonstrated care for them in dual roles—personally as a human being and professionally as the school leader. The principal also believes that concept of care has permeated the school:

There’s a lot of care and concern here—a lot of compassion—call that love, call it whatever you want. But I have people who are very, very interested and committed to the educational progress of each and every boy and girl, no matter what their social status and their background is. (SP3)

The concept of care also takes root in school decisions and actions. Both the academic and the social-emotional needs of the students are always reflected upon and incorporated into the school structure:

I think that the reason that so many of our youngsters are successful is because we try to provide them with the very best resources—hardware, software—the latest teaching techniques. We try to keep our classes as small as possible for all students . . . We try to develop a partnership with our parents and having those parents behind you makes all the difference in the world. (SP3)

The principal constantly thinks of initiatives that will provide students with opportunities to be better connected to the school:

We also try to provide small things like a tutorial period every day for an hour to help kids with remediation, to help youngsters with their homework—a number of situations. And we try to provide vehicles so that all kids can achieve—clubs, activities, that kind of thing so that everybody feels a part of the institution. (SP3)

The principal is proud of the many awards the school has received and tries to ensure that the school emphasizes a positive learning environment free from any interruptions:

The climate of the school can also help the school achieve--just by the small things. Never having announcements during the day unless it’s really an emergency. Some of these may sound, excuse the expression, Mickey Mouse, but that’s very important. Trying to allow each class to function to the maximum of its ability. By that I mean start on time, end on time, make sure that fifty teachers are offering a multitude of ways to reach Rome in terms of instructional theories, instructional techniques, the delivery of the curriculum. (SP3)
The principal encourages time for relationships to flourish and for children to feel cared for:

I think we have to have some time during the day where we gather small groups with kids—be it in an advisory period or whatever . . . You hear great stories and you hear great problems discussed when these kids are comfortable and just open up to their teachers. (SP3)

Because the principal cares about student success, relationships with staff have also been strengthened. The principal ensures that time with staff is built into the day, recognizing the important issue of high quality teaching and the positive impact teachers can have on children:

I always adhere to the theory that the most important people in my school are always the students. But, I must say to you that I’ve changed my priorities a little bit and I think the most important people in my school are my teachers, because they communicate all the values they communicate all the wisdom, they really make it happen. So I spend a lot of time—a lot of my day—a high percentage—talking to teachers, interviewing teachers, being in teachers’ classrooms, seeing what’s going on, watching educational practices, district initiatives being put in place. (SP3).

The principal effectively uses the administrative team to support student needs. “I’m a great person to think that I don’t have all of the answers and these people are very smart and bring a lot to the table and I use their strengths in as many ways as I can” (SP3).

Strong academic performance is also a result of understanding how to competently manage all the components of the educational system, and this principal is adept at integrating all stakeholders for the good of the school. As noted this educational leader:

I think school leadership involves all the parts of the school--the students, the staff, the community, the parents and every facet of the school . . . We are team oriented so I meet with each team . . . The counselors are very involved with the situation looking at kids--both their social and academic performances. We have
a child study team which meets here every week—and that is the guidance counselor, sociologist, assistant principal, two counselors, [and the] nurse. (SP3)

This leader knows how important all the school staff are in making sure that the school is successful and wants to hear their ideas:

A great school has a lot of participatory conversations--a lot of ideas--knowing the principal has, I guess, 51% of the voting stock--but it’s good to hear what the people have. A great school is not only students and staff--it’s the whole pie--it’s the custodians, it’s the aids, it’s the cafeteria folks, it’s the secretary. I think my job--our job--is to make people want to come to this building every day--and make it as nice a place and welcoming a place as we possibly can. So there’s a humane, compassionate piece to it that’s very important. (SP3)

Not only staff but also parents are acknowledged as critical for school success:

Of course, I’m in constant contact with my Home and School Association . . . looking and listening to these people, explaining the programs here about college, but at the same time listening to their concerns because they’re really our adult clients--and I think that’s why they have a real stake in the program. (SP3)

The principal is personally involved with many community organizations and also has a personal concern for community success. “I’m very involved in my community . . . because I want a broad range of seeing how the community functions and listening to them . . . and being interested in their welfare” (SP3). There is a commitment to fulfill the community expectations in the school. “I think that it’s been great because of our focus on community outreach involving our parents, involving our business community . . . try to live up to those expectations each and every day. (SP3)

The principal also celebrates the role of colleagues in the superintendent position and recognizes their influence:

Great schools don’t happen--you work at it 24-7. [They are] a product of the expectation of the work--whether a school is mediocre or on the firing line, so to speak. I think great schools have great superintendents, men and women--who are dedicated to the very best in terms of educational principles--and they’re really going to make a mark with that school district. (SP3)
The principal reflects upon the role of the school leader and what is needed for success, while reiterating the value of the team approach:

Leadership is based on goals which the leader sets for the school. I think it’s based on extremely effective and frequent communication for the staff—and I think leadership takes a willingness to on the part of the individual to take some risks—it may turn out fine—it may not turn out fine—but you have to be willing to go out there in the fray sometimes and see if it’s going to make it way to the top. And I think school leadership definitely involves all the parts of the school—the students, the staff, the community, the parents—every facet of the school.

This leader is personally committed to continuing to grow and improve and integrates school improvement planning into the professional role. “I spend a considerable amount of time reading instructional practices latest research—always thinking how can we do it better . . .” (SP3).

The leader is also comfortable with practicing self-reflection and frequently uses a gentle sense of humor to make a point. “The leadership is fairly constant. I don’t mean it ever gets stale—I hope it never gets stale—I’m a life-long learner! And I think that there’s stability of this building and this has just been tremendous” (SP3).

In the end, the principal has achieved satisfaction with the role as building leader and is proud of the legacy that will be contributed from a long career:

You get a doctor’s degree and people expect you to run a district or do something. And I’ve found that over the years with my community involvement—I’m also very involved with my church--these are the aspects that make life total. One person’s life can’t be another person’s life. (SP3)

The theme of joyful dedication is integrated into all of the ideas shared by this caring educational leader:

We always know where we’re suited--where we’re best fitted. No day is Utopia--I mean there’s going to be days that you go home and you say, Wow, there’s got to be something better. I haven’t had any of those days in 20 years, I must say. (SP3)
This principal is a strong example of an educator who has created a high performing building that has as its foundation care and concern for all individuals involved with the school community. The positive effect of this one individual has been multiplied and has provided generations of students with an exemplary learning experience. The leader truly understands and effectively manages all of the educational system components. All of the 5W Framework elements, WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHY and HOW, were strongly represented.

The theme of the role of leadership for the improvement of the community was also expressed by Suburban principal five:

Principals must be servant-leaders—first in, last out. Any good leader is sacrificial. Putting in more time is not the answer but certainly a key necessity. I worry about people with the wrong motives who gravitate to the principal job just for money or power. (SP5)

Urban principal two (UP2) also recognized how adult expectations and attitudes could affect school performance:

I struggle because common sense does not always prevail with adults. Our school does well not because we have better students—we have the same issues such as transience—but the kids can learn! I am not here to make teachers happy as an adult . . . Don’t let adult attitudes affect kids negatively. If I am not happy, I will keep it to myself. (UP2)

This superintendent of a very large and high-poverty urban school district in the state, Urban superintendent one (US1) had one or more schools that demonstrated high performing results for minority students. The superintendent was concerned that that there was ignorance about the district as “kids are painted with a broad brush as poor and first generation American.” The superintendent was eager to share a positive philosophy of hope for students and schools. “Committed educators [who] have the opportunity to
be transformational leaders can change from a place that says ‘it can’t’ to ‘it can.’

Dedication, joy, and purposefulness in which people function put success in the lives of children” (US1).

Continuing the theme of creating a positive school culture, the principal of suburban school five (SP5) promotes the concept that every child deserves a personalized education plan. This school demonstrated exemplary performance for economically disadvantaged students (18% of eighth grade population). The principal noted, “Families who move here cannot believe it—or the faculty either—that [the school] is so responsive to kids and families” (SP5). The principal is pleased with the quality of the caring faculty yet would like more professional development time to promote strategies such as innovation.

Finally, Rural principal four (RP4) was delighted with the school’s relationship with the community. This school achieved exemplary status with economically disadvantaged students (39% of eighth grade population). The principal believes that the building site is beautiful, and events at the school receive huge community turnouts: “All events are full and there is not enough room for everybody who comes (RP4).” Notes the principal, “Our focus is helping students to become productive citizens.”

The final story had the focus of creating a caring school. The leader who was studied is a strong role model for effectively incorporating all elements of the educational system into a high performance and highly compassionate learning site. In other words, the leader recognized and employed all the strategies described in the themes of the previous two stories, yet took those to another dimension by enveloping everything in an attitude of care. This interview demonstrated that when the WHY component of the 5W
Education Framework is addressed by the educational leader and all other components are also in place, the school can become an outstanding site in creating strong results for all students. The theme of care was found in other sites, with representation from all three types of geographic locations, but the other leaders did not necessarily integrate the other themes so effectively into this third theme.

This third theme appears to be the easiest to understand but may be the most complex to put into action. The idea of care was defined in many varied ways---interacting with students, providing high quality teaching and learning experiences, building relationships with staff and community, having a positive attitude and being responsive to students and families. Although the leaders were eager to share what they had accomplished, the steps of how they had achieved their results were not as clear. The principals also recognized that their roles and actions as ‘servant-leaders’ strongly influenced the school outcomes.

Although all of these interviews were conducted across different parts of the state and in different types of schools settings--urban, rural and suburban--the similarity of perspectives across major themes is a remarkable finding. The three sites selected for the main theme reviews represented each geographic location, and each of these schools was classified as exemplary and also demonstrated strong results with three different subgroup populations. There appears to be a continuum in place of adopting different areas of the leadership framework, potentially based on experience and years at the school site. The leaders believed they were able to effectively rely on the theme strategies to deliver results, and the student performance on the state tests demonstrate
that they appear to be on the right track. The strategies that can be developed from these interview responses will be discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter.

**Interview Responses With the 5W Framework**

The interview responses have been integrated with the 5W Framework in Table 12 to illustrate overall similarities and differences as well as strengths and potential areas of growth. Coding the responses and separating out the topic represents the issue-focused analysis approach.

**Table 12**

5W Framework Elements Addressed in Education Leader Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>WHAT</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
<th>WHY</th>
<th>HOW</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>UP3</td>
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<tr>
<td>US1</td>
<td>X</td>
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</table>

As can be noted from Table 12, the strongest element that the sample of education leaders in this research study emphasized in the interview discussions was the importance of focusing on teaching and learning and ensuring that academic efforts were forefront, or the WHAT component. A close second was the WHERE category, as many leaders were enthusiastic about promoting more distributive leadership and community collaboration.
efforts. Data, tools and resources were also frequently discussed as part of the HOW element. The WHY category was discussed the least, which indicates that although there is a strong focus on academics, other areas that are part of the educational system may require more attention.

In comparing urban, suburban and rural school responses, there were some key differences. For example, urban school leaders seemed to be much more aware of the diversity of the population they were serving and emphasized the WHO element in their responses, with three out of four participants referring to this category, while only two of the five suburban and one of the four rural principals emphasized students. Rural principals were unanimous in including the WHERE category as compared to the other two groups. Suburban principals were the least likely to refer to the HOW category.

Summary of Interview Section Responses

Next follows a brief summary of each of the four sections of the interview protocol, which includes administrative practices, school strengths and challenges, school practices and open responses. Open response items emphasized topics such as vision of effective school leadership, successful and struggling students, policy and program changes to improve results, sharing effective strategies with new principals, and defining a “great” school. The complete questions are listed on the Interview Protocol (Appendix B).

Administrative Practices

For question one, administrative practices, the practice listed first by most participants as the major use of their time was school meetings. This area incorporated meetings with teachers regarding instruction, curriculum and management issues. Three
areas were prominent next for frequent use of the administrators’ time: classroom visits and instructional supervision, interactions with students in school public areas, and communication with parents. As noted one principal, “You cannot lead by sitting in your office—being visible is the key to all.” Leaders added building management, community activities, and responses to administration and school board issues as other key uses of their time. Other topics mentioned included communication “emails are now a burden,” budget, school safety, data analysis, review of current literature and research, motivation and affirmation activities, and finally, paperwork.

In these discussions of administrative practices, school leaders were reflecting upon how their time was used and what activities became the focus of their energy and efforts, and therefore, most important and potentially most valued. Table 13 lists the administrative practices by frequency of mention by the number of respondents.

School Strengths and Challenges

Educational leaders were asked to reflect on the top three strengths and challenges of their schools. The participants generated these priority topics independently, and defined and described them in their own words. Topics were then coded by theme and clustered by frequency. Table 14 provides an overview of responses for school strengths. The majority of educational leaders cited the number one strength as faculty and staff for their school. The next most important topic focused on instructional quality, with an emphasis on personalization, school structure and vision, and a high quality curriculum. Also receiving high mention were the topics of the student body, a supportive school board and/or community, and the overall positive attitude of the school, with an emphasis
Table 13

Administrative Practices

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<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Item mentioned</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Meetings (instruction, curriculum)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Student interactions (visibility activities)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Classroom visits/Observations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Parent interactions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Building management</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Community activities</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>School board/administration interactions</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Communications (community, press, other)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Data reviews</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>School safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Read current literature</td>
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<tr>
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</table>

Table 14

School Strengths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Item mentioned</th>
<th>Response frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Faculty/staff</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Instruction/Curriculum</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Positive, caring climate</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Supportive school board/community</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Building/location</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Leadership/creativity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
on caring and dedication. Other topics included were geographic location, the school building, and school leadership and creativity.

For school challenges or needs, the list of topics became much more varied and individualized. Table 15 illustrates the diversity of responses for school challenges or needs. The topic mentioned most frequently was finances and funding, while student performance gaps and meeting student needs was second. The long list of needs and challenges included areas such as poverty and low socioeconomic status of students and families, student transience, community attitude and lack of resiliency, parental involvement and parent demands, state and federal legislative proposals, large school size, quality of physical plant, student language skills, sufficient time for staff professional development, technological safety, highly rural location, lack of staff, and in one case, the wealth of the community.

In considering the variety of topics raised by the school leaders in this section of strengths and challenges, it is important to review these responses in relation to the research literature. The frequently mentioned responses of the strengths of staff, instruction, and curriculum demonstrate the essential role of teaching and learning factors for school performance. Teacher quality has become more and more recognized as one of the most critical elements for student success, and that may include both the content knowledge the teacher possesses as well as her ability to share it in a meaningful and caring way with students (Elmore, 2003b; Ingersoll, 2003; O’Day, 2002). Curriculum rigor and quality of instruction (Barton, 2003) are critical areas that can affect student achievement. A positive school climate and supportive community are also
Table 15

School Challenges/Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor Item mentioned</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Finances/funding</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Student performance gaps</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Community attitude/expectations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Poverty/low socioeconomic level</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Student transience</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Time with staff</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Parental involvement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Parental demands</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Education legislation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Building size</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Student linguistic abilities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Rural location</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Sufficient staff</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Technology safety</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Wealth of community</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

emphasized in the Search Institute’s Asset Building Model (Starkman et al., 1999).

Interestingly, the topic of students appeared as both strength and a challenge in these lists, and could be reflective of the leaders’ individual experiences with diverse student groups.

The list of needs and challenges presented more diversity, and that could be due to issues such as the geography of the school, the experience of the principal, the relationship with the community, and other issues. The topic of finances, especially given all of the budget changes in Pennsylvania, was forefront in many of the conversations. Student performance differences were recognized as a critical need, and the specific factors of poverty (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010), transience, and student linguistic ability (Ramirez & Carpenter, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, 2003) are all discussed in the literature. Other topics such as parent involvement (Epstein, 2005), education
legislation (Bardach, 2005; Hope, 2002), and technology safety are issues that could potentially affect all leaders, but may be of immediate concern to those who raised them in the interviews. Overall, most of the administrator responses did seem to correspond to the research on student achievement.

School Practices

The third component of the interview presented a holistic picture of the leader’s defined school practices for success at his/her site. Based on the research literature, a list of practices associated with leadership were provided to the participants. The practices were reflected upon in context in order to provide the school story in response to the second research question. Table 16 shows the individual ratings by the different educational leaders as well as the average number given to each category. Practices were ranked from one to five regarding the importance of the practice in the school’s ability to meet student needs. Ranking level one corresponds to “not at all important” while five correlates to “extremely important.” The abbreviations represent urban principal (UP), suburban principal (SP), rural principal (RP) and urban superintendent (US). One principal, UP1, did not participate in this section of the study. Participants were confident that in most cases the evidence for the school practice was readily available for review by the public. One leader noted that the school mission statement, slogan, newsletter, web page, open house events, letters to homes and student meetings all provided access to school efforts. Another leader referenced Grow reports, the School Report Card, the district website, and even mentioned that the budget sits on the front
### Table 16

**Ranking School Practices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UP2</th>
<th>UP3</th>
<th>US1</th>
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office counter. It was noted by another leader that the school board meeting agendas might not always make the evidence clear to the public.

As leaders reflected on the school practices, different items evoked a variety of emotional responses. As can be seen in the average of the rankings, the highest rated areas were high expectations for all students, then accountability, data use and instruction. Practices that received the lowest rankings included resources, parent engagement and community partnerships. There was some consensus that the budget was the number one indicator of evidence because “that is where the money is put.” One principal noted that schools “need data to survive--there should be no assumption that a quiet classroom is equal to good test scores.” Another participant stated, “A school can be successful without parental engagement.” Regarding shared decision-making, one leader noted, “it can be a struggle because the principal may depend on the same people—parents and teachers--all the time.”

**Open Ended Responses**

The open ended questions allowed educational leaders the opportunity to reflect upon their own beliefs and experiences and consider what impact their role may have upon the school performance. The main themes were coded based on frequency of appearance. Additional topics were listed to demonstrate the variety of ideas. Short quotes are integrated into the summaries of the question responses to provide more detail in the voices of the participants.

**Vision of educational leadership.** This first question, requesting a vision of educational leadership and implementation efforts for student achievement, generated many diverse responses. The top two responses were setting annual goals and reviewing
data. Leaders believed that both the school and individuals should have goals that support the vision, plan and purpose of the school. Using data was critical to successful results.

The leaders emphasized a safe and orderly school with a healthy climate, and believed that the importance of leadership was to engage and empower other people. Leaders should be comfortable with shared decision-making and delegation.

Leaders use effective instructional practices such as observations, pre and post conferences, walkthroughs, and child study teams. Leaders have high expectations and support teachers with resources, interventions, PSSA strategies, and time on task.

The best leader tries to be “all things to all people” and “elevates everyone.” A school leader is “spinning many plates” and “nothing is too mundane or too high.” The school leader should “think outside of the box” and “take risks.” Effective and frequent communication is very important. There is “power in every interaction” and a school leader should “practice what you preach.” This means to “lead by example” and “outwork everybody else.”

The vision of effective school leadership includes having “an open door,” promoting respect and caring about kids. Effective leaders put “children first,” “cultivate growth,” “celebrate ideas,” and help students own what they learn. The key responses for vision and implementation included:

1. Set annual goals
2. Review data
3. Ensure school is safe and orderly
4. Engage and empower people/shared decision-making
5. Have a clear purpose

6. Think outside of the box/take risks

7. Time on task

**Student performance.** School leaders had very strong perspectives on why some students were successful and others struggled, and listed many ideas about eighth grade student performance in reading. To begin, the school must address individual student needs and recognize that “no one size fits all.” Every child has different physical, mental and emotional needs, several leaders noted. Relationships with “phenomenal teachers who go overboard” really motivated students and helped them perform.

Success could be attributed to student choice, priorities, and student belief system in their own capabilities. The issue of adolescence was referred to frequently, as hormones and opposite sex attraction were spiking, so students were focused on “the emotional side of life.” Eighth graders seek “instant gratification,” “may lack effort and initiative,” “do not take school seriously,” and “may be ready to move on.” Students need to feel like they belong, and many are at different maturity levels.

Some educational leaders pointed out the youth challenges of poverty, family-life situations such as divorces, learning disabilities and other environmental factors. Remediation approaches were stated to be important for struggling students, as well as an emphasis on reading, with both quality and quantity and non-fiction text promoted to students. One leader advocated for more culturally responsive instruction, especially for African American youth. Another leader mentioned that the best resources were time, high quality teaching and partnerships with parents who support and value education.
**Policy and program changes.** A wide range of responses was provided to this question regarding policy or program change recommendations. The most popular response in this area was the request to have student achievement measured more through a growth model rather than an “arbitrary target.” Educational leaders seek “more sustainable, obtainable goals.” Leaders ask the questions, “What value has been added to a child?” and “How have knowledge and skills been gained?” Administrators are frustrated with NCLB regulations and believe there is too much testing, especially in eighth grade. One leader was concerned that elements of NCLB also seem to contradict IDEIA requirements in terms of instructional modifications for students with disabilities. The emphasis on testing is “losing the human element,” and current home issues, such as a family member in the hospital, may affect student test performance.

Additional participant responses called for increased opportunities for students, including a longer school year, more after school programs and study labs, and mandatory world language classes. There should be “time and resources for every child,” so that youth can mature and develop empathy. There was a call for more clubs, sports arts, and bullying prevention, and less interaction with electronics such as cell phones.

School leaders would like to offer improved instruction by adding literacy blocks, small groups, technological enhancements, professional development in reading for all staff, and more one-on-one reading support for struggling students. For high school success, one leader mentioned establishing a buddy program between the middle and high school, with an emphasis on positive transition. Several principals were concerned that the middle years school experience was not necessarily enough preparation for high
school, and would like to see a stronger junior high type of model with more connection to the local high school.

Finally, principals recognized their accountability but also asked for increased autonomy, such as the ability to hire their own teachers, because “each school has its own unique characteristics.”

**Workshop strategies.** Educational leaders thoughtfully responded to this topic about sharing effective strategies in a workshop for new principals. For the beginning of the workshop, some leaders stated that a question should be, “Do you really want to be a principal?” There was a reminder that the principalship is “not a power trip” and it is “not possible to change the world.”

New principals were reminded that the education field is all about people. There was a lot of consensus in the top four responses, and then a long, varied list of ideas followed. The responses included:

1. Know student needs
2. Set goals/learning targets
3. Know how to use data tools and help teachers use them
4. Learn how to prioritize and organize (but be flexible)
5. Know your school building and its culture

The majority of participants stated that it is most important for a new administrator to have knowledge of student needs on an individual basis in the school. The new educational leader must set goals and learning targets, and build a program based on the academic performance and test scores as well as the school culture. A new
leader must learn how to prioritize and be highly organized, yet also flexible. A new administrator must know how to use data tools and how to help teachers use them.

Additionally, a new principal must know the school staff, community, the building plant, the local values, and other dynamics. Other recommendations included knowledge of budgets and a resource review, with a comment to “put the money where the need is, such as creating a strong reading department.” New leaders were encouraged to meet teachers and use them as resources--“pick their brains”--yet have their own vision and remain open but cautious. If the goal is to give students a quality education, the principal must become knowledgeable about curriculum alignment, rigor and relevance, and have her “actions meet what you are preaching.”

A new principal should “be open to kids, “ have a personality,” “be approachable with a friendly attitude,” and “establish relationships.” It was important for leadership to “have a human element” because it was “not just numbers.” The new principal was encouraged to “create a culture where kids are first.” Principals gain capital through experience, and they should reflect every day and “affirm the vision.” New principals need to become knowledgeable about public relations, politics, structures and programs, and communication with parents, “who can help or haunt but never go away.” New principals were encouraged to seek out personal mentors such as recommended in PILS and NISL. In the end, the principal has the “best of both worlds,”--the central office desk as well as daily interactions with students and staff.

**Great school definition.** The final question of the interview asked participants to define a “great” school. The independently generated responses were categorized by theme and the top responses are shown in Table 17.
Table 17

Definition of a Great School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Response frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>School is safe/no incidents</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Students are engaged and successful</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>High quality staff is excited about teaching</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Students feel cared for and connected</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>People want to come to the school</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The school is making progress and achieving</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>High expectations and high quality opportunities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Students are well-rounded with strong skill sets</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Youth are nurtured and empowered</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was a lot of consistency among the top responses with the most frequent responses emphasizing a school that was safe, with students engaged and successful. The school is making progress and achieving and the high quality staff is excited about teaching and meeting academic goals. A great school has "high expectations and high quality opportunities." Best practices are evident, and "creativity is personalized." The school values education and embraces 21st century learning. The leader of a great school must be visionary, and customization and individualization of instruction for students is key. Attendance is high because people want to come there; the school has "an environment created to make kids get out of bed, not due to the law or their parents." It is a school where staff would send their own child. As noted several participants,

A great school or a world-class school allows kids to grow, nurtures and empowers them, and provides them with the skills set to be successful in the outside world. (US1)

In a great school kids feel very comfortable, cared for and connected. They have fun learning. Teachers are excited about teaching and are supported to try new things, to be creative and stretch their abilities. [Students] have a unique educational experience where the environment is exciting and support services are available ... to let no kids fall through the cracks. (SP1)
A great school is one in which it can be demonstrated that physical, emotional, academic and intellectual needs of students are being addressed [on an] ongoing [basis]. (SP2)

A student can come every day and feel safe [and] free to express self when learning. Faculty, administration and staff all have one goal--to teach and help children. (RP4)

A great school, most simply put, has “many wonderful things going on.” For many children, school may be the best part of the day, especially for those youth who arrive “outside the door at 7:30 AM although the school does not open until 8:10 AM.” The administrators emphasize that the school must be student-centered for success to occur.

It is interesting to note that the school leaders’ definition of a great school included a combination of academic and wellness issues, with the needs and the success of the child as the priority. This perspective seems to be in consonance with the focus of the Pennsylvania Department of Education Standards-Aligned System model (NISL, 2005) in emphasizing teaching and learning elements as well as student resiliency initiatives (Henderson & Milstein, 2002). There appears to be strong correspondence to the school models that were mentioned in this study, such as the highly successful Department of Defense schools (American Educational Research Association, 2004), the Arizona model schools (Center for the Future of Arizona, 2006), and the ASCD Whole Child Approach. The number one priority for a great school is safety, and it is likely that the school is safe precisely because students are engaged in teaching and learning activities and feel connected to the school community. The theme of a great school being a nurturing place emphasizes the importance of creating protective factors and building relationships, and the research literature demonstrated that both the school climate
(Henderson et al., 2007) and school relationships (Conchas, 2001; S. Weiss, 2004) can be especially critical for students of diverse backgrounds.

School leaders visualized a great school as a site that effectively prepared students for the future with innovative, world-class learning. It appears that evidence-based thinking would need to be a part of the culture, and the staff would require skills and knowledge to address the needs of all students. These issues correspond to the research emphasizing teacher quality (Elmore, 2003b; Ingersoll, 2003; O’Day, 2002; Van den Bergh et al., 2010). These administrators were not necessarily explicit about their own roles and responsibilities in a great school, but they did recognize the importance of multiple efforts being implemented at a high quality level in order for success to follow (Martin, 2007).

Findings Summary

These educational leaders all volunteered to participate in this dissertation research and were eager to share their leadership experiences and ideas. Although it can not necessarily be measured through question and response, one important perspective that was obvious from these interviews was the attitude all displayed: being positive about their careers, displaying hope and ambition for their students, and keeping learning and knowledge at the forefront for their institutions and themselves.

As a result of conducting this study, it has been demonstrated that schools with traditionally underperforming subgroups showing high performance can be identified using available state test data, as the variables for special populations are now part of the data collection process. There should potentially be a deeper data analysis of the individual school site to confirm these state test findings in terms of retention and student
movement, but as a baseline of school performance comparability the value added analysis demonstrates strong utility. The identified schools can be identified as potential models for additional qualitative research, and the relationships across populations could be examined in more detail to identify contributing factors for student success.

In reflecting on these interviews, the key themes of having a high quality staff, rigorous literacy teaching and learning experiences, conducting data analysis, focusing on individual student needs and creating a caring school environment are recognized as the major learnings of the research. School administrators reported that they spent most of their time in meetings, being visible with students, visiting and observing classrooms, and interacting with parents. The time these leaders spent in meetings was usually related to teaching and learning, as efforts to improve instruction, review and improve teacher practice or update curriculum were mentioned as the main activities. Although school safety was the first category for the definition of a great school, most leaders reported little of their time was spent in that area. Perhaps this is because the academic environment is so engaging for students that less direct administrative effort is required to maintain a safe school site. As leaders reflected on school practices, they ranked high expectations for all students, then accountability, data use and instruction as the greatest areas of importance for school success. However, data review was another area that was reported by only a few of the leaders for actual use of time. The impact of policies was mentioned by all but highlighted by the more experienced leaders.

Based on the sample interviews included in this study and in response to the second research question, school and district leaders with high performing diverse populations believe they influence and support student achievement by being committed
to their role, emphasizing academic efforts, using data, recognizing their student needs, and creating a caring environment. The respondents’ understanding of their strengths were similar in that all stated they used data very well to monitor student progress and students were at the center of instruction, yet they differed and were more of a continuum in terms of seeing their schools as high functioning learning organizations or using shared decision-making. Community partnerships and parent engagement were rated the lowest areas of implementation by many of the leaders, but were still valued as important.

Although school leaders understand that many of the students they are working with may have special needs, they recognized that often the home and sometimes the schools were not able to necessarily provide all the supports to meet those needs. Nevertheless, the leaders maintained high expectations for every child and sought appropriate interventions and strategies for success.

The main strategies for school leaders that the interview responses revealed are:

1. Ensure that the school is student-centered and individual student needs, academic as well as social-emotional, are being addressed
2. Hire high quality staff who know content and can create positive relationships
3. Set goals and monitor progress
4. Ensure that the school is safe and has a focus on wellness
5. Use data effectively to understand school/student performance
6. Create a caring environment in the middle years school
7. Engage family and community as part of the school stakeholder team
8. Take time to reflect upon one’s personal leadership development and experiences
These strategies, developed from the voices of school leaders, were recommended as practices that could have a positive impact on student performance. Overall, the focus is on both student academic and socio-emotional needs, reflective of the literature and previously discussed in this chapter. These strategies do seem to address many of the key issues discussed in the literature and in this chapter, such as teacher quality, creating a caring culture, and engaging the family and community. However, school leaders also emphasized the importance of setting goals, using data and tracking progress. These types of functional skill abilities were recognized as valuable in the Wallace study (Louis et al., 2010), and are called for in the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership standards (PDE, 2007). The leaders also encouraged their colleagues to take time to practice self-reflection, an area emphasized in leadership development (Goleman et al., 2002; Heifetz & Linksy, 2002; Schon, 1983) but perhaps not taught explicitly enough in education administration programs.

In these leadership interviews, the exact details of implementation of these strategies seemed to differ by site, depending upon the individual leader’s knowledge and skills, the school goals, the leader’s relationship with staff and community and the time, focus, and resources allotted to the particular strategy. The strategies seem to be applicable to most schools, and are general enough that they can apply to most students. However, the complexity underlying the statement of “address both student academic and socio-emotional needs,” means that successful implementation will depend upon a wise leader who has learned through both experience and research review what will be most effective for her particular school and the students who place their futures in her hands.
In general, these education leaders with schools that displayed high subgroup performance were pleased to share their perspectives and seemed positive about future school results. The interview examples of exemplary school models of diverse student success offer windows into how to effectively reduce and/or eliminate achievement gaps in our nation.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

This research investigated two questions that could be perceived as very important in the field of education today: (1) How are schools that demonstrate significant achievement in eighth grade reading with diverse student populations identified? (2) How do school and district leaders believe they influence student performance in these schools? The study combined large-scale data analysis with local interview analysis to present a continuum of focus, from broad to deep, on critical educational issues for student achievement in Pennsylvania schools with eighth grades. This final chapter is divided into three main sections, discussion, implications and conclusion. This first section reviews the topics of the Pennsylvania context, the study framework and process, the role of standardized assessment, and leadership and school performance. This section emphasizes the key issues that were explored in the research literature and which provided the impetus for this study, offers reflections on the limitations that may have affected the research results, and links the data findings with these issues.

Pennsylvania Context

The implementation of NCLB created both demands and opportunities in our nation, and many schools in Pennsylvania were overwhelmed and struggling to become more data-informed and responsive to diverse needs of students. The challenge was to focus on the goal of improving student learning while determining which practices could have a positive impact. In Pennsylvania, the state leaders rolled out a new vision of quality teaching, quality leadership, the artful use of infrastructure, and a continuous
learning ethic. The state education department was offering more support to school
districts, but also demanded increased accountability. One major initiative to improve
results was that the PDE asked all school districts to implement a standards-aligned
system approach based on the National Institute for School Leadership model, which
highlights the key areas of standards, assessments, curriculum, instruction, resources and
materials, and interventions (NISL, 2005). School leaders were required to learn this
approach and implement it in their buildings and districts. At the same time, the new
governor was rolling out educational initiatives in Pennsylvania, such as expanding early
childhood programs, offering increased interventions such as tutoring and after school
programs, revisiting the educational practices for students with disabilities due to revised
federal legislation, embarking on high school reform and dual enrollment efforts,
promoting evidence-based practices, and above all, making sure that schools were
keeping student achievement as the focus of all these efforts. Pennsylvania also
attempted to address its long-standing statewide achievement gaps with the inauguration
of a new initiative called PAGE 1 (Pennsylvania Achievement Gap Effort), sponsored by
the State Board of Education. Sixteen schools were selected to implement research-based
strategies, form partnerships with community groups and parents, visit high performing
schools across the country and receive technical assistance while examining their
curricular and pedagogical practices. However, the state did not continue to separately
fund this initiative after the first 3 years.

Pennsylvania polices and practices, as well as the NCLB federal law, have been
put in place to reduce and eliminate differences in student performance, but are they truly
working? In the state, and in the rest of the nation, schools with high numbers of diverse
student populations are often the most challenged and in many cases, have the fewest resources to combat the achievement gap. In Pennsylvania in 2004, many superintendents across the state signed a petition/position paper regarding the NCLB requirements and expressed concerns about meeting the performance goals due to challenges of insufficient time, funding and resources (PA Association of School Administrators, 2004). The testing requirements for students with disabilities and for English language learners was a critical topic as well, and that debate on the appropriateness of testing these special populations has been ongoing and still continues. Other high need populations may include students who are homeless, foster youth, teen parents, migrant or refugee students, or youth undergoing disciplinary processes, all groups that may not be able to meet state testing requirements without additional supports. The research and federal recommendations regarding teacher quality were also influencing state efforts. There are many concerns raised by districts in Pennsylvania that prospective teachers are not adequately prepared for the true classroom demands, and the needs of diverse student subgroups increase the challenge. This then, was the context for the dissertation research—a time of new federal and state policies with increased accountability for the performance of diverse student populations by using disaggregated data, and the recognition that achievement gaps were a challenging issue in Pennsylvania.

The Study Framework and Process

This research had the goal to investigate student performance differences by attempting to identify high performing schools that strongly supported diverse populations, and then examining practice through the perspectives of those school leaders. The main objective was to identify whether some schools were more successful
with diverse subpopulations in literacy learning and reading skills and if so, how did the leaders believe they had influenced those results.

Throughout this research process, constant and high-level decision-making was required for the quantitative data analysis. In order to ensure the highest accuracy of quantitative data, the Pennsylvania value-added office approved two custom analyses for the four special population groups. These data then underwent additional selection criteria in order for purposeful sample schools to be obtained. Practitioners who have had some familiarity with assessments must recognize that each step of a complex quantitative analysis requires a corresponding detailed design decision that will set the framework for the corresponding analysis and the subsequent results.

The results of this study demonstrated that it is indeed possible to identify schools that seem to outperform for special populations using state PVAAS data. The value-added analysis used 2 years of eighth grade reading test results to discover which schools displayed the highest levels of effectiveness (SAS Institute, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d) for each of four different subgroups. For all subgroups, small samples of less than 10% of all schools with special populations were identified as overperformers, or successful schools. Schools were then reviewed for exemplary student performance—in other words, those schools that displayed both growth and achievement at the fourth and fifth quintile levels. This final small sample of exemplary schools provided the source for the leadership interviews. In future years, these results can be compared to see if there are changes in the listings of the schools in the subgroups.

The strengths of this study are that the data were statewide, the study encompassed 2 recent years of state testing, it emphasized the critically important content.
area of reading, it was grade specific, and it is can be replicated in a variety of ways to look at school performance by subgroup across all schools and all subgroups. The study provided access to schools with exemplary results and allowed school leaders to share their ideas through candid conversations. The importance of the research is that specific strategies and key recommendations are provided for leadership actions that could positively impact student learning, especially for diverse populations. Additionally, during the course of the study two key resources were developed, the interview protocol and the 5W Education Leadership Framework, which could be applicable to other research efforts.

The limitations of the study are that the quantitative data relied on state value-added test scores, which may be difficult to replicate at the local level. Although it is extremely important for educational leaders to know how to effectively examine multiple sub-group high performances in individual schools to better study and understand success in student achievement, the ability to conduct value-added analysis in Pennsylvania is limited to the department of education’s expert contracted partners. Specialized requests may take time, have additional costs, and can be difficult to interpret. Another possible limitation is that the schools identified across categories may not be truly comparable, given the differences in student population percentages at each site. Schools were not individually examined to determine any issues of retention or large student movements in enrollment that could affect test participation and results data. The sample sizes are also small, due to the high criteria for inclusion as an exemplary site. The decision of using only state standardized testing results to judge school achievement was also an issue of concern for school leaders.
Regarding the qualitative component of this study, the limitations are that the interview numbers were limited in scope and may not be generalizable to other sites. Only the perspectives provided by the administrators themselves in interviews were examined, which may not necessarily be true representations of their daily leadership practices. Achieving high levels of participation by school leaders can also be a challenging process. There are several major school districts in the commonwealth that do not publicly publish or release email addresses for their principals. Contrast this with schools where every email address is proudly displayed and staff even design and publish their own web pages for parents, students and the community to review. Is the issue one of privacy versus access, one of electronic capacity versus limited ability, or simply an attitude or decision that determines that principals and/or school staff of certain districts do not believe they need to have their communication information publicly available? Therefore, it can be very difficult to directly contact some school administrators electronically. In order to access the direct email of the principal and the superintendent a website search had to be conducted electronically on the district site. The websites usually featured the most up-to-date information about current school staff. However, school district websites in Pennsylvania have no consistency, and most are so homegrown in construction that they challenging to navigate. For example, some schools websites can only be accessed with the name of the local sports team. It would be interesting to study these developing electronic resources and compare the content, quality and use of information available on the sites. If all districts and schools used a standardized website address format and content listing, the public could have greater access. Finally, the research literature used in this dissertation are not comprehensive for
the topics; new literature findings have been published in the past few years that could both deepen and broaden the focus of this study.

Two other original key areas in terms of school comparisons included the geographic designation as rural, suburban or urban, and the district per pupil cost. It was not possible in this study to adequately compare the various issues the three types of schools may face. Some topics did arise through the interviews, but were not examined in great detail. For example, all sites have challenges, but for rural sites they may have to do with long-distance transportation and access to community services, for urban sites they may have to do with an influx of immigrant students or high staff turnover, and for suburban sites, they may have to do with parent demands. The impact of geographic designation appears to be most critical in terms of leadership perspective and how the leader believed that location had an impact on the school results. Overall, beyond school geographic designation the unique context and culture of the school affect the focus that the leader has in addressing school performance. This study demonstrated that the exemplary school model existed across all three geographic locations. Topics such as quality staff, student engagement and innovative teaching and learning practices were discussed in all locations.

Although the issue of funding originally seemed strong in its ability to affect outcomes and comparisons, especially in terms of staffing, it was not possible to specifically quantify an ideal per pupil amount based on the school leader responses. Schools across the country, including in Pennsylvania, believe that funding levels of per pupil costs have a significant impact of what can be accomplished in terms of instruction and services provided to children. States are exploring what constitutes “adequate
funding” cost models and attempting to analyze more carefully the needed student allocation amount, and perhaps move away from the traditional property tax model (Colgan, 2003). The concept of adequate school funding seems to be strongly linked to the value a community or society places on education, and although there are now increased data sets on student performance and use of school budgets, there is still major disagreement on whether available resources are used as effectively as possible (Berne & Stieffel, 1999). However, although adequate resources are critical, it appears from the interview responses that leaders believe effective practices put in place with available resources can truly make the difference in student results.

Analyzing state test disaggregated data and then demonstrating that schools can achieve high results for multiple subgroups should help to work toward addressing student performance differences as described in the literature review. The interview results then provided windows into the school practices that create the stories behind the numbers.

**Role of Standardized Assessment**

In almost all of the qualitative responses, a major concern was raised in terms of examining student achievement by only using standardized testing. Yet because the first part of this dissertation research used student achievement results from state test scores, it is important that this study also highlights key current issues in assessment, evaluation and accountability. Should test scores be identified as the only measure of a successful school? And are we unfairly discriminating by designating schools as unsuccessful because one of their subgroups did not achieve proficiency on a state standardized test? And what about the inherent bias in all tests? There are many potential ways to look at
multiple measures and data sources of student and school achievement, such as promotion and graduation rates, post-secondary participation, attendance and even good citizenship and community service. Nevertheless, policymakers have put in place an accountability system that uses the results from a single test to judge school performance.

Is there, then, a greater good being addressed in terms of the growing political focus and the shift from access to adequacy in education? The fact that the test scores now disaggregate and track subgroup performance opens up insights into specific student population needs that have never been so publicly or appropriately addressed in the past. The data that were used in this study were not available a decade ago. Value-added analysis also allows for the ability to track individual student performance over time, recognize the influence classroom teachers may have upon results, and examines both growth and achievement.

It should be recalled that the real purpose of state tests is to provide a snapshot of overall school performance. However, there are still challenging issues in the use of standardized tests to judge school progress, such as the differences in number versus percentage in subgroup representation, the issue of English language proficiency level for ELLs, and the designation of special education that contains a range of disabilities. It must be acknowledged and recognized that much of the burden of looking at subgroup performance is going to be on the urban districts, given the fact that they possess the highest numbers for diverse student representation. This is both good and bad, since these preliminary data potentially indicated that there are some urban schools who are very successful in undertaking that responsibility, while many more still face steep challenges. Yet looking at both achievement and growth for school performance will add
more opportunity to ascertain definite student progress. Using summative tests such as the state test in reading do provide a perspective on student performance, but using formative and diagnostic testing in classrooms truly allows for teachers to pinpoint students needs and areas of strength, and adjust instruction accordingly.

As more data contexts become available for public use, such as the original Schoolmatters data website resource created and funded by Council of Chief State School Officers (2006), more individuals can look at school performance and consider what the results signify. Currently the emphasis has been examining in-depth those schools that are failing in order to provide interventions. Yet this study proposes that it may be more valuable to follow-up with high performing schools in a qualitative approach to determine what is happening locally to produce such effective state test results—and how those effective practices can be shared and replicated.

**Leadership and School Performance**

Nationwide in the educational field there is a demand for more strategic and effective leadership, and it is critical to understand how leadership positively impacts student performance at the school level. This issue of leadership and student learning was the second key piece of this study. If the model of schools as complex systems is assumed, and schools are held responsible for the improvement of teaching and learning, communities may lose focus that the individuals in those buildings and beyond are strongly affecting student performance (O’Day, 2002). In other words, the individual principal (or the individual teacher) can have a powerful positive or negative effect on student or school results. Therefore, educational leaders who understand their student needs and school community can effectively take action to achieve results. It is
especially important, in order to reduce achievement gaps, to determine what efforts are in place at the local school level to support diverse student populations, and what role the leaders have in implementing effective practices. The 5W Educational Leadership Framework provided a model for examining leadership actions and understanding of effective practices. Using the elements of who, what, where, why and how, leaders can efficiently review what strategies for effective leadership practices are in place and which may still be needed.

The qualitative data that were collected and examined do present important findings: the leaders who had high performing sites with diverse populations were goal-driven and promoted excellence in teaching and learning as their school’s main purpose. These administrators championed high expectations, depended upon the expertise of their staffs, and advocated for data-driven decisions. The principals understood that both academic and socio-emotional needs of students needed to be addressed by the schools. The leaders were also on a continuum in effectively managing all of the responsibilities of the education system. The leaders were willing to share their ideas and strategies, which formed the basis for the recommendations later in this chapter. All of these individuals were also very positive and eager to learn, and displayed a sense of pride in their school community and its accomplishment, with hope for the future.

The skills, traits and abilities identified in these leaders of overperforming schools are found across all of the leadership frameworks presented in this study and summarized in Table 5 (Chapter 3). As found in the National Principals Leadership Institute study, Pennsylvania leaders who participated in the interviews were focused, eager learners, strong communicators and strategic in their actions (Smith, 2008). The leaders
understood the importance of school and classroom conditions (Louis et al., 2010), and tailored their efforts to the context of the school (Gray & Streshly, 2008). They recognized the value of a nurturing climate (ISLLC, 2000) to better address student needs (Louis et al., 2010). School leaders emphasized the hiring of good teachers (Great Schools, 2010) and using data to monitor progress (PDE, 2007). Above all, the leaders confirmed their own responsibility in ensuring strong results for student learning (Great Schools, 2010; Louis et al., 2010), and using their own skills and knowledge to create a high performing school site (Gray & Streshly, 2008; ISLLC, 2000; PDE, 2007). These education administrators had thoughtfully and effectively addressed the who, what, where, how and why elements of education, and their students were reaping the benefits.

In this study the research literature emphasized diverse student performance and the potentially positive role of leadership. The fact that achievement gaps are present in our country and state and continues to exist was discussed in detail. Now promising results from some Pennsylvania schools show that school leaders believe high academic expectations, quality staff and a focus on student needs can counter the national statistics and achieve effective student results. Almost all leaders emphasized the importance of frequent data review and monitoring to understand current student performance status. It is likely that these leaders referred not only to state test results but also to locally used diagnostic and formative assessments. Most leaders claim that effective practices are being comprehensively implemented in their schools, and they seem to rely heavily on staff ability to put these in place. However, several leaders also emphasized the initiatives they had implemented in the schools to improve performance. These included diverse strategies for improved literacy instruction, such as adding reading coaches or
offering literacy professional development opportunities for all teachers. Several leaders mentioned that they had “doubled” the class time for students in reading, or added after school time. The three exemplary schools featured in the interview stories were each successful with three diverse student populations. This was a very difficult milestone to obtain and potentially involved complex leadership decisions as school contexts and subgroup student populations are distinct. Therefore, these leaders truly demonstrated that special efforts were underway at their sites in order to produce those types of results. It appears likely that theses leaders undertook the responsibility to exercise their influence, produce positive change and lead the school in the direction of achievement (Harris, 2008; Louis et al., 2010).

As the population demographics change it is critically important to be culturally aware and sensitive to student needs. Why are some children of special populations such as minority, economically disadvantaged, English learner and student with disability more successful in certain schools? This study identified schools that achieve results for diverse students and asked the leaders what role they believed that they had in the outcomes. Several leaders mentioned they wanted to improve cultural sensitivity in their schools. School leaders recognized that their students came with many “needs,” and that they had to respond both academically, socially-emotionally and physically. This understanding is reflective of the expanded focus in current education research literature is discussing how to meet the needs of the “whole child.”

Ten of the 13 school leaders interviewed emphasized the importance of their staff, which is reflective of the research on teacher quality. The leaders were enthusiastic about expanding professional learning communities and encouraging collaboration for effective
practices. However, not all leaders fully embraced or had implemented the concept of shared decision-making.

The literature research of Chapter 2 and the school leader interviews demonstrated that improving student performance requires a comprehensive knowledge of many distinct issues. This dissertation study focused on how school state test results could identify locations where leadership decisions and actions may positively influence student achievement.

**Implications**

This section offers the opportunity for the findings of the dissertation study questions to be directly put into action at school sites. In this section, eight key recommendations developed from the analysis of the quantitative state test data used in research question one and the analysis of the qualitative interview data for research question two are presented. There is also a section discussing key issues discovered by this study, their relation to the literature, and ideas for next steps.

**Recommendations**

The two main questions of inquiry for this study provided the basis for the recommendations that resulted from this investigation. The first question was how are schools that demonstrate significant achievement in eighth grade reading with diverse student populations identified? Quantitative data were analyzed to investigate this question, which resulted in recommendations one and two. The second question was how do school and district leaders believe they influence student performance in these schools? Interview collections and analysis provided six recommendations, recommendations three through eight. Therefore, a total of eight major recommendations...
for potential action by school leaders were developed based on the analysis of the assessment data and the interviews. These recommendations can be implemented at the school level to immediately address issues of student performance.

Educational leaders should:

1. Fully understand assessment data, and know how well each diverse student group is performing.

2. Understand the importance of value-added analysis and become knowledgeable about addressing both growth and achievement for their students.

These first two recommendations relate directly to the analysis efforts that were performed in this dissertation study in order to answer the first research question of identifying high performing schools. School leaders who wish to identify high performing schools in their districts and exemplary classrooms in their schools need to become adept at analyzing and interpreting diverse types of school data. Because value-added analysis is now a part of the state accountability system, school leaders also have the responsibility to use this tool to improve school results.

The next six recommendations were developed from the interview responses of the school leaders. These recommendations incorporate the summary strategies as well as many of the rich perspectives shared by the administrators. These concepts are recognized as effective leadership practices that are applicable to all schools, based on the discussions with the samples of the school leaders in the successful and exemplary schools.

Educational leaders should:
3. Integrate data reviews into the teaching and learning framework and ensure professional development is provided for staff, students and families.

4. Be aware of the research on effective educational practices for diverse student groups and implement efforts appropriate to the school’s context and needs.

5. Ensure that staff are highly qualified and also fully committed to the success of the middle years student. All staff should be knowledgeable “teachers of literacy.”

6. Create a safe and caring school environment with a focus on wellness.

7. Enhance their own knowledge and skills by participating in professional development and taking time to reflect.

8. Create or participate in a professional learning community of colleagues to share successes and offer perspectives.

Using state testing data for analysis was a major activity of this study. Many of the administrators also mentioned the importance of data reviews and several leaders highlighted their use of ongoing data. The dissertation research successfully identified high performing diverse populations in schools using PSSA data. This type of analysis should be replicated at the local level. Superintendents should be aware of growth and achievement scores for all schools and principals should conduct this review at the classroom level. The first recommendation is that school leaders should fully understand assessment data, and know how well each diverse student group is performing. This recommendation can be referenced to the 5W Education Leadership Framework component of Data, Research and Resources (HOW), where leaders know how to access and wisely use and share data, tools, models, materials, and budgets. Regularly reviewing student data and using it to guide instruction decisions was highlighted as one
of the major themes in the interviews. One strategy emphasized by school leaders in the interviews was to use data effectively to understand school and student performance while another was to set goals and monitor progress. Leaders must know the strengths and weaknesses for each student subgroup, and be able to access and effectively use all tools that will improve results.

There is a growing movement to use student performance data as early-warning indicators so that students can potentially receive the academic interventions necessary to become more successful (Pinkus, 2008). School leaders play a critical role in promoting this concept and implementing effective prevention and intervention strategies for youth who are struggling with low grades, failures, disciplinary issues, and other academic challenges. School leaders should also be aware how their performance ranks statewide, nationally and internationally, and use data as the impetus for improvement.

The second recommendation is that school leaders need to understand the importance of value-added analysis and become knowledgeable about addressing both growth and achievement for their students. Some preliminary research with principals in the state regarding their awareness, use and perception of effectiveness of PVAAS demonstrated that although they valued this tool, more time and professional development was needed to thoughtfully use it in schools (Lewald, 2008). School leaders may also need assistance in learning how to effectively interpret results and create research designs, especially if custom analyses are requested. In this study, achieving high levels in both growth and achievement was the definition for an exemplary school. Unfortunately, there are far too few schools in the state that could qualify for the
exemplary label. School leaders need to fully understand both performance standards in order to support improved results.

Data can be a powerful tool but they can also be very complex to access, analyze and interpret. Data analysis is also a time-consuming and potentially expensive process that requires many decision and selection strategies. There are also many different types of assessment data available to the educator, and these assessment data must be clearly understood in order to be used purposefully and appropriately. Educators who wish to conduct future research using assessment data would benefit from the support of the state department of education as well as institutions of higher learning, although it is understood that there may be limited personnel and resources available. It would also be helpful if in the future test companies could create functions that would make data more accessible, and easier to use, for both educators and families.

The second dissertation question examined the influence that school leaders believe they have on student performance. The third recommendation is that school leaders should integrate data reviews into the teaching and learning framework and ensure professional development is provided for staff, students and families. Many of the principals discussed the importance of using data to monitor student performance, and therefore this is a valuable practice that should become a regular part of daily teaching and learning. Data analysis was used by leaders as a broad term but is likely to include the use of diagnostic, formative and summative assessments. It would be essential to provide more professional development on data analysis for staff, but several of the leaders noted how they wanted students and families to be aware of the results and take
more responsibility. Therefore, data analysis workshops should also be offered for students and families, using customer-friendly models that inspire rather than intimidate.

This study focused on special population students, all of whom have historically underperformed in comparison to all other students. The strategy that was derived from the interviews was to ensure that the school is student-centered and individual student needs, academic as well as social-emotional, are being addressed. The fourth recommendation is that school leaders should be aware of the research on effective educational practices for diverse student groups and implement efforts appropriate to the school’s context and needs. This dissertation literature review provided a great number of models that school leaders could consider, based on their specific populations, available resources, and community support.

This recommendation corresponds to the first component of the 5W Education Leadership framework--Student achievement; leaders have high expectations for all, provide equitable opportunities and meet the needs of the whole child (WHO) as well as the second component, Academic excellence; leaders have a vision, focus, knowledge and plan for teaching and learning (WHAT). Knowing the needs of individual students and using effective teaching and learning strategies appeared as main themes across the interviews.

Education leaders need to understand the challenges of youth development and be able to fully address student needs during the schooling process. As young people go through the experience of identity formation, racial and cultural factors can influence their behaviors and academic performance (Noguera, 2003). Additionally, youth subculture and peer relationships can be complex and not fully understood by adults
Students’ perceptions of being behaviorally, emotionally and cognitively engaged in middle school can affect their academic achievement (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). A recent report focusing on the high dropout rate of African American and Latino males in the Philadelphia School District (Philadelphia School Reform Commission, 2010) emphasized the importance of “building conducive learning environments, strengthening professional development, and providing structural supports” (p. 15-19) as some of the critical strategies needed to improve opportunities for high risk youth. The increase in poverty levels in this nation is also creating more challenges for student learning (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010). Finally, students in the middle years may still struggle with literacy development skills such as reading comprehension and must be provided with appropriate interventions (Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010). Leaders should be aware of evidence-based practices that have demonstrated results and improve their knowledge about implementation (Corcoran, 2003).

Although this dissertation research was able to access and review disaggregated assessment data for high-need groups such as minority, economically disadvantaged, special education and English learners, schools should be encouraged to expand those categories and also monitor the performance of other at-risk student populations such as homeless and foster youth, pregnant and parenting teens, migrant and refugee youth, students with disciplinary challenges, and so forth. Successful educational leaders understand that one size does not fit all, and prevention and intervention efforts must be differentiated and culturally appropriate.
Throughout the interview process, administrators mentioned again and again the importance of effective faculty. Educational leaders often cited the expertise of their staff as a reason for success, and this became one of the main themes of the school interviews, an example of the WHERE category in the 5W Framework. The strategy that was emphasized was hire high quality staff who know content and who can create positive relationships. Therefore, the fifth recommendation is educational leaders should ensure that staff are highly qualified and also fully committed to the success of the middle years student. All staff should be knowledgeable teachers of literacy. Research has demonstrated that teacher quality is one of the most important factors for positive student outcomes (Nieto, 1999). Administrators need to ensure that teachers have high expectations for every child, and the importance of this issue was also discussed in the research literature (Evans, 2005; Van den Bergh et al., 2010). The leaders expected that teachers should be fully qualified in the content area and knowledgeable about pedagogy (Elmore, 2003b; O’Day, 2002). Yet at the same time the leaders valued the caring relationships that effective teachers established with young people and the approach of not allowing any child to fail, which is also highlighted in the research literature as a crucial strategy for special populations (Conchas, 2001; Weiss, 2004).

The sixth recommendation is that the educational leader should create a safe and caring school environment with a focus on wellness. This recommendation is very similar to the recommended interview strategy of ensuring that the school is safe and has a focus on wellness. This recommendation also integrates the interview strategy of creating a caring environment in the middle years school. Throughout the interviews, the topic of a safe school was brought up as the ideal in order to positively influence teaching
and learning. This description also was listed as the first factor when educational leaders considered the definition of an ideal or great school. School safety is more likely to be achieved when schools increase protective factors and build resiliency (Henderson et al., 2007; Henderson & Milstein, 2002).

Educational leaders should self-monitor and self-evaluate their efforts to achieve the ideal of a “great school.” They should not do that in isolation, but rather engage their staff, communities and students to make it a positive, action planning effort for continuous improvement. The school community should be aware of the strengths and challenges and work together to achieve success. Another key strategy mentioned in the interviews was to engage family and community as part of the school stakeholder team, which was also discussed in the research literature as an important approach to support student learning (Epstein, 2005; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Wiltz, 2005).

This recommendation integrates both the WHY component of the framework--Systems theory in action--leaders in great schools understand the complexity of the education system and know how to manage it for positive results with the WHERE component--Professional Learning Community--leaders create a multi-stakeholder approach with students, staff, parents and community members for the success of their school/district. Other frameworks that could be used as potential models and expanded upon are an equity audit (Harris, Edmonson, & Hopson, 2009), and a walk-through or learning walk instrument. For example, in Philadelphia the district review teams not only monitored instructional strategies, teacher content knowledge, student engagement, behavior and learning, but also examined safety and school climate and the value placed on educational equity in the classroom and building (School District of Philadelphia,
2004). As more emphasis is placed on leadership success in authentic settings and the importance of research and evidence, school leaders can partner with higher education in their evaluation process in order to contribute more knowledge to the field and support leader preparation (J. Murphy & Orr, 2009).

When school leaders were sharing in their interviews, most of them were very excited to define a great school and were eager to share its qualities. Why is not there more focus on the great school concept, with ideas and recommendations on how leaders can put this ideal into implementation? School leaders from these exemplary sites generously provided strategies that they believed made a real difference in student performance. Why do not we use the ideas of successful school leaders more frequently and more publicly, and not expect each school to be so individualized and isolated? Just as effective school leaders provide support to their staff and students, there should be similar efforts and resources available for them in order for school success to increase. Because there exists a potential positive impact, it is critical for school leaders to increase their own knowledge and skills in order to influence their staff, students and community. The seventh recommendation is that educational leaders should enhance their own knowledge and skills by participating in professional development and taking time to reflect. In the interviews, the strategy that was emphasized was to take time to reflect upon one’s personal leadership development and experiences. Leaders should take responsibility to become more knowledgeable about issues such as needs of special populations, data analysis, literacy, and management of the educational system.

Professional development could be done in partnership with other organizations and could include critical friend cross-school visits by teams and instructional learning groups.
for leaders. Leaders who carefully reflect upon the use of their time and setting priorities in administrative practices, and who also consider which school practices are emphasized and why, become valuable sources for recommendations for improvement. Many leaders stated that they only participated in professional development occasionally, and this may be due to the demand on their time and school duties. Pennsylvania is also a very large and very rural state, which may prevent school leaders from interacting with the state education department, higher education institutions, and administrator colleagues as frequently as they would like. More on-line forums could be established so principals have the opportunity to share and mentor each other. School leaders also need to more fully understand the best practices approaches for each of the individual elements of an education system, and processes for effective alignment. As noted in a recent report on Pennsylvania’s Standards Aligned System:

A state department finds its advantage in providing leadership by designing, managing, evaluating and continuously improving the statewide system of support--setting policy, ensuring resources, and managing relationships. (Tanney, 2009, p. 22)

School leaders could also use reflection time to consider their personal commitment to this career as an educational administrator, and review their influence as both a leader and a human being on the children and adults that surround them and depend upon them. As was noted in the interviews, a positive attitude and a culture of care can greatly contribute to leadership success. This concept of leaders creating a positive, nurturing school culture was emphasized in the ISLLC (2000) Standard and Poor’s and the McREL Balanced Leadership Framework (Gray & Streshly, 2008).
The important issues in education of achievement gaps and leadership practices set the stage for practitioners and policymakers to strive to increase their effectiveness by using research evidence as available, and by modeling the most effective efforts.

The eighth recommendation is that educational leaders should create or participate in a professional learning community of colleagues to share successes and offer perspectives. This concept is also highlighted in the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Framework (PDE, 2007) and the Wallace study (Louis et al., 2010). The interviews revealed that although school leaders in these successful schools understood how distinct factors such as geographic location and education costs may have played a role in student results, the more critical issue may have been the local attitude about student achievement and corresponding instructional and support processes provided by the school. School leaders were very thoughtful in considering potential policy and program changes at the school, district, state and federal levels. However, there really exists no public vehicle or systematic process that leaders can use to share their ideas. Professional organizations offer one model, but participation is voluntary, and the variety of topics for discussion may be limited. Many of the principals interviewed stated they had never had the opportunity to share their thoughts, and given the many rich anecdotes that were provided, tapping into administrator perspectives would truly be discovering many “fonts of wisdom.” The state and the federal education departments should consider how to appropriately survey the school leader “voice” in order to access useful suggestions and guidance. Additionally, there should be a sense of professional responsibility that inspires the educational leader to become an active advocate and share perspectives.

**Key Issues and Next Steps**

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The eight recommendations described in this study, which were developed from the data analysis experience and the voices of effective school leaders, offer action steps that educational administrators can put immediately into practice. In addition, the findings from the two research questions examining school identification and leadership perspectives provide a justification to consider topics with broader implications. There are three key issues that can be concluded from this study that can potentially provide more guidance in thinking about the education experience for diverse students.

First, as the literature discussed and as this study demonstrated, certain schools can overcome performance differences and support all children to be successful (Hirsch, 2001). These examples are similar to the results discussed in the literature review, such as Department of Defense Schools (American Educational Research Association, 2004), Arizona model schools (Center for the Future of Arizona, 2006) and Education Trust sites. This study presented models of three very different schools across the state and each had managed to help diverse eighth grade students become very successful on the state literacy tests. The original data analysis demonstrated that there were many schools in which there was no detectable difference for special population students as compared to the overall school population—either those schools are doing very well with everyone or very poorly. Additionally there were schools where performance gaps still continue and the students struggle. Yet in these key exemplary sites, diverse students are achieving at high levels and the schools have created high functioning systems, which allow the students to continue to grow.

The next steps for this area begin with continued investigation. Why are these types of high performing sites more rare than common, and why do they seem to be
independently unique? How can these types of successful schools be expanded or replicated? What challenges do districts face in trying to create multiple exemplary sites? What purpose could these schools serve for the greater education community; should they become demonstration sites? What is their role in supporting other schools, both within and outside of their districts? Too often the perspective is that each school is its own island and what happens in that school concerns only that school community. This concept can be compared to the way that teachers used to be viewed—an expert operating independently in her own classroom. The perception of schools as either an oasis of achievement or a lost cause to be closed has been ingrained in the American culture and is not necessarily the most productive model. Perhaps if students would travel to a different school every day of the week there would be more demands for consistency in excellence. School leaders should not be shy in ensuring their sites have sufficient resources needed to support achievement. Also, school leaders should be comfortable in examining strengths and weaknesses at their sites, and then working toward that ideal of a great school by examining their more successful sister schools.

The second major learning is that school leaders have gained a great deal of knowledge from hands-on experience, yet many of them have not adequately reflected upon their own efforts or had the opportunity to share their insights. Reflection is an important strategy for leaders to undertake and deepens emotional intelligence (Goleman et al., 2002; Schon, 1983). There is value in this collective wisdom and the voices of successful administrators should be heard more often. Across the nation policy efforts place a lot of emphasis on ineffective leadership, and how to improve failing schools. Yet too little has been promoted about the leadership of successful schools and how
struggling administrators can learn from colleagues, or how to determine the educational leadership effect (Louis et al., 2010). As success is a process (Gray & Streshly, 2008), long-term leaders should be recognized as valuable resources.

Next steps could include additional research that uses the case-study model to study schools in more detail. These leaders who have demonstrated strong results should be encouraged to participate in principal-inquiry practices and lead professional development sessions. In this research study, principals were asked to design a workshop for new colleagues and offered many suggestions. Those ideas and recommendations should be formally integrated to become an electronic resource or toolkit accessible to all and constantly updated. This tool could be similar to the USDE What Works Clearinghouse. Principals should also be encouraged to become mentors and partner with struggling schools. It is critical that the knowledge and skills possessed by these leaders becomes recognized for the resource that it is—the human capital.

The third topic is the issue that educating children is extremely complex and leaders rely on different actions to be successful (Firestone & Shipps, 2005). Sometimes leadership actions may be situational, sometimes they are learned from regular practice, and other times they are learned from reading research or participating in professional development. In this study, different leaders emphasized various components of the leadership framework in their interviews more so than other areas. There were activities that some felt they did very well, such as review data, and they wanted to continue that formula for success. Leaders knew they had to respond to the diverse needs of students and relied heavily on their staffs for assistance. Effective leaders also wanted to continue
to achieve, and even do better, and were emotionally connected to the performance of their school.

This issue merits much thoughtful reflection in order to consider potential next steps. It is important to develop educational leaders so they can become both nimble and adept in their responses to the experiences they may face. Leaders should have the opportunity to do their training or have internships in diverse types of settings. There could also be shadowing days where principals visit colleague or even exchange schools for the day as a learning experience. Educational leaders should also have professional development in recognizing the needs of diverse populations and learning how to interact with children and families from different cultural backgrounds. It is still true that too many of our schools operate as factory models rather than rich centers of individualized instruction. The electronic age is providing more and more opportunity for youth to independently learn, yet there seems to be no real substitute for a positive relationship with a caring adult. Leaders should know how to establish a variety of processes, both formal and informal, for staff, students and families to interact more closely, deepen relationships, and create ongoing opportunities for learning. Leaders who take responsibility to enhance their own skills and abilities should have more success in meeting the complex challenges of the education system. This perspective also seems to be promoted in the many available leadership frameworks, such as the ISLLC Standards (2000), the McREL framework (Gray & Streshly, 2008) and the Wallace study framework (Louis et al., 2010).
Conclusion

This final section highlights the potential future use of the dissertation findings. This dissertation research provided the opportunity to explore two important research questions: (1) How are schools that demonstrate significant achievement in eighth grade reading with diverse student populations identified? (2) How do school and district leaders believe they influence student performance in these schools? The study was conducted to examine Pennsylvania’s efforts to address the NCLB accountability requirements and the state’s goal to improve educational leadership and increase student performance. The research provided a valuable opportunity to access disaggregated statewide data as well as learn directly from school leaders.

The results of this study point to the need for more purposeful training for education leaders with an increased focus on school success. As discussed in the strategies and recommendations, school leaders must become fully aware of how to address student needs (both academic and socio-emotional), learn how to access and use assessment data, and understand how to support a teacher to become highly qualified. The educational leader is learning how to master all the elements of the education system, a complex but attainable goal.

The three key issues learned from this study are that schools can overcome performance differences and support all students to be successful, successful education leaders need to have more opportunity to reflect upon and share their insights, and educating diverse children requires leaders to rely on different actions to be successful. The study produced a set of useful strategies and recommendations that educational leaders could immediately implement as they aspire towards increased school
improvement. However, underlying all of the strategies are wisdom and experience, which may be difficult to translate or duplicate. This study demonstrates that the research knowledge can be put into action in order for all children to become proficient in literacy, and school leaders do believe they can have a positive impact on student performance.

**Future Use**

More research studies are recognizing the importance of educational leaders. As the Pennsylvania state requirements for education leadership training continue and expand, further data will become available as to the effect of leadership on student performance. Ongoing research in Pennsylvania should be conducted on the role of educational leadership and its impact on school and student performance. The state could potentially require participation of education leaders in qualitative feedback experiences in order to evaluate increased knowledge and understanding from professional development and compare responses with district and school results. A recent state-sponsored research study obtained statistically positive effects for students achieving proficiency in reading in schools with NISL trained principals versus comparison schools (Nunnery, Ross & Yen, 2010). However, the middle school sample size was only nineteen schools and the data has been aggregated rather than separated by grade or by subgroup so it is not necessarily possible to review those findings with this dissertation study. Yet there exists the potential to link these types of studies in the future. Additionally including more qualitative data from other unique models such as charter schools could potentially strengthen state leadership efforts. Although these educational leaders in this research study were based in different geographic locations across the state
and had different experiences, all of them produced strong results for their special population students.

The qualitative component of this study focused only on the perspectives provided by the administrators themselves in interviews. Future studies could enhance those interview responses, such as conducting observations of the school leaders in action, or shadowing practices; and interviewing staff, students and families to learn their perspectives of the school and its leadership. Using exemplary school models as sources for investigation is a valuable practice that should be repeated and expanded.

This research analyzed the practices in schools from two diverse yet triangulated perspectives: assessment data and interview responses. The construct of this study is a comprehensive analysis project that could be replicated for other grades in Pennsylvania or used by other states. The school-based component could also be administered separately as a possible means for identifying and analyzing school-based practices to provide supportive and reflective feedback to the local practitioners.

The most critical findings for this research were that using value-added analysis of state tests scores, schools with high-performing subgroups could potentially be identified for additional review and investigation including site visits, surveys, interviews and other data reviews. School related variables have significant consequences for achievement as they reflect efforts undergoing at the local level. Schools that reduce and/or eliminate achievement gaps can be highlighted as potential instructional models. Leaders with a vision and a focus on students can demonstrate results across youth population groups that have been struggling with student performance differences. Sites in three geographic locations of the state--rural, urban and suburban--demonstrated
exemplary results for both growth and achievement with different groups of traditionally underperforming students. Therefore, the opportunity exists to learn from these leaders and replicate their recommended strategies in other schools. If the goal is to create a great school for all children, then the possibility has become achievable, as recently reported by TIME magazine:

Legions of public schools . . . are succeeding while others flounder. These successful schools are altering fundamentals that were for so long untouchables, by insisting on great teachers, more class time and higher standards. We now know that it is possible to teach every kid, even poor kids with wretched home lives, to read, write and do math and science at respectable levels. (Ripley, 2010, p. 35)

It is not clear why this nation still allows serious differences in student performance to exist, when we know they can be overcome by effective schools with strong, caring leaders. The issue of achievement gaps has dominated the research because too little action has been undertaken to eliminate them. Each child and each school is unique, but by thoughtfully addressing causes and offering a variety of evidence-based solutions, schools in Pennsylvania and across the country are getting the job done. Now, how do we amplify those efforts to make high achievement by special populations an everyday experience rather than a rare occurrence?

This dissertation study can be used as a discussion point to initiate collaborative processes with diverse stakeholders, and as a long-term plan, to utilize the data, tools and findings for policy change (Light, Singer, & Willett, 1990) towards improvement in student academic achievement and to move toward the great school ideal. Education leaders should also be aware that in polls across the nation citizens expect successful schools to promote problem-solving, teamwork, critical thinking, civic engagement,
creativity, innovation and 21st century skills for youth as well as content knowledge (Dorsey, 2007).

These types of issues were mentioned in some of the school leader interviews when they discussed the concept of a great school, but do not yet seem to be universally recognized as necessary for and achievable by every school.

It has been advocated (Stringer, 1999) that all action research should promote positive changes in peoples’ lives, and that perspective was highly valued and used as a goal for this dissertation research on leadership and student performance. As the efforts and the voices of the education community are represented throughout this research, it is anticipated that this research will help to empower colleague educators and improve learning experiences for youth. Effective leadership practices could be the driving forces that help to put in place actions that will lead to improved student achievement. It is hoped that these findings will have a positive effect on results in Pennsylvania and beyond.
APPENDIX A: SAMPLES OF PSSA FIELD DESCRIPTORS

The following sample descriptors are used by the Pennsylvania Department of Education to organize data for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA; W. Murphy, personal communication, 2005).

Grade, District Number, School Code, District Name, and School Name

Institution Code: regular public, intermediate unit, charter, state school, juvenile correction facility, nonpublic

Number of students scored in Reading-school level

Number of Returned Answer Documents in Reading-school level

Reading Percent Advanced-school level
Reading Percent Proficient-school level
Reading Percent Basic-school level
Reading Percent Below Basic-school level

Same descriptors used for:
  IEP
  Limited English Proficient
  Title I
  Migrant
  Economically Disadvantaged
  Male
  Female
  White
  Black
  Hispanic
  Asian
  Native American
  Multi-ethnic

Note: PVAAS analysis uses the Minority category rather than racial or ethnic descriptors.

For this study, school community type was also added: Rural, Urban, Suburban
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Dissertation Interview Protocol
Interview Invitation

Dear Colleague,

My name is Mary Ramirez and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. My research focuses on eighth grade student performance and leadership practices of principals and superintendents in Pennsylvania public schools. The purpose of my research is to focus on these areas of inquiry: How are schools that demonstrate significant achievement in eighth grade reading with diverse student populations identified? How do school and district leaders believe they influence student performance in these schools? This study is in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Education. Data gathered from this study will also be used in presentations and publications. This study has received approval from the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board.

You are reading this letter of informed consent and invitation to participate in this interview because you are either a superintendent or a principal working with a Pennsylvania public school with an eighth grade. One benefit for you of participating in this interview is that you could personally review your own leadership actions that could potentially affect student results. Another benefit for you to participate in this research is that you would receive a copy of the research findings.

Participation in this interview is voluntary and is estimated to take no more than one hour of your time. The interview will focus on your leadership and school practices. All responses will be kept confidential and your school will not be individually identifiable. You will be asked to sign a consent form to permit use of the interview responses at the beginning of the interview process.

The interview may be audiotaped only for accurate transcription purposes, and all recordings will then be destroyed after the completion of the dissertation. These interview data transcribed responses will be kept safely and securely for as long as required by university regulations.

I really appreciate your time and assistance with this study. The dissertation will be published by the university and available for your review. If you are agreeable, I will contact you by phone to arrange a mutually convenient date and time. I would like to schedule this interview as soon as possible. Thank you very much for your assistance.

Sincerely,
Mary I. Ramírez
Graduate Student, University of Pennsylvania
Home email: xxxxxxxxx@xxx.xxx
Home phone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
Participant Consent Form

I hereby give consent for my interview results to be used in the dissertation research of Mary Ramirez. I have read the interview letter of invitation and I agree to all the stated conditions.

NAME

________________________________________

SIGNATURE

________________________________________

DATE

________________________________________
Part I: Administrative Practices.

I would like to hear about your practices in your administrative position. Please list and briefly describe what you consider the top ten key activities that you perform on a regular basis to promote success in your school. Also, can you estimate what percentage of time you spend on each practice?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.
Part II: School Strengths and Challenges

A. What do you consider the three greatest strengths of your school? (Why/How do you know?)

1.

2.

3.

B. What do you consider the three greatest challenges or needs in your school? (Why/How do you know?)

1.

2.

3.
Part III: School Practices

Please indicate if the following practices can be evidenced in the school(s)/district serving 8th grade students through the diverse indicators. Also, please rank from 1-5 the importance of the practice to the school’s ability to meet student needs. (1 = Not at all important, 5 = Extremely important)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Mission statement</th>
<th>Report card</th>
<th>Meeting agendas</th>
<th>School plan</th>
<th>Budget item</th>
<th>Imp’t to Stdt nds</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L  Accountability for student results</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>M  Adequate resources available/allocated equitably</td>
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<tr>
<td>N  Community partnerships in place</td>
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<td>O  Data informs decision making</td>
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<tr>
<td>P  High expectations for all students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q  Parents are engaged</td>
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<tr>
<td>R  Safe climate/welcoming school culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>S  School functions as a learning organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>T  School planning for continuous improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>U  Student-centered and high quality instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>V  Teacher/school community involvement in decision-making</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Part IV: Open Responses

1. What is your vision of effective school leadership? How do you, as an educational leader, focus on and implement the goal of student achievement?

2. Why do you think some 8th grade students at your school/district are successful and why might some 8th grade students in your school or district struggle? [Please do not identify your school in the response.]

3. If you could make policy and/or program changes to improve results for your 8th grade students and support their academic, social and emotional readiness for high school, what changes would they be? Refer to special populations in schools—ethnicity/race; economic status, ELL, disabilities (IEP). [Please do not identify your school in the response.]

4. If you were to offer an orientation workshop to new principals with the goal of helping them better meet the academic needs of their students, what would be the most effective and efficient methods and strategies you would share? What would you recommend to assist them in learning how to manage all of their multiple responsibilities in the educational system?

5. How would you define a “great” school?
Part V: Participant Information

Please provide the following data elements to better refine data responses.

Your position:
Principal _____
Superintendent _____

Years in this position at this site:
0-3 _____
4-6 _____
7-10 _____
11 and above _____

Gender:
Male _____
Female _____

Highest degree obtained:
B.A./B.S. _____
M.A./M.Ed. _____
Ed.D/Ph.D. _____

FOR INTERNAL ADMINISTRATIVE PURPOSES ONLY

Name of school: ____________________________________________
Name of district: __________________________________________
County: __________________________________________________
Name of interviewee: _______________________________________
Position: __________________________________________________
Interview date: _____________________________________________
Contact Information: ________________________________________
Name of Interviewer: _______________________________________
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