The Role of the Central Office in Shaping Instructional Leadership: How Does the Central Office Help and Hinder the Work of School Administrators?

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THE ROLE OF THE CENTRAL OFFICE IN SHAPING INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP: HOW DOES THE CENTRAL OFFICE HELP AND HINDER THE WORK OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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Leslee Marie Hutchinson

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Dedication

I wish to dedicate this work to several people who have meant much to me throughout my life and throughout this research. First, to my students. From a very early age, I have known that I wanted to be a teacher. Without students, I would never have been able to engage in what I view as a dream profession. Second, to my children. Before I knew I wanted to be a teacher, I knew I wanted to be a mother. Without my children, I would never have been able to fulfill that dream, either. Third, to my teachers. Nothing in my life would have been possible without you. You believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself, and I have tried to do the same for as many people as possible throughout my life. Finally, to my husband and family. You are my support system, even when I make things challenging. I only hope to one day return the favor.
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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF THE CENTRAL OFFICE IN SHAPING INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP: HOW DOES THE CENTRAL OFFICE HELP AND HINDER THE WORK OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Leslee Hutchinson
Laura Desimone

Instructional leadership for school leaders is a complex, multifaceted task. Central office leaders can and must support the instructional leadership of school leaders. Yet the central office can sometimes present roadblocks that make it challenging for principals to be effective instructional leaders. Complicating matters is the impact of context, which can influence the ways that the central office supports or hinders the instructional leadership of school administrators.

This exploratory study examined the ways that the central office supported or hindered the instructional leadership of school administrators. It also examined the way that school district size, type and access to resources may have impacted those interactions. Participants included central office staff involved in teaching and learning as well as school principals and assistant principals in six public school districts in Pennsylvania. A qualitative design was employed. Fifty-one participants were interviewed and asked to provide documents related to curriculum, instruction, professional development, and/or assessment.
Central office administrators played a role in managing curriculum, assessment, professional development, and expectations in school districts. Supportive practices included fostering connections between and among school administrators, skill-building/mentoring, and shielding school administrators from community issues and state mandates. Practices that created roadblocks included lack of expertise and quality work products, failure to bring school administrators together around collaborative work, lack of trusting relationships, and failure to shield school administrators from community issues and state mandates. Tension around the balance between school autonomy and coherence to district mandates/needs, the process of change, feedback and accountability, and philosophical differences created additional roadblocks. Context was a relevant factor in the areas of trust and relationships, the amount of autonomy granted to school administrators, and the role of resources.

Four main conclusions were drawn. In the districts studied, there was little work on the part of central office around instructional strategies. The central office played a more direct role as instructional leaders in schools housed in smaller districts. When the central office engaged in supportive practices, fewer tensions were reported by participants within districts. Finally, the central office provided the “glue” that held schools together within a district.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Recent calls for reform in public education have brought instructional leadership to the fore of the complex work of school leaders. The passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 ushered in a new era of accountability for American schools. Calls for accountability continued with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2016. These pieces of legislation were preceded by a myriad of public reports and policies that focused attention on the performance of public schools. The first was Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1965 (ESEA), which represented the entry of the federal government into the functioning of public education. It was passed as an effort to provide supplementary funding to students in schools that served low-income and minority populations, which the public recognized as needing additional support to obtain a quality education. Next, in 1975, Public Law 94-142 was passed. This law required that all students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). In many cases, this meant that students with disabilities who might have previously been educated in special schools or classrooms were now to be included in public school classrooms with their same-age, non-disabled peers. Shortly after this law was passed, a report entitled A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) was released. This report claimed in no uncertain terms that our nations’ public schools were a failure.
These reports, laws, and policies combined to fundamentally alter the way educators did their work, bringing instructional leadership to the fore as the primary task of school leaders. In addition to instructional leadership being considered critical for school leaders, it is increasingly eyed as an important role for central office staff in public school districts (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Instructional leadership is defined as leadership whose primary purpose is “to reach more ambitious student achievement targets by focusing…on the quality of teachers, teaching, and the curriculum (LeFevre & Robinson, 2015).

Instructional leadership is enormously complex and therefore impossible for any actor in a school system to enact alone (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2009; Hallinger, Leithwood, & Heck, 2010; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). In most public schools, the central office, alternately titled the district office, oversees and evaluates school administrators and is one potential source of support for school leaders who seek to strengthen their practice of instructional leadership. Yet there is little research on how central office administrators can effectively support and shape the instructional leadership of school administrators.

It is also true that context influences district and school leaders’ interactions around instructional leadership. School district type (urban, suburban, or rural), size, and access to resources have the potential to influence the interactions and the work that takes place between central office and school administrators around instructional leadership (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Hallinger, 2003; Lee, Walker, & Ling Chui, 2012; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). However, most research conducted on the topic of instructional leadership has focused on large, urban school systems, which are often
under-resourced and considered to be poorly performing. Knowing more about the role of the central office in shaping school administrators’ practice in other contexts would be beneficial and give educators a more well-rounded view of how these important educational leaders work together to support effective teaching and learning in their public school districts.

Statement of the Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of the district, which I term the central office, in shaping the instructional leadership practices of school administrators, which includes both school principals and assistant principals. In addition, I wished to explore the role of district size, type (urban, suburban, rural), and access to resources in shaping the interactions that take place between central office and school administrators. A number of researchers have suggested that the central office plays an important role in helping or hindering the instructional leadership of school leaders (Hallinger, 2003; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Russell, 2013). They have also suggested that context influences the role of the central office in shaping the instructional leadership of school administrators (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppesou, & Easton, 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008). In this section, I will describe this research in more detail, thereby leading to the research questions that guide this study.

Instructional leadership is a concept that has been discussed in education for years (Neumerski, 2013; Southworth, 2002). Although the concept itself has been a part of the field of education for quite some time, the term “instructional leadership” was not used until the 1970s when the effective schools movement began. During the 1980s,
researchers such as Phillip Hallinger and Joseph Murphy (1985) began to define the concept as a set of behaviors and practices enacted by school leaders that lead to improved teaching and learning. Instructional leadership was the dominant approach to school leadership through much of the decade.

Other approaches to leadership emerged in the 1990s and 2000s. Three that gained popularity during this time were transactional, transformational, and contingency approaches to leadership. Born of the business world, these theories were enacted in schools with the goal of improving student performance (Hallinger, 2003; Robinson, 2010). Transactional leadership focuses on the exchange of “something valued” (Kunhert & Lewis, 1987, p. 648). Transformational leadership seeks to change the values, beliefs, and goals of the people in an organization (Kunhert & Lewis, 1987). Contingency theory recommends that a leader match her/his leadership practices and theories to the needs of the context in which s/he leads (Hallinger, 2003). While many of these leadership theories may have value for school leaders, it is instructional leadership that has the largest impact on school culture, teaching practice, and student achievement (Goldring et al., 2009; LeFevre & Robinson, 2015; Robinson, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008; Sinnema, Le Fevre, Robinson, & Pope, 2013).

As instructional leaders, school administrators are expected to not only be effective school managers but to be effective leaders of teaching and learning (Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, & Daly, 2008; Neumerski, 2013; Townsend et al., 2013). Principals and assistant principals, which I term school administrators or school leaders, must know how to evaluate instruction, provide meaningful feedback to teachers, oversee student performance, and foster a collaborative, supportive, positive school culture.
Given that school leaders must balance this myriad of tasks, it stands to reason that they require support in order to be successful (Leithwood et al., 2004; Russell, 2013; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

The most current thinking about the effective practice of instructional leadership by school leaders is that it is a set of behaviors that indirectly impacts classroom instruction and student performance (Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). To be successful in the practice of instructional leadership, according to Phillip Hallinger and Joseph Murphy, a school administrator must do several things. First, she must create a positive learning environment for teachers and students. Second, she must hold high expectations and support engagement with high quality curriculum, standards, and instruction. Third, she must match reform strategies and initiatives with school culture and needs. Finally, she must support ongoing, high-quality professional development for teachers (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). This is a tall order for most school administrators, especially given the myriad of other tasks they must perform each day.

Goldring et al. (2009) conceptualize instructional leadership, which they term leadership for learning, as the convergence of two dimensions, core components and key processes. The core components are high standards for student learning, rigorous curriculum, quality instruction, culture of learning and professional behavior, connections to external communities, and systemic performance accountability. They describe what leaders should do if they are to improve teaching and learning. The key processes are planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating and monitoring. They describe how leaders will accomplish the core components. Their framework describes
effective leadership as the intersection of these two dimensions. It also demonstrates that leadership can and should be distributed throughout an organization and need not be enacted only by school principals (Goldring et al., 2009).

Viviane Robinson (2010) has studied the components of instructional leadership at the school level. Her conceptual framework defined instructional leadership as consisting of five dimensions. The first was leading through supporting and participating in teacher learning and development. Her research found that principals who not only arrange for quality professional learning for teachers but who participate in such learning alongside teachers were able to yield more influence on teacher practice, which resulted indirectly in better student performance. Robinson’s second dimension was establishing goals and holding high expectations for teaching and learning. It was important that these goals not only be of high quality and rigor but that they be communicated effectively to all members of a school system. The third dimension was planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and curriculum. Fourth was strategic resourcing, which involved allocating resources in a way that was aligned to the first three dimensions of this framework (teacher learning, rigorous goals, and effective teaching/curriculum). The final dimension in Robinson’s framework was ensuring an orderly, supportive school environment. This dimension involved maintaining a safe, secure school environment for staff and students. It also involved the provision of mechanisms for supporting the other dimensions, such as providing time for teachers to collaborate, building trusting relationships, and attending to the managerial functions of running a school in an efficient manner (Robinson, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008). The amount of time spent on this final dimension may vary based on district context since the role of school administrators and
the central office may differ from one type of district to another. My study sought to examine these potential differences to determine their impact on instructional leadership by school administrators.

Supovitz et al. (2010) found that principals who attended to instruction, developed a positive, trusting, atmosphere, fostered collaboration among teachers, and maintained a focus on clearly communicated school goals were successful in helping teachers improve their instruction. Townsend et al. (2013) described how three aspects of instructional leadership, defining a mission, managing instructional programs, and establishing a positive school climate were impacted by the enactment of NCLB. They found that district staff expected principals to engage in instructional leadership with an eye toward improved student achievement and that principals had similar expectations of themselves.

Christine Neumerski (2013) found that district staff had a role in fostering instructional leadership for principals. Through the enactment of policies supportive of teaching and learning, creating job descriptions that emphasized strong teaching and leadership skills, communicating a vision, building principal confidence and collective efficacy, prioritizing achievement, instruction and school improvement, creating conditions principals perceived as supportive, and defining effective teaching practice, central office staff could have a positive influence on the quality of principals’ practices (Neumerski, 2013). We are beginning to understand more about how instructional leadership should look and what practices comprise effective leadership. However, research on the ways that the central office can support principals remains minimal and does not always spell out the “how” of such work.
Even though instructional leadership is well researched, there is still some disagreement among researchers about the aspects that are most salient to improving instruction and student achievement. Most agree that fostering a collaborative, trusting school culture is important. In such an environment, leadership tasks, effective practice, and responsibility for student learning can be shared freely, resulting in better student outcomes (Goldring et al., 2009; Hallinger, 2003; LeFevre & Robinson, 2015; Leithwood, Anderson, Mascall, & Strauss, 2010). Most also agree that school administrators need to have a strong foundation in effective teaching and curriculum. Teachers, parents, and students need to feel confident that their school leader knows what to look for when evaluating performance and how to suggest useful, effective strategies for improvement (Goldring et al., 2009; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; LeFevre & Robinson, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). Beyond these broad descriptions of the components of instructional leadership, there is less agreement about the relative importance of each of these factors and about the other tasks and components of leadership that are relevant to student outcomes.

Given the enormity of the task of enacting all of these aspects of instructional leadership, many researchers have suggested that they cannot all be accomplished by school administrators alone (DeFlaminis, 2011; Goldring et al., 2009; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). In addition to finding ways to share these tasks, school administrators must make daily choices about which to emphasize in their practice since they cannot possibly enact them all. How do they make these choices? What role can and do districts play in supporting or conflicting with principals in these choices?
Further complicating the work of instructional leaders is the role of context in shaping their decisions and practices. Patricia Burch (2007) studied the role of political and policy context in the interactions between central office and school administrators in three urban school districts. She found that central office staff play a role in shaping the instructional leadership practice of school administrators. Her findings explained that when central office and school administrators agree on the aspects of instructional leadership that are important, school administrators are more effective in improving student outcomes (Burch, 2007). Her study left unanswered the question of what those effective aspects were; she focused instead on the alignment between central office and school leaders’ conceptions.

Anthony Bryk et al. (1999) also studied the role of context in his analysis of the reforms that took place in Chicago Public Schools in the 1990s. They posited that urban schools have unique challenges that make collaborative work difficult. They face intense scrutiny from outside agencies, such as federal and state education departments, are pressured to focus on short-term goals, and are frequently subject to external redirection (Bryk et al., 1999). In such an environment, which in addition to housing many schools and staff members also tends to lack adequate resources, one wonders how central office can play a supportive role in developing the instructional leadership of school leaders. And if it cannot, one wonders about ways central office might hinder the efforts of school leaders to enact instructional leadership that results in better outcomes for students. Since most research on the topic of context has been conducted in large, urban, under-resourced districts, one also wonders whether smaller suburban or rural districts might have a different experience. Might the central office play a different role in shaping the
instructional leadership of school administrators in districts with fewer staff members, fewer schools, and better resources?

The conceptual framework that guided this study was derived by taking concepts from more traditional definitions of instructional leadership and combining them with more modern concepts taken from transformational leadership theories. However, I will continue to use the term instructional leadership throughout my study. For purposes of this study, I define effective instructional leadership for school administrators as consisting of supervision and evaluation of instruction, the creation of a collaborative culture, a focus on high quality performance goals, and the provision of professional development for staff. To do this work effectively, school administrators require the support of their central office staff. I define effective support for instructional leadership by members of the central office in public schools as consisting of high expectations for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and teacher supervision, the creation of a trusting, collaborative district culture, the provision of professional development for staff, and shielding school administrators from tasks unrelated to instructional leadership to the greatest extent possible. To better understand the role central office plays in shaping these practices for school leaders and the role of context in shaping that role, I will use the following questions to guide this study:

1. What is the district’s role in shaping the instructional leadership practices of school administrators?
   a. In what ways do central office administrators support school administrators' instructional leadership?
   b. In what ways do they present roadblocks or challenges?
2. How do district size, type, and access to resources seem to influence the district’s role in shaping school instructional leaders’ practices?

In the following section, I will describe the conceptual framework that formed the basis of this study in more detail. I will then review the literature that describes the important components of instructional leadership, the role of the central office in shaping school administrators’ practice of instructional leadership, and the role of context in shaping the ways central office and school administrators interact around instructional leadership.

**Conceptual Framework**

Instructional leadership is a multifaceted, complex task. School leaders who wish to be effective instructional leaders must make daily choices about which aspects warrant focus given the myriad of tasks they must perform to keep a school system running effectively. Through synthesizing the research described in this literature review, I have identified four components of instructional leadership that are essential to effective practice. One is the supervision and evaluation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, which includes high expectations for student achievement. Second is the creation of a collaborative culture. Third is a focus on high quality performance goals. A final component is the provision of professional development for staff. It is these aspects that will serve as a guide for this study.

The central office practices that have been shown to positively shape the instructional leadership practices of school administrators are the communication of high expectations and goals for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and teacher supervision,
the creation of a trusting, collaborative district culture, the provision of professional
development for staff, and the shielding of school administrators from tasks unrelated to
instructional leadership to the greatest extent possible.

The model shown in Figure 1 shows the most important aspects of instructional
leadership by school administrators, the components of effective support by central office
administrators, and the paths of influence between these key variables. All paths of
influence in this conceptual model are mutual, meaning that the actors within each level
of the system exert mutual influence on one another.

**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.**
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will begin with a review of the literature describing the components of effective instructional leadership for school administrators. The second section will describe the role of the central office in shaping the instructional leadership practices of school administrators. The section will conclude with a discussion of studies that describe the influence of context on the interactions between central office and school administrators around instructional leadership.

This study focused on the role of the district, often termed the central office by practitioners, in shaping the instructional leadership practices of school administrators in public schools. There is a wealth of research on the instructional leadership practices of school administrators, but less is known about the way that central office and school administrators perceive and describe their interactions around instructional leadership. This study attempts to identify how school administrators perceive the role of the district in supporting or hindering their practice of instructional leadership. In addition, there are many studies that mention the role of context in shaping the instructional leadership of central office and school administrators as separate entities, but fewer that directly examine the role that context plays in shaping the interactions between these two groups of leaders. This is information that would be valuable for district leaders seeking to support effective instructional leadership by school administrators in a variety of contexts.
Instructional Leadership for School Administrators

There is no shortage of research on the topic of instructional leadership as enacted by school administrators. In fact, Grissom and Loeb (2011) found that the most common category of principal leadership and behavior studied in the literature is instructional leadership. In this section, I will describe some of the most important research on this topic and the components of effective instructional leadership that guided this study.

Supervision and Evaluation

An important component of instructional leadership is ensuring that students receive effective, high-quality classroom instruction focused on worthwhile curriculum every day. Goldring and her colleagues described the elements of high-quality instruction. Such instruction is delivered by teachers who hold and communicate high expectations for students. It is focused on clear, challenging goals that are appropriately communicated to students, reflective of current knowledge of how people learn, inclusive of frequent formative assessment and subsequent adjustment to instruction, and adapted to meet the ever-changing needs of students (Goldring et al., 2009). Their research has shown that effective instructional leaders know what high-quality instruction looks and sounds like; they also spend time providing feedback to teachers on their instructional practice and guiding conversations around student achievement data.

Many researchers have focused on the instructional practices of classroom teachers and on the oversight of these practices by instructional leaders. Among these is Phillip Hallinger, who included the supervision and evaluation of instruction in his second dimension of instructional leadership – managing the instructional program (Hallinger, 2003). In a reflective paper he wrote in 2005, Hallinger laid out some of the
challenges associated with ensuring effective, high-quality classroom instruction. He stated that principals who are frequently in classrooms directly observing practice were rare and usually found in elementary schools. However, he did not see this as an insurmountable obstacle to school success as his research demonstrated that such direct observation of practice does not have as great an impact on school outcomes as defining the mission of the school. He also felt that oversight of instructional practice was a special challenge for high school principals who may have less expertise in a given subject area than the teacher being evaluated. In short, Hallinger felt that it was very difficult for principals to directly oversee instruction (Hallinger, 2003, 2005). I agree, but I also feel that Hallinger’s assertions are based on an outdated conception of the instructional leadership role of the school principal that focused almost singularly on observation in the classroom accompanied by suggestions for improvement. In this model, the school leader was viewed as the expert in instruction. More recent models, including the model that guided this study, rely on a more collaborative, conversational model of instructional leadership.

Current research has uncovered ways that school leaders can ensure highly effective classroom instruction without spending inordinate amounts of time in classrooms directly observing instruction, such as through the implementation of shared leadership models (DeFlaminis, 2011). However, school administrators must still have deep knowledge of effective instructional practices, worthwhile curriculum, and valid assessment if they are to lead successful schools; they must also continue to learn about high-quality curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
In order to be successful in the practice of instructional leadership, Hallinger and Murphy (2013) assert that a principal must hold high expectations and support engagement with high quality curriculum, standards, and instruction. This view is shared by many researchers. Coordinating the curriculum is part of Hallinger’s (2003) second dimension of instructional leadership, which is managing the instructional program. Hallinger, in cooperation with Ronald Heck (2010), conducted a longitudinal study that examined collaborative leadership and its impact on school improvement and student achievement. They found that principals could indirectly impact student achievement by aligning curriculum and instruction. Principals who were able to align curricular materials, standards, and goals from one grade to the next within their schools were more successful in improving school outcomes than those who did not (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

Goldring et al. (2009) reached a similar conclusion in the research they conducted in developing the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED). They posited that effective leaders were knowledgeable about the content of instruction. They shaped what was taught in classrooms and ensured that it was rigorous and of high importance. They pointed to research that showed that rigorous curriculum and appropriate assessment led to higher levels of student achievement. Additionally, they defined rigorous curriculum as including high levels of cognitive demand for learners as well as high level content.

Principals who were able to align curricular materials, standards, and goals from one grade to the next within their schools were more successful in improving school outcomes than those who did not (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Robinson et al. (2008)
reached a similar conclusion. They found that principals in high-performing schools were frequently involved with the vertical alignment of their school’s curriculum (Robinson et al., 2008). LeFevre and Robinson (2015) included the evaluation of the quality of classroom teaching in their definition of instructional leadership. They found that leaders who lacked content knowledge about effective teaching practice and about high-quality curriculum were less likely to be successful in supporting student learning within their schools. Additionally, they found that many school leaders were reluctant to directly discuss ineffective practice with teachers. Given the emotionally charged nature of such conversations, they found that many leaders simply avoided them and permitted poor-quality instruction to continue. These leaders were not as successful at producing successful school outcomes as those who were more willing to directly discuss poor-quality instruction (LeFevre & Robinson, 2015). It seems clear from this research that the ability to evaluate and communicate directly about curriculum, instruction, and assessment is an important task of effective instructional leaders.

In their study of the instructional leadership of secondary principals in Hong Kong, Lee et al. (2012) found that direct supervision of teachers was positively associated with student outcomes only when teachers perceived the supervision to be rooted in a genuine desire to improve practice. When teachers perceived the supervision to be rooted in accountability measures or in expectations of adherence to top-down requirements, it was negatively associated with student outcomes. They recommended that district leaders keep this in mind as they develop policies around curriculum and instruction.
Robinson et al. (2008) found that principals in high achieving schools were more directly involved in direct observation of practice than those at low achieving schools. While this finding may appear to contrast with Lee’s, an examination of the way that direct observation was enacted may explain why. In Robinson’s study, she found that successful principals observed classrooms then followed those observations with discussions with teachers, providing useful feedback about practice. These principals also did a good job of defining effective practice consistently for their schools. Teachers had a clear understanding of what was expected, and their principals engaged in reflective dialogue around observed practice. This contrasted with many of the principals in Lee’s study who were under pressure to adhere to top-down directives and to use observation as an accountability tool. What is clear from a review of the research on instructional leadership is that school leaders who wish to positively impact teaching and learning in their buildings must become effective supervisors and evaluators of curriculum and instruction. This includes holding high standards for student achievement, quality instruction and rigorous curriculum. It also includes providing useful feedback to teachers about their practice and holding staff accountable for quality practice. Research clearly shows that these behaviors are associated with positive school outcomes.

**Collaborative Culture**

Bryk et al. (1999) studied the impact of trusting relationships on the level of collaboration and risk-taking for teachers in Chicago public elementary schools. This team found that school leaders who spent time developing trusting relationships with staff and who were successful in facilitating the creation of such relationships among teachers saw their staff engage in more collaborative work. Teachers in these environments were
more willing to share practice, attempt new teaching strategies, and seek feedback from peers about their teaching. Such collaborative work has been associated with positive student achievement, so school leaders who wish to be effective need to consider spending time nurturing a trusting, supportive environment for staff (Bryk et al., 1999; Bryk et al., 2010).

Ellen Goldring and her colleagues (2009) reached the same conclusion and included fostering a culture of collegial learning and professional behavior as part of the conceptual framework underlying their VAL-ED instrument. In such a culture, a leader creates structures for shared practice that is focused on student learning and achievement. Colleagues engage in reflective, open practice around shared academic learning goals. It is through this sharing of quality practice and rigorous goals that school leaders can distribute instructional leadership to a larger number of school staff, thereby reducing some of the monumental workload associated with the effective practice of instructional leadership.

In 2010, Robinson completed an analysis of research on the capabilities and skills associated with effective instructional leadership. She concluded that principals must develop trusting, supportive relationships with staff to facilitate risk-taking, willingness to try new strategies, and collaboration. While she found that this was easier to accomplish for principals who led schools with existing positive cultures, she found it was also possible for leaders who found themselves in more dysfunctional schools. In such instances, she recommended that principals use their positional authority to counsel out teachers who are detrimental to the building of trust as they had the ability to
significantly hamper a leader’s ability to foster professionalism and collaboration within a school (Robinson, 2010).

Other authors, such as Mike Schmoker (2006) and Kim Marshall (2008) also described the critical nature of developing collaborative relationships with teachers around the design and monitoring of high quality curriculum, instruction and assessments. Schmoker stated, “Schools won’t improve until the average building leader begins to work cooperatively with teachers to truly, meaningfully oversee and improve instructional quality” (p. 29). Marshall maintained that school leaders must prioritize collaborative, close work with teachers in classrooms given the many other tasks that can consume time each day.

Focus on High Quality Goals

Phillip Hallinger spent several decades studying instructional leadership. He conceptualized instructional leadership using three dimensions, defining the school’s mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive climate for learning (Hallinger, 2003). According to Hallinger, it was the first dimension of instructional leadership that most strongly influenced school and student outcomes (Hallinger, 2005). This dimension was comprised of two main tasks, framing and communicating clear school goals. But while Hallinger supported the framing and communication of clear goals, he did not speak to the quality of those goals or to the process of creating them.

Goldring et al. (2009) posited that a leader should ensure the existence of “individual, team, and school goals for rigorous student academic and social learning” (p. 8). They claimed that it was important for principals to communicate clear, measurable
goals for student progress and achievement around academic content. Their conceptual framework differed from Hallinger’s in that it measured the quality of the goals communicated and created by principals, not just the quantity and existence of goals. This emphasis on quality is important. Leaders can create and communicate poorly crafted goals, thereby leading their schools to disappointing outcomes. In addition to being of high quality, Goldring and her associates contend that goals should focus on outcomes that are absolute, not normed, and which apply equally to all students in a school. While this is a worthwhile criterion to apply to a goal statement, it may not incorporate the influence of context on the work of instructional leadership, which these researchers agree is important.

Leithwood, Anderson, Mascall, and Strauss (2010) recently described the four paths through which school leaders exert indirect influence on student learning. One of the paths was termed “Academic Press” (p.2). The development and communication of shared goals, establishment of high expectations, and clarification of shared goals focused on academic achievement were all ways to improve academic press, according to these researchers. What distinguished this conception of establishing and communicating high expectations and standards for learning was their inclusion of the word “shared.” In their framework, leaders were most effective when they involved others in the creation, monitoring, and implementation of school goals.

In their meta-analysis of studies relating leadership and student outcomes, Robinson et al. (2008) found that setting and communicating goals yielded an average effect size of 0.42 standard deviations, which is considered a moderately large effect. Overall, they found that goals with an academic focus were found in higher achieving
schools. Also in those schools, leadership and organization were aligned around those high academic goals. As part of the monitoring and implementation of academic goals, principals in high performing schools ensured that all staff systematically monitored student test results and that student performance formed the basis for improvements to the school’s processes. Robinson et al. also found that skillful management of and focus on established goals was important for school leaders because they faced many distractions in the normal course of their work. Part of what I hoped to uncover through this study was how leaders in central office mitigate or exacerbate those distractions for school administrators.

**Provide Professional Development**

In more recent research pieces, Phillip Hallinger has described the notion that leaders can support quality teaching, and ultimately student learning, by providing high quality professional development opportunities for their teachers, fostering collaboration, and encouraging shared practice among teachers (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). By conveying the expectation that everyone in the school and district will have a part to play in enacting instructional leadership and by assistsing staff in fulfilling their instructional leadership role, school administrators can have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning in a school (Hallinger et al., 2010). Using professional development experiences as an opportunity to develop a shared language around teaching and learning, creating team leadership, and developing school-wide assessments and curricular frameworks all facilitate the building of instructional leadership skills in school staff (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). It is through the enactment of these practices that
leaders and staff members can co-construct a culture of collegial learning and professional behavior.

Viviane Robinson included this aspect of instructional leadership in several of her studies. One meta-analysis yielded a finding that principal support for and participation in teacher learning yielded an effect size of 0.84 standard deviations, which is a large effect. This support and participation not only took the form of formal professional development experiences but also took place during informal conversations about practice (Robinson et al., 2008). By supporting quality professional development for teachers and by allocating the resources necessary to support it, school leaders can positively impact the quality of instruction and professional behavior in schools, thereby improving student learning.

**The Role of Central Office**

In most public school districts in the United States, including the state of Pennsylvania, school administrators work under the direction of some type of central office. Central office staff typically includes a superintendent along with a variety of other professionals, which vary by district. The role of the central office has changed over time, but it has generally maintained a supervisory role over school administrators. The central office is also responsible for creating the district-level culture, vision, and policies that comprise the context for school administrators’ work. In this section, I will explore the evolving role of the central office as it relates to the instructional leadership of school leaders. Principals and assistant principals cannot do the work of instructional leadership alone. They must engage in the work in an environment that supports and even demands
Central office staff can and should play a large role in creating this type of environment for school leaders.

The role of central office administrators is changing in public school districts. These changes reflect the growing understanding of the primacy of the teaching and learning process in schools. While we have traditionally understood this teaching and learning to take place in classrooms, it has been less clear how teaching and learning takes place among the adults in a school system. Yet adults can and must continually learn new practices and information in order to keep abreast of new knowledge generated by researchers and through practice itself.

Increasingly, the demands of school reform and accountability have caused central office staff to become more involved in the work of district schools (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004). Central office staff have taken on a variety of roles, from setting vision to arranging for professional development for principals to leading Principal Professional Learning Communities (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Honig, 2009, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2004; Townsend et al., 2013). These evolving roles for school and district administrators require that we re-examine the interactions between these staff members and how central office staff can effectively support school administrators in their roles as instructional leaders.

Recent research has uncovered the fact that effective central office leaders can and do support effective instructional leadership on the part of school principals and assistant principals (Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004). As far back as 1985, Hallinger and Murphy found that principals tended to enact what district administrators expected. They noted that principals engaged more consistently with
aspects of leadership, such as supervision of teaching, when those aspects were a focus for the district office. Effective district leaders establish vision, goals, and positive culture, all of which are similar to the role of effective school administrators. They also provide opportunities for professional development, allocate resources, and interpret policy for school principals and teachers (Leithwood et al., 2004; Townsend et al., 2013). When district leaders engage in these types of effective practices, schools and districts are more successful than those with ineffective district leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Wendy Togneri and Stephen Anderson (2003) reported on successful reform efforts by five large, urban school districts. Several aspects of their report focused on the role of central office in leading and shaping these successful reforms. In all cases, the central office in these districts re-conceptualized their role, shifting from one that mainly focused on policy, management, and politics to one that focused on student achievement and high quality instruction. They found that central office staff who included a focus on developing an in-house network of experts by strengthening principal and teacher instructional leadership, strategically aligned and allocated resources to support professional development, and provided principals and teachers with data around which they could have conversations about changing instruction were successful in seeing improved student achievement and a more positive school culture. These districts also established principal training and support systems, coordinated development of district-wide curriculum, established and implemented accountability systems, and “expected principals to act as the primary instructional leaders at the school sites and provided significant support to help reach this ideal” (p. 7). While this report included detailed descriptions of results, it included little about the details of the interactions that took
place between central office staff and school principals. The “how” of these processes was not discussed. My study explored those interactions with the goal of better understanding how others might engage in similarly effective practice in their own sites.

As the research described thus far has demonstrated, there are several ways that central office staff can support the instructional leadership of principals and assistant principals. Central office staff can communicate a focus on high expectations for the organization, establish trusting, collaborative relationships with staff, create opportunities for professional development focused on quality goals, and shield school administrators from tasks unrelated to instructional leadership. Each of these aspects of central office support will be described in more detail in the following section. Without such support from central office, it is highly unlikely that school administrators will be able to sustain engagement with the practices of effective instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013).

**Communicate a Focus on High Expectations**

Hallinger (2003) wrote that setting organizational goals and holding high expectations for both staff and students were associated with positive school outcomes. Goldring et al. (2009) found that the establishment of clear, measurable, high-level goals was a foundational part of the work of school leaders. It was upon these goals that many of the other aspects of instructional leadership that resulted in successful schools rested. These researchers posit that resource allocation, professional learning, and many other actions should be based on clearly articulated goals that operationalize the high standards and expectations held by the leader (Goldring et al., 2009). In fact, much of the research described in earlier sections around the setting of high standards by principals can also be
applied to central office staff. Through establishing and communicating high standards for all members of the district and by engaging in processes around shared goals for academic and professional learning, central office staff can have an indirect but positive influence on student achievement and on school culture (Goldring et al., 2009; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger et al., 2010).

Other authors, such as Mike Schmoker (2006), described the critical role of central office in supporting the instructional leadership of school administrators. In his book, *Results Now*, he posited that those in authority, in this case the central office, either “supported or constrained” the effectiveness of those below them (p. 151). He recommended that district leaders use their unique position to keep schools focused on quality curriculum, instruction, and assessment with high expectations for student outcomes. He also pointed out that central office staff were in a position to ensure that reforms, goals, and effective practices were shared across all schools in a district. Without such oversight by the central office, it was not always likely or possible for successful practice to be scaled up from the classroom to the district level. This resulted in uneven outcomes for students and a lack of cohesion across district schools.

*Create a Trusting, Collaborative Culture*

A great deal of research has been conducted on the important role of trust in producing positive, successful results in organizations. Trust is a crucial component of any relationship, including the relationship between central office and school administrators. In order for district staff to successfully support school administrators in their work as instructional leaders, they must work to establish trusting relationships both with one another and with school staff. Indeed, Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider
(2002) described the critical nature of relational trust for any school system hoping to enact change or instructional improvement. It is the development of this type of relational trust that is a key role for central office and school staff.

Adams and Miskell (2016) examined the role of teacher trust in district administrators as they worked to build expertise and capacity within one urban school district. They began with the premise that trust in district administrators was essential to enacting successful educational practices and growing expertise within district staff. They found that teacher trust in district administration had a significant effect on their commitment to their work and on their openness to new practices. While this study uncovered new information about the relationship of trust between teachers and district staff, it did not directly describe how trust impacted relationships between district and school leaders.

Chhoun, Gilkey, Gonzalez, Daly, and Chrispeels (2007) studied the role of trust as they worked with one school district engaged in a district-university partnership as a method of school reform. Issues of trust arose as the district office and school leaders worked together. The hierarchical nature of public school districts and relative isolation of the work of school leaders made the social interactions so useful in building trust difficult for the central office and school administrators they studied. These researchers posited that “central office administrators’ actions may be critical in the trust-building process” (p. 231). The district studied had grown larger over time, and some of the close relationships fostered when the district was smaller had weakened due to the lessening amount of in-person interaction between staff members. In response, the central office put three actions into place in order to grow trust between district and school leaders.
These were changing the content of team meetings, making more in-person visits to schools, and bringing leaders from across the district together around topics of practice. The researchers found that these actions were very helpful in building more trusting relationships between district and school staff.

Other researchers have explored the critical relationship between trust and successful school reform efforts. Alan Daly and Kara Finnigan (2012) studied the role of social capital and trust in one urban district as it tried to enact school reform measures. They found that these elements were missing both among central office administrators and between central office and school administrators in the district, thereby inhibiting the district’s ability to enact improvements. Their study emphasized the relational nature of the work of schools and the fact that trust is a necessary component of such work. However, as is the case in much published research on this topic, their study was situated in an urban school district. Since such districts are typically large both in terms of number of schools and number of administrators, it seems logical that relational trust might be an issue. Opportunities for face-to-face interaction between administrators are more limited when a district is large. While this study will include one such district, it will also examine interactions between central office and school administrators in smaller suburban and rural districts as well. I hope to uncover different insight into this issue through my research.

Bottery (2003) also described the essential role of trust in the relational work of schools. He claimed that learning within organizations will not take place to the extent needed without the presence of trust. Others, such as Durand, Lawson, Wilcox and Schiller (2016) reported that districts whose central office administrators successfully
built trusting, communicative relationships with school principals were able to enact the Common Core State Standards more smoothly than those who did not. It is clear from a review of this literature that trust and collaborative working relationships are an important component of successful work between central office and school administrators.

**Create Opportunities for Quality Professional Development**

Similar to the way school principals can and should support professional learning for teachers, the central office can and should support professional learning for school administrators. Research has demonstrated that professional development that is focused on high-level academic goals and sustained over time can have a positive impact on professional practice (Goldring et al., 2009; Hallinger, 2003; Honig, 2012; Robinson et al., 2008). In 2008, Robinson et al. found that when leaders support and participate in professional development for staff, there is a large, positive effect on school outcomes. Although most of the research she analyzed used the school principal as the unit of analysis, I suspect that the support and participation of the central office may also have a positive impact on school districts.

Meredith Honig (2012) studied three urban school districts that were implementing reform strategies involving the central office’s support for principals’ instructional leadership. She focused on central office staff whose primary responsibility was to work with principals to grow their instructional leadership practice, which she termed Instructional Leadership Directors (ILDs). Her findings indicated that ILDs who saw themselves as teachers and had a peer group comprised of effective instructional
leaders that supported each other’s practice had a positive impact on principals’ instructional leadership.

Honig (2012) described the concept of ILDs who thought of themselves as teachers as those who engaged in five practices on a consistent basis. One was joint work, meaning that central office staff worked and learned alongside school administrators as they engaged in instructional leadership practices. Second was differentiation, which involved tailoring interactions to the needs of school administrators and context. Third was modeling whereby central office staff demonstrated effective practice to school leaders. Fourth was the use of tools, such as teacher evaluation rubrics or school culture surveys, to guide the practice of school administrators. The final aspect of the central office as teacher was brokering. This involved not only providing external and internal supports to school administrators but also buffering them from the distractions of other district departments and external policies. Central office staff who saw themselves as administrators tasked primarily with overseeing adherence to policy or had an ineffective or nonexistent peer group were less successful at supporting school administrators. This study further points to practices that can be supportive of school administrators’ instructional leadership and makes that point that it is possible for central office leaders to act in ways that strengthen the instructional leadership practices of these school leaders.

Building on her prior study of central office instructional leadership, Meredith Honig, along with Lydia Rainey (2014), studied the ways that central office staff enact instructional leadership in support of principals’ practice. They studied six central office administrators in an urban school district to find out the impact of the Principal Professional Learning Community (PPLC) initiative that was introduced in the district.
They described two ways that central office staff approached their work in leading these PPLCs. One was as a manager. These leaders felt that their main role in facilitating principal instructional leadership was to find times for the principals to meet in their PPLC, to set expectations for the work and to find outside facilitators to manage the actual work of the PPLCs. The second was as a teacher. These leaders felt that their role was to act as a facilitator of the principals’ learning and as a collaborator in the study of instructional leadership practice. Honig and Rainey used the lens of socio-cultural learning theory to explain why those who approached their role as teachers were more supportive of effective instructional leadership for principals. They found that central office staff who were focused on joint work with principals, developed and used tools, engaged in talk that challenged practice, created opportunities for all principals to contribute expertise to the group, and brokered interactions between schools and other district departments had a more positive influence on principal learning and engagement in the PPLC.

**Shield School Administrators from Non-Instructional Tasks**

A final area in which central office personnel can support the instructional leadership of school administrators is in shielding them from tasks that interfere with their focus on instructional leadership. LeFavre and Robinson (2015) reported on the fact that school administrators are widely believed to have job demands that make it challenging for them to find adequate time to effectively lead teaching and learning. They listed several barriers to focusing on instructional leadership tasks, such as administrative tasks, school size, and school context. While these authors did not specifically name the central office as a mitigating factor in shielding school administrators from such tasks,
they did confirm the fact that principals and assistant principals face challenges to focusing on instructional leadership.

Meredith Honig (2012) described the concept of shielding school administrators as buffering. She found that central office staff who made it a priority to shield principals from tasks such as building maintenance and communication with other central office departments were able to help school administrators spend more time and focus on managing teaching and learning in their schools. Central office administrators also removed external demands, modified mandated tasks, and completed tasks for school administrators to help them devote more attention to instructional leadership.

Hallinger and Murphy (2012) described the fact that school administrators often have a difficult time enacting effective instructional leadership due to the demands of the managerial aspects of their work. School administrators frequently face unexpected, external demands on their time. These demands cause them to postpone or cancel such plans as visiting classrooms, leading curriculum meetings, and analyzing student achievement data, all of which are important components of effectively leading teaching and learning in schools.

In their study of school districts, Togneri and Anderson (2003) found that districts that refined their focus to minimize the amount attention given to tasks that were unrelated to teaching and learning achieved better student outcomes than those that did not. In these districts, central office staff not only modeled a focus on aspects of instructional leadership such as curriculum creation, student data analysis, and collaboration around professional leaning, but they reimagined their roles as well as the
The Role of Context

Researchers have long understood the importance of context in shaping practice. Whether we are examining qualitative or quantitative research, we are sure to see the researcher detail the participants, sample, site, and other aspects of context as they are critical to how we interpret what we learn. I hypothesize that context has an equally important part to play in the ways that central office and school leaders interact around instructional leadership.

The role of context on the practice of instructional leadership by school leaders has been examined by several researchers. Phillip Hallinger found that the effectiveness of any type of leadership, including instructional leadership, is dependent upon context (Hallinger, 2003). As someone who has studied the topic of instructional leadership for many years, he noted that definitions of effective instructional leadership continue to evolve based on changing school contexts. He cited several aspects of context that seem to be most relevant for school leaders as they seek to select from among the many practices researchers have deemed to be effective those that are most effective for their given context. These include the socioeconomic status (SES) of the students and of the community in which the school is housed, a school’s current level of student achievement and associated perception of school success, and a supportive district culture that expects school leaders to focus on instructional leadership and provides opportunities for school leaders to continue to develop their skills. Hallinger also stated that leadership is a
process of mutual influence. All aspects of context influence the leader, at any level, as much as she influences that context. As a researcher, I am very interested in exploring this concept of influence. Do contextual factors such as access to resources, which is sometimes measured by the socioeconomic status of a school’s community, and support from the central office influence a school leader’s practice of instructional leadership? Does the school leader’s perception of support by her/his central office vary based on context?

Another group of researchers discussed the role of context as they studied Chicago Public School District’s de-centralization initiative, which was enacted in the 1990s. This team found that, at first glance, factors such as a neighborhood’s socioeconomic status, level of crime, and size did not seem to make a difference in its ability to benefit from the local governance model that was being attempted (Bryk et al., 2010). In this model, central office had little, if any, influence over school leaders’ practices of instructional leadership. However, as Anthony Bryk and his team analyzed the data more closely, they came to learn that those schools housed in communities of extreme poverty did not fare as well under a de-centralized system as those with better access to resources. They found that, in such neighborhoods, community members were unable to provide the type of stability, social capital, and attention to schooling that those in better-resourced neighborhoods could provide. The sites selected for my study had similar disparities in access to resources. Part of what I hoped to learn was whether this aspect of context had any impact on the ways school administrators were supported by the central office in the practice of instructional leadership.
Another aspect of context found to be relevant to a school’s success in Chicago was size. Bryk and his team found that, in smaller schools, leaders were better able to develop the trusting relationships needed to enact instructional leadership (Bryk et al., 2010). In addition, these researchers found that there were factors associated with under-resourced schools, such as greater student mobility and teacher turnover, that were associated with more negative school outcomes. In these ways, the team found that school size and access to resources influenced the practices and effectiveness of school leaders. Left unanswered was the question of whether this was also true at the district level. Since their study was examining Chicago’s experiment with de-centralization, it did not give much insight into whether the size and access to resources of a district will impact the practice of its leaders at both the district and school level.

Bryk also co-authored a quantitative study of elementary schools in Chicago. His team surveyed 5,290 teachers from 248 elementary schools to learn more about the development of professional community and its impact on teacher learning (Bryk et al., 1999). According to these researchers, urban schools, such as those in Chicago, face unique challenges that make collaborative, innovative work difficult. Work in urban schools is often hurried and focused on short-term goals. It is also subject to frequent redirection from external entities. While this study cited the relevance of context on the quality of interactions between teachers, it did not address the ways that these challenges might impact the interactions between school and district leaders. I hypothesize that they will, perhaps presenting some of the same roadblocks to collegial, innovative work that they caused between teachers.
Melinda Mangin (2007) conducted a study that examined the interactions between school and teacher leaders in five school districts in New Jersey. All the districts were considered small, which she defined as housing between 2200 and 7500 students. Four of the five school districts studied were low SES as measured by a New Jersey state ranking system. Although her study did not directly examine the role of the central office in influencing the interactions between school and teacher leaders, she nonetheless found that district staff did shape these interactions through the form and frequency of its communication about what those interactions should look and sound like. Mangin also found that influence did not always equal support. In her study, central office staff sometimes hindered effective interactions between school and teacher leaders. My study examined the influence of the central office more directly with the goal of uncovering additional information about how interaction with the central office shaped school leaders’ instructional leadership.

Research conducted by Patricia Burch (2007) further pointed to the influence of context on interactions between school and district leaders. Her study was conducted, as are many that deal with the topic of instructional leadership, in three large, urban school districts. Using qualitative techniques, she examined the way that the instructional leadership practices of school leaders were influenced by context. Her focus was on political and policy contexts, but she uncovered some interesting findings related to other aspects of context as well. She speculated that with increased attention to instructional leadership and additional resources to support it, tension around its effective enactment increased accordingly. She found that district practices had a mediating role on how school administrators enacted instructional leadership but that research has largely
ignored the role of the central office in shaping the instructional leadership practices of school leaders. However, all the districts involved in her study had a relatively large central office staff with many departments and levels of hierarchy. One may wonder if this mediating role would be similar in districts with a smaller central office staff, as is often the case in suburban and rural school districts.

A recent study by Carraway and Young (2015) was conducted in a rural school district that they considered to be large, housing 9000 students. Half of the students in that district were considered low SES since they qualified to receive a free/reduced lunch. The district had adequate access to resources and had recently implemented a program called Skillful Observation and Coaching Laboratory (SOCL) to improve their school leaders’ instructional leadership practices. Using interviews, observations, and document review, they found that principals sometimes voiced frustration about the role played by their central office administrators.

These school leaders felt that their central office asked them to focus on far too many initiatives, making it difficult for them to enact any of them well. While the central office wanted the principals to fully implement SOCL, it did not provide adequate time or focus on that program, which was time-consuming and challenging for school administrators to implement well. In this rural district, whose access to resources may have allowed them to take on a great many initiatives and programs, school leaders experienced frustration and voiced an inability to perform well as instructional leaders. Could access to resources and a small size be problematic for school and district leaders as they interact around instructional leadership? Through my study, I sought to learn more about how the role of the central office in shaping the instructional leadership of
school leaders may vary based on district size, type and access to resources. Several researchers have found that it does, but they have not done so by comparing varying types of contexts. I will examine the role of central office through comparing different types of districts, thereby yielding unique information about how the role may vary.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceived role of the central office in shaping the instructional leadership of principals and assistant principals and to explore the role that context may play in influencing these interactions. The gathering of such perceptual information has the potential to help the field have a better understanding of the views of participants in their sites of practice. Data collection consisted of one-on-one interviews and analysis of documents related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

This study was focused on a genuine problem of practice concerning the instructional leadership of school and central office administrators in public schools in Pennsylvania. As the Assistant to the Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction in my school district, I am charged with supporting our school administrators in their role as instructional leaders. Learning more about how I can do that well is important to me as it directly impacts my job performance and indirectly impacts our students. The way practitioners describe and perceive their work around instructional leadership was what I hoped to learn more about through this study. Therefore, this study employed a qualitative design. Qualitative research methods are most effective when seeking to understand how the participants in a setting define and perceive their practice (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Ravitch & Riggins, 2012).

To gain an understanding of how principals and central office staff in my region define, support, and practice instructional leadership, I used practitioner action research, a
qualitative research methodology (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). Practitioner action research has emerged as an effective method for helping people solve problems of practice that are directly relevant to their site and to their professional goals (Anderson et al., 2007). This type of design is best for coming to a deep understanding of phenomena that are relevant to participants (Anderson et al., 2007; Deemer, 2004; Hill, 2007). This methodological approach may potentially allow for a different understanding about instructional leadership that is uniquely relevant to my site of practice.

Anderson et al. (2007) described action research as being uniquely positioned to support problem solving for practitioners in specific contexts, asserting that one strength of action research is that the research takes place in a natural setting. Second, action research allows for the incorporation of tacit knowledge into the data. Tacit knowledge is often unspoken and undefined in an organization, but it is known well by those who live and work within a group. Practitioner action research allows participants to become more aware of this tacit knowledge and how it impacts their work. Since my research questions involve perceptions about aspects of instructional leadership that are important to participants, which are often tacit and unexamined in the day-to-day work of public schools, this approach will yield useful information (Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta, & LaParo, 2006). By making the “familiar strange” (Anderson et al., 2007), I can help my colleagues reexamine what we believe about our practice and how those beliefs influence our instructional leadership.

A third benefit is that the phenomenological approach of action research permits a focus on how the participants themselves define their behavior (Anderson et al., 2007). This will allow participants to describe and define what they believe to be true about
what instructional leadership is and how it can be effectively supported and enacted in schools and districts. Finally, action research includes flexibility in design so participants can shape the research while in progress; this is typically titled emergent design (Anderson et al., 2007; Maxwell, 2013). As I learned from my colleagues and themes began to emerge during data collection, refinements to data collection methods, research questions, and conclusions were made based on that data to better capture what participants believed about effective instructional leadership.

In the next section, I will describe the participants and sites selected for study. I will then go on to describe in more detail the specific methods I employed and how I addressed issues of validity.

**Research Sample**

This study employed a purposeful sampling strategy. Such as strategy “provides context-rich and detailed accounts of specific populations” (Ravitch & Carl, 2015, p. 128). Participants for this study were selected from among public school districts in Pennsylvania. Since I used in-person interviews as a main source of data, I selected districts that were geographically close to my site of practice, which is the Lincoln Area School District¹ in Pennsylvania. Table 1 describes all nearby districts considered as study sites in terms of type, number of schools, students, school administrators and central office administrators involved in teaching and learning, and median household income.

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¹ Pseudonyms will be used throughout this document.
Table 1

School Districts in PA REGION X

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Central Office Staff</th>
<th>School Admins</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Median Household Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District G</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2082</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$43,646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District A</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2176</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$37,455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District H</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3813</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$43,069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District B</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11815</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>$33,049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District C</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1617</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>$72,537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District I</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2113</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$52,732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District J</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2173</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>$48,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District K</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1743</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$47,091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District L</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2068</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>$62,988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District D</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1218</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>$54,160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District M</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7205</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>$56,379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District E</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1684</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$46,622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District F</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1452</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$48,174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District N</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3050</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$45,252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District O</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1159</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$42,982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District P</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4499</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$33,955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Q</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1407</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$61,883</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


To adequately explore the role of context, a comparison-focused sampling strategy was used. Since this study aimed to examine the role of district size, type, and access to resources, sites and participants were selected to allow for the inclusion of these criteria. Principals and assistant principals from elementary, middle and high schools and all central office staff involved in teaching and learning, which included superintendents, assistant superintendents, curriculum directors, and assessment coordinators, when these
roles existed in a district, from six school districts were invited to participate in interviews and share documents. I did not include special education directors, business managers, or human resource staff in the central office invitations as these personnel do not typically have a direct role in managing teaching and learning in our area of the state. These districts included rural, suburban, and urban types. They varied according to access to resources, which was determined by dividing the median household income of district residents by the number of students enrolled. The sites also varied by size, which was measured by average number of students per school and total number of schools.

To select districts for participation, I examined the data detailed in Table 1. I sorted the data according to type of school since I wanted to have representation from rural, suburban, and urban sites. District B was the only urban site in this region of the state, so it was automatically included. From the suburban sites, of which there were only five, all of which were of comparable size, I selected one with low access to resources and one with high access. To select from among the rural sites, I examined not just total number of schools and total number of students but the average number of students per school and average per student expenditure based on median income. I selected three rural sites of the eleven available. While all had a small number of students overall, they varied on the number of students per school. They also varied by median income. For each district, I obtained a letter of support from its superintendent (see Appendix A).

In five of the six sites, I interviewed all willing principals and assistant principals in the district. In District B, which had over fifty potential participants, I used the sampling strategy described above to ensure that participants were selected from schools within the district that represented a variety of sizes and access to resources. Of the forty-
four school administrators employed by District B, I invited eighteen to participate (approximately 41% of the total). In all six district sites, I interviewed all willing central office administrators involved in teaching and learning. In total, I interviewed fifty-one of the sixty-two invited participants, 85% of the number invited. Those who declined to be interviewed cited scheduling conflicts as the reason in eight cases; three invited participants declined to respond to my request for unknown reasons. I made three attempts to contact each of those three invitees. Those who declined did not represent a sizable number from any particular district, gender, or position. Therefore, I am confident that their lack of participation did not unduly influence my findings. In addition to conducting interviews, I collected curriculum documents, when available, and comprehensive plans from all participant districts. Table 2 details the number of participants invited and the number who participated in each District selected.
Table 2

Participants by Role and District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>School Administrators</th>
<th>Central Office Administrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Invited</td>
<td>Participating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District A</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District B</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District C</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District D</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District E</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District F</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection Strategies

To answer the research questions I posed in the outset of this proposal, I used an emergent design strategy in the collection of data. Anderson et al. (2007) describe an emergent design as a common characteristic of practitioner action research. Such a design allows for flexibility so that the researcher can make changes as the study progresses based on what is learned and on feedback from the participants who should ultimately benefit from the study. My data collection strategy consisted of interviews and document review.

Interviews

To learn about the views of school and central office administrators in selected districts, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Using a semi-structured interview format allowed me the flexibility to deviate from my interview protocols (see Appendices B and C), to pursue other paths of questions that seemed relevant when they arose while keeping the interview focused on my research questions (Rubin & Rubin,
2012). By allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words, one-on-one interviews allowed for the personal interpretation of experience that is at the heart of qualitative research (Anderson et al., 2007; Maxwell, 2013). Each participant was interviewed once. Before each interview, the participant signed an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix D). Interviews lasted for approximately one hour to ninety minutes, during which time school administrators were asked about the ways they felt central office administrators shaped their practice of instructional leadership. Central office administrators involved in teaching and learning were asked about the ways they felt they have shaped the instructional leadership practices of school administrators. Interviews were digitally recorded. I personally transcribed the first twenty-five interviews to assist with my ongoing analysis. The remaining interviews were transcribed by an online service.

**Document Review**

Concurrent with interviews was document review. Curriculum documents, when they existed, along with the state-required comprehensive plan were examined. From these documents, I hoped to learn more about how support for instructional leadership was enacted and communicated by central office and school administrators. Since interview data is inherently based on self-perception and self-report data, confirming responses with documents was a useful way to strengthen the validity of my findings (Anderson et al., 2007; Maxwell, 2013).
Data Analysis

Analysis of qualitative data began as soon as my first interview was completed. I used several strategies to help me note patterns, emerging themes, and possible theories as my data collection progressed (Miles, Huberman, & Sladana, 2014). Initial analysis began during the process of interviewing principals and central office leaders. I made decisions about what to ask and what to exclude, which represented a first analysis of the phenomena I was studying (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). Analysis continued as I personally transcribed the first twenty-five interviews. Atlas TI software was used as a tool to help organize documents, code data, and conduct my analysis.

Data was condensed through the use of coding, categorizing and analytic memos (Miles et al., 2014). Initial coding was completed using a set of a priori codes taken from my conceptual framework. The first twenty transcripts were coded using this initial code list; additional codes were created as new topics emerged from participants. Throughout the process of data collection, transcription, and coding, all of which were ongoing, codes were eliminated, collapsed, and added as I attempted to accurately reflect the views of participants. The initial and final code lists can be found in Appendices E and F, respectively.

After the first twenty-five transcripts were coded, data was analyzed to note emergent themes. These themes were determined as topics were voiced by participants, such as curriculum work, professional development, and assessment. More focused coding followed based on amended categories, allowing for more focused coding based on the inductive codes that emerged in the first round of coding. For example, the code professional development had yielded over two hundred pieces of data. Those data pieces
were then subjected to a second cycle of coding, noting them as either professional development for teachers, professional development for administrators, or professional development for central office to yield more specific information about who provided the professional development and to which group of staff members (Emerson et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014).

After two cycles of coding, themes were identified as multiple participants voiced similar ideas. Data was analyzed in two ways, first by participant type (school or central office administrator) then by district. This allowed me to first determine more general themes about district support for instructional leadership then determine themes about such support by district. This approach to analysis allowed me to focus on my research questions. Findings are arranged accordingly, beginning with general themes around district role, support, and roadblocks found across all participating districts followed by more comparative findings that delineate differences that appeared to be related to district context. Research memos were created to help me organize and refine my thinking throughout this study and to guide the course of data collection and analysis (Emerson et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2013). Excerpts of data and findings were shared with a group of cohort colleagues to act as a check on the accuracy of my analysis. In this way, I hoped to present themes that represented the prevailing perceptions of participants.

**Researcher Roles/Issues of Validity**

*Validity*

To address issues of validity and trustworthiness in my study, I used a variety of methods. First, triangulation was achieved through the selection of multiple methods of
data collection and multiple participant viewpoints (Anderson et al., 2007; Maxwell, 2013). Second, a group of colleagues from my doctoral cohort was utilized through all phases of the study. The feedback I received through discussions with this group were incorporated into my study design, data collection, and data analysis to establish trustworthiness in my findings. Finally, feedback from the members of my dissertation committee were incorporated into my design to strengthen it and to increase the trustworthiness of my findings.

**Researcher Role and Positionality**

As Maxwell (2013) stated, the researcher is the primary instrument of qualitative research. Therefore, I felt that it was critical that I examine my own positionality in relation to this research. I am a former teacher who has worked in self-contained elementary and departmentalized middle school classrooms. Most of my experience is in suburban, parochial, and urban school settings; therefore, my expectations, definitions, and practice of instructional leadership were formed in those settings. I have a strong personal conviction that everyone involved in education, be they central office leaders, building principals, or teachers, should view themselves as teachers first. In investigating the way that others in my context view their roles as instructional leaders, I needed to guard against my own personal bias toward the primacy of the act of teaching.

Since I have worked in the field of education for over twenty years, all of which have been spent in Pennsylvania, several of the districts selected for participation in this study include staff with whom I have had a working relationship in the past. The fact that we have worked together and have some preexisting relationships may have impacted the data I collected. I remained mindful of that fact as I completed my data analysis and
worked to avoid making assumptions based on prior knowledge, focusing instead on the
data at hand.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The Role of the Central Office

The first research question that guided this study asked about the role of the district office, which is often used interchangeably with the term central office, in shaping the instructional leadership of school administrators. I found that the central office played an important role in shaping the instructional leadership practices of school administrators in all districts studied. While this role varied, it was nonetheless a powerful force in shaping what happened at the building level in each district. Some roles were similar across all districts; others varied. These roles were consistent with my conceptual framework. However, one aspect of central office support, shielding school administrators from tasks that might distract them from their work with instructional leadership, is described in a separate section as it was found to be supportive when present yet a roadblock when absent.

In this first section, I will describe the roles that were similar across most or all districts, of which there were three. One was guiding curriculum and assessment work in the district. Another was providing professional development opportunities for teachers and for school administrators. The third was creating and communicating expectations for the work that took place in the district around teaching and learning.

Curriculum and Assessment

One of the main roles played by the central office was around curriculum and assessment. District staff provided processes, documents, resources, expectations, and
even mandates that made it possible for school administrators to engage in instructional leadership in their schools. In the following section, I will describe in detail the role of the central office in creating processes, documents and mandates around curriculum. I will then describe how central office staff provided resources, guidance, and feedback around common assessments. These examples represent practices that school administrators found to be supportive.

Curriculum

Participants in Districts A, B, C, and F cited the central office as a supportive partner in the creation and dissemination of curriculum. The form and content of this curriculum varied from district to district, with some providing open, online access to all stakeholders within a system and others providing paper or electronic documents housed internally. These districts also created and enacted processes in the development of curriculum and selection of curriculum materials that were effective.

An example of how districts created processes around curriculum was found in District A. One central office administrator described the process the district followed for selecting a new reading textbook. He had spent time building a broad group of teachers who had a lot of voice in the selection. “As a result of that, there’s been a high level of engagement on the part of teachers to really allowing the program to work the way it’s supposed to do and they’re happier that way. They didn’t get it, you know, force-fed to them this time” (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016).

In District A, the process of curriculum development was led by central office staff. As one central office administrator explained,
We spent some time researching how we wanted the framework, and so we came to a consensus of we wanted a snapshot of the entire year broken down by unit, weeks, instructional resources, materials, all that...we did reading one year, math and science one year, we did social studies one year. So that department spent the year working on and revising, and then there was a review of and approval process that department head and instructional coach, building administrator, central office administrator, so we reviewed all the curriculum documents, sent it back for revision, brought it back through. And so at this point, all those curriculums have been updated, and then at the end of the year, each year we try to do a part of an in-service day as department review, revision, update your curriculum maps. So as far as core curriculum, I feel that we’re right in line, that it’s updated, it’s revised, it’s matched to the standards and eligible content. (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016)

Several participants in District B shared about the helpful involvement of central office staff in the development of curriculum. For example, in one high school, a content area department made changes to its curriculum based on student test scores. The district took notice, and central office staff began to examine the curriculum more closely so that it could be implemented in other district high schools. As the principal explained,

We feel, based on our numbers last year, that that’s showing some promise, and now the district’s actually looking at us saying, you made some pretty nice strides with your [content]. What are you doing? So they’re in here looking at our teachers and our content and our curriculum, and that’s gonna be what the district is. (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016)

He went on to explain additional support his school received from the central office.

[Curriculum Director] was a good resource on that, one, because that’s her forte, where she comes from, from language arts. But two, her experience with the state writing the test, looking at the questions and so forth, really helped us structure in this way and work with this. So our language arts teachers who have to update those maps, and they’re doing that right now, as we speak, as well as teaching it, so I’m very curious and very excited to see what fruit that’s gonna bear because we weren’t too far off with, you know, hitting our target numbers. (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016)

His comments seem to indicate that he and his staff trusted that the advice provided by the curriculum director would result in improved student outcomes.
A school administrator from District C described central office involvement in the revision of the district math curriculum.

Our curriculum director is a very big driving force behind that...as far as making sure that...If we're going to go out and spend on curriculum, he wants to know that we're getting the right stuff, and so he really makes the team sit down. (District C AP2, June 23, 2016)

Administrators in District F described changes that were made to their district’s curriculum development process as the result of central office leadership. When asked to describe the process, one school administrator shared,

The before was they [teachers] wrote it all. When I wrote mine in civics they let me use my textbook and we wrote it outa there and they looked at it and approved it. That changed with a couple curriculum directors that… took the bull by the horns…and started transitioning us to a better way. [Central office administrator] really did a good job of getting teachers more motivated to do it, helped them work through rough spots where I say thank you, now I don’t have to do that. Cause I’m not very good at that. Curriculum’s not one of my specialties, and it was good to have her be the one to do it. So that’s how it’s changed. The teacher was all in control, now I feel like [central office administrator] is in control of trying to get the teachers to do it. (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016)

He went on to explain how the central office balances this desire to control the process of curriculum writing with the desire to help teachers feel that they have a voice in what they teach.

As a philosophy we let our teachers have a lot of leeway in what they teach. We don’t hand em something and say hey, teach this and we’re gonna fix it whenever we want to, and [central office administrator] likes it that way, I think. And it’s self-motivating for the teachers a little bit to have that much control. And then she works closely with em for the resources and things like that. So it’s been good and I think the district’s better off for it in the long run. (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016)

Another school administrator in District F talked about his work with the central office around Algebra I. Having selected this topic as an area of focus due to disappointing student performance on the state exam, he found the support of his central
office administrator to be valuable. “This year I focused on Algebra I, so I was working extensively with the Algebra I teachers and [central office administrator] with curriculum and stuff like that” (District F AP, Interview, June 27, 2016). Another principal shared that he appreciated the expertise of the central office around curriculum and instruction. “[Central office administrator] is the best at instruction. [Previous central office administrator] was pretty good at curriculum” (District F P1, Interview, June 9, 2016).

A third principal, who had worked with the current central office administrator while she was still a teacher, had this to say about how her role impacted curriculum in the district,

The more confident she has been, the more I think she offers to my building. Her having come from my building helps. Because, she knows a ton of the faculty. Yes, so from curriculum wise, that has helped. She is organized, she is able to get people to write their curriculum. I don't know who writes it, in your district. I'm guessing more often than not, teachers are a big player in that process, no matter where you're coming from. (District F P2, Interview, June 21, 2016)

In these four districts, the central office played a supportive role in creating processes and documents around curriculum for school administrators and teachers. School administrators found that this work enhanced their ability to work with their building staff around curriculum and instruction. Along with providing curriculum, the central office also played a role in supporting the effective use of student assessments and assessment data.

Assessment

The central office played an important role in all six district sites around student assessment. The work of central office staff around assessment varied. In some cases, the central office provided common district-level assessments. In others, it guided school
administrators and teachers in examining data. A third role involved using assessment data to guide their work and the work of schools around teaching and learning.

_Provision of common assessments._ Central office staff in Districts B and C provided various types of assessments that school administrators used in their buildings. These assessment resources were selected and purchased by the district and were used in addition to many of the no-cost resources made available by the state department of education. Having these assessment resources available provided school administrators with useful data that they later used to make decisions related to instructional leadership.

For example, one school in District B used a reading assessment called DIBELS as a tool for assessing incoming kindergarten students. “I sat down with the [kindergarten] team, we did the kids’ DIBELS right coming in since we had to screen em anyway the first few weeks of school” (District B AP4, Interview, April 26, 2016). Another school used a resource called Easy CBM to guide mathematics instruction. The school team combined this district-provided resource with other assessment sources.

We have district assessments. We also have Easy CBM for math, so that’s what we’ve been using for the math department. We check in and then look at the standards, and item analysis, Easy CBM doesn’t have item analysis but the district scans do, and we use that item analysis to go right back to the test and look at the particular problems and use the SAS or whatever else to create materials. (District B P6, Interview, May 2, 2016)

Another school administrator in District B shared what he felt were helpful aspects of assessments provided by the central office in supporting his instructional leadership.

[District B] does some things that are pretty good, for example the unit exams that they give out. That's a good benchmark…We can take that unit exam and say, "Okay, what did we get?" Because they're writing all the unit exams to PA Core,
but the curriculum itself is on Common Core. Things like that have been really
good. (District B AP7, Interview, April 14, 2016)

Assessment was cited as a priority in District C as well. When asked which areas
he felt would be worth attention in supporting student learning in his district, one central
office administrator shared, “I guess if I was gonna tackle any of that I would tackle
assessment. I think that kind of influences all of what you do” (District C CO2, Interview,
April 29, 2016). School administrators in District C seemed to understand these
expectations around assessment as evidenced by the following example shared by one
school administrator.

The elementary has been getting some benchmark testing done…in their math
area. "This is what we should have mastered, and we're going to test for it," and
so forth. I know that's a push coming from our curriculum director towards us,
too, that we're going to start developing those benchmark tests, our own personal
ones, so that we can check. (District C AP2, Interview, June 23, 2016)

*Examination of assessment data.* In addition to providing actual assessments for
school administrators to use as data sources, central office staff played a role in all six
sites in teaching administrators to analyze assessment data. A central office administrator
from District A talked about the role of assessment data and how it was used by district
staff to guide the work of the district.

We have people who are so well versed in data that sometimes when they start to
talk, we’re all like, oh no. I don’t wanna talk about PVAAS anymore. But you
know what, they bring us back around and say, you know, PVAAS shows you
growth and achievement. They bring it down to our level for us to understand the
importance of it. Everything we do is based on data. (District A CO2, Interview,
July 1, 2016)

She continued on to talk about the critical role of assessment in effective instructional
leadership.

Data is something that, if you lose sight of that, I think you’ve lost your roadmap,
because that should drive everything you do. And I believe in that. I have a
passion for it, and you know, as an instructional leader, if you don’t have that passion, if you can’t see the destination of your journey…if you don’t use those guides along the way, you don’t know where you’re going and you don’t know where you’re going to end up. And that’s how I see data, and I believe that we have experts on our administrative team that continue to keep the other ones focusing. Hey, but don’t lose sight of PVAAS or PSSA or Study Island or whatever assessment we’re using. (District A CO2, Interview, July 1, 2016)

A school administrator in District A also shared an example of how she had worked with the central office to come up with new solutions to problems she faced in her school.

I think with [central office administrator], he kind of keeps us really focused on what our job is and what we need to do for the people in the building. He talks to us a lot about data and test scores and what are we going to do (District A P1, Interview, July 5, 2016)

A central office administrator in District B shared one way that the district provided support to school administrators around assessments. “She [central office administrator] is the assessment coordinator. She educates principals on the assessments, the purpose of the assessments” (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016).

One school administrator described a time when his school’s state test scores were lower than what the school team had expected. He and his team had done all that they could think to do to address the problem, and he found a helpful resource in the central office in examining the data in a new way, ultimately resulting in new solutions.

For the first time ever in the history of [our school], we’re not doing well. We’re not showing growth. Our students are performing well but not showing growth. So the challenge is...how do you do even better? How do you squeeze that orange to get all the juice out? And that’s where I turn to the district going, ok, I’m not a language arts person. It was [central office administrator] who said let me dive deep into those scores and see what it was. When we looked at it, it was the nonfiction vs. the fiction. Most of our content was all fiction. So something that simple we were able to do. And then looking at a list of vocabulary that our teachers are or not teaching, also, so those really little fine tunings that thankfully,
you know, [central office administrator] was a good resource on that one… (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016)

One school administrator in District B talked about the importance of assessment data in helping him not only monitor student performance and the effectiveness of particular teaching practices but to make adjustments to his own practice as an instructional leader.

We go back and look at the data. I go into the classroom, I do all these things and I say ok, well how did they do? And then I go back and re-measure what I’m doing. How effective I am at going in, doing what I’m doing? That’s what I do with the instructional practices and everything. Then we look at the data. And then what does the data tell us is happening? (District B P2, Interview, April 27, 2016)

District B was unique in that it had a central office position specifically focused on assessment. She described her role in supporting principals in the district.

My main focus is to provide the principals with assessment literacy because a lot of them do not know the purpose of assessments and why we do them and how to build a proper assessment plan within their buildings, how to use the tests that we give across the district to the advantage of the teachers, and also being able to have data conversations with the teachers during professional development. I guess it's just that basic knowledge of assessment and how to use it instead of just looking at the numbers and then moving on, actually using it in making instructional decisions. (District B CO7, Interview, June 2, 2016)

In addition to providing direct support around assessment and data analysis, central office administrators provided what they hoped was easy, convenient access to information for school administrators. One central office administrator from District B shared one way that she had attempted to provide such information to district principals.

I created an assessment website off of our district main page, that has "how to do" videos of how to pull data... Every document they would need for assessment is on there. It's knowledge about assessments as well. There's a way to break down data so that they could have conversations and a step-by-step procedure of "here's how you can look at data and share it with your faculty." That's one way that I try to make their lives easier. It's all in one place and they can look at it. I try to make it as easy as possible for them to be able to find that information. I do a lot of
step-by-step things for them to provide them with knowledge and to provide them with materials that they may need to push themselves forward. (District B CO7, Interview, June 2, 2016)

Central office staff in District C echoed the prominent role of assessment in guiding their work. “The principals are all really in tune with it because a lot of our placement decisions for honors math and that sort of thing are driven by the assessment information. [Central office administrator] is the keeper of that information” (District C CO1, Interview, June 27, 2016). This thinking was confirmed by a school administrator in District C. “As far as assessment playing a role, yeah, it's big. We use numbers to make all our decisions, which kids are going to go into advanced language arts, which kids are going to go onto the advanced math” (District C AP2, Interview, June 23, 2016).

The connection between knowledge of assessment data and strong instructional leadership was also commented upon by a school administrator in District D. She stated,

The educational leader side comes in when that data is in there. Now let's pull it out, let's pull it apart, let's see where our students are performing, where are there some curriculum gaps where we're noticing that students aren't performing well in these areas at all. (District D AP2, Interview, June 7, 2016)

A central office administrator in District D reiterated this sentiment as he talked about his use of a state-provided diagnostic assessment designed to help teachers direct next instructional steps for students.

I attempt to be very data-driven. I not only pay attention to CDTs when they're going on, I have the schedule, I'm on checking the results as they're coming in. If things aren't going well, I may call that principal or [central office administrator] and say, “What the hell is going on here? I can't handle this." The teachers hate that because I'm paying attention to what's going on. I walk the hallways, I'll stop in a room saying, "Hey, I know that your CDTs are really up, good job," or, "Hey, I know that your fifth, fourth period class wasn't doing so well, what's going on?" (District D CO1, Interview, June 22, 2016)
District E also engaged in work around data analysis. A school administrator described the interactions he and his fellow school administrators had with their central office administrator.

[Central office administrator] and I will often review data. We’ll review our summative data, PSSA data, things like that in the summertime. Once we get our growth data in the fall we’ll certainly review that. I keep him in the loop in terms of benchmarking data that we’re accumulating over the course of the year…We talk about data a lot. (District E P1, Interview, June 24, 2016)

Conversations about assessment data were a large part of the work between central office and school administrators in District F as well. One school administrator described the work he engaged in with his central office administrator.

I work with the [central office administrator] to help me do some of the preliminary assessment data analysis. I can then look at it and go okay, this is what it's saying for this year. What are we going to do for next year? (District F AP1, Interview, June 27, 2016)

His colleague shared a similar thought. “I think, data drives it all. Until you can sit down with people, and really dive through, get into the data, you don't really have anything to work from” (District F P2, Interview, June 21, 2016).

*Use of data.* A final area of work around assessment for the central office was in the use of assessment data to make improvements to educational programming. An example from District A came when a school administrator described his reaction to disappointing state assessment data. After examining that data with his central office staff, he concluded that changes were needed in his school, a message he conveyed clearly to his teachers.

I needed something different, something to push, I needed to push them harder. Scores come back last year and they were in the [expletive]. And I thought we worked our [expletive] off last year, and then the scores come back and, slap in the face. And so from day one I said, you know, when that door closes, what are
you doing differently? Because if you do the same thing you did last year thinkin' it was all hunkey-dorey, I have bad news for you. So when that door closes, and everyone can recite the line in their sleep, I’m sure, but when that door closes what are you doing differently? Because if it’s not, you’re gonna get the same result, and that sucked. (District A P2, Interview, June 20, 2016)

He had a unique insight into what assessment data can do for a school, one that was not voiced by any other participant. He shared,

I think people wanna be excited about the building they work in. And if there’s even one, if every score is in the [expletive], but one is not, and the person presenting that one can make that one score look like the gold pill, then someone’s gonna smile. (District A P2, Interview, June 20, 2016)

This concept of using assessments as a motivating force was unique, but I think important to note.

   Central office staff often guided curriculum development by matching it with current state assessments. In District A, one central office administrator explained this alignment.

   We went through a total revision of all of our core curriculum for reading, English, math, science, and social studies in line with the eligible content for the appropriate grade level assessment and Keystone exam. (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016)

To further illustrate how much some districts have come to rely on state assessments as a curricular guide, I cite this statement from a central office administrator in District A. “The areas we’re struggling with now to work through are the music, the tech ed, you know, the ones that aren’t as directly connected to an assessment” (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016). His District A colleague shared similar thinking when he described how he used assessment data to guide changes to their reading program at the
elementary school. “I knew that we had to get a reading program in that was going to return us back to center. And we could see that in our data” (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016).

District A also made structural changes in their schools based on assessment data. These changes were made by a team of folks led by central office administrators. One of these administrators explained the changes and the reason they were made.

We’ve departmentalized in grades two through five. We finished that change last year. The way we structure our days, small group reading, small group math, so we’ve just brought one thing after another to really try to stop the bleeding. Because we see the need. We did not see the growth numbers like we were hoping. (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016).

When asked about the role of assessment in his work, one central office administrator in District A explained it this way,

I think it comes from a moral obligation for us to look at the data and say, look, we’re not growing kids. What do we do next? That’s what drives me. I can look at achievement and see that we’re low and we’re the lowest in the county and considering our demographics who else is like us, I look at all that. But when all things are equal, and we’re not growing kids like the research says we should be, I get really bothered by how do we fix that? (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016)

The need to use assessments to provide the data administrators relied on to guide the work of the district was evident from participant responses.

A central office administrator in District B talked about an interaction he had with a school administrator around the use of assessment data. The two of them were discussing the school’s improvement plan, which included goals for student achievement and action steps designed to help the school reach its goal.

We were just kind of discussing what were the strategies in his plan at the beginning of the year that he had identified that were going to have an impact on student achievement, what was the data saying? And then what were those next
steps going to be? You said you were gonna do small group instruction…What’s the student data to say that it’s been effective? (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

He found it important to remind school administrators of the importance of monitoring assessment data to determine next steps for instruction and for their school improvement plans.

…coming up with an assessment plan, an assessment strategy. What assessments are you gonna use to identify your, as the school improvement plan would call it, indicators of effectiveness? What student data? Don’t tell me that you had regular PLCs. That’s great. How did it impact kids? (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

District D, the smallest district in this study, had only two central office positions, yet school administrators voiced their opinion that the central office played an important role around the use of assessments to drive instruction. One shared,

He does a great job, he is the only superintendent that I've worked for that has a pulse of the formative assessments. He's looking at the CDTs as soon as they are done. Sometimes he gets to them before I can get to them. (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016)

A central office administrator in District D described the process the district would be using to ensure that teachers were acting upon assessment results. “This year the expectation is that they're going to use the data that improved instruction, and we're going to work through that process, through the PLCs” (District D CO1, Interview, June 22, 2016). PLCs are professional learning communities, structures that bring educators together to examine student assessment data and collaboratively determine next instructional steps. He also described a new web-based system his district would be employing to monitor and use assessment data.

You can set up a dashboard that shows what kids are doing while on this standard, and you can set it up however you need to. I'll be able to get on, Keystones, CDT, I'll be able to see how many kids are proficient by each grade level, chart, right
there, right now. Then I'll pull information from the CDT as soon as it's done, so it's a matter of generating those reports and then using that data. Then I'll have the big picture, and I can hand it to the principals, and they can bring the teachers in to drill down to see what our problems are. (District D CO1, Interview, June 22, 2016)

In District E, where there was only one person in the central office to guide principals’ instructional leadership, assessment and data still played a key role in guiding teaching and learning. The central office kept the administrative team focused on assessment data as a driver of teaching and learning practices in the district. As described by a school administrator in District E,

   Most of my conversations with [central office administrator] in terms of instruction are grounded in data and what are we seeing and what focus areas are we identifying, and then we talk about different strategies that we can try to incorporate to reach some of those focus areas. (District E P1, Interview, June 24, 2016)

He went on to describe how he used what he learned from those conversations with his school staff.

   Based on what we’re seeing from the data we’ll talk about the kinds of action steps and things that we’re trying to do to help address the areas that we know are focus areas for us. That’s probably the major part of what we would talk about in terms of instructional leadership. (District E P1, Interview, June 24, 2016)

Another District E school administrator shared his thoughts on the role of assessment.

   When I think of instructional leadership, I'm doing stuff with data right now, that I'm going to disseminate to the teachers, but not only give it to them, but walk them through what do we do with this, so it's not just giving it to them. It's actually saying, "Here's how we're going to use this." (District E AP1, Interview, July 6, 2016)

   Assessment data was used to guide many decisions at both the district and school level, and the central office played a role in guiding that work. Another important role of the central office was around professional development. In the following section, I will
discuss that role in more detail. As one central office administrator shared, there was often a solid connection between assessment and professional development.

The second year, though, when our data came back and it seemed so off, it was not where we were hoping it was going to be, the achievement was low but it was the first year of a new assessment. Our growth was mixed. That hurt…and the more we digested it, the more we looked at it…we identified key areas in the data that we felt like we had the greatest potential to close the gap…So that’s how we started off with our PD and we stayed focused on that. (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016)

**Professional Development**

Central office staff created opportunities for professional development in all six districts studied. In most cases, this professional development was designed for teachers. But in others, it was designed for school administrators. Generally, school administrators found this support to be very useful in helping them guide instructional practices in their schools.

**Professional Development for Teachers**

The central office played a role in providing professional development for teachers in five of the six districts studied. Central office staff often used assessment data along with other types of survey data to design professional development for teachers. One example came from District A. Central office administrators used state assessment data to guide professional development each year.

We had teams that went to the Math Design Collaborative and the Concrete, Representational, Abstract. We had teams going to the TDAs. We refocused our literacy coach on TDAs, you know, that evidence-based writing in the primary building, and that’s what guided our PD for last school year. So we haven’t set our PD [for the coming year]. We don’t know what it is we’re after yet because we haven’t seen our data. (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016)
Central office staff in District A had an important role in managing professional development for new teachers. As explained by one central office administrator, “One of my main responsibilities is [central office colleague] and I supervise the induction program. We have the new teachers for the induction program. We have the orientation, we do quarterly meetings with them” (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016). Central office staff also worked closely with school administrators to develop a professional development calendar each year that told teachers exactly what they would be learning about as the year progressed.

We sit down and develop a yearly professional development calendar that we give out in the beginning of the year. First day teachers are back they get a wealth of information from us, but we found that it’s nice for teachers to know where we’re going over the course of the year. First of all, they don’t dread that oh my goodness, we have an Act 80 day. What are we gonna do? There’s a focus for it. And we try to pick big areas that are initiatives around the state. I mentioned a few before, Educator Effectiveness, aligning curriculum, school wide positive behavior support, adaptations, modifications, instilling in teachers that they can do that just because a child doesn’t have an IEP…actually that is based on a survey that we do in the spring of every year that we say…What would you like to see offered? We really do value the opinions of our teachers of what they would like to see. (District A CO2, Interview, July 1, 2016)

School administrators in District A seemed to appreciate the way that the central office managed professional development for teachers. One shared,

[Central office administrator] has been really good about saying, ok, we’re gonna do this training and then we’re going to let the teachers work together on this, have some time to process this because it’s not meaningful if you’re just giving them all the information and then you walk away and think that they’re gonna implement. (District A P1, Interview, July 5, 2016)

In District B, one assistant principal described how a district administrator supported the school administrators by directly providing professional development to teachers around a district initiative, “We had her here last year cause we struggled with
some of the teachers getting it, so [central office administrator] actually let us bring her to the building for her to come explain it” (District B AP8, Interview, April 12, 2016).

District B created a summer professional development opportunity for teachers. As will be illustrated in an upcoming section, school administrators had mixed feelings about the opportunity, but it was clearly a district-initiated, district-planned series of workshops designed to help teachers self-select areas in which they wanted to engage in professional development. One school administrator shared her thoughts. “When we look at the summer institute...Are there some great courses? Absolutely...I think there’s quality there” (District B AP4, Interview, April 26, 2016).

Central office staff in District B also provided professional development in specific areas as requested by school administrators. One example was on assessment literacy. “I do professional development for teachers and I have been asked by certain schools to do professional development at their schools,” said one central office administrator (District B CO7, Interview, June 2, 2016). She worked with teachers to help them use the assessment tools provided by the district.

We do Easy CBM for math and CDTs, so I build the system all the way up to professional development, all the way to how to use the data...It's usually how to use a system, like CDTs. I think I did five in the beginning of this year at different schools of just how to pull up the site, how to use the data. That would be one example. I do individual trainings for schools that need support. (District B CO7, Interview, June 2, 2016).

It was the role of the central office to manage, plan, and coordinate professional development in District C. A district administrator described this role.

We have a professional development committee who [central office administrator] heads up and he works with that group. That’s mainly teachers and some principals but mainly teachers, and so we’re constantly getting feedback on

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what they need. He coordinates it, organizes it, does all the follow-through. (District C CO1, Interview, June 27, 2016)

In District C, the goal of the central office was to have as much teacher-led professional development as possible. This goal was shared by one central office administrator who stated, “When I was a teacher at [former school] I never had an in-service day where teachers weren’t leading. When I came here, I never had an in-service day where teachers were leading, so I wanted to get back to that” (District C CO2, Interview, April 29, 2016). He shared one way that he had started to design such professional development for elementary teachers in the district.

We got our tech ed teacher out into the elementary school so he’s doing some STEM integration. We’ll have ASSET science, which comes with the professional development, which is really good so those teachers will have some focused training in science, right, cause they never had that. (District C CO2, Interview, April 29, 2016)

A District C school administrator shared an example of how the central office coordinated the district’s professional development around new technology initiatives. “All of the professional development [central office] coordinated for that in terms of talking about the rubric, the process, the orientation. Those were a year-long series of professional development experiences” (District C AP3, Interview, June 29, 2016).

District D’s central office also planned a lot of professional development for teachers. As one school administrator shared, “[Professional development’s] district level here, for the most part” (District D P2, Interview, June 21, 2016). In talking about the balance between district-planned and school-planned professional development, one school administrator described it as, “I would say last year it was 70-30, district more than us. [Colleague] and I wanted to change that to at least 50-50” (District D P1,
Interview, June 7, 2016). Even though school administrators were hoping to have a larger role in planning professional development for teachers moving forward, it was clear that the district continued to play an important role in that planning.

In District F, the central office shared responsibility for teacher professional development with school administrators. As a central office administrator shared,

I plan all the in-service days. What I’ve done is, I want teacher leaders and principals to lead it. We find out from the teachers in their needs assessment what topics they want then I go out and find the presenters whether they’re teachers or people from the outside. Some sessions were mandatory…and they loved the autonomy. (District F CO1, Interview, June 21, 2016)

Central office and school staff often worked collaboratively to provide professional development to teachers in District F. For example, one school administrator shared how he relied on central office to help him plan for teacher learning.

I work extensively with [central office administrator] when we set up our hour-long faculty meetings. We have one every month. What are we going to present? What are we going to focus on that teachers are going to be able to take and go right back into the classroom and start using? (District F AP1, Interview, June 27, 2016)

He also cited the district’s role in planning professional development on in-service days.

“Our in-service days, in the past few years there's been some district-wide things” (District F AP1, Interview, June 27, 2016). He confirmed what the central office administrator shared about the district’s model of professional development.

What's nice is that we've got a lot of people on the staff that aren't afraid to share things and so we kind of had like a workshop type in service. The teachers get to choose different things that they go to. We've had some people come in and present from outside and we've had teachers present different topics. So that's been like for the last two or three years. (District F AP1, Interview, June 27, 2016)

When asked who did the majority of the planning for these workshop days, he said,

“[Central office administrator] does the bulk of it, especially with getting what teachers
are interested in taking. That's based on the online needs assessment that we do” (District F AP1, Interview, June 27, 2016). While the central office managed the bulk of professional development, school administrators did have a role to play.

In our big in service days, it is team planned. [Central office administrator] might take a little bit bigger of a role in it. If you ask the principals, would you prefer [central office administrator] runs it all, we would all say let [central office administrator] run it. It doesn't work like that. It is too big for one person so we all get involved. (District F P2, Interview, June 21, 2016)

**Professional Development for School Administrators**

In addition to providing professional development opportunities for teachers, the central office also played a critical role in providing professional development for school principals and assistant principals. An example from District A came from a central office administrator as she talked about the district’s emphasis on ensuring that school leaders received adequate professional development in state initiatives so that they could effectively lead them in their own schools.

I also believe that as an administrator in a district not only is the day-to-day support important as far as what we’re expecting them to do as leaders, but I think you also have to guide the professional development that’s brought into the district to support those initiatives because several things that we’ve been faced with, whether it’s the new Educator Effectiveness model, whether it be the Common Core, and then, of course, the PA Core Standards, if you do not have an administrator that is well-versed in those areas and may not agree with everything that’s coming down from the state, but we also say we’re moving forward with this because it’s an expectation, your building level administrators are gonna struggle because they’re gonna look at you at central office to support them. And they need that. (District A CO2, Interview, July 1, 2016)

One central office administrator in District A described his role in securing professional development for the school administrative staff around teacher evaluation.

“We were a Race to the Top district, so we were in the whole Educator Effectiveness project, and so we went through all of that training for supervision and evaluation, the
Danielson rubrics, the Teachscape, so we led, actually I led the grant and the principals’ training for that” (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016).

District B devoted considerable attention to professional development for school administrators given the large number it employed and the fact that the district had received a sizable grant from General Electric to support such professional development. As shared by one central office administrator, “As instructional leaders, I do feel that...we're up above many different districts because of the PD that we were able to have because of GE. [School administrators] have had so many opportunities” (District B CO3, Interview, May 12, 2016). In reflecting back on her experience returning to the district after some time in other locations, one central office administrator had this to say about the district’s focus on professional development for principals.

When I came back here I will say [the central office] had done a tremendous amount in the meantime to build the principals of [District B] schools in their capacity to be instructional leaders and to understand what that role meant to them. I felt like they had been given the tools and they had been encouraged. (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016)

She went on to explain how the district’s comprehensive plan included a significant amount of professional development for principals to strengthen their capacity as instructional leaders.

As far as helping the principals have confidence in and a better grasp of data analysis, that was part of our plan. And our last piece of it was ongoing professional development and job-embedded professional development and using our own expertise within. I think we’ve provided them with excellent professional development...I believe the instructional leaders were given the tools to understand the Danielson model, the components of it, what they were looking for, how to give feedback based on that rubric, and how to move their teachers forward from where they were. Last year we did professional development with the principals and our curriculum leaders, and so we brought the principals in and [central office administrators] talked with them in terms of what was new... provided them training on the look-fors and how to have those conversations with
teachers about what components should be in a quality lesson and what it should look like. (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016)

Another central office administrator in District B talked about his role in developing principals’ instructional leadership. He and a colleague were tasked with managing monthly principals’ meetings. In the past, these meetings had been used to disseminate information. However, these two central office administrators had been trying to shift the focus to professional development and collaboration around problems of practice.

We put a significant amount of planning and prep and things into those building principal meetings. We weren’t really seeing any returns. So now we’re actually rebooting and saying are these big meetings really where we should be putting our time or should we be taking a look at maybe breaking into smaller PLC groups with principals and saying look, you have common needs or a common area in your practice or a common proficiency in your practice, and so we’re gonna group you folks together and kinda have you go on your own on this. (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

To illustrate one example of how he and his colleague had structured a principals’ meeting to make it about professional development, he shared a story about how they engaged in inter-rater reliability conversations using existing evidence from teacher observations.

What we’ve also done in thinking about rater reliability is randomly pulled out evidence submissions and then had principal meetings and said here are these submissions. First of all, what component do you think it applies to? What rating do you think it supports? Those have been some really interesting discussions. (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

School administrators echoed the message that the district had provided them with quality, useful professional development. One shared, “the district put us through the Research for Better Teaching, Skillful Leader, we did those. And I utilize those now” (District B AP8, Interview, April 12, 2016). Another shared, “certainly the learning target
cycle…coupled with Research for Better Teaching, that was really moving the average teacher up” (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016). His colleague also shared,

…the crosswalk that they did between the Danielson and the RBT was really beneficial, we just got it at that last training, and I’ve been using that with teachers. It seems to be beneficial cause you can actually see the Danielson rubric and then merge it in right with the pages from Skillful Teacher. (District B AP1, Interview, April 27, 2016)

A final example from a school administrator in District B summarized the prevailing sentiment of principals and assistant principals.

I would say clarity and misconceptions were the biggest things we worked on this year, and that learning target theory of action helped with that, and some of the other professional development we’ve had as a leadership team, I’ll give that, you know, the district did a good job with Yonkers with the clarity piece and then Annie Morton with the clarity piece, so that’s really been our focus I would say. (District B P6, Interview, May 2, 2016)

While District B had a clear focus on professional development for school administrators, they were not alone among participants in providing learning experiences for principals and assistant principals. In District D, one central office administrator explained how he worked with school administrators to help them strengthen their instructional leadership practice. “I present at every admin meeting…we're doing a book study together. I also do walkthroughs and observations with them.” (District D CO2, Interview, April 14, 2016). A school administrator in District D cited this person as a valuable source of information and resources that strengthened her instructional leadership. “[Central office administrator] is constantly researching different curriculums. He has this unending well of places to find things” (District D AP1, Interview, June 23, 2016).
It would seem that the central office has a role to play around the provision of professional development for both teachers and school administrators in the public school districts that participated in this study. Along with that professional development, and perhaps even preceding it, was the creation of expectations for the performance of instructional leadership by school administrators. Central office leaders had an important role in establishing expectations and holding school leaders accountable for meeting them. In the next section, I will describe that role in more detail.

**Establishing and Communicating Expectations**

In five of the six districts that participated in this study, the district’s central office played a pivotal role in shaping the work of school administrators by establishing and communicating their expectations for practice. Given that the findings in this section tended to coalesce around topics rather than around specific districts, I have elected not to present them by district but rather by topic. This theme of establishing expectations was encapsulated by one central office administrator who stated, “When you focus on something and we set goals, you see growth” (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016).

Even within the central office, the expectations of supervisors played an important role in guiding practice. One central office administrator shared how he felt about meeting the expectations of district supervisors. “If that’s the expectation, I feel like I need to meet that expectation” (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016). Another shared that she felt a responsibility to model the behavior she wished to see in those she supervised in the central office. “They are very involved. I have sent the message clearly, and I think it’s by the way I feel like I have to be a role model for them” (District A CO2, Interview, July 1, 2016). The communication of expectations was accomplished in several ways.
A District A central office administrator shared what he felt was the district’s role in shaping the instructional leadership practices of school administrators. “The biggest thing is helping people understand the vision. What’s our mission here? Where are we going? And then I’ll see you at the finish line” (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016). He felt that his job was to shape the vision while allowing others to execute the plan for making it happen. “I set the lofty vision, the big picture. I don’t get lost in the weeds. I don’t have to figure out all the details” (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016).

He then explained his expectations for the instructional leadership of school administrators.

What I would hope they’re able to do is to find a balance and to be out working with grade level leaders, cultivating that leadership at the grade level, with that grade level leader, and they’re very good at what they do and they’re the closest to the ground on what we’re trying to do. (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016)

These expectations seemed to be understood by school administrators. In sharing about what she felt was the central office’s expectation for her as a leader, one school administrator in District A stated, “Their expectation of me is the day-to-day management, of course. I have to be up on top of that and discipline. But as far as instructional leadership, yah, they want me to be working with those teachers” (District A P3, Interview, June 23, 2016).

One school administrator in District B spoke about what he felt was the role of the central office in establishing expectations for building administrators.

Most of the things that come in - teaching strategies, curriculum - it's a lot of central office's [saying] this is what the expectation is. We follow that, but then you have to do what's best based on the kids sitting in front of you. too. We make adjustments as necessary. (District B P4, Interview, April 26, 2016)
He shared that he felt supported for the most part in making those adjustments. A similar thought was shared by a school administrator in District C. He was discussing what he felt the district’s expectations were for his practice. He stated, “[The expectation is] praise what's good out there, and, where it's not right, let's see if we can help [teachers] fix it” (District C AP2, Interview, June 23, 2016).

School administrators understood expectations of the central office primarily through indirect means. As one shared,

We’re not getting memos that say hey, this is exactly what we expect. We’re getting trainings, and we’re talking about ideas and trying to implement them, and maybe guidelines, much more probably verbal than in print, from central office. (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016)

Another shared, “They're setting the overall pathway, and then we're following along” (District B AP3, Interview, June 20, 2016). A school administrator in District C voiced this idea as well.

[Central office administrator] kind of sets the expectations. He’s not the type that sits there and says I expect this, this, and this from you. He goes on the basis of like you just know what he expects. He doesn't really have to come out and say it. He’s the type, I think he feels like I hired you for a reason, so I don't need to sit here and say these are all my expectations. I think you just kind of know and how you know is just from being part of the district. That's helped me… It’s nice because they are so supportive and I think all three of them are the type that if you're not doing your job they will tell you, but they don't have to tell you. They just expect you to do it. (District C AP1, Interview, April 22, 2016)

In District D, one school administrator explained her thinking about how the central office conveyed its expectations of her instructional leadership. “They expect me to know what's going on in the classrooms. They expect me to know what the teachers are doing. They expect me to be in the classrooms” (District D AP1, Interview, June 23,
2016). She went on to explain how the district office communicated these expectations to her.

I think that [central office administrator 1] models that and I think [central office administrator 2] models that because…they very much were just like, ‘We have an expectation for you. We know it's going to be a tough first year. Might be a tough second year but we just want you to keep working towards it.’ (District D AP1, Interview, June 23, 2016)

She went on to share how she, in turn, conveyed this expectation to teachers as part of her instructional leadership. “Then I can communicate that to my staff then, too, and say I'm not expecting perfection” (District D AP1, Interview, June 23, 2016).

A school administrator in District D described a method central office administrators used to both inform principals and assistant principals of the goals and expectations of the district but to also receive information back about each school’s progress toward those goals. “With [central office administrator], he has district level goals every year. Then as a part of that, we have an administrative report that we fill out every week” (District D AP2, Interview, June 7, 2016). Three of the four school administrators in District D told me about this report and about how the district goals communicated by the central office guided their school’s instructional and curricular goals. One shared, “He sets administrative goals, obviously, and then we have to set building level goals based on his administrative goals. He does share that with us, and then we share it with the teachers” (District D P2, Interview, June 21, 2016).

In describing his thinking around designing this process for communicating expectations, the central office administrator shared,

I put out goals then ask them what they're doing…to help me reach those goals. I'm not the best long-term planner, so that's something I need to work on, but the principals that I have are good planners. [Central office administrator] is an idea
guy, so if we all get together, we can get to the end somehow. (District D CO1, Interview, June 22, 2016)

It would seem that he sees his role as defining goals and expectations then asking school administrators to plan the execution of practices and plans that will help them all to achieve those goals as a team.

In District E, the central office administrator shared his expectations for instructional leadership with school administrators. One shared,

He brought up the point to me, to say that, “You need to schedule time to be in the classroom.” I would guess his expectations are to become more of an instructional leader and impact the school more than just a disciplinarian, because he's told that to me several times. (District E AP2, Interview, July 6, 2016).

One way that central office staff managed expectations was through their own evaluation of school administrators’ work. What they looked for, how they communicated with school administrators, and what they expected the work of instructional leadership to look like had an impact on how administrators conducted their work. One central office administrator in District B shared what he felt was important for school administrators.

Are they able to recognize good practice or effective practices, but then what kind of feedback do they provide for their folks? What kind of professional development do they provide for their folks? So that their struggling people are moving forward and their advanced people are moving forward. (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

By identifying these questions, he pointed to practices that he saw as valuable to the successful practice of instructional leadership. In so doing, he provided a blueprint to the school administrators with whom he worked to guide their practice. Without this blueprint, school administrators would be left to themselves to decide what constituted effective practice. While some might argue that this is preferable, what seems clear is that
the central office does, in fact, have a role in using its own expectations to guide the work of school administrators. This central office administrator attempted to communicate those expectations to his school administrators. As he shared, “supervision and evaluation, that’s really important, I think, as my role and being clear about my expectations for the importance of that” (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016).

Another central office administrator in District B shared her vision and expectation for the work of school administrators.

We want them to run their buildings…to really be instructional leaders. That's our expectation in that we can…raise the achievement levels in our students. That's the goal. That's the expectation. They should be really monitoring their teachers. Their teachers need to be doing what is expected and teaching our students to be successful and working at raising the achievement level.” (District B CO3, Interview, May 12, 2016).

When school administrators did not perform as expected, the central office had a pivotal role in holding them accountable. As one shared,

Sometimes with those folks it has to be more than just supervision; it has to be evaluation, you know what I mean? It has to be evaluative. And there may not ever be an eye to eye, but I have to come to the grips with, I can’t change somebody’s belief system. That’s super hard to do. But I can change their practice, right? I can say these are the things you need, this is what I need to see. (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

In District B, school administrators seemed to know that their central office staff would be following up to see that strategies presented during professional development workshops were being utilized in classrooms. This expectation was shared by a school administrator as he talked about one of the expectations around a district initiative.

“That’s always the constant so we know they’re looking for that all the time” (District B AP8, Interview, April 12, 2016). His thinking was supported by this statement from a central office administrator, “as far as ensuring that it happens, I do go out into
classrooms. I think I was in at least forty-two this year, which was more than last year, and see for myself if I think change is occurring” (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016). When sharing about the expectations for the district coaching initiative, around which professional development with school administrators had occurred, she shared, “We’re trying to say out loud this is what this looks like. This is what the expectation is,” (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016).

Many central office administrators expressed expectations around the responsibility of principals and assistant principals to be visible and present in schools, thereby building the relationships and trust necessary to executing effective instructional leadership. One shared,

I still expect the visibility. I don’t think you can have any change or any success with kids without visibility. The principal has to be visible… I really see the time that you spend with the kids and the teachers during the school day as very, very valuable.” (District A CO1, Interview, June 29, 2016)

School administrators in District C also understood the expectations of the central office around their role in maintaining close relationships within the district. As one shared, “I think the one thing that [central office administrator] does is he promotes this. It may sound a little hokey, this sense of family… He’s big on community service. He’s big on the administrative team doing things together” (District C P2, Interview, June 29, 2016).

There were other areas in which the central office communicated expectations that helped school administrators guide their work. District B established expectations around school culture, specifically around expectations for student behavior. School administrators were given leeway to enact the expectations, but the central office
provided some structure and clarity around what they needed to do in their schools.

“They were able to choose their own, but there should be a positive model in place for behavior moving forward” (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016). There were also expectations around the ability of school administrators to model effective classroom instruction. In District C, one central office administrator shared what he expected of his school administrators as they worked with teachers whose performance was below standard. “We’ve had principals go in and model what they expect” (District C CO1, Interview, June 27, 2016). This seemed to imply an expectation that a principal not only know what effective instructional practices look like but that they be able to model them for ineffective teachers.

In summary, participants in all six districts voiced three similar roles played by the central office in their districts. These were curriculum development, professional development, and establishing expectations. In general, school administrators found these roles to be supportive of their instructional leadership practice. In the next section, I will explore in more depth the ways that the central office executed its support for school administrators around instructional leadership. Specifically, I will explore those practices school administrators found to be supportive and those that presented challenges, or roadblocks, to their effectiveness as instructional leaders.

**Central Office Support and Roadblocks**

As it engaged in its work with school administrators, the central office sometimes provided needed support and sometimes put roadblocks in place that made instructional leadership more difficult. In the following section, I will describe some of the ways that
central office staff provided helpful support to school administrators as they engaged in leadership around teaching and learning. I will then describe ways that central office staff made it more difficult for school administrators to engage in that work.

Central Office Support

My first research subquestion dealt with central office support for school administrators around instructional leadership. There were three main ways that central office administrators provided support to school principals and assistants. One was by finding ways to help school administrators connect with one another. Another was by acting as a mentor and skill-builder. School administrators often pointed to central office staff as a source of expertise, advice, and modeling. A third was by shielding principals from distractions from the community and the state department of education. In the following section, I will elaborate upon each of these areas to demonstrate how participants viewed central office staff as supportive of their role as instructional leaders.

Connecting by Fostering Supportive Connections between and Among Principals and Schools within a District

Both central office and school administrators cited the fostering of collaboration with their district peers as a supportive function of the central office. Practice around the fostering of connections between and among school administrators fell into two distinct categories. One was to directly provide time and topics around which school administrators would interact. The other was, ironically, by being absent from the work of instructional leadership. In districts where there was no dedicated support from the central office around teaching and learning, principals were sometimes forced to collaborate to achieve the coherence they desired around curriculum, instruction, and
professional development. Fostering connections and collaboration took place around several aspects of practice. These were supervision and evaluation of teachers, curriculum, and professional development.

The collaborative ethos evident in districts often seemed to stem from the leadership of the central office. Both school and central office administrators talked about their collaborative work and central office staff’s role in making it happen. A central office administrator in District B described her role in fostering collaboration. “A lot of my role, I think, had to do with coordinating the efforts of all of those people” (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016). She went on to explain how the district tried to provide opportunities for principals to connect with one another around their work. “If they could be sharing with one another, even across buildings, some of their experiences, that would be helpful” (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016).

Another central office administrator from District B described what she saw as a benefit of her work with two school administrators. “Cause they both do really different things, and they both have success in different areas, and so I like to think that I can be a benefit to help give ideas to each other, cause sometimes…people don’t always connect” (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016). Her colleague shared this sentiment in talking about the work they had done to provide a place for principals to connect with one another across the district and to share practice in a meaningful way.

We really put a lot of focus on these principal meetings, initially, and trying to really craft them into ways that we felt would build collaboration among building principals because… you have building principals who have very different needs, very different demographics, and so how do you build capacity and practice among building principals and then also try to create that district vision, you know? We wanna promote…Don’t just do the best for Hilton…how does Hilton help the whole district grow? (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)
These central office administrators seemed to see value in their roles in bringing administrative staff members together to share practice, thereby strengthening practice for all.

School administrators in District A shared the fact that they appreciated the efforts of the central office to facilitate conversations with their peers. They pointed to the ability to problem-solve together with others as a benefit to their practice.

We’re all there and they can say, hey, you can try this, you can try that, or what do you think about? And sometimes we talk about it in passing, but just to get everybody to sit down and focus is nice. Because you get so busy that you’re running, you know? And then when we sit down as a total administrative team, it’s nice to hear what’s going on in the elementary because otherwise I would have no idea…and it’s good to know that because then when I’m talking to parents and they say something, I don’t look like an idiot because I’m aware, you know? (District A P3, Interview, June 23, 2016)

This collaborative mindset was evident in other districts as well, as evidenced by the following statement from a central office administrator in District C. “We’ve been strong in forming committees, having those committees take leadership roles and really being the spokesperson for whatever that initiative is. So, it’s really the only way to get things done” (District C CO2, Interview, April 29, 2016). This sentiment was also voiced by another member of District C’s central office.

We call it our A Team meetings...they’re twice a month...and in addition to the administrative team meetings, [central office administrator] probably told you, he has a CTS meeting. So they meet as a group four times a month. It’s a lot, and A Team never gets cancelled. That’s a meeting that’s written in stone, and they’re long...we start at 9:30 and usually we work...maybe through lunch on those because...we go around the horn and everybody shares, business manager, curriculum director, director of special ed, facilities director’s in the room at that time, the athletic director’s in the room during that time, our psychologist, technology coordinator, and all the principals and we all share what’s happening in our worlds. So that’s probably the best communication that we have. (District C CO1, Interview, June 27, 2016)
Administrators in District D also described the way that the central office brought them together with colleagues in order to share practice. A school administrator described this support by saying,

Our administrative team meetings are good in that we share, [central office administrator] is really good at praising someone who is doing something unique and…something to consider…I've had the opportunity to collaborate with [colleague] more than I have with any other high school principal. (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016)

A central office staff member in District D told about techniques he has used in order to bring principals together.

I'll send them an email...’Hey, I noticed this. Can you guys give me an answer? That means they both have to get together and talk about it. At a staff meeting I'll say, ‘Show me the data on this, and let's talk about it as a group.’ (District D CO1, Interview, June 22, 2016)

It was this type of monthly administrative meeting that constituted the involvement of the central office around principal collaboration in District E. “As an administrative team, we meet regularly. We probably meet with the superintendent minimally once every two weeks” (District E P1, Interview, June 24, 2016). While these meetings often focused on topics other than instructional leadership matters, they did provide a means for principals to connect with one another and with their central office personnel on a consistent basis.

District E was unique among participants in that it did not have a central office staff member dedicated to curriculum and instruction. In this district, the central office played a different role in bringing school administrators together. One role involved the physical layout of the schools. All are on one campus, so it was very easy to move back and forth from one building to another. To take that one step farther, the primary and
intermediate schools were actually housed in the same building. One school administrator described the impact this close physical proximity had on his ability to collaborate with his colleague.

When they combined their elementary schools...we’re all housed physically under one roof, and we’re called two separate schools. There is a principal that runs each one. There’s a mindset of separation while at the same time we try and build the bridge between the two schools and collaborate daily.” (District E P1, Interview, June 24, 2016)

In District F, the central office provided a venue for communication around topics related to instructional leadership at its monthly meetings. A school administrator stated, “We have an education team meeting… That's the superintendent, the curriculum director and the principals…we have that once a month...That's where a lot of that kind of stuff will take place is in that smaller meeting” (District F AP1, Interview, June 27, 2016).

Supervision and evaluation of teachers. One topic that school administrators collaborated around frequently was teacher supervision and evaluation. Central office administrators in three of the six districts studied were integral in making those collaborative conversations happen. For example, central office staff in District A conducted joint building walkthroughs followed by conversation about what was seen in classrooms.

…we do have elementary admin meetings, and we have those about once a month, and we talk about things that we see in the building and we also take some time during those admin meetings to walk the building. So the meetings are either in this building or they’re in [principal]’s building and we just go walk around…see what’s going on and talk about some things that we feel are some needs…(District A P1, Interview, July 5, 2016)

This school administrator went on to explain how she and her colleagues used what they learn through these joint walkthroughs to talk to teachers about practice. “Sometimes it’s
an informal type thing…[colleague] might approach that teacher and say, hey, when we were in your room we saw some really good things going on or…tell me more about what was going on when we walked in” (District A P1, Interview, July 5, 2016).

A central office administrator in District A described his efforts to bring principals together around the topic of teacher supervision.

We often discuss, we meet weekly, every two weeks as an administrative team for secondary, at least once a month we talk about what’s going on in the classroom, are we in the classrooms? What are we seeing, those types of things. I look for the principals, because they’re usually nose down, ears to the ground, they have the best insight no what’s going on. But in terms of broad areas, we look at it together as what we can do to try to grow the teachers (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016).

In District B, several participants discussed the ways that the central office played a role in helping school administrators work collaboratively and consistently around supervision and evaluation of teachers. Being the largest district in this study, it was a priority in District B to bring some consistency to the work of supervision and evaluation by school administrators. One central office administrator described district efforts around consistent practice in this way.

…since that’s something I know we’re all focused on and the principals have received professional development and the teachers have received it, it’s good practice to look for, even if it’s not implemented exactly the same way in all buildings. The fact that there’s clear goals, that there’s learning worth doing, that the lesson plan is a worthwhile lesson plan connected to standards, the kids understand what they’re shooting for…and that there’s some sort of assessment piece that they know how to check, they’re managing that. (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016).

Central office staff in District B brought school administrators together to create a district handbook that would govern teacher supervision and evaluation in the district. This was a collaborative effort by a team of principals and assistant principals from
several district schools. This work was described by one school administrator who worked on the committee.

[Central office administrator], I work a lot with her ‘cause of the teacher effectiveness, [colleague] and [colleague] and I, we’ve done a lot of work on that...We put the handbook together. We get back together for the rubric. We’re gonna go now with the differentiated supervision... (District B AP1, Interview, April 27, 2016)

Central office staff also led conversations between and among school administrators around inter-rater reliability and supervisory processes. The district had engaged in professional development with the administrative team around a couple of different methods for supervising and evaluating teachers, so the central office team followed up with time for school administrators to make sense of those workshops and to develop a consistent district strategy for evaluating teachers.

We have randomly pulled out evidence submissions and then had principal meetings...First of all, what component do you think it applies to? What rating do you think it supports? Those have been some really interesting discussions because sometimes people are like, oh my God. Somebody put that in there? And I say, remember, these are all coming from us, and they’re real, so the person might be sitting next to you. Really interesting, but those conversations about like, so, do we really need to, as a district, say there’s a certain format that we put submissions in? Or does it matter what format it is but it needs to have these certain, specific components? (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

Another way that the central office supported school administrators was demonstrated by staff in District C. They had developed a rigorous hiring process followed by close attention to teacher development and performance as a way to unite the administrative team around conversations about quality teaching. A central office administrator summarized this practice of hiring talented teachers by saying,

With that, we take developing them really seriously as well. And if we have a teacher who’s not developing appropriately, we step in immediately. We average probably two improvement plans a year I would say. We don’t terminate that
often, but we have because our goal is to make them better. We think we’re hiring a good person and if they turn out not to be so great in the classroom then we try to make them better. And so we do a lot of improvement plans, which means intense observations by the principals and [central office administers]. (District C CO1, Interview, June 27, 2016)

District C also worked as an administrative team to reshape their teacher supervision and evaluation processes. They added elements that they felt would further improve the collaborative ethos of the district while more effectively developing their most accomplished, talented teachers. “We're going to give teachers an option of visiting other classrooms to see their colleagues. That's going to be a new piece” (District C AP2, Interview, June 23, 2016). This new effort at improved supervision and evaluation procedures was developed collaboratively by the central office and school administrators in the district.

In addition to bringing school administrators together to work collaboratively around teacher supervision and evaluation, the central office also brought them together around curriculum.

Curriculum. District administrators played a role in bringing school administrators together around the topic of curriculum in four of the six districts studied. A central office administrator from District A described the ways that the administrative team, including central office and school administrators, collaborated around the rebuilding of the district’s curriculum. He summarized the district’s role in guiding curriculum development.

The initial part was developing the framework, rolling out the entire project of what our vision was, and then after that it became more of giving the time on the in-service days or whenever to work on it, and then the final review of the completed documents. (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016)
This collaborative work by the administrative team resulted in what the district considered to be positive outcomes. “So as far as core curriculum, I feel that we’re right in line, that it’s updated, it’s revised, it’s matched to the standards and eligible content” (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016).

The collaborative curriculum work in District A did not end once the initial curriculum was in place. Ongoing revisions were part of a continual process of examining and improving curriculum in the district. As described by one district administrator,

I work very closely with the building principals who work very closely with the teachers so that when we’re talking curriculum on an Act 80 day or an in-service day, I’m with them. And so when we’re talking about the mapping and what does the curriculum framework have that’s important and how do we align it so that everything aligns, I’m not sitting off-site. I’m actually involved and I’m answering some of the questions that come along the way. (District A CO2, Interview, July 1, 2016)

Another way that the central office helped connect principals was around curricular options for students. One school administrator in District B described an example of how his central office supervisor helped him to connect with another district principal to discuss sharing facilities and elective options for students. “For example...we don't have any electives...we have music, phys ed, and that's not middle school...I went through him, to go talk to [principal] so that I can start…sending our eighth graders over there to do electives” (District B AP7, Interview, April 14, 2016).

A school administrator in District C talked about the role his central office staff played in bringing teachers and administrators together to create, revise, and develop curriculum. “They're sitting down as a team, and they're over in the one room right now, and they're looking at scope and sequence... We do a lot of departmental meetings like that, so that's a good example” (District C AP2, Interview, June 23, 2016).
As was true in several other districts in this study, District E’s central office administration did play a supportive role in bringing school administrators together around curriculum. However, its role was much more indirect. In reality, it was the absence of a central office position that forced the school administrators to try to carve time out of their schedules to do collaborative curriculum work between buildings. This was viewed as a change from previous practice in the district, however, as explained by one school administrator.

Our [central office administrator] certainly does his or her very best to try and be an instructional leader for the district…it’s very difficult to try and be an instructional leader in that position when there’s nobody else in central office to help in that effort. So a lot of that falls onto the principals. This year, we have put together a K to 8 committee with representation from every grade level…with the support of [central office administrator]. But I will tell you that’s the first time probably in a long time…that we’ve done something in that fashion. (District E P1, Interview, June 24, 2016)

It seems that the current person in the central office in District E has made progress in bringing school administrators together, in this case, around curriculum.

Professional Development. Collaborative efforts around professional development for teachers were described by participants in all six district sites. Central office staff often worked closely with the district’s school administrators as a large team to plan and select professional development topics for teachers. As one central office administrator explained, “we have a professional development committee…the principals drive that. [Central office administrator] coordinates it, organizes it, does all the follow-through, but the principals really drive that” (District C CO1, Interview, June 27, 2016). A school administrator in District F echoed that sentiment. “We’ve done a kinda, as an administrative team, [superintendent] has provided more leadership in that area than we
had in the past...I think one of the good things [superintendent] has done is...she’ll ask us and we get to direct some of that” (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016).

Such collaborative planning was also part of the practice in District D. As one school administrator explained, “We co-plan, because the first in service days basically were planned before I got here last year. This year, [central office administrator] said we are going to discuss it” (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016). District F followed a similar approach. According to one school administrator, “In our big in service days, it is team planned” (District F P2, Interview, June 21, 2016). In these districts, the central office brought school administrators from across the district together to engage in the work of instructional leadership.

This was also the practice in District E. “We meet as an administrative team, and usually [central office administrator] has a couple of hours on the first day where he says, ‘I need these two hours to do something,’ then after that it's largely up to us” (District E P1, Interview, June 24, 2016). The results of this collaborative effort were described by another school administrator from District E. The team had decided to conduct in-service workshops themselves to begin the year.

When the staff started seeing us teach the lesson and teach how to break down the standards then they said, “Aha. They know how to do this too. They’re on board with this and they’re going to help us.” I think that that was a big transition for us in going from an outside agency providing the in-service to us becoming the experts on what we actually need and teaching our staff what to do. (District E P2, Interview, July 6, 2016.)

This team learned to value their work as instructional leaders and to feel successful in their ability to do that work well through this collaborative planning.
The administrative team in District A also worked collaboratively to develop the professional development that would be offered in the district each year. Their offerings were based on state mandates, student achievement data and on data from a staff survey they conducted every year. This data was examined by the team, then topics for professional development for teachers were selected. A school administrator in District A confirmed this process by sharing how their team developed professional development.

“We’ll sit down this summer, we haven’t done it quite yet, but we’ll sit down this summer and kinda decide what we want to be our goals for professional development for the year” (District A P3, Interview, June 23, 2016). She went on to explain the benefits of this type of collaborative planning for their team and for their district.

...we can plan out for the year and make sure we have a very consistent, meaningful professional development. We have a plan for the year and everybody’s involved in making that plan. And that helps because sometimes it would get so disjointed cause the special ed director would want to take her people, and then you’ve got the aides and they would want to go this way, and then you’ve got all these mandates now that you have to throw in, and so we try to set up a plan so that everything’s consistent. The full admin team does the planning. (District A P3, Interview, June 23, 2016)

Another benefit of collaborative work seemed to be improved practice for both central office and school administrators as these practitioners learned from one another, an example of the idea that teams can produce better results than any member could achieve alone.

What I like about our administrative team, I will tell you that we have experts among our team in every area. I know who to go to when I need to talk about a school-wide positive behavior support plan. I know who to go to when there’s expulsion hearings coming. I know who to go to when, you know what, I have a child who needs to be on cyber school. What do I do? What’s the process? I have experts in curriculum. I have experts in grant-writing. So it is so comforting to know I sit at a table with a team of educators that know what they’re doing. (District A, CO2, Interview, July 1, 2016)
Skill-Building by Being a Sounding Board or Respected Mentor Resulting in Improved Practice and/or Learning on the Part of the Principal.

The central office played a role in helping principals and assistant principals within school districts connect with one another around a variety of topics. But district administrators in all six districts studied also provided one-on-one support for school administrators. This often took the form of acting as a mentor or sounding board. Central office staff helped school administrators to move forward in their careers as leaders, to improve their practice, and to further their professional learning through this personalized, one-on-one support.

A central office administrator from District A described her feelings about a district colleague. He had left the district for some time but then returned. “I was very fortunate that [central office administrator] reapplied to come back, and he truly has been a wonderful mentor for me” (District A CO2, Interview, July 1, 2016). She went on to discuss her feelings about how she needed to work with the school administrators in the district.

I feel like I have to be a role model for them. I want them involved in the process. I want them to lead that process. I'm a firm believer in turnaround training, so I expect them to be up there and guiding that, yet I also want them over time like a gradual release of responsibility. I will show you, I will help you, but then I want them to kinda step back and allow that process to continue. (District A CO2, Interview, July 1, 2016)

Another District A central office administrator described his work with one of the district’s newer school administrators. He shared, “at least early on, worked with [school administrator] a little bit closer to mentor her. I know I did. I was working closely with her on those first several months particularly” (District A CO4, Interview, June 29,
The school administrator mentioned in that comment described how this central office administrator impacted her daily work.

[Central office administrator] has been outstanding for me. He really has. He’s helped me to be comfortable in this role. When I’m frustrated and he comes in and sits down, he knows when I’m frustrated, and it’s usually...the adults...I look at him as the eternal optimist, you know? So he has a way of looking at things and changing things...he has been able to steward changes that a lot of people probably wouldn’t. He’s one of those leaders where he’s like, hey guys, let’s go jump in the mud. And, OK, what should we wear, you know? (District A P1, Interview, July 5, 2016)

She seemed to feel very supported and inspired by watching the way this central office administrator went about doing his work.

School principals and assistants in District B spoke of different ways that central office administrators worked with them on an individual basis. One example centered on joint visits to teachers’ classrooms.

[Central office administrator] does come here a lot. He has been here, because he’s asked me before, how can I help?...I said your biggest help to me would be to walk in a classroom with me and observe with me because I observe certain things and other people will come in and see so much more than what I see. So if you could help me we can kinda just hash out what we saw. That would help me tremendously. And he did that… this is the best year that I’ve had professionally, and I think it’s mainly because of him and his input and his support. (District B P2, Interview, April 27, 2016)

The central office administrator discussed above also described the work he had done with the school principal.

We’ll take a walk together…through classrooms, and take some notes and then come back and do a debrief. I just really try to not talk, which is hard for me sometimes, and listen, and see what that person sees, and then try to be a critical friend to them. I don’t want to give them answers, or give them what my idea of the answer is. Instead I want to try to push them to think and question why they think about it the way they see it. (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

In addition to working one-on-one with this school principal around classroom observation, the two also worked together around school improvement planning.
We were just kind of discussing what were the strategies in his plan at the beginning of the year that he had identified that were going to have an impact on student achievement, what was the data saying? And then what were those next steps going to be? When we look at the student data, he’s still identifying 60% of his kids in K, 1, and 2, that are below benchmark. So not much movement, not much growth. And so, what was great was, if I can share this cause this is, like, a real win, ah-ha, is he is actually looking to make more of a tier 1 adjustment. So instead of taking a look at these interventions in small groups, they’re saying, listen, maybe we need to rethink how we’re doing [reading instruction], cause we spend a lot of time in guided reading. Let’s just make sure that they can read fluently first, and so let’s spend a little bit more time in word work….so it was pretty cool. It was a neat ah hah, and I was really proud of him. (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

In this same vein, a school administrator in District B described how a central office administrator helped him to navigate both teacher unions and the internal politics of the school district. Being new to his district, he relied on the advice and guidance of his central office supervisor to avoid creating conflicts with his new district colleagues. “I’m glad that he’s there to kind of, fix all that political stuff so that when it does come to ‘Hey, can I go talk to or observe the teacher over at [another district school]?’” (District B AP7, Interview, April 14, 2016). This assistant principal found such support to be helpful.

Another example was shared by a central office administrator as she described the roles of other district staff in supporting and guiding school principals. “It’s the role of [central office administrator] and [central office administrator] to be giving them feedback” (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016). One of the central office administrators named in this comment shared a similar sentiment during our conversation. “For some folks, those nice, relaxed, formative conversations build practice because people are already kind of like thinking what am I doing? What am I not doing?”
He went on to give an example of when this type of informal mentoring needed to give way to more directive evaluation.

I think a lot about mindset. Those are my growth mindset folks that are always looking at trying to figure out how they can continue to improve, but then you have some folks out there who have those fixed mindsets, and they’ve already identified their practice in this specific category and that’s who they are (pounds finger on table for emphasis), and it’s really hard to provide feedback that helps them move their practice. That’s the tough one. And so sometimes with those folks it just has to be that it’s more than just supervision. It has to be evaluation, you know what I mean? (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

Another district administrator described how she worked closely over time with one high school principal and her school team around teacher supervision and professional development. She had visited the school several times during the school year and tried to provide the school team with a fresh perspective on what was happening in their building. The following statement illustrates what happened during and after one such visit.

I talked to her before I went in about what kinds of things she was proud of or what she wanted me to look for or where she had concerns, so I tried as best as I could to look for those. I know already what kinds of PD she’s been doing. I know which teacher she has concerns about and which ones are her strong ones, so this isn’t a first time around, I’ve been doing this throughout the year. And so this morning, I sat with the principal and the assistant principal and we spent about an hour and a half kind of debriefing some things that I saw around the culture and climate of the building and changes that I saw in the hallway or student behavior. But more specifically we talked about individual teachers, where I really saw some strengths and where they could push those teachers and some teachers I had concerns about. We talked about learning targets and the implementation level cause I know that’s something she’s been working on with her teachers. (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016)

She also engaged in similar work in another district school. After a school visit, she and the principal got together to talk about what was happening in classrooms.

She had just done a couple formal observations the day before, and they’re on that A/B block, so I actually saw some of the same lessons that she had seen the day
before cause the teachers taught the same thing both days. So it was really interesting to compare notes there. There were some insights. One thing she hadn’t thought of that I wasn’t even looking for was in four of the nine classrooms there were interruptions during class where people were calling into the room or an announcement was made, that kind of stuff, which stopped instruction, and it was something that sometimes you don’t notice or pay attention to that kind of thing and she was very surprised that that had occurred and so something that she was gonna be watching out for, you know? So hopefully, again, giving feedback and then I’ll follow up. (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016)

This central office administrator described what she felt was another benefit of one-on-one work with principals.

One thing that our conversation led to there was the fact that we did see some things we were both concerned about, but they were things that, even though she and I were on the same page, which was great, I’d been in so many times and she had been in so many times and we were all frustrated that things had not changed. Then she and I were able to talk and run through ideas about what the next steps would be. And so, ok, if you've done this, this, and this and there’s no changes, what can we do now to hold people accountable for not implementing ideas that you have in your professional development? (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016)

As she and the principal engaged in this discussion, there was an opportunity for the principal to learn about different ways to follow up with her staff.

She said, ‘If I send everyone a mass email that I’m gonna put em all on awareness that’s gonna get big kickback. I shouldn’t do that, you know? But I don’t know what else to do.’ So again it was, well have you thought about this? Have you thought about that? It was really a coaching model. (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016)

Mentoring by providing support and guidance in developing as a leader was also evidenced in District C. One school administrator described this support. [Central office administrator] says…‘I'll put you in either building, but the board members kept saying we're crazy not to put you in the elementary school, so would you take the elementary job?’ That's how I got here” (District C AP1, Interview, April 22, 2016). Once he began the job, he received additional advice from central office staff.
I remember...talking to him about it because he was [in the same role]. He said the one thing about being an administrator is, and I'm a list person and an agenda person, he says you're always going to have a list or an agenda but you're never going to get to it...because when you come into work, people are going to pull at you in every direction. (District C AP1, Interview, April 22, 2016)

A district administrator in District C described what he felt was his role in working on-on-one with his school administrators to foster their growth as instructional leaders. “So much of it has to do with knowing your principals and knowing their strengths and weaknesses… It’s just like teaching or coaching. It’s knowing your constituents or your people” (District C CO2, Interview, April 29, 2016).

In District D, central office personnel were viewed by school administrators as valuable resources for personal learning and growth. As one school administrator explained, “I would say I brainstorm more with [central office administrator]. That's nice because he was in this position. I brainstorm quite a bit with him” (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016). Another school administrator, who was very new to her role, shared this when asked about how her central office administrators convey their expectations of her work.

I think [central office administrator] models that because even when I first came into this, they very much were just like, ‘We have an expectation for you. We know it's going to be tough first year. Might be a tough second year but we just want you to keep working towards it.’ They don't expect mastery out of the gate. Then I can communicate that to my staff then, too, and say, ‘I'm not expecting perfection. Just show me that you're trying something different. Always try something different.’ (District D AP1, Interview, June 23, 2016)

Staff in District D also talked about ways that former central office staff in other districts in which they had worked acted in a mentoring role. As one principal shared,

The superintendent came to me and she said, ‘[principal], I need you to do this." They had a surprise retirement. Three weeks before the school was to start they said, ‘[principal], we need you there." She was a great lady and I said, ‘I don't know [superintendent], I don't know if I'm cut out for high school.' She said, ‘You can do it.' I said, ‘If you think I can do it, then I'll go do it.' (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016)
In District E, one relatively new school administrator had this to share about the way the central office shaped his conception of his role and the way he went about doing his work.

I think that he brought up the point to me, to say that, ‘You need to schedule time to be in the classroom.’ He said that, ‘when I was an assistant principal, I had kids lined out my door, and I know you can get stuck in that rut and that's all you want to do or that's all you think you can do, but you need to put some of those detention slips behind your desk and get out of the classrooms and do that.’ He kind of put that bug in my ear, to realize that I'm not just the disciplinarian, that I need to do that. (District E AP2, Interview, July 6, 2016)

As a new administrator, he looked to his more experienced central office personnel to guide his work and to set his priorities. In this case, he was advised to see himself as an instructional leader instead of the more traditional role of disciplinarian.

One example from District F came from a school administrator as he talked about his former superintendent as a mentor and skill-builder. He described the way that his former superintendent would deal with mistakes made on the part of school administrators. “Even if he didn’t agree, he’d give me a reason why, and it usually was a pretty good one, and I’d say, hmm, didn’t think of that. I’ll go fix it” (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016). This superintendent also helped the school administrator early in his administrative career.

I went from assistant principal to principal with only one year of assistant principal experience, which was a pretty interesting jump. And [former superintendent] helped pull all that off. He had to write the state and convince ‘em that I was the guy he wanted for assistant principal as an emergency guy. But it wasn’t an emergency. They had candidates, but I had been here long enough, coached, taught, and knew everybody so it worked out. (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016)

Another area of interaction between central office and school administrators in District F centered on evaluation of principals themselves. As one principal explained,
They talked to me about that in evaluations probably five, seven years ago, two superintendents, the last two, about my role as an instructional leader. And I think it might have been a weakness of mine because I tend to be more of a focus on the moment guy…so I could work with a teacher that was having a problem right now but it wasn’t developing a whole lot of where are we going kinda stuff. So I worked on it as a way to try to satisfy their criticisms. (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016)

He went on to describe one way that his practice changed as a result of these “criticisms.”

“I think I’ve become better at advising about professional development again, the last five years as part of my goals for instructional leader” (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016).

**Shielding Principals from Distractions from the Community and the State Department of Education**

Participants in all six district sites voiced the supportive nature of this role. A central office administrator in District A described what he felt was his role in helping the school board and other community members understand the work of school administrators more clearly, thereby helping them to appropriately support that work.

I don’t care if you’re a teacher or a principal or a superintendent, if you’re doing your job, you’re making, on average, 5000 decisions a day. You are just absolutely drained. And so I think you can make bad decisions because of that…but it’s more involved than the people from the outside could possibly learn. I try to teach it to the board. I do have a couple board members that say, “Don’t write us another letter.” Well, I try to give em the background because I know at a board meeting, [they will ask] how did that happen? The majority over the years have admitted afterwards, I had no idea. I went to school, knew kids that got a bum deal, or I got a bum deal, but I had no idea when it takes to deliver. (District A CO1, Interview, June 29, 2016)

A school administrator in District A talked about how the central office helped her to deal with members of the community and better serve her students.

We had a child abuse thing that was happening and the grandparent came in and he was holding back information, “I’ll tell you on Monday.” And I’m thinkin,
why are you waiting til Monday to tell, you know? So I said, “hey, I have a situation here.” He was here in less than two minutes. He knew the grandpa and he talked to the grandpa and we sat down together. (District A P1, Interview, July 5, 2016)

The outcome of their conversation was that the child received the help that was needed.

This principal knew that she could rely on her central office administrator to support her when she needed help dealing with sensitive community issues. She also explained that central office staff worked to keep school administrators informed about community issues so that they were prepared to discuss them with their staff. “We are briefed about things that are going on in the district, things that we might wanna be aware of, something that might be hitting the newspaper soon” (District A P1, Interview, July 5, 2016).

In addition to working with school administrators about local community concerns, central office staff also played a role in helping them make sense of mandates from the state. As one district administrator in District A explained,

…may not agree with everything that’s coming down from the state but we also say we’re moving forward with this because it’s an expectation, your building level administrators are gonna struggle because they’re gonna look at you at central office to support them. And they need that. (District A CO2, Interview, July 1, 2016)

A school administrator in District A shared that mandates from the state made it challenging for her to devote as much time as she would have liked to her work around instructional leadership. In describing how the central office played a role in helping her with those mandates, she shared,

They’re very supportive with giving me resources that I need, it’s just a matter of I have to schedule that time out and say, ok, I am not going to see kids Wednesday morning from 8 to noon and I’m gonna be in the class, you know? I just have to schedule it. And that’s sometimes difficult. And it’s hard because the
state is putting so many, that’s the biggest thing, and there’s nothing anybody can do about it. All the mandates that we have from the state are the biggest issues. And you know [central office administrator] tries to help out as much as he can with those. (District A P3, Interview, June 23, 2016)

Two other central office administrators in District A shared ways that they tried to help their school administrators manage their time by shielding them from distractions from the school and outside community, thereby allowing them to spend more time engaging with practices that would strengthen their instructional leadership. One stated, “We are working on a monthly schedule that we would set up time for each principal to go into the classrooms and that the other principals and myself would cover the day-to-day operation of the building,” (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016). The other shared,

I would work my schedule so that I at least had one day in a building. And when I was there, the goal was you get out. I’ll take care of the office. You go, I’ll take care of the discipline. You go observe teachers. You go sit and read. Whatever you wanna do, just go and enjoy your building. And for the most part, that worked. (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016)

A similar sentiment was voiced by a district administrator in District B. He talked about the fact that mandates from state and local government around education often change and that it was the job of district staff to help school leaders, and others in the district, to navigate those changes.

They're all gonna change. And so we've been sort of in a compliance mode and a lot of central office's work has been around compliance. I'm really ready to say, forget compliance. Let's do what's right and find a way to call it compliance. (District B CO1, Interview, June 29, 2016)

He seemed to be saying that he felt it was the central office’s job to help school leaders to comply with requirements from the state and federal legislature without allowing them to unduly interfere with doing what they felt was in the best interest of students.
Staff in District B also cited the central office’s role in helping them to focus on instructional leadership. One school administrator in District B described how the central office helped to shield him from interactions with the school board and with the media when state test scores for the school took an uncharacteristic dip. He was told, “this is how we’re handling it from the standpoint of the board and the paper and so forth, but just so you know this is coming, here’s what we’re saying” (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016). The central office took care of talking to the media so that the principal could focus on communicating with students and parents to explain the drop in scores.

Another administrator in District B explained support his team received from the central office around the problem of challenging parents.

There aren’t a whole lotta problems that we can’t absorb here that end up going downtown. That being said this has been, like, the banner year for people to threaten litigation, bring people on board and just go really way out in left field with things. Everything unsubstantiated. I’ve never experienced anything like this in the past. There’s three or four parents...that are highly accusatory, demanding, want what they want, gotta have it right now, coming up with a thousand and one ways that we did everything wrong. Those kinds of things just, we’ll handle it, handle it, handle it, but end result is parent doesn’t get what they want they’re going to go to the administration building. And we’ve gotten great backing, you know? (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016)

One district administrator in District B talked about her role in supporting school administrators in working through state-mandated reporting and mandated forms for teacher evaluation.

My number one plan is always to support the schools, so if somebody calls…”I’ll be right over,” because I’ve done that. If they’re stuck on something…with roster verification right now, I was at a school the other day helping somebody get through that. A principal was in here this morning. I was helping her with teacher-specific data and being able to report it correctly on the 82-1. (District B CO7, Interview, June 2, 2016)
An example from District C came from a school administrator who shared several ways that his central office administrator worked with the community to create a district culture that was supportive for school leaders.

He’s just a down to earth good person. People know that. He makes that extra effort. That goes a long way. A lot of times, I think [central office administrators] are like it’s us and them...He wants to know what’s going on. He’ll come right over in a heartbeat. If there is a discipline issue, we have to involve law enforcement. He wants to know. He’ll come over. He’ll assist, if he needs to. It goes a long, long way with the staff, with the administration and with the parents, I think. The kids, like I said, they all know him. He walks in the lunchroom. They all come up and talk to him. They’re not afraid to approach him. (District C P2, Interview, June 29, 2016)

In District D, one school principal described the relationship he and his colleagues had with their central office administrator. Most of the school administrators in District D were relatively new to the district. In describing a conversation he had with his central office administrator, one principal said, “We basically said you hit all the big stuff and keep the board off our backs and we’ll make the building run. We'll make learning happen” (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016).

A central office staff member in District D shared what he felt was his role around managing state mandates for building principals.

I think it's really my role is to explain what the state mandates are. It's here's the state and then what do we currently have? What resources do we have at our disposal? Are we in proper alignment? Is what's written, what's tested, and what we're actually doing, and is it all in alignment? Then giving the teachers the reassurance that we're on the right page. Then when we're not, not penalizing them, but explaining how do we get back on track? (District D CO2, Interview, April 14, 2016)

A school administrator in District E summarized what he felt was the district’s role in supporting his work and the work of his colleagues.
In terms of what he can do to help us, when I came into this job I told the teachers that I saw one of my responsibilities as clearing the brush, keeping the stuff out of their way, so that they could teach, focus on teaching and I would handle stuff. A good superintendent does the same thing. They clear the brush for the principals. He does a good job. A lot of the craziness at the board level doesn't filter its way down here. He's blocking a lot of that. (District E AP1, Interview, July 6, 2016)

In District F, one school administrator talked about what he saw as an important role for the central office in allowing principals to do their work effectively. “Keep the board informed so they know what you’re up to and if they don’t trust each other, the board and the superintendent, that’s not a good mix because they start running end-rounds on you and put principals and teachers in a bad way” (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016). He talked about a former superintendent who effectively played this role. “He was good with the board, man. The board ate out of his hand. They knew what was going on and he controlled them. It was nice for us as principals” (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016). He also shared that the former superintendent had given his school administrators permission to put state mandates behind the needs of students and schools. The former superintendent had said,

Don’t be afraid of the state, you know? They don’t know what’s going on here. They don’t know what’s going on, first of all. And when they do, when they think they do, they don’t know what’s going on. And so the legislature really can kiss my butt. (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016)

**Central Office Roadblocks**

While many school administrators felt that the central office played a role in supporting their work as instructional leaders in the areas described in the preceding section, there were also several areas in which the central office presented challenges, or roadblocks, to the work school administrators wished to do on behalf of their schools and students. This was the subject of my second research subquestion. Common themes on
this topic included a lack of expertise, coherence, tools and support around issues related to teaching and learning. A second theme focused on the lack of opportunities to collaborate with colleagues provided by the central office. A third theme was that some school administrators felt a lack of trust, respect, and time spent developing relationships from their central office staff. Finally, some school administrators voiced issues around the central office’s failure to shield them from distractions from community issues, state mandates, and managerial tasks. In the following section, I will describe each of these themes in more detail to point out some of the ways that school administrators felt the central office made their work more challenging.

**Lack of Expertise, Coherence, Tools and Support around Teaching and Learning**

School administrators often shared that their efforts toward improved instructional leadership were hampered by the central office. Whether through confining mandates around curriculum and assessment that were not perceived to be working well in schools, a lack of adequate communication, or lack of support in staffing, administrators in four of six districts voiced concerns with the way central office sometimes hindered their efforts at improving teaching and learning in their buildings.

Staff in District B voiced this concerned far more than any other district. District B was the largest, poorest district in the study, and it was the only urban district. It is also fair to note that it is a district in which I previously worked as an administrator. I had existing relationships with many of the participants, which may have made them more likely to share openly with me about their concerns. While I have described in previous sections how some administrators found the central office to be helpful with curriculum and assessment, there were also opposing descriptions, sometimes from the same
administrator. One summarized this sentiment when she shared a question she wished she could hear from her central office staff.

Another question, if I was asked, "What are the handcuffs that you feel like this curriculum puts on you that we don't maybe intend? How are you feeling it as a handcuff or a paralyzer in your work and your efforts to move forward?" That would be helpful to me. (District B P5, Interview, April 20, 2016)

One school administrator in District B described what he saw as a lack of support from the central office as he attempted to implement a district initiative around instructional strategies.

It was rolled out in principals’ meetings, and here’s how we’re gonna support you, and here’s what it is. So they give us a rough outline and gave us the A, either the flexibility or B, they didn’t know what to do, how we’re gonna roll this out in our building and let us do it ourselves, see how it’s gonna be successful…Beyond that, we’re not getting much direction beyond the fact that you have to do this. It’s a district initiative” (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016).

He went on to share, “I would say the double-edged sword is they say do this, but they don’t provide you with support. They will help you, but you don’t know what questions to ask in order to get that help.” This principal also described his experience in dealing with the district around disappointing performance on the annual state exam at the school.

Central office didn’t say, hey, you need to do x, y, and z, they just said, hey, your numbers are low. I mean, I got called down because, oh, you’re only one of three schools that didn’t do well on the Keystones…How do we fix it? …Well that’s where curriculum started chirping in. we weren’t supported in that capacity. We were kind of left internally to say how can we do this? (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016)

He felt that the school had already been working hard to adjust curriculum and instruction and needed more support from central office. “...we’re not making any headway. So what did downtown do? Hey, your [content] scores tanked. Period. OK, what do you
recommend? It’s like, swim faster. You’re drowning, swim faster. Well how do I swim faster?” (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016).

In another school, teachers voiced concerns about the lack of coherence between the district-created curriculum and the district-created assessments. When their school administrator tried to support them in making changes, she was met with resistance from the central office.

My teachers get very discouraged because when they have tried to ask questions or they tried to point out mistakes or “This is on the assessment, but this was never in any of the work that was given to us,” and when we are reminded to stick to the fidelity of the program and not do something completely on our own, and then there's something on the test that we didn't have anything for, they feel like they're backed into a corner. (District B P3, Interview, May 9, 2016)

In her school, a lack of quality curriculum and assessment provided by the district posed a real issue for her students and staff. This concern about a lack of quality curriculum was also voiced by another school administrator. She had described prior work in the district around cohesive curriculum and assessment before summarizing what she saw as the current state of affairs.

We've totally lost that. The algebra I curriculum has kind of fallen. Everybody's doing what they want to do again. There was no effort to put together curriculums for other content areas. It just all fell apart. The middle school curriculum fell apart. When you don't have that leadership, things fall apart. (District B AP3, Interview, June 20, 2016)

She concluded by saying, “Our support from central office is gone. In my position, I don't expect support from the assistant superintendent or the superintendent. Who else is there out there to turn to?” (District B AP3, Interview, June 20, 2016)
A central office administrator in District B who worked with assessment in the district shared what she felt was a prevailing opinion among school administrators when it came to the lack of alignment between the district curriculum and assessments.

I think that the principals then start to question some of our curriculum that we have, because they're seeing results from these other various tests that are not district-made, but more national tests, even with our state testing, so then I think questions come up about the curriculum and if it's truly aligned to what we need it aligned to. (District B CO7, Interview, June 2, 2016)

This lack of attention to the development of quality curriculum also impacted other schools and teachers. One administrator explained how it impacted her work with the kindergarten team at her school. Her teachers did not feel that the curriculum was working well for their students, but they did not have the knowledge or authority to make needed adjustments on their own. While the school administrator felt that she could help, she did not feel that she would be permitted to do so, nor did she expect assistance from central office staff in the effort.

…even if it's just in reading or just in writing. Just in kindergarten, for central office to take a look and say, "Maybe we should take a look." I understand they don't want to blow up the whole thing, everybody worked hard on it and there's stuff that needs to be revisited…It's just wrong, what we're doing is so wrong. The whole structure of it all, it's such an institution and I feel like my hands are so tied. (District B AP6, Interview, April 20, 2016)

She continued to describe the district’s focus on particular reading assessments for all district students. The school administrator did not see value in the assessments but was required to report their results.

If we're going to say we're rewriting kindergarten curriculum let's give it. Let's see how we're doing. If you're telling me no, we're not looking at that curriculum then why am I giving it? I already know who needs help because we're giving the developmental reading assessment. I get a ton of information from that that we use that day. We check ourselves, we're taking running records on kids at least once a week. If you're in the bottom group it's more than that, so I already have all
that information...it is total compliance…I'm like, All right guys, I'm getting a
little frustrated. I don't want to do it anymore. We're already in the toilet. We
already stink at standardized tests. I don't need to give my kids any more. I need
to spend the time teaching. (District B AP6, Interview, April 20, 2016)

As she summarized her comments about the role of the district in providing sub-par
curriculum and assessments for students, she said,

I'm going to central office and I trust what you're saying is going to get me to the
outcome that I need. I can't think of anybody that I can call on there that could do
that. Not without good intention, but that I would really trust what advice they
were giving me. (District B AP6, Interview, April 20, 2016)

Still other school administrators shared that they lacked any type of common
assessment, especially in subject areas that were not tested on state exams. For example,
one shared, “Basically our homemade self-assessments are just basically chapter reviews,
you know, at the end of a chapter or something like that. That’s all we have” (District B
AP8, Interview, April 12, 2016).

Another school administrator from District B described a lack of support from
district staff around a curricular initiative in the district. A new type of writing framework
was being implemented that required content area teachers, namely social studies
teachers, to learn new ways to teach writing along with their traditional content. The
district had provided professional development to teachers on the framework, but in
doing so, it sent a message to teachers that ultimate responsibility for their
implementation of the new framework rested with their principals and assistant
principals, not with them. One school administrator had this to say about the way the
central office handled this implementation.

They’re implementing something that social studies teachers never did with the
writing process, teaching them something brand new and then said, oh, by the
way, don’t really worry about not doing it cause if you don’t do it, it goes on the
principal anyway. So that was kind of a [expletive] thing to do. (District B AP8, Interview, April 12, 2016)

Another described the process employed by District B in implementing initiatives mandated by the state around teacher supervision and evaluation. “That's how all of those rolled out. We went to a meeting for an hour. We were sent to PowerPoint, expected to present like the expert, not being the expert” (District B P3, Interview, May 9, 2016).

School administrators in District B sometimes pointed to central office staff who were charged with supporting them in curriculum work, but they were not always trusting that it would be provided with the degree of quality they hoped for. One principal explained his frustration with district support around mathematics.

If I need support for literacy or language arts I will go to [central office administrator]. However, she’s also supposed to be the person I go to for math support, and I felt like I was getting a corporate answer every time I went in and asked for any type of math support. And for the first time yesterday I think somebody admitted, yah, we screwed up with the math part of it. And I’m like, thank God somebody finally admitted that and said it out loud. (District B P2, Interview, April 27, 2016)

A similar thought was voiced by another District B school administrator. He felt that his school had turned inward when solving issues around curriculum, instruction, and assessment due to a lack of expertise in and communication from central office.

We take care of ourselves and every once in a while, you get a comment from central admin, but I don't look at them as a resource for us anymore. I don't see them doing anything. It's not like it used to be. We had some very strong people. (District B AP5, Interview, April 26, 2016)

Issues with a lack of curricular support in District B were sometimes compounded by the high teacher turnover rates in some district schools. One school administrator shared her concerns about how a lack of curriculum communication and expertise from the district impacted her school.
In a building like this, the [school A], the [school B] where we see that turnover rate, that’s huge...what one teacher uses in strategy next year could look completely different. And I don’t blame the teachers for that, I blame our lack of an organized curriculum. I mean, you know, our math curriculum has changed ten times over... (District B AP4, Interview, April 26, 2016)

Concerns about the lack of a quality curriculum and about the central office indifference to the issue permeated District B. One school administrator shared her school’s story around the issue of poor curriculum and how she and her team had attempted to address it.

Here's what I asked for. I asked for our own PD and six day week rotation of revisiting the curriculum, because they can't look at the results, they meaning central office, can't look at the results and think everything's going great. It's not, it's a kid problem because they come in at a deficit and it's a teacher problem because I have to keep re-training people to get them to a certain point...It is a curriculum issue and no one seems to want to say okay, let's take a look. I really would like to revisit curriculum and when we've had meetings with supervisors about that, the answer was very clearly, I'm not making this up, no. I'm not saying that's my summary. The answer is no, we're not looking at it. (District B AP6, Interview, April 20, 2016)

A school administrator in a different District B school had similar concerns, sharing his rationale for why the district curriculum was not working and how he and his school team were planning to address his students’ needs. The district mathematics curriculum in District B had been written to address the Common Core State Standards. However, Pennsylvania’s state assessment was written to the PA Core Standards. Variations between the two sets of standards had not been addressed by the district.

I look at it this way, if you have the perfect student with the perfect teacher, you're going to get a 100%, right? Well, now we’re saying, "Okay, I'm only teaching Common Core, so I'm losing 25% of my curriculum." Then I'm looking at a curriculum that goes 120 days. Now with the perfect kid and a perfect teacher, I'm looking at a 50% with a cut-off score of like, 54? Then you add in the not-so-perfect kid and the not-so-perfect teacher. You're getting dismal results from it...That's why I've kind of started going through a lot of this stuff and just
saying, "Hey, we have to almost start writing the curriculum on our own here." (District B AP7, Interview, April 14, 2016)

The impact on his school, and his perception of the impact on the district’s students, was negative. The requirement that teachers follow the district curriculum was, he felt, a hindrance to his ability to do what he thought was best for his students.

Because the problem, again, is I can pound somebody over the head when it comes to scores and their evaluation. They’re teaching what is asked to be taught. How am I going to stand up and say to somebody, when you look at our fourth grade math scores, and not one person in the district has a positive growth score, and say, "Well, you're teaching it wrong." When they're saying, "Well, I'm teaching what is asked to be taught." (District B AP7, Interview, April 14, 2016)

In addition to issues around curriculum initiatives, some school administrators in District B had concerns about district-mandated common assessments. In one school, both students and teachers voiced concerns with the assessments. When asked to explain how the assessments caused concern, one school administrator shared,

A great example and you hear this a lot, would be all the mistakes in the district assessments. Our kids will kill us on those kinds of things here. I mean, I made mistakes as I wrote tests in my classroom all the time...But doing that on a grand scale when it’s coming to us...I think there’s a little more understanding when it’s a classroom teacher with the students and parents vs. this is an official assessment coming from someplace whether it’s a district or a company, and there’s a bunch of mistakes in it. Then they’re gonna start saying why are we doing this? How do we know that this is ok or it’s valid? It’s almost like there’s a deeper sense of trust with our classroom teachers than what there would be from outside of that realm. (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016)

This sentiment was echoed by other school administrators in District B. When asked about things the central office could do to be more helpful to his practice as an instructional leader, one principal shared, “give us some leeway as far as what we can do, especially with assessments. Right now, for me, the district assessments are just really not beneficial to me. It gives me no benefit right now” (District B P2, Interview, April 27, 2016).
Concerns about the quality of curricular leadership from the central office were expressed in other districts as well. For example, a school administrator in District C shared what he felt was a weakness of his central office administrator when it came to curriculum.

He can't do the nuances of writing...Our areas of what we're targeting ... He couldn't do this stuff. What he could do is he could put people in the room and they would make up whatever they wanted, and he would go ah-huh. I have everyone...they have to have their teaching points. There has to be an order, because I know how it should be. I know how it works. (District C P1, Interview, April 22, 2016)

In his district, it was primarily the responsibility of the central office to engage teachers in the work of curriculum revision, yet this school administrator did not feel confident that the central office could adequately engage in that work without his support and guidance.

I live, breathe, love this job. Love this curriculum...at some level there has to be the accountability to get stuff done. I take this on and I'm probably different than some principals. At what level does that happen? Is it the [central office]? Yeah, they can make all that happen, but my own personal belief is they don't know the nuances. That's a power of mind that I have which they never taught it so you can't know those nuances. (District C P1, Interview, April 22, 2016)

In District D, one school administrator described what she felt was a missing component in their district. She was frustrated by a lack of coherence and commonality around K – 12 assessment.

What I would really like to see is common assessments throughout the grade levels, from kindergarten all the way up to twelfth grade, so that we know what the expectations are...to align those assessments, which they're not at this point, which is very frustrating. District D AP2, Interview, June 7, 2016)

This administrator lacked the authority to mandate or even coordinate such common assessment work, but it was work that she felt a central office administrator could have
completed. She also had concerns about the process the district had used in the past, as well as about the most current process, for developing and implementing curriculum.

[Former central office administrator] had teachers essentially work on their own, and upload the curriculum that they taught, which is great. Now you have your curriculum of what you taught based on what you went through in your textbook in this outside program that no one ever opens or looks at ever again. That was a big waste of time in my book. Now fast forward, we have new [central office administrators]...so we implement [new curricula] at the 7th and 8th grade levels because that's where the scores were not doing so well. We began implementing them there, however there's still no consistency before and after, as far as what's being implemented. (District D AP2, Interview, June 7, 2016)

She went on to explain the frustration that she and her fellow school administrators felt about the state of the district’s curriculum.

What's our ultimate goal? We know where we want to be, let's develop the steps on how to get there, as opposed to well we're just going to throw this here and throw that there and see how it works, and if it works then we'll keep ... You know what I mean? We have the building level principals that feel like there needs to be a written curriculum, which I agree. There needs to be something written that, in my mind, if one of our teachers leaves tomorrow, we need to have something to be able to hand them to say, "These are the concepts that you're expected to cover, these are the materials and resources that we have available for you to meet these objectives, and there you go." We don't have that right now. We have a text book. Here's a text book, work your way through the text book. People confuse, a lot of times, curriculum with a text and that's ... That's not what it is. We have the building principals, again, saying that we need to have that written curriculum and then we have some district office staff saying, "Well, you have the modules, that's a curriculum." (District D AP2, Interview, June 7, 2016)
Her colleague in District D shared a similar viewpoint about the curriculum the district was using. He had concerns that teachers lacked understanding of why they were following the curriculum as directed. He felt that central office administrators had chosen a particular curriculum without providing an adequate foundation for the staff to execute it properly.

It's [central office administrator’s] curriculum. That's shiny, let's bring that over. Okay we have the pieces, now let's refine our pieces and let's take our pieces and write our curriculum and make sure ... They are following the modules but do they know why they are following the modules? Do they believe in the order that the modules are coming in? If not, it's just a module. (District D P1, June 7, 2016)

In District E, there was not central office staff member solely dedicated to curriculum and instruction. There was one person available to provide support around teaching and learning, but this was only one of several other duties he was responsible for managing. Devoting time to supporting teaching and learning could be a challenge. As explained by one school administrator, “He wants to be an instructional leader, but our board is challenging. That consumes a huge amount of his time. I don't know that he's able to do as much as he wishes he could do” (District E AP1, Interview, July 6, 2016).

Another school administrator described the impact of this lack of support.

It’s very difficult to try and be an instructional leader in that position when there’s nobody else in central office to help in that effort. So a lot of that falls onto the principals. We have done curriculum mapping in the past, but I’ll just throw out terms like diary maps, power standards, and those kinds of things and you can probably think that those are terms from, I don’t know, six, seven, ten years ago? (District E P1, June 24, 2016)

While the school administrators in District E felt competent to manage the curriculum, instruction, and assessment in their separate buildings – a sentiment voiced by all of them – there was acknowledgement that the lack of coordination at the district level made it
challenging to know what was happening in other buildings, thereby compromising the coherence of the curriculum for students.

**Failure to Facilitate Collaboration between School Staff**

In three of the six districts studied, school administrators voiced that a lack of effort to bring school staff together around collaborative work by the central office hindered their work as instructional leaders. One example came from District B, where a school administrator wanted to help his teachers learn from teachers in other schools. He described his desire to have the central office play a role in coordinating such activities.

...one of the things I've been asking...for was to set up a program where we could find a particular teacher...that...is doing really, really well in...language arts. Why is [School M] doing very well in...language arts, and [School N] is not, or [School O] is not. What's the difference? Are they doing something, is it the teacher? Which we all know is a lot a part of it. Did they throw away the curriculum and start them doing their own stuff and that's what's getting them good scores? Any of that interconnecting thing from building to building. I try to get that through [Central Office Director] or [Curriculum Director], someone like that. (District B AP7, Interview, April 14, 2016)

When I asked whether or not such connecting occurs in the district, he answered,

“Sometimes. Sometimes not.” For this school administrator, this lack of connection with successful practices in other district schools seemed to be a roadblock to better student outcomes.

In District B, which otherwise provided some resources around collaboration for school administrators, there was still room for improvement in the minds of some principals. One shared his frustration that the district office did not make a greater effort to bring principals together who worked in neighborhoods that experienced high rates of student mobility. In this district, families were forced to change schools when they moved during the school year, a policy that impacted poor neighborhoods more than
wealthier ones. A principal in one of the poorer neighborhoods voiced his wish for a form of central office support that he considered lacking.

… stay connected with our peers. Like I said, I’m not sure if that’s their job or our job as the [school] administrators, but help facilitate that, maybe that’s what they need to do. They need to facilitate us coming together and being able to talk about what we’re doing in our schools, because when our kids switch, they get lost. They get lost. And that can’t happen. (District B P2, Interview, April 27, 2016)

Another school administrator in District B shared what he felt as a lack of valuable collaborative conversation among school administrators. He discussed the topics of conversation at their monthly principals’ meetings, which he felt were often focused on trivial, managerial types of topics. Instead, he would have preferred conversations about issues more relevant to teaching and learning.

I would much rather have a big debate on are we covering the whole curriculum? Are we doing those kinds of things, than to mess around with the minor things that don't really mean a whole lot in the grand scheme of things. I would say that everybody seems to be open to ideas, however, it also seems that you have to kind also tip-toe a little bit around the egos of certain people, should I say. (District B AP7, Interview, April 14, 2016)

Another school administrator shared that he did not feel the district had a good system in place for helping him share questions and solutions with his colleagues.

If things weren’t working, we would certainly try to find some ways to fix it. And seek help, too. We’re certainly not above that. We call around and talk to other administrators around the district and see what they’re doing, and as much as we’re able to we share ideas. We probably don’t necessarily have the best system for sharing ideas throughout the entire district but open to anything that really will help make us better. (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016)

District B was not alone in having issues around the central office’s role in bringing staff together. Principals and assistant principals in District E talked about the fact that much of their work was done in their separate buildings, not as a collaborative team. “The large in-service day, we usually kind of plan together as a group, but when it
comes down to, for example, instructional techniques, analyzing data, we're going to do that here rather than as a curriculum team” (District E AP2, Interview, July 7, 2016). In fact, when asked whether they work together as a full administrative team around anything related to teaching and learning, three of the four participants interviewed in District E answered “no.” One school administrator described the mindset of their team as follows,

I would say there’s probably some bigger tie-in between third through eighth grade where they have those crossover years and maybe even between the primary school, second to third grade. I think there’s a lot of interaction between those two principals because here’s what we would like them to be able to do in third grade. Here’s what we can give you in second and the same with that fifth to sixth transition, but the eighth, the high school transition, we’ve said, “You take care of the middle school and we’ll take them when you need to send them here.” (District E P2, Interview, July 6, 2016)

In the absence of a collaborative ethos in District E, school administrators were given the choice and responsibility for engaging in collaborative work. One wonders what impact this may have on students and their experience of a coherent curriculum as they progress from grades K to twelve, if any. District E enjoys high levels of student achievement on state exams, so it would seem that the administrative team has found a way to ensure that students receive a quality education despite a current lack of a dedicated central office role in managing curriculum and instruction. However, the district did have such a role up until a couple of years ago, so perhaps the district has yet to feel the effects of a lack of coordination around teaching and learning.

Unlike District E, District D did have a central office position partially dedicated to curriculum and instruction. However, work in that district did not seem to mirror the type of collaboration noted in some of the other sites. A school administrator in District D
talked about his work with both central office staff and with his colleagues. “I've had the opportunity to collaborate with [administrator] more than I have with any other high school principal. With that whole transition, six to seven especially that's part of the ESSA, it's going to be huge. [Administrator] and I have been friends for years too” (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016). It is telling that this was one of only a few mentions of collaboration between and among members of this administrative team. District D did have a central office position dedicated to curriculum, but much of the work of collaboration centered on direct work with teachers.

**Lack of Trust, Respect, Time Spent Developing Relationships**

Several school administrators in Districts B, D and F voiced concerns about what they felt was a lack of relationships with district staff. A lack of time spent in building relationships impacted school administrators’ perception of the district’s respect for them and their work. It also created problems with trust; school administrators sometimes felt a lack of trust in their central office administrators. It should again be noted that staff in District B voiced this concern far more often than staff in any of the other districts. Even in Districts D and F, it was mentioned by slightly less than half of participants. It should also be noted that it was not mentioned at all by participants in Districts A, C, and E. It is also worth noting that in Districts A and C, central office staff included the development of relationships as an accountability measure for school administrators and for other central office staff. The biggest difference between district B and the other sites was the fact that it is large and under-resourced. It would seem that this is one area where those factors might impact the interactions between central office and school administrators.
One example came from a school administrator in District B. He was discussing the process of principal evaluation and how it was being executed in the district.

The interesting thing is, with the administrative evaluation process, it’s all self-promotion. I mean I can put all kinds of stuff in there, but I really would rather trust that [principal] knows what I’m doing and can vouch for me and speak to, you know, give me the credit for the work I’m doing… cause we all know people who are great at fluffing themselves up, and I certainly am not that person, and I know I don’t ever wanna be that person. I solely wanna be judged based on the merit of the work that I’ve done. (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016)

He went on to further share how he felt about the lack of time spent developing personal relationships with school administrators.

We’re so isolated…I feel that way… there are very few opportunities to discuss our work, to talk about it, to share what we really feel like are the good things we’re doing. And I’m not really the kind of person that will, I’m not a self-promoter kinda person in any way, shape or form, and so for me the only way that works is if it’s more organic. If we can sit down and actually have a conversation or if we’re in the same room or if they’re stopping by at lunch and we’re having conversations around those kinds of things, if you want me to come and show you all the wonderful things that I’m doing and putting on a parade that is so off-putting to me. I’d almost say just fire me, you know what I mean? If you really wanna see what I’m doing, come and talk to me and see what I’m doing. (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016)

The impact of poor relationship-building on the instructional leadership of school administrators was also described by another administrator from District B. In this case, he lamented the lack of accurate feedback about his work, which he felt not only stifled his own professional growth but negatively impacted his students and staff.

…just get out to the buildings and see what we’re doing. Because if they don’t see what we’re doing and they’re just making a decision based on what they’re hearing from other people, that can be very, very good, and it can be very, very bad, and it could be neither of the two. I mean, for so many years I’ve been told what a great job I’m doing and what a great job I’m doing, and then [central office administrator] walks in the door and said, not so much. It’s not so good. And to hear that for the first time after six or seven years of doing it, I’m like, oh my gosh, all those other kids that I had before that I coulda done so much better for, or the teachers that were here before that I could have done so much better
with. It changes your perspective on what they could do for you. (District B P2, Interview, April 27, 2016)

The lack of candor that resulted from minimal in-person time spent in buildings for District B central office staff was also discussed by another school administrator. He had received a satisfactory rating for the year, but there were areas of the evaluation marked with a “needs improvement” designation despite a lack of conversation about his practice. His frustration and lack of confidence in his central office administrators was evident as he shared,

He was very blunt. [central office administrator] has a different approach where I think he wants to help you but he doesn't want to, in the process, dent you and have to fix you which sometimes that's what you need. I do better with blunt. If I'm messing up, tell me. I'll fix it. Don't tell me I'm doing a good job and then go, "Oh, by the way." That happened...My end of the year email all of a sudden needs improvements when I haven't been spoken to all year. I said, "I'm not going to argue with it but I don't know where you came up with that." I just looked at him. I went, "Whatever. What's my overall rating? Satisfactory. Thanks are we done?" (District B P4, Interview, April 26, 2016)

Another area in which some administrators voiced a lack of trust and respect was around the hiring of new teachers. In some schools in District B, there was a high turnover rate for new teachers, requiring them to hire new staff on a frequent basis. District staff managed the hiring of teachers, not school administrators. While principals and assistants were sometimes part of the interview team and were consulted about hires, they were not always asked to share in the construction of the hiring process itself. One District B school administrator voiced what she felt was a lack of quality in the hiring process in place in the district. This lack of time spent in listening and respecting principals’ thoughts resulted in damage to students because of the practice of hiring inexperienced, poor teachers.
…serve us, support us. Listen to what we're saying as far as interview team, interview protocol, what we want it to look like here. Who you're placing here, listen because it hasn't worked out yet and then it's just a series of I feel like wasted time. (District B AP6, Interview, April 20, 2016)

A similar issue arose when a lack of communication between a central office department and a school created a negative consequence for students.

Our kids haven’t had art in a month. We haven’t had an art sub. Our art teacher’s out on maternity leave. It hasn’t filled. I think we had a sub for one week and she was done. It was long term and the girl quit. And then they thought it was filling day-to-day and I called human resources. I said, “So how long do my kids have to go without art?” “What are you talking about? We thought it was filling day to day.” I said, “It’s not.” I said my art teacher left on, like, March 17th and my kids have had art maybe once since then. (District B AP4, Interview, April 26, 2016)

This administrator was clearly frustrated by what she felt was a serious lapse in communication from a district office. This lack of communication was often felt as a lack of respect and understanding about what was happening in district schools, resulting in eroding trust in the central office.

One central office administrator from District B echoed the concerns around lack of trusting relationships voiced by school administrators.

I really wanna support what’s happening in the buildings, and I really respect the building principals. And I see, hear, kind of a lack of that. Lack of knowledge of what’s happening at the building level, sometimes a lack of respect about what’s happening…so that’s frustrating. I struggle a lot, cause I’m told, sometimes, what I have to do here, and being that buffer is a challenge, it’s just a real challenge to know the frustrations at the building level and to be able to support them and help them be better and also (pause) doing what I’m told. Sometimes I buy into what I’m told. Sometimes I don’t. I struggle often with that. (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016)

A school administrator talked about how current central office staff differed from those with whom he had worked in the past and how the lack of time spent in schools impacted him.
It was different. They were more hands-on. They were visible. I used to see Baron out in the buildings. I've been here four years, the Superintendent has been in my building, I think four times and none of those times has he ever stopped in the office. He was being interviewed for [award] recipient kind of thing…and just, kind of, in and out of the building. You don't feel real important when a lot of the top people won't come here. (District B AP5, Interview, April 26, 2016)

This lack of communication eroded trust in other ways as well. One example centered on the addition of a new emotional support classroom in one district school. The school administrative team was not consulted before the addition was made, nor were they informed of it by anyone from the central office.

They added an additional classroom without having any conversation with [school administrator] and I. We got a phone call from a grandparent saying, "My kid's coming to your school." [school administrator] and I start calling, then we get a list of twelve kids we're getting. It was five days before the first day of school. This school administrative team was unable to focus on other matters, such as instructional leadership, due to the pressing need to prepare their school, staff, and students for this new classroom.

A lack of trust in the central office and a feeling of being disrespected was voiced by another administrator in District B. She explained a situation in which she had been asked to attend a meeting regarding professional development. Due to a lack of clarity about what was expected of her, she felt that she was not given ample opportunity to prepare for the meeting. The result was that she was not permitted to engage her staff in the professional development she felt would best move her school forward.

The expectations of what to bring or be prepared to discuss are not clearly laid out. For example, I was called to a meeting around professional development. I was sent the message at 2:00 to just come tomorrow at 10:00 to openly discuss just a specific topic in professional development. Literally, I had notes jotted on a scrap sheet of paper. I had a meeting downtown at 8 the following morning, and then an 8:30, and it was after the 8:30. There was no additional time. When I got into the meeting, I was asked for my proposal for professional development. I
said, "I don't have a formal proposal. I wasn't expecting to bring that. Let me just talk you through what I was thinking." Again, if the timeline had to be such, then what would be helpful for me, because I want to do what central office wants me to do, is just give me the list of things that I'll be responsible for. I could have changed my evening plans if necessary, if I knew that a proposal was going to be asked of me the following day. Those types of things are not helpful.

What we need here is differentiated PD. We need it differentiated for our staff at our school based on our school improvement plan. When I was requested to come to the meeting, I felt like it was going to be really casual, and the perception of at least one other member of the team when I got there was an expectation for a proposal.

I'm not really sure why, though, because I was told no from the start when we sat down at the meeting. Again, if you're going to tell me no, just tell me no. We don't need a meeting for that. Just tell me no in the email. We're following the district process. We're following the district procedure. I left with a very clear understanding, at that time, that we were following the district process that's been put in place for this self-choice regardless of what I had been asking. (District B P5, Interview, April 20, 2016)

In short, this school administrator clearly felt that the district had not done a good job of supporting her work as an instructional leader. She ended this part of our conversation by saying,

Those are two instances where the structures of central office have not felt supportive or helpful to me moving forward, specifically in this last case with instructional leadership. We're saying we want to have three really devoted days to our needs based on our school improvement plan, but it's not happening. We have a school improvement plan for a reason. The district structures have not allowed us to get where we need to go. (District B P5, Interview, April 20, 2016)

One school administrator in District D shared a story of a previous experience he had had with a former central office administrator. His former superintendent had done a poor job, in his opinion, of holding others accountable for executing her directives. This put him in an awkward position with his teaching staff and cultivated a lack of trust between central office and himself.
The biggest complaint I always got when I was at [former district] was...A superintendent would give a directive...I'd follow the directive, a high school principal will go in two weeks later and saying, "We don't think that works for us," and they weren't held accountable to finish that. Then elementary teachers would say, "Why do we have to do it if the high school teachers don't have to do it?" I would say, "The high school teachers do have to do it." They'll say, "No, we talked to them they said they don't have to do it." It was my credibility. I said, "All I can tell you is I was given a directive by my supervisor and I'm following it and I'm your supervisor. This is what I'm doing." (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016)

A lack of time spent directly communicating with school administrators was another issue for central office in District D. While the school administrators felt the central office did a lot of good work with teachers, they did not always feel that they were kept adequately informed about results, making it challenging for them to execute their own instructional leadership.

The only thing I would say is that we probably need to schedule monthly conversations because sometimes he'll talk to teachers and I don't know he's had those meetings to talk to them about piloting go math. He'll think he said something to me and he hasn't. Just making sure we stay on the same page, so that the teachers see us on the same page. (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016)

The failure to spend adequate time face-to-face with school staff caused divisions between central office and school staff in District D, according to one school administrator. In prior years, central office staff had been more visible in the buildings, spending time and energy staying personally and professionally connected to school staff. According to this administrator, that had changed during the current school year.

There's a little bit of a division between administration and teachers. Plus, [central office administrator] has not really been over here very much...because he's had so many other things going on at the district office level, so he isn't really able to be over here as often as he had been before. I think it's more so they're feeling kind of slighted. (District D AP2, Interview, June 7, 2016)

A school administrator from District F shared what he thought about the role of the central office in developing trusting relationships with school principals.
If you have a [central office administrator] who micromanages and doesn’t trust the principals and the teachers who come in contact with kids every day to deliver the message to kids, what you want, then you’re one step removed from having kids wanna achieve the goal. Like, they sit down there all the time, and I say down there because it has become a little bit more of a we and they than there used to be. (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016)

A school administrator from District D shared a similar sentiment as he related a story about his former school district.

One of the main reasons I left [former school district], we were so micromanaged. It was only the last two years of me being there…Our last superintendent got mad at one of the principals early on when she first started. Basically we were told in administrative council meetings we were not to talk unless we were spoken to…I got my hand slapped and I got called into the Superintendent’s Office for $36. I said, “It’s not like I went out to lunch.” I said, “We needed pencils for the PSSA.” We had no, no autonomy whatsoever, I mean, everything. It got so bad with [former school district]…Each school had its own culture, its own schedule, everything. Well, to make it easier for the new curriculum director and her superintendent, they said we all had to run the same bell schedule at the same time, the same classes…The only way I got to do the STEM program at Tarton was we started getting involved with it and they actually told me to put on the brakes. Well, then [local TV station] came down and did a little piece…then the school board was like, “This is amazing. This is amazing.” Then, all of a sudden I had the blessing to do what I wanted, which I did not before that. Otherwise, yeah, it got to be very oppressive. We lost nine administrators from May to August. (District D P2, Interview, June 21, 2016)

**Failure to Shield Principals from Community Issues, State Mandates, and Managerial Tasks**

Administrators in four of six districts shared this concern. One school principal in District B described what he felt was a lack of support from the central office when it came to measuring the success of the school. Mandates from the state around standardized test performance were given more weight by the district than they were by the school community. The school’s performance was excellent, but had dipped from the previous year. The school administrator shared that he did not feel the central office
supported him in his efforts to communicate with parents about the true value of such tests.

I like to think that our parents believe in what we’re doing and our external results, be it the SAT, be it our college acceptance, be it our financial aid, those are the nitty-gritty things that I just stress to our parents. I know this test is important to you, but in the long term, it’s irrelevant. So let’s not get crazy about it, you know, we need to focus on what we need. But again, not so much important downtown on that. (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016)

Some school administrators described ways that central office staff members created structures and requirements that were meant to be useful but ended up being a draw on their already precious time. One talked about his thoughts on the usefulness of monthly principals’ meetings hosted by district administrators.

You know, [central office administrators] were doing the meetings where we would go…and we’d go to the board meeting after and all that, people were riffed about that and feeling like I’m pinched in, you know what I mean? And then you get the, you know, it’s not mandatory, but what is it? I can’t think of the wording that was used but it was kind of like, you know, you need to be there but it’s not mandatory but you’ll be looked upon in a good way if you go. I think a lot of those meetings, sometimes I think you get caught up in wanting to try to just fill time because you’re obligated to have the meeting. I’m sure somebody’s watching, making sure you’re accountable. (District B AP1, Interview, April 27, 2016)

School administrators in District B also voiced frustration over the perception that central office staff asked them to take care of tasks unrelated to teaching and learning that central office could take care of themselves. As one shared,

…you think, ok, there’s three people sitting down there in this office, why am I doing this? It’s simple little things that they probably don’t think anything of, like, I get an email, “We were made aware through an address change on another student that this child in your building will need to be at this school next year. Please notify them.” Why aren’t you notifying them? Why is this my job? You know, those kind of things. I don’t think they realize. (District B AP4, Interview, April 26, 2016)
Another shared a similar sentiment.

They make decisions without talking to the people that do the actual work. Either there’s many more steps they add in the process or it’s just something that’s unnecessary. Or they’ll ask us for stuff that already exists downtown, all they had to do was walk down the hallway. (District B P6, Interview, May 2, 2016)

The same concern was shared by a third school administrator in District B. “What agitates me that comes from central office is when they request information that they can get ten feet down the hall or they can go on [student information system] themselves (District B P4, Interview, April 26, 2016). He went on to elaborate on his concern and how it impacted his ability to engage in matters related to instructional leadership.

They are fifteen feet down the hall from you. It's faster for you to walk down and ask them to get it for you than to send me an email and expect it by the end of my workday when I just had a wrestling match in the ES room. It's those kind of things that make it more difficult when you're given the clerical work that can be done by someone else. Someone else has the information...That makes it more difficult because it eats away time that could be much better spent for sure. (District B P4, Interview, April 26, 2016)

One school administrator had advice for central office staff to help them avoid this type of roadblock.

…it seems like little consideration for remembering what it's like at the building level. I would never want to not remember what it's like in the classroom, and so the same consideration. Think about what that feels like, the week of spring break or the week of Christmas. Kids are in crisis, can't be having callings to meetings or having due dates. Come here and help, that kind of thing. (District B AP6, Interview, April 20, 2016)

Another shared an example of how central office staff made her job challenging due to last minute requests for information, often via email.

Another challenge of time for me is really, I'm just being honest, is responding to central office emails that come last minute and require a response quickly. Here's an example. I got an email this morning at 9:20. We were doing PSSA testing. Then I went to attendance court. I came back at 10:30, and my 9:30 email had asked for a response, but by 10:50, when I was reading my emails, there was a
follow-up to that, which has already responded as if I had affirmed the 9:20 email, but I hadn't. (District B P5, Interview, April 20, 2016)

This type of request from the central office impacted her work around instructional leadership in her building. As she stated, “If I felt like I was going to be in classrooms today, and now I have an email that says I have to respond, then it's a different day” (District B P5, Interview, April 20, 2016).

She shared other examples, both of which impacted her building and her work in a negative way.

A couple challenges are things like timelines. I'm sure I don't understand, because I have this lens as my primary lens right now, but literally that short window of response. That's happened a couple of times, where I'm asked for a response. I don't have the time, so I feel like it's inadequate time to respond. If there is a timeline, I would just appreciate a phone call, to say, "I just sent you an email, and I have 60 minutes to hear back, so if you could jump right to this." I want to do that. I want to respond in a way that's helpful to central office every time I can, but when I don't know about it and then the decision is made anyway, that doesn't feel supportive. That doesn't feel helpful.

That happened in the hiring of an employee this year, as well. We were asked for feedback, and by the time we were able to give feedback ... It wasn't days later. It wasn't even the next day. It was by the end of that day. The person was offered a contract, and we never would have supported that, but now she's here under contract. Again, just some heads-up when there's a time-sensitive message sent would be great. (District B P5, Interview, April 20, 2016)

School administrators also shared that they felt central office staff could do more to help them manage state-mandated testing. Requirements around test security meant that anyone proctoring the state test had to pass an online certification test. This sometimes caused issues for school administrators, especially when certified staff became ill or needed to take days often during the testing window, which ran for almost three weeks in the spring of each school year. One school administrator voiced this concern. “I just get confused why people at central office, who I know have certificates to teach,
don't get the PSSA cert to come and help in buildings, or even just a, ‘Hey, how are things going?’ There was nothing” (District B P3, Interview, May 9, 2016).

Other school administrators voiced concerns about what they saw as a lack of central office support when it came to holding teachers accountable for their performance. Given that all of the participants in this study came from public school districts in Pennsylvania, all dealt with teachers’ unions. School administrators were often beholden to the central office to work with them during disagreements with teachers. When that support and collaboration was not present, it made the work of school administrators more difficult. One school administrator from District D explained this concern.

Right now, we're the bad guys, because we're trying to reel them back in, and previous administrators have tried to reel them in, too, but again, it comes with the support of the district office. When [former colleague] was here, as far as personnel issues, they really didn't have the support…There really wasn't that district office support of ... It was more fear of the union and what could happen. (District D AP2, Interview, June 7, 2016)

In District E, school administrators seemed to voice a common concern that they and their central office staff were spending an inordinate amount of time managing the community, often to the detriment of their work as leaders of teaching and learning. One stated,

We have gone from a very hands-off board…Now, everything gets questioned. I don't know whether it’s ignorance as to how the process works just because we have so many new board members or if it is distrust…Right now, I would have to say this has been the hardest year of my career because it seems like right now my time is spent answering questions…The superintendent and I right now are kind of that different levels because I want to say, “Step and lead the board. They’ll follow you. Be firm. We’ll back you.” He is still trying to please them. I just think we all know that especially if you have a bully and you keep answering the bully’s demands, they’re just going to keep bullying you. Sooner or later, you’ve got to say no. I say to myself, “I don't know that I’m serving students anymore.”
It’s like the educational process is forgotten. (District E P2, Interview, July 6, 2016)

In District F, the need to comply with mandates from both the district office and the state posed a challenge for administrators. One shared about his frustration with the current system in place, which he sometimes disregarded in favor of spending more time developing relationships and trust with his students and staff.

…it gets me in trouble with the superintendent who is a paper Nazi. You didn’t used to be, [previous superintendent] was not worried about paperwork. We didn’t even have to get all our observations done as long as we could back up or justify our DEBEs at the end of the year. He didn’t care…Not so much anymore, so gotta do the paperwork stuff, and I find it hard to get it done. (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016)

**Tensions Between Central Office and School Administrators**

Tensions invariably arise as people work alongside one another each day. This tension can be generative or it can be problematic. For study participants, tensions were generally problematic and are therefore presented as a roadblock to collaborative work between the district office staff and school leaders around instructional leadership. These tensions were concentrated in four main areas. One was around the balance between school autonomy and coherence to district goals. A second was around the process of change. Third was around the process of feedback on and accountability for performance. A final area of tension centered on philosophical differences among educators within school districts. In the following section, I will examine some of the tensions that were voiced by central office and school administrators as they shared about their work.

*Autonomy vs. Coherence*

School administrators seemed to be conflicted when it came to the amount of autonomy they wanted to engage in instructional leadership in their buildings as they saw
fit. On the one hand, they wanted the central office to give them the freedom design curriculum, assessments, policies, and professional development as they wished. Yet on the other hand, they wanted the central office to support them by providing authority, coherence across the district, and guidance as they worked. This was especially evident in District B. Many articulated feelings of tension around this topic with some even calling out the fact that they recognized that asking for both autonomy and direct support were sometimes incongruous. Unique to District B was the large number of schools and school administrators it contained for relatively few central office administrators to serve primarily because of a lack of resources. While a few other districts are included in this section, tensions around autonomy and coherence were most prominent in District B.

Curriculum and Assessment

Central office administrators voiced their thoughts about coherence, with some feeling it was necessary for all schools to follow district mandates and others feeling it was most beneficial to leave important decisions to school administrators. Several felt that there were reasons why it was important for all schools within a district have a certain level of consistency around curriculum and assessments.

In describing his thoughts on the tensions between providing a common, coherent curriculum for students and providing autonomy to school staff, one central office administrator from District A discussed what he felt was one way to find balance.

It doesn’t come from somebody saying, hey, you’re gonna march to this drum and you’re gonna do x, y, and z. I’m very lucky that way. Now I’ve worked the other way, where I’ve gotten orders from central office, and that doesn’t work for me. Cause they were never the same thing on any given day, it was always changing. Then I could never hit the target and I was never able to be successful. (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016)
Many school and district level staff felt a tension between the need for autonomy and the need for coherence. This was especially true in District B, which was unique among participants in that it had many schools in the district. However, there was less mention of the need for consistency around instructional practices. Perhaps central office staff did not feel the same urgency around common strategies as they did around common curriculum and assessments. One central office administrator in District B shared her thinking on the topic of common curriculum. She stated,

Because of our transience, I do feel like there needs to be curriculum across the board that people are following. That’s one of the main reasons I feel that way. I also think, though, when we were talking about those conversations across buildings, obviously it’s much easier to have those and pull resources and maybe even grade level teams across the district if we have a common basis for discussion. (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016)

For her, issues of student mobility and the need for a common topic around which district staff could collaborate were important reasons for maintaining a consistent curriculum in all schools. She went on to clarify, however, that there was room for autonomy. “People certainly have room to innovate or add their own resources as long as they’re staying within the parameters of what they’re being asked to do. And as long as they’re meeting the standards” (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016).

Central office staff in District B did create a process by which school administrators could request to use curriculum other than the district-approved curriculum maps. The process was new, so most school administrators were unaware that it was an option. One school, which was not selected as a participant school for this study, had begun to use its own mathematics curriculum. It was designated as a priority school by the state due to low test scores, so the district was required to work closely with
school staff to help them make improvements. Grant funding was also provided by the state in order to support efforts at reform. In talking about the school principal’s decision to use alternative math materials and curricula, a central office administrator explained the confusion and resolution.

I knew they weren’t doing what everybody else was doing, but I didn’t know what they were doing. And so we had a conversation with their administrators and Jay explained the process for piloting and said if they truly wanted to go in this direction and they felt that strongly about it, and especially being a priority school, you know, he could support that. But he needed a rationale. He needed something in writing. They needed to apply to pilot this, and then that’s exactly what happened. (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016).

For her, the district was able to balance the need for coherence around district curriculum with this particular school’s need to engage in school reform. As she shared, “that, in a way is how we dealt with the fact that they strongly felt that they wanted to be autonomous from what we’re doing.”

Her thoughts were shared by another central office administrator in District B, who also discussed the balance between autonomy and coherence when it came to district curriculum. The district was going to be moving to a more site-based system of curricular management primarily due to ongoing issues with inadequate funding.

There are going to be a number of principals who want central office to hand them the district curriculum and let them just go ahead and implement it. There are others who are very interested in doing something different, that they may not like what we've produced or they may have learned about something different that they think might be more effective for their students, and they should be able to do that in a controlled way. One of the reasons we always go for exerting some sort of central control over curriculum, instruction, assessment is our high mobility rate. That cuts against what some of the principals have wanted. I'll use [school administrator] as an example. [School administrator] was really very interested in doing her own thing, has a lot of outside training and experience working with the implementation of common core and really wanted to go in that direction. Well, they have 40%, 50% turnover and so that's great. Go ahead and do something wonderful there but then we've got half of your students are going
to go somewhere else. So we've had to have that debate with her as we have done this past year and a sort of a formal pilot program, so at least we could justify to her peers and take it out of the shadows. I'm envisioning doing a lot more of that. (District B CO1, Interview, June 29, 2016)

This decision did not come without repercussions, however, pointing to the ongoing tension between allowing school staff to do what they think is best for their own students while managing the need for common curriculum across the district.

But when I did ask the question, well, what happens when someone transfers in from another school where they’ve had none of this, they did say it’s an issue. But again, I think we need a formal process for that because otherwise you’d be back to having twelve elementary schools, all of whom had their own favorite and their own agenda or their own, sometimes just comfort level was something. And again, then we’re losing coherence. (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016)

Another central office administrator in District B who often worked closely with school principals also discussed the ongoing tension between curricular autonomy and coherence.

Building principals don’t have a lot of leeway in varying from the curriculum. There’s not a lot of give and take. There’s a lot of compliance. And so I think that sometimes makes it challenging for some of those folks who actually do have a good understanding of it and wanna move forward, and they are oftentimes rebuffed. But I love to argue both sides. So from a district standpoint, I was just talking about that poverty, also what comes with that is transience. So we have kids that are moving from school to school to school and really can’t have six different curriculums at six different places. (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

His central office colleague shared a similar sentiment, taking her discussion one step farther as she also discussed the tension she feels internally about trying to meet the needs of individual schools while meeting the needs of the district as a whole.

When you are a building principal, you’re tasked with looking out for the best interests of your students and your building. That doesn’t mean it’s necessarily the best interests of the district as a whole…I’m in a weird position…I have to support both [school A] and [school B], I have to figure out how…not to interfere with the work they’re doing. The people above me are looking at that whole picture, like all the K-12 schools…(District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016)
She went on to explain the conflicting feelings she had about her work as she sought to balance autonomy for school administrators and the coherence needed by the district as a whole.

I find myself sometimes really working to protect the work of the schools, and so I’m kind of, I don’t wanna use the word enemy, but I speak out against the flow of the district because I need to protect the buildings. And then sometimes I find my role as a cheerleader for the district, convincing schools why this is the way we need to go at the district level. And so, you know, I’m bipolar, and that’s a challenge…another piece of this is the autonomy of the building principals that I really struggle with. I have so much respect for the role, and I think site based vs. district based is a huge thing, you’re probably gonna hear that with everybody you interview here… there are pockets of principals that want that…I would rather err on the side of autonomy but knowing we have a lot of kids that are transient…for the best interests of the kids being transient, but we could still come together as a group and make some decisions. But I would rather err on the side of, you are an instructional leader and you are competent and you can provide professional development for your staff, and you can evaluate textbooks and materials, and if you can’t, then I would want to hold you accountable, provide you support, evaluate you. If you can’t do that, then you’re not an effective principal and you’re not where you should be. (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016)

School administrators also felt conflicted in some cases about the tension between autonomy and coherence. On one hand, some were very clear about the fact that they required freedom from district mandates in order to help their students and schools be successful. Yet on the other hand, some also voiced issues that arose for their schools when “feeder schools” did not adhere to a consistent curriculum. One example came from a school principal whose school took in students from a variety of elementary schools across the district. His school had created a specific class designed to prepare students from different elementary “feeder” schools for the state assessment. In talking about how he and his staff developed the curriculum for the class, he shared,

…using the PSSA data we create that new curriculum for all the fifth graders coming in, and it’s amazing, you can tell the same strengths and weaknesses come from the same teacher every single year. You know who their teacher was cause
you know the teacher’s strengths and weaknesses from the feeder schools.
(District B P6, Interview, May 2, 2016)

One wonders whether these repetitive differences in teacher strength and student skill might be mitigated by a more robust district curriculum and better clarity around instructional practice.

This same concept was voiced by another school administrator. She shared that, while the district still had expectations that all schools follow a common curriculum, the lack of quality, lack of alignment with state standards, and lack of resources forced teachers to make so many changes to the mandated curriculum that it no longer was common.

We feel like there's still that priority of everyone doing the same because we remember back when different schools did different things and kids were so transient in and urban district, would go from one school to the next and be completely off, so we're all doing Common Core. We're all doing the same math, except for [school A], but teachers are finding that they are adding so much of their own information that they're really not doing the same. They're really not. (District B P3, Interview, May 9, 2016)

In another district school, the administrator felt that he had a green light to make changes to his school curriculum as he saw fit, a green light he felt had been granted by the central office.

Our fifth-grade science person scrapped the kits years ago and she uses the outside, the woods back there as her kit. It's five acres and she ties it in so they're covering the same topics and they take the same assessment but they're just attacking it a different way. I tell people if you have an idea and you can present it to me and show me that it can work, I'll let you try it. I'll back you up. The nice thing is [central office administrator] is very good about saying to at least me here, "I trust you. Do what you're going to do." We do sometimes. (District B P4, Interview, April 26, 2016)

A similar sentiment about the district’s willingness to allow school administrators to do what they felt was necessary was shared by another District B principal.
Sometimes I feel like we are under a microscope, but many times I feel like we are just left to our own devices, which I am choosing to take as a compliment. Whether or not it's meant as a compliment or just that everybody else is busy and the building is typically not blowing a lid off, I don't really care. I'm choosing to take it as a compliment, to say that central office trusts enough that we are doing the work on behalf of kids and families. (District B P5, Interview, April 20, 2016)

Another school administrator shared his thoughts about the tension between autonomy for his school and the need for district support.

So (pause) there is this kind of fine line between wanting more clarity and then also really liking the autonomy, you know what I mean? And I could get how that would be very difficult to navigate for anybody in central office. If there are clear expectations, most of us are the kind of people that would say you tell me what you want, I will go make it happen. But at the same time, most administrators probably feel that they themselves are there to be the leader in some capacity, and when you’re doing that, it’s hard to have somebody else driving your agenda. (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016)

In discussing the role of district mandated common assessments, one school administrator voiced a concern that, for his school, such adherence to conformity with the other district schools was not in the best interest of his students or staff. “A lot of the other schools you see the tests, the district assessments, have kind of become their tests, and I just don’t know that that’s a model that a lot of our teachers would be comfortable with” (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016).

One central office administrator pointed to changes that were forthcoming, perhaps based on some of the concerns shared by school administrators. The district was moving away from mandating all of its assessments to a model where principals could design a school assessment plan by choosing from a menu of district-supported options.

There's always a question of "We take too many assessments, it's too hard on the kids" ... That comes up all the time as well, and we've tried to scale back this coming year. They're going to be designing their own assessment plans from choices that we're giving them, so eventually they're going to see that they're going to need some of the different assessments that we've offered in the past.
We're still offering everything, we're just not requiring everything. (District B CO7, Interview, June 2, 2016)

The results of this change remain to be seen, but as of the writing of this dissertation, school administrators were enacting their assessment plans.

While District B’s administrative staff, both central office and school, voiced the majority of tensions around balancing autonomy and coherence, which is not a surprise given that it is the district in this study with the largest number of schools, administrators in other districts shared concerns about this balance as well. One from District C shared about his work in a previous district. He had worked in a district with just one elementary, one middle, and one high school, yet his central office administrator maintained that he needed to keep the entire district in mind as he crafted curriculum for his school.

I just remember I had five years at [previous school district], so I had a lot of liberties when I came. They just wanted to start a book room. I've started book rooms. Okay. I'll go out and buy totes. I was told, “No, because it has to be the same.” It took three months to get it done. I could have had it done in a weekend and I just remember walking down the hall, I said [to central office administrator], "You need to let me be the principal of this building." She goes, "Yes, but there are other buildings in this district, and they have to be the same." I get it in one sense, but I'm not a patient person. I have issues with it. (District C P1, Interview, April 22, 2016)

In talking about the state of curriculum in his building at the current time, he shared what he felt was a result of a lack of oversight of curriculum in the district and in his school.

Well, right now, we're in a ... My God, what do we do phase? Because we had all the lists from [text series], we had all the list from all different things, and then we adopt something and only half of people like it, the other half they go ...off, and teach other things, and this whole ugly mess. I have just been trying to figure out this year what are we teaching. (District C P1, Interview, April 22, 2016)
Policy

School administrators from District B also voiced concerns about the way policies were adopted and implemented without sufficient input from building staff. Negative outcomes resulted, from their point of view, when the district mandated certain policies without taking specific building needs into account. One shared,

I think things wouldn’t be so black and white. No matter how much you try to make up a rule or say this is how we’re doing things, it’s never as black and white as it seems. And so I think if they spent a little more time in the buildings you would have a better understanding of you know, how some of the decisions that they might make would work for [school A] but maybe not so much for [school B] because we’re just a middle school whereas an elementary or a K – 8 is a different world than just a middle school. (District B AP9, Interview, April 25, 2016)

A school principal in District B explained a situation in which the district created a policy mandate. For this principal, the central office staff member in charge of the policy did not obtain sufficient input from impacted stakeholders before mandating its adoption.

I expressed my displeasure, in that room there were three of us that said no, this won’t work for our buildings, we’re constantly told site-based management, and yet this is being forced on us. It’s not being forced on you. When you say this is the policy and we’re moving forward, it’s forcing it on us without any insight. So that’s probably been the biggest one as of late that I think will adversely affect our building. (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016)

This principal clearly seemed to feel that the coherence to policy demanded by the central office would adversely impact his school. He also felt that the district was engaged in a level of hypocrisy around school autonomy. While the district communicated a goal of site based management to principals, their actions seemed to indicate otherwise. For him, the requirement that he conform to district mandates designed to bring common expectations and coherence around curriculum was a hindrance to his ability to maximize
student achievement in his school. He was not alone in this thinking. A colleague in a different district school shared the following,

When we get the chance to actually to tailor it ourselves, and the district has been saying a lot more building-level decisions, and when we use our ILT to make those decisions, we're still dumped on with a lot of “Here's the core. Tailor to your needs.” We don't always get to do that. That's kind of the part we're stuck with when you're telling the teachers, I know you don't need this part or we have to watch this mandated video or I have to send you with everyone in the district even though we're not on the same playing field. (District B AP5, Interview, April 26, 2016)

**Professional Development**

School administrators in District B frequently shared concerns about their lack of autonomy in designing professional development in their schools. Yet at one school, a contrasting view was offered. In this school, administrators were given more autonomy than some of their colleagues, especially when it came to professional development. One school administrator explained why he felt this was the case.

That’s kind of always been the case at [school A]…there is a fair amount of autonomy, although it is overseen at the district level, but there is a fair amount of autonomy here when it comes to those kinds of things. But I think what we’re able to do is actually show, and we’ve got some, I think, pretty good evidence that we’re doing good work, at the same time. (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016)

He went on to explain the role he felt the central office played in helping the school continue to maintain its autonomy.

I think central office seems to have to try to advocate for us in a lot of instances to allow us to keep doing the things that we’re doing rather than jumping on board and doing what the rest of the district is doing. (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016)

Not all school administrators in District B expressed this same sentiment about professional development. For them, the district’s insistence that all schools participate in district-mandated professional development left little space for engaging their staff in
professional development that was tailored specifically to their school’s needs. One shared his frustration with such a model.

The problem with the [district-mandated professional development], it is district-wide and it was a lot of people presenting, but I don’t feel like every school needs to do the same thing. So those are great to have to kinda get continuity between your district and everybody doing the same thing in the buildings, but I think we need to have those separate from what we do in our building professional development. There needs to be two separate things that go on. (District B P2, Interview, April 27, 2016)

Another shared a similar sentiment.

The district mandates a lot of professional development. They’re looking at the whole district and it's hard. Yes, there are some things that absolutely everyone needs, but a lot of [school administrator’s] needs at [school A] are not the needs that my teachers here have…my teachers don't need to quell all those behavior issues. They can get in there and teach. We can gloss over the stuff that's really not needed and get to the meat…(District B AP5, Interview, April 26, 2016)

When asked how the central office could better support him in his work as an instructional leader, one school principal in District B shared the following,

I think there’s…things that I would say they could do different, better, I’m not sure how it would work. But they have to give some autonomy back, like we just talked about, give some control back to the school to do what they feel is best for their kids. They hired us here for that reason because I think they thought we were good educators. I think that. So if they think that about us then let us do some things that may not look exactly the same. We have to be connected as far as what we’re doing somehow, some way. (District B P2, Interview, April 27, 2016)

Even as he called for more autonomy, he noted the need for some level of coherence throughout the district so as to best serve students.

One principal expressed her conflicting opinions about the involvement of central office in her work by saying,

Keeping the bar high, and helping me see if we are in fact lowering the bar unintentionally. I'm not sure. It's a catch-22...one of the things I said earlier is we're left alone. When we ask, though, I feel like we ask for only what we need. I feel like I've been around long enough for central office to know that. Can we find
a way to make it happen, when the ask is there? That would be helpful. (District B P5, Interview, April 20, 2016)

She seemed to express her wish that central office staff have a strong enough relationship and trust with her to know that, when she seeks support, it is truly needed. In this same spirit, she would like to be given the autonomy and authority to otherwise do what she feels is needed to help her students succeed. She went on to describe what she felt would be a better practice for the central office.

Stop lumping us all together. There are colleagues among us who break out in hives when they feel like they have to lead professional development around either content or strategy, and there are colleagues among us who feel like they thrive when they're asked to do that. To send the message of differentiation across the district, to send the message of valuing who we are as individuals, to start at central office and allow us that at the building level, would be huge for me. (District B P5, Interview, April 20, 2016)

As a potential solution to managing the need for the autonomy to innovate and to act as an instructional leader with the need to maintain some level of coherence as a district, several central office and school administrators offered interesting thoughts. By developing processes whereby school administrators could present well-researched proposals around topics such as curriculum, assessment, policy, and professional development, these central office administrators offered a compromise. Similarly, school administrators offered suggestions for ways the central office could help them meet the needs of their schools while meeting district needs at the same time. One central office administrator shared a strategy for bridging the gap.

…as an organization, if people are willing to do that kind of study to give me a good reason why they should be able to do something different. If they're willing to do that work and put their time in then we should honor it. That's kind of where we're going. I'm excited about that. (District B CO1, Interview, June 29, 2016)
A school administrator in District B shared her thoughts on how the district might provide better support for balancing school autonomy and district coherence.

I understand that we don't want a different expectation for the students at [her school]. We want different supports. If someone from central office said to me, "These are the expectations. You know them. Show us how you know them. Demonstrate to us that you do know them." When I do, stop lumping me in with everybody else in feeling like I need to be spoon-fed about what the expectations are. I don't need to be spoon-fed about that. I need to be supported in saying, "When we have 2nd graders who are reading on a pre-K level, what do we have to offer differently than schools where they don't have as many?" We probably all have some, but where there is a need different, how can we support? Is it manpower? Is it time? What is it that we need? That question would be really helpful to me. (District B P5, Interview, April 20, 2016)

**The Process of Change**

Both central office and school administrators in Districts A and B expressed tension around the topic of change. Sometimes this tension was felt as a mutual phenomenon when administrators were working together in an effort to make change in either teacher practice or in their school communities. At other times, this tension came from change that arose due to actions taken by central office staff. Districts A and B were two of the larger districts studied, and both lacked access to resources. Anthony Bryk noted that in such districts, external mandates were more frequent (Bryk et al., 1999). Yet District A seemed to see change as positive; it brought administrators together as they sought to help teachers navigate large scale changes in the district around scheduling, curriculum, and school configuration. One wonders whether this was due, at least in part, to the fact that the District’s leadership saw visibility and relationship development as a priority and as a point of accountability for his administrative team. Such attention to positive relationships leads to trust, and trust is essential to the successful enactment of change in an organization (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). There was no such expectation
voiced by the leadership of District B. Perhaps this contributed to the fact that its administrative team voiced many concerns around the process of change.

In District A, one central office administrator described what he saw as a mutual challenge around trying to make changes in teachers’ instructional practices. This was a common goal of both central office and school administrators, and it represented an area of tension for both. “It’s probably the most difficult thing there is in education is to get a teacher to change how they instruct and how they are going to hopefully improve. It’s very difficult” (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016). He went on to describe the tension inherent in trying to spend the time needed to make such instructional changes happen while at the same time managing the other important needs of a building.

I think the biggest impact we have, and probably one of the things that we struggle the most about to make a difference is to actually be in the classroom…I think administrative presence, mine, the principal’s whoever’s, is the one way you’re gonna see a big difference in whether things are being implemented, whether we’re seeing improvement…so I think that’s probably the one area that we try to stress the most is to get people into the rooms. But like I said, it’s a challenge every day, between the managerial side and the demands there, the discipline, the instructional leadership side, unfortunately, is probably the most important part of the job that usually gets the least amount of attention. (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016)

The ongoing tension between the time demands of instructional leadership and the demands of other aspects of the job were common concerns for both central office and school administrators.

Another central office administrator in District A shared his thoughts on what he felt was is role in helping folks in the district navigate change.

I think my role is to create the conditions needed so that we understand why the change needs to occur and that we eventually can work with having all stakeholders having a point of view and being able to contribute to realizing, here’s where we need to go. We have just gone through so many changes here
that have been very difficult. The major one most recently has been the closure of two buildings, the reconfiguration of the other two, and then helping folks through that process. If I came from a building where I was in the same room for eighteen years and now I come into seven others with a schedule that’s predetermined with some different type of kids, holy crisis, you know? So we worked really hard to support that. It has not worked for some. They really bucked it…but if they’re being honest they will tell you that they’re working harder but they have more support than ever before. I just feel like I have a moral responsibility that if I can see at least a possible solution to at least look at it and march halfway there instead of saying yah, we could fix it, and it’s gonna be hard, but I’m gonna go the easy route. I just can’t do that. I’m not wired that way. (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016)

A school administrator in District A talked about this change from her perspective.

In second grade they started departmentalization last year. That was hard. That was a very hard move for them. But once they realized that they only really had to focus on language arts or math and the lesson planning became [easier], I think they’re really going to see the benefits of it this year now that we’ve had a chance to get past those growing pains. (District A P1, Interview, July 5, 2016)

Her colleague also talked about the impacts of the change brought about by consolidation of school buildings in the district, this time with the impact to parents in mind.

When we did the consolidation sixth grade moved up here, so I’ve just had sixth grade for two years…That’s been an adjustment, moving the sixth grade up here, but it was definitely the right move. Sixth grade needs to be part of middle school…the parents were very reluctant and afraid, and rightfully so. I get it. (District A P3, Interview, June 23, 2016)

As a team, central office and school administrators pulled together to help teachers and parents work through the often tense process of change, a change initiated by the central office. Yet the team seemed to pull together so as to support teachers, perhaps due to the emphasis on relational trust created by the district’s leadership.
In District B, one central office administrator described a way that she uses tension around change to propel school administrators to grow and strengthen their practice of instructional leadership. She acknowledged that the process of getting teachers to make instructional changes is difficult and talked about how she uses that opportunity to help them make changes to their own instructional leadership.

If you’ve done this, this, and this and there’s no changes, what can we do now to hold people accountable for not implementing ideas that you have in your professional development? So again, it’s being a sounding board and pushing a little. (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016)

School administrators in District B also acknowledged the tension inherent in getting others to make changes to their practices. One example came from a school administrator as he talked about how he worked with his staff. “They wouldn’t move unless we pushed them” (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016). He used an interesting metaphor to describe why he felt that the process of change induced tension in teachers. “I think as a classroom teacher you’re always dancing as fast as you can in the first place, and you don’t want the music to change cause now I gotta learn a different routine” (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016). He seemed to feel that the change process required some type of “push” or catalyst, both of which imply a certain amount of tension between the pusher and the pushed.

His school colleague shared this sentiment when he shared, “You have the people that will adjust and you have the people that are stuck in their ways and you just continually have to prod and prompt and work them in” (District B AP1, Interview, April 27, 2016). Another school administrator in District B shared what he felt was required to get teachers to make changes to practice.
When I'm able to get in and we're able to talk and say, this is what I want to see different next time because this is where this is lacking, that's where things change. That's the only time things change. They don't change if you don't go in. (District B P2, Interview, April 27, 2016)

It is clear that both central office and school administrators in District B see a need to work directly with teachers to manage the process of change. While there are examples of times when they worked together to engage in this work, several of which are described in previous sections, there are others where central office and school administrators experienced tension with one another around the process of change.

One such example centered on a new curricular initiative in the district. School administrators felt little support regarding how they were to implement the change in their buildings.

It was rolled out in principals’ meetings, and here’s how we’re gonna support you, and here’s what it is. They gave us a rough outline and gave us the A, either the flexibility or B, they didn’t know what to do, how we’re gonna roll this out in our building and let us do it ourselves, see how it’s gonna be successful. We’re not getting much direction beyond the fact that you have to do this. It’s a district initiative. (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016)

In other cases, school administrators felt tension around the frequent changes to curriculum initiated by the central office. One described her feelings about such change.

“What one teacher uses in strategy next year could look completely different. And I don’t blame the teachers for that, I blame our lack of an organized curriculum. I mean, our math curriculum has changed ten times over” (District B AP4, Interview, April 26, 2016).

This was voiced in a slightly different way by another school administrator. In this case, she was explaining the lack of district communication around curricular changes which caused tension for her and her teachers. “Things have changed since we've had the
trainings before by grade level, the roll-outs, and then there was really no training on updates when things changed” (District B P3, Interview, May 9, 2016).

Other changes initiated by the central office caused friction between district and school administrators. One such change was described by a central office administrator. She was discussing changes the district made to one of its mandated assessments.

When we moved companies, we changed goals as well, we changed the recommended goals, which are a little bit more challenging, and so questions did come up about "Why did you make this decision?" It was not a decision I made by myself and I don't think this particular administrator knew that, just didn't understand the test itself and didn't understand why we made those moves forward. That would be an example of a disagreement that happened, and it was just more of a ... We had to have a discussion and she needed to understand the background behind it and the reason why we made the different changes that were made. (District B CO7, Interview, June 2, 2016)

One wonders whether such tension and misunderstanding could have been smoothed had central office staff made relational trust a priority in District B.

**Feedback and Accountability**

Tensions between central office staff and school administrators sometimes arose around the process of giving feedback and of holding staff accountable for performance. This tension was voiced primarily by District B staff, but it was also mentioned by staff in Districts A, D, and F. One central office administrator from District B shared a challenge he faced in evaluating the performance of school administrators. He felt a certain amount of tension as he engaged in the work of speaking with principals about their instructional leadership practices.

…with building administrators…for me the challenge is figuring out how to best provide them with feedback that’s gonna move their practice. Because just like teachers, for some folks, those nice, relaxed, formative conversations build practice because people are already kind of like thinking what am I doing? What am I not doing? But then you have some folks out there who have those fixed
mindsets, and they’ve already identified their practice in this specific category and that’s who they are (pounds finger on table for emphasis), and it’s really hard to provide feedback that helps them move their practice. That’s the tough one. (District B CO4, Interview, April 13, 2016)

A central office administrator in District A shared similar ideas about the tension that arises when one person tries to give another feedback about performance.

You’re gonna have people that are overly critical of themselves, and they grade themselves down, and you’re gonna have people that are on the other end of the spectrum that, I’m distinguished in everything. Those people at that end are the more challenging ones, because at some point you’re going to have a disagreement about I see myself here and you see myself here, and those are difficult conversations because you still have that person believing they’re this good, and you’re saying I think you can work on this. (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016)

A school administrator in District B shared the tension he felt around one way central office held him and his colleagues accountable for their work. In his mind, the district staff was looking at the wrong type of data when making decisions about the performance of school administrators.

There’s all this talk about, ok, where are you documenting that you’re meeting with all these kids? And so I don’t want to spend as much time documenting what I’m doing with kids as I do actually doing the work, do you know what I mean? I can show you. I can show you lots of handwritten notes and things like that, but is is all in [the student information system]? No. We resisted putting things into IC because it feels like they’re in trouble…but in all the other schools they document everything they do and it’s all neat and tidy, but then, you know, they’ve turned themselves into clerks rather than people who are actually helping…if you’re spending that much time documenting and justifying the work that you’re doing, how are you actually accomplishing the work that you’re setting out to do? And how do you document a thirty second conversation with a kid in the hallway to say hey, I’ve been checking up on your grades, great job? Should I run back to my computer and sit down and log in and put that in there just to make it look like I’m doing a better job? If that’s what they’re expecting out of me, this is not the job for me. I don’t want to be the person that has to do that. But again, if you really wanna know, come and…see me when I’m doing that stuff, and then you decide. Take that as a measure. (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016)
This school administrator clearly felt tension around the feedback he received from the central office about his performance. Another felt a similar tension when he felt central office staff micromanaged his performance, which to him, demonstrated a lack of confidence in his performance.

I don’t like being micromanaged and I like being able to run the building. Every building is unique, every year of students is unique, every parent’s unique, so you need that flexibility, you need that trust. I would say two out of the three direct supervisors have just given me that trust and that support and called me in when I needed it, and I respect that. When I need to get my hand smacked, go ahead, smack my hand… (District B P6, Interview, May 2, 2016)

Tension arose between central office and a school administrator in another District B school around feedback and accountability for performance.

If I'm messing up, tell me. I'll fix it. Don't tell me I'm doing a good job and then go, "Oh, by the way." That happened. My end of the year email all of a sudden [my evaluation contained] needs improvements when I can't been spoken to all year. I said, "I'm not going to argue with it, but I don't know where you came up with that." I just looked at him. I went, "Whatever, what's my overall rating? Satisfactory. Thanks are we done?" I hate to be like that but if you're going to come at me and tell me I got a needs improvement under assessment and it was because not all my teachers had their tests scanned on time… I looked at him and my response was, "Whatever. Are we done?" (District B P4, Interview, April 26, 2016)

School administrators in other districts voiced tensions over the feedback they received from central office staff. In District F, one school administrator shared feedback he received from his central office administrator around his handling of discipline.

[Central office administrator] said, “I don't get very many phone calls from the high school about you.” She couldn't find a way to make it a compliment. Too often, when you hear from somebody higher up from you it's about an issue or a problem that needs a fix, not about what's going well. (District F P1, Interview, June 9, 2016)
Another school administrator in District D shared a story about a former central office administrator with whom he experienced tension around accountability for following through with directives.

The biggest complaint I always got when I was at [former school district] was, a [central office administrator] would give a directive as far as in service day or expectations for finishing things, portfolios would be one of them. I'd follow the directive, a high school principal will go in two weeks later and saying, "We don't think that works for us," and they weren't held accountable to finish that. Then elementary teachers would say, "Why do we have to do it if the high school teachers don't have to do it?" I would say, "The high school teachers do have to do it." They'll say, "No, we talked to them they said they don't have to do it." It was my credibility. I said, "All I can tell you is I was given a directive by my supervisor and I'm following it and I'm your supervisor. This is what I'm doing." (District D P1, June 7, 2016)

For him, the fact that central office staff did not hold him and his colleagues equally accountable for performance caused tension.

**Philosophical Differences**

A final area of tension between central office and school administrators was around basic philosophical differences in how to best accomplish the work of instructional leadership. This area of tension was voiced by staff from districts A, B and C. Even within the central office, there were sometimes philosophical disagreements among staff members. As one central office administrator explained, there were times when her conception of the role of school administrator clashed with that of her colleagues.

I mean, you would never want a teacher to teach to the bottom kids…but we do that. We feel like if the principal isn’t knowledgeable about curriculum, [we think] oh you poor principal. You have so much to do, let us worry about that. I’ve literally had people say to me, well they couldn’t possibly know all the content that they’re doing, so we’ll take care of it for them. And I’m thinking, well why would they possibly know? They know more about it than we do. And I
know we could be really strong in curriculum and pedagogy, but so can they. They’re expected to be. (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016)

In one district, the central office staff had mandated that a traditional high school course be reflected in a student’s transcript even when it was taken in the middle school. One school administrator voiced his frustration with the mandate, saying,

There’s a big push from the middle school principals to validate the work that their people are doing, but from our point of view it just isn’t something that really makes a whole lot of sense. There’s no benefit to it for our students, colleges don’t care, employers don’t care, business schools don’t care, nobody cares if [content] is on your transcript if you’ve taken [other courses] and everything else. (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016).

For him and his school team, the philosophy of central office staff resulted in a district mandate that did not mesh with their ideas about how to successfully lead teaching and learning in their building.

This type of philosophical difference was also found to occur between central office administrators and teachers, especially in smaller districts where district staff often worked directly with teachers. One shared his thoughts on the practice of grouping students into classes based on their perceived ability or on past performance, a practice generally referred to as tracking. “The other philosophy I have that sometimes people don’t agree with, if a kid wants to try the advanced track, let em go” (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016). This philosophy often clashed with that of teachers and even of some school administrators in his district, resulting in tension.

In District C, one school administrator voiced tension around the philosophy of district staff that led to their choice of topic for districtwide professional development, which happened to be wellness.
I philosophically believe that professional development, that these wellness topics, to me, is a waste of our time. I don't understand a day where I put people in a room and we're talking about eating right. I get it all, but that's my own personal thing. I'm sitting there going, what I'd give to have five teachers talking about grammar right now so I could check that off. (District C P1, Interview, April 22, 2016)

This administrator also voiced tensions around the direction the district was talking regarding instructional practices and curriculum.

[Central office administrator] knows where he wants to be, and I know where we are. That's why they're down worrying about problem solving and getting your kids to discuss it, and I'm at the ... They don't even know what they are teaching at this point. (District C P1, Interview, April 22, 2016)

A school administrator in District B shared a similar thought about the district philosophy of developing curriculum and common district assessments.

We should say, before I move on to a different subject, it's all skills based. It's all so compartmentalized and it's like you can go back and review that skill, that doesn't fit our philosophy that doesn't fit the way I'm trying to get people to teach. I really don't want them to go back and drill something, it's not about that. It's about teaching the kids how to read, process information, find evidence and then do something with it. Make some judgement, be able to write it down whether it’s a summary or reaction a connection, whatever. Answering a question, all of that. If they can do that then they can take your test. (District B AP6, Interview, April 20, 2016)

When philosophical differences arose between the central office and school administrators, tensions inevitably arose alongside them. While I make no judgment about who was right and who was not, I do point to the reality that when people hold different beliefs about something important to them, in this case instructional leadership practices, tensions arise as they interact. As I stated in the beginning of this section, I believe that tension can be both generative and debilitating depending upon how long it lasts and how it is resolved. Future research may be able to delve more deeply into these tensions to find out which are useful and which are detrimental to effective practice.
As may be evident by this section, tension and the overall interactions between central office and school administrators varied in some important ways based on context. In the following section, I will delve more deeply into these differences.

**The Role of Context**

The second research question on which this study focused dealt with the role of context and how it might impact the interactions between the central office and school administrators in a school district. Sites in this study were chosen with an eye toward their size as measured by number of students overall and per school, their access to resources as measured by median household income divided by the number of students, and their type (rural, suburban, or urban). I suspected that the role of the central office might vary based on these characteristics. I did indeed find that the work of instructional leadership and the role of central office in supporting or hindering it for school administrators seemed to vary by context in several ways. In the following section, I will describe some of the differences that emerged. One area involved relationships and trust between central office and school administrators. A second involved the amount of autonomy school administrators were given around their practice of instructional leadership. A final area centered on the impact of resources on instructional leadership and on the interactions between central office and school administrators.

**Relationships and Trust**

In comparing the number of central office staff in each district to the number of schools and school administrators in the district, one can relate district size to the development of trusting relationships between central office and school administrators. In
the largest district, District B, face-to-face interaction between central office and school administrators was minimal. Given that there were five central office administrators directly involved in teaching and learning and forty-four school administrators spread over eighteen schools, it stands to reason that there would be less person to person interaction in that site than in the sites that had a smaller ratio of school administrators to central office administrators. However, this lack of face-to-face interaction often created tension between central office and school administrators. It is telling that, of the fifteen District B school administrators who participated in this study, only one felt that he had a trusting, close relationship with central office staff.

One example of this tension involved the procurement of a substitute art teacher.

The school administrator explained this issue.

And the other problem is, our kids haven’t had art in a month. We haven’t had an art sub. Our art teacher’s out on maternity leave. It hasn’t filled. They thought it was filling day-to-day and I called [human resources] last Friday and said…so how long do my kids have to go without art? What are you talking about? We thought it was filling day to day. I said it’s not. I said so my art teacher left on, like, March 17th and my kids have had art maybe once since then” (District B, AP4, Interview April 26, 2016).

The miscommunication she described was not noted in any of the other sites. In smaller districts, frequent personal interactions may make this type of miscommunication less of an issue.

Another repercussion of a lack of face-to-face interaction dealt with school administrators’ trust in the central office as a partner and fair evaluator of performance.

This was summarized well in this comment from one school administrator in District B:

My primary suggestion would be, maybe I would hate it, but to see em more, to have conversations with em more and to be able to partner with em more. There is a little bit of, whether it’s because we’re so isolated or I feel that way or whatever
it may be, what’s going on in that brain down there? And while we don’t necessarily have to know everything, there are very few opportunities to discuss our work, to talk about it, to share what we really feel like are the good things we’re doing. And I’m not really the kind of person that will, I’m not a self-promoter kinda person in any way, shape or form, and so for me the only way that works is if it’s more organic. If we can sit down and actually have a conversation or if we’re in the same room or if they’re stopping by at lunch and we’re having conversations around those kinds of things. (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016)

Other school administrators in District B voiced a desire for more in-person interaction with central office administrators. As a suggestion for how the central office could be more helpful to him, one stated, “get out to the buildings and see what we’re doing” (District B P2, Interview, April 27 2016). Another shared how he felt as the result of a lack of in-person time with central office administrators. “You don't feel real important when a lot of the top people won't come here” (District B AP5, Interview, April 26, 2016). He went on to share his suggestion for making things better between central office and schools. “I just think if they get in there and get back in touch with the buildings and see where the needs lie.”

The remaining districts in this study had much smaller ratios of school to central office administrators. While there were still some issues voiced around a lack of trust and lack of relationships by a few school administrators in the remaining study districts, the overall sense was that there were established relationships developed through frequent, regular in-person contact with their central office administrators. This is in stark contrast to the sentiments voiced by most District B school administrators.

For example, one central office administrator in District A described how he approached his work with school administrators, specifically calling out the need to develop trusting relationships with them. “I think you just try to value em and appreciate
em, but also to hopefully have that relationship where they trust you” (District A CO3, Interview, June 29, 2016). His District A colleague in the central office shared a similar philosophy. “I try to be available. It try to be open so that they feel comfortable” (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016). He went on to describe how he felt about school administrators in his district. “The thing is, I trust them explicitly to say, I’m ok here. I’ll call you if I need help. Ok. They’re seasoned. They’re bright people. They don’t need me meddling. They need me to help them.”

Their central office supervisors confirmed that this in-person, relationship-building philosophy is valued in their district. One shared,

I’m very proud of the job that [central office administrators] have done in the sense that they have not lost touch with the buildings. They might have an office here at central office, but they are out and about in the buildings. (District A CO2, Interview, July 1, 2016)

She models the importance of trust in her own interactions with those in the central office she supervises. “I value their opinion with everything. I’m very comfortable in their decisions” (District A CO2, Interview, July 1, 2016). This ethos was also valued by the superintendent in District A. He shared, “I think if you don’t work hard and be involved and visible, it’s just not gonna happen for you. It’s just not. Because I think we gotta connect to people…” (District A CO1, Interview, June 29, 2016).

The importance of in-person connection was also cited by school administrators in District A. One shared, “not being visible just carries too many negative comments…when you’re not visible, I see a disconnect” (District A P2, Interview, June 20, 2016). His colleague also spoke of a positive relationship she had with a central office
administrator. “He has been very helpful with many things with me, and I’ve called him” (District A P1, Interview, July 5, 2016).

In District C, every central office and school administrator I interviewed, which included seven of the eight in the district, mentioned how much they valued the trusting relationships they had with one another. One example came from a central office administrator as he discussed ways he followed up on professional development and curricular initiatives promoted by the district.

My follow-up comes from a lot of one-on-one time, then, in their offices. My secretary will tell you I’m not in my office a whole lot, so just kind of getting in with those principals one-on-one, kinda getting a feel for it. And then you also know what teachers to go get a pulse on what’s happening, what’s not happening. (District C CO2, Interview, April 29, 2016)

He also shared what he felt was the benefit of the small size of his district in facilitating the development of strong relationships.

…lots of one-on-one time. And that’s the benefit of three buildings on the same campus and only three buildings. You know, I only have three principals and three assistants to work with so it’s easier to have those conversations. Or lunch, you know, have lunch with the, to hammer out business. My goal is to be in the buildings every day. It’s easy to do and there’s so much value in it. (District C CO2, Interview, April 29, 2016)

A central office administrator in District C spoke of several ways he encouraged school and central office administrators to develop trusting, in-person relationships with each other and with the school community. He also modeled this behavior himself. One way was to ask school administrators to share positive news about their schools at monthly school board meetings. “They actually do a report at the board meeting every month to talk about the commendable things that are happening in their building. So they have to be aware, they have to be present” (District C CO1, Interview, June 27, 2016). He
continued by describing ways he and his staff stayed visible and available during school events.

We strongly encourage attendance at evening activities. You won’t come to a basketball game and not find either the principal or the assistant principal and the AD and me and usually [central office administrator]. We’re there. I don’t miss a home or away football game. I usually don’t miss a home or away basketball game on the boys side, and I’m always at the girls home games. We’re very present, and I make them. I don’t make them, they want to. They wanna be visible. (District C CO1, Interview, June 27, 2016)

In describing the leadership structure in their district, he shared, “I’ve never heard [central office administrator] say, well, I’m your boss, to a principal. And I’ve never said that. I would never say that. We work together” (District C CO1, Interview, June 27, 2016).

School administrators in District C described how this effort to build and maintain strong, trusting relationships by central office staff influenced their work and their feelings about working in the district. Other school administrators in District C shared similar thoughts. One shared, “They put a lot of trust in me…I like that and I enjoy it. It's my school and I know this stuff. They put a lot of trust in me to make the decision” (District C P1, Interview, April 22, 2016). Another expressed his thoughts about the amount of in-person contact he has with central office staff. “They're just a part of our building. It's not a surprise seeing them. In fact, if we go a week without seeing them, something's wrong” (District C AP3, Interview, June 29, 2016). His colleague shared several examples of ways that the central office makes relationships with stakeholders a priority.

[Central office administrator] is here all the time. It’s really nice because he’s right across the street. If you call him and say, “Hey, we need this. We need that.” Hey, I’ll come right over. We’ll talk about it. I think the one thing that [central
office administrator] does is he promotes this sense of family. He has a district theme. He’s big on community service. He’s big on the administrative team doing things together. He’s very involved whereas other superintendents I’ve worked for, you’d see them at maybe an in-service day or first and last day of the year and not see them the rest of the year. I think that’s huge. He’s just a down to earth good person. People know that. He makes that extra effort. (District C P2, Interview, June 29, 2016)

School and central office administrators in other districts also spoke of trusting relationships. In District D, one shared his thoughts about his central office administrator. “[Central office administrator] is very supportive. Again, it's a trust factor” (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016). He also shared his thoughts on how he felt trust impacted the work of teaching and learning in his school and in the district.

In order for it to be successful, you have to establish trust. Trust is the first thing that, you are not going anywhere without trust. [Teachers] have to trust in a lot of things. They have to trust that learning is at the center of everything you are doing and every decision that you make. Once you can establish that ... they say, "I might disagree but I trust him that he's doing this for the betterment of the kids and the program overall." (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016)

A central office administrator in District D said, “If I don't have contact with everybody at every level in a day I didn't do my job” (District D CO2, Interview, April 14, 2016). A school administrator confirmed this commitment to contact. “[Central office administrator] is in the building a lot, more so than any central office administrator I’ve ever met” (District D P2, Interview, June 21, 2016).

In District E, a school administrator shared about what he felt was a very open, trusting relationship between his central office supervisor and the school administrative team. “The relationship between him and us, he's very open” (District E AP2, Interview, July 6, 2016). In explaining how that came to be, he shared,” I think being in a small school district makes it obviously a lot easier and accessible to do something like that.”
Another shared the fact that he and his central office administrator speak directly on a regular basis. When asked how the two of them communicate and how he gets answers to questions he has, he said, “The simplest way is that I just ask him… he has taken the approach that the building principals will do what needs to be done in their buildings, and they’ve seen very positive results for many years” (District E P1, Interview, June 24, 2016). In District E, administrators seemed to feel confident that they had the trust and close relationship with their central office needed to engage in successful instructional leadership.

In District F, one school administrator shared what he saw as a value of the team atmosphere he felt within his district administrative team. “There’s always gonna be a grey area where you disagree, and if you have enough team approach you can suck it up” (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016). He also talked about the importance of maintaining positive relationships with people in an organization so as to avoid future problems. “You gotta treat everybody well, even the ones you don’t like because in the end it bites you. You can treat people you don’t like poorly and it’s gonna come back and bite you in other ways” (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016).

Another school administrator in District F talked about his relationship with a central office administrator. “I know she's not out to sabotage me or anything like that. We work together well. If I'm being clueless she'll find a way to [tell me]... It works well” (District F P1, Interview, June 9, 2016). Another shared what he saw as an important part of the relationship his central office administrator had with his teachers. “She knows a ton of the faculty…so curriculum wise, that has helped” (District F P2, Interview, June 21, 2016).
Based on the comments shared by participants, I conclude that the size of a district may have some impact on the development of trust and personal relationships between central office and school administrators. Future research may uncover the mechanisms by which this influences student achievement, which is the ultimate goal of successful instructional leadership.

*Amount of autonomy*

Another area in which the responses of participants differed was around the amount of autonomy administrators felt they had to engage in instructional leadership as they saw fit. Generally, administrators in District B voiced concerns about their inability to do what they felt they needed to do to effectively lead teaching and learning in their schools. Administrators in the other districts had fewer concerns in this area. They felt that they had enough trust and confidence from the central office to do their work as they saw fit.

Previous sections of this study have detailed some of the tensions administrators in District B voiced around the lack of autonomy with professional development, curriculum and assessments. In District B, it seemed that there was a skewed balance between autonomy and coherence, which other researchers have termed decentralization and centralization (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In this section, I will outline some additional dimensions of this issue as voiced by administrators and contrast them with those voiced by administrators from other districts.

Differences around the amount of autonomy granted to administrators began in the central office. In talking about her role as a central office administrator in District B, one shared,
I guess that what I sometimes struggle with in my role…is that I really think that for me to be effective, I have to kind of have a balance of accountability and support, right? So when I’m working with people they have to feel like I’m supporting the work that they do and that I’m providing them with opportunities to go out on a limb, to take chances, to make decisions, and then I feel like I can hold them accountable to those…give them some of that autonomy. I feel like sometimes that’s not the vision of the district per se. I think sometimes the vision of the district is more of here’s the direction that we’re going, and building principals, you should be submitting your ideas, decisions, to be approved or denied. (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016)

In contrast, a central office administrator in District A had this to share, “I am given a tremendous amount of freedom and trust, quite honestly. There are some things that I have to do because it’s coming from state. I very rarely get a marching order from our central office folks” (District A CO4, Interview, June 29, 2016).

School administrators were especially aware of the lack of autonomy they experienced in District B. In a previous section, I detailed some of the tension they voiced around the need to balance autonomy with coherence as a district. However, this tension was far more pronounced in District B, perhaps due to its size and type. Being an urban school district that enforced internal attendance boundaries, administrators there expressed more issues related to transience than did administrators in other districts. As students moved from one school to another, especially at the elementary level, they would have experienced different curricula and assessments had the district not mandated adherence to common curriculum and assessments. As much as some administrators seemed to understand this need, they still voiced concerns about this lack of autonomy impacting their ability to be effective instructional leaders.

Examples of comments were many. One shared, “We’re constantly told site-based management, and yet this is being forced on us. It’s not being forced on you. When you
say this is the policy and we’re moving forward, it’s forcing it on us without any insight” (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016). Another shared, “They (central office administrators) have to give some autonomy back, like we just talked about, give some control back to the school to do what they feel is best for their kids” (District B P2, Interview, April 27, 2016). In talking about her wish that the central office see them as individuals with specific strengths to share in their schools, one expressed, “…send the message of valuing who we are as individuals, to start at central office and allow us that at the building level, would be huge for me” (District B P5, Interview, April 20, 2016).

**Resources**

The amount of resources available to districts impacted the work of the central office and the way it interacted with school administrators. For purposes of this study, access to resources was determined by dividing the median household income of the district by the number of students enrolled. District B, the district with by far the smallest amount of resources at $5.25 per pupil, experienced unique tensions around curriculum and staffing. Districts A and F were also relatively under-resourced at $21.43 and $22.76 respectively. It should be noted that District A had received a recent grant from the state which it used to fund curriculum work. It had also undergone a recent school closure and consolidation of district schools due to funding problems. Districts D and E were relatively well-resourced at $30.75 and $31.31 respectively. District C had by far the largest amount of resources at $44.86 per student. While some mention of issues related to curriculum and staffing were voiced by administrators in districts D and F, they were few. No concerns related to curriculum and staffing were voiced by administrators in districts A, C, or E.
District B had also received grant funding in 2007 which was provided through 2012. Part of that funding was used to provide instructional coaches to district schools. Other funding was provided to develop curriculum and purchase materials. At the time of this study, grant funding had been discontinued for four years, yet the district had managed to maintain the coaches during that interim. However, the coaches were scheduled to be discontinued at the end of the 2015-2016 school year.

In District B, one school administrator talked about the tension she and her school team felt around the loss of instructional coaching positions due to lack of funding.

And my coach has been wonderful about really meeting with me and talking to me about, like when she wanted to work with the first grade team, saw that’s where our weakness was. And that’s gonna be a huge loss to us next year. We just sat in an ILT meeting and said, here are positions we know we’re losing, how do we distribute this work for next year?” (District B AP4, Interview, April 26, 2016).

For this administrator and her school team, the knowledge that they would be less capable of addressing student and teacher needs was a cause for tension both within the school and between school and district staff.

The tension around the loss of instructional coaches was felt by other school administrators as well. One shared what he saw as a potential negative impact for his school.

Losing [the instructional coach] in that capacity is gonna be really pretty difficult because he also brings in the ability to go and find those people that are the resistors and sit down and have a conversation with them and talk things through. And when that’s not coming from the administration, it opens things up incredibly, and so it’s suddenly not that bad. It’s gonna be difficult to replicate. (District B P1, Interview, April 21, 2016)
Another shared, “My coach has been wonderful about really meeting with me and talking to me about where our weakness was. That’s gonna be a huge loss to us next year” (District B AP4, Interview, April 26, 2016).

Another issue for administrators in District B was substitute teachers. It was a challenge to procure and keep substitute teachers in schools given the relatively low pay and difficult working conditions found in the district’s schools. This not only impacted school administrators’ ability to focus on teaching and learning but it caused tension between central office and school administrators at times. One school administrator shared the way that a lack of substitute teachers compromised his ability to bring teachers together on a regular basis to discuss curriculum and student achievement. “We try to get it in as much as we can, obviously, but there’s a lot of times that we get slapped down because of sub shortage,” (District B AP8, Interview, April 12, 2016). His colleague confirmed, “We do our department meetings. Not as frequently as we used to because we don’t have the subs. When there was money, when there were actually subs and we could do these, then we would do them monthly” (District B P6, Interview, May 2, 2016).

This concern was also voiced by another school administrator as she talked about the impact on student learning. “Because the sub situation, that’s another whole issue, you wanna talk about breaks in the curriculum? We have the lowest sub fill rate in the district, I think. Last I knew it was 40%” (District B AP4, Interview, April 26, 2016). She went on to explain additional negative impacts of the lack of substitute teachers on her ability to lead instruction. She was explaining what happened when the school was unable to secure enough substitutes to cover classrooms, which required her to use
support staff as substitutes or for administrators to have to teach to cover classrooms.

This caused concerns about their ability to complete benchmark assessments for students.

...[support staff] who normally are my sub people have all this testing to do. I said to [school administrative colleague], you realize that we’re gonna have to look at dividing classes up into [other teachers’] classrooms because we can’t keep pulling these people [to sub]. We’re never gonna get our testing done. [School administrative colleague] and I are out of our offices two or three hours at a crack teaching. (District B AP4, Interview, April 26, 2016)

While it is sometimes beneficial for administrators to spend some time teaching in classrooms, the frequent and unscheduled nature of that work for these school administrators meant less time visiting classrooms, overseeing curriculum, or engaging in other tasks related to instructional leadership. Since school administrators in District B were not permitted to procure their own substitute teachers, they were at the mercy of the human resources department to manage those placements. In this case, it directly impacted students.

A central office staff member from District B shared another impact she saw from a lack of adequate resources. She had been discussing the need for common curriculum in all district schools yet acknowledged that some schools were more successful in covering that curriculum than others. She shared,

...and then the problem was buildings saying, well I made it to unit seven, almost hearing themselves, well, maybe [school A] and [school B] could make it to unit 7, but, you know, at [school C] and [school D] we were lucky to get to unit four. So I did have a major concern in that these kids are moving forward without having what they needed in order to be solid in their subject area. So, and to me, that’s an ongoing issue. I don’t know how we solve that, with differentiation, or really what we need is more interventions, but that takes time and money. (District B CO5, Interview, April 13, 2016)

This concern was shared by school administrators as well. They expressed issues with the fact that the district was unable to keep up with needed curricular changes and
updated professional development due to a lack of funding. One shared, “I think, it’s sad to say, that when the [grant] money was there, it was great. We were getting teachers in-serviced and I think we were getting them curriculum…I don’t necessarily see happening now” (District B AP4, Interview, April 26, 2016). She continued, “the best years were when we had the money to spend and they were giving teachers what they needed.” A colleague from another school also shared what he saw as a problem with updating the district’s math curriculum to align with the PA Core Standards due to a lack of resources. “They tried to de-spiral [the math textbook] before [the publisher] was done de-spiraling itself because we need to hurry, right? We weren't going to be able to afford to buy the new version” (District B AP7, Interview, April 14, 2016).

In extreme cases, District B staff expressed concerns about their own job security due to lack of resources. This caused a lot of tension within and between central office and school administrative teams. One shared, “We don’t have any money next year. I probably won’t have a job next year anyway” (District B CO6, Interview, April 13, 2016). Another was discussing his concerns about the way school administrators were evaluated and stated, “Especially in this climate right now when they’re talking about cutting assistants [assistant principals] and stuff like that…” (District B AP2, Interview, April 14, 2016). In discussing the loss of positions in central office that had already happened due to lack of resources, one school administrator shared, “We've lost central office. The central office that I worked with is gone, and that's a huge loss as far as leadership goes” (District B AP3, Interview, June 20, 2016).

Concerns around resources related to curriculum and staffing were also mentioned in District D. As one District D central office administrator shared, “If you talk about a
science coach, that's me. If you talk about a coach for anything, it's me or I better be able to find somebody who's an expert nearby that can do it” (District D CO2, Interview, April 14, 2016). In his small district, he had an important role in helping not only school administrators but teachers as they worked toward improved practice. He went on to explain, “In a district this size, not only am I the curriculum, I'm also the coach. We don't have curriculum coaches. When you talk about a reading and a math coach, that's me” (District D CO2, Interview, April 14, 2016). As the sole staff member available to support school administrators and teachers, this central office administrator shared the important role he played in making sure he was able to provide expertise.

One other district that raised issues around resources was District F. Concerns centered primarily on staffing reductions due to lack of adequate funding. In discussing the current conversation among school board members and the central office, one school administrator said, “They were just talking about cutting teachers,” (District F P3, Interview, June 21, 2016). Another shared, “I know this spring we were in a budget crunch…one of the things we were tasked with was trying to determine whether we could give up teachers” (District F AP1, Interview, June 27, 2016). One school administrator shared what he felt was the prevailing sentiment regarding funding at the community and school board level.

The finances aren't always the greatest. [The school board] would rather brag that they have the lowest taxes in the county by far than figure out how they're going to put enough money into education to make it the best education they can. (District F P2, Interview, June 21, 2016)

In three district sites, a lack of adequate resources seemed to raise concerns around staffing. In one site, which had far fewer resources than any other district in this
study, and in this area of the state, the lack of adequate funding caused issues around curriculum and instruction that were not seen in other districts. While there are certainly other issues that accompany a lack of funding that may also contribute to these tensions, it seems clear that central office and school administrators in districts with fewer resources experienced different types of interactions and tensions than those in districts with more resources.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

It is clear from a review of the preceding section that the district office does play an important role in the school districts that participated in this study. It served to support connections between and among school and district staff, provided much-needed professional development, and provided a focus for school leaders. In the following section, I will present the major findings yielded by my analysis. First, districts that engaged in supportive behaviors, namely establishing trust, communicating clear expectations, providing professional development, and shielding school leaders from tasks unrelated to instructional leadership, had participants that voiced fewer tensions and positive perceptions of their instructional leadership work than did participants in districts that did not engage in those supportive behaviors. Second, it was the central office, when it engaged in supportive practices, that provided the “glue” that brought disparate schools and school leaders together around coherent, collaborative work. Third, while most districts engaged in work around curriculum and assessment, few engaged effectively and directly with instruction. Finally, central office staff in smaller districts played a much more direct role in proving instructional leadership to schools than did those in larger districts.

Support and Positive Perceptions

There were differences between districts around the support provided by central office staff. Table 3 summarizes the roadblocks and tensions voiced by participants in each school district as a way to illustrate areas where such issues were not raised. In
districts where participants reported positive relationships between central office and school administrators, it was typical to hear comments about mutual trust, the communication of clear expectations, the provision of useful professional development tailored to the needs of students and staff, and the work of central office staff in shielding school leaders from tasks unrelated to instructional leadership. These practices were consistent with those deemed to be supportive in the conceptual framework that guided this study. These districts also tended to have better access to resources. District C reported most frequently that staff felt trusted and supported, received useful professional development, and clearly understood the expectations of district staff. Participants from District C reported very few areas of tension or issues with resources (frequently associated with tension and mistrust). All participants from District C voiced their confidence that the district was successful in what the superintendent called “developing the whole student” (District C CO1, Interview, June 27, 2016).

District E, a district very similar in size and access to resources to District C, shared comparable sentiments to those expressed by participants in District C. There were few tensions or roadblocks mentioned by either district or school leaders. District A staff voiced more areas of tension than staff in either District C or District E but had a generally positive outlook toward the district’s potential and its level of teamwork. Participants in District A shared multiple examples of ways that district and school staff worked collaboratively and in a focused way on behalf of students. Districts A, C, and F also shared positive, collaborative practices around curriculum development put in place by central office staff.
Districts D and F reported fewer positive comments about district level support than Districts A, C, and E. These two districts were in the mid-range among participants when it came to access to resources. It would seem that positive interactions between central office and school administrators were found more often in smaller districts with adequate resources than in larger districts with few resources. To illustrate this point, we need to compare the rural and suburban districts from this study to District B. While these five districts did vary in size, type and access to resources form one another, District B varied greatly from all five.

District B was the largest and only urban district involved in this study as it is the only urban district in this area of Pennsylvania. It also had far fewer resources, approximately $5.24 per pupil, than any other district in this study. The district closest to this level was District A at $21.43 per pupil. District B staff expressed more areas of tension and reported the least amount of district support for school leaders. My analysis led to the conclusion that adequate resources are a necessary but insufficient condition for fostering supportive relationships between the central office and schools in the districts studied. For example, District D had $30.75 per pupil as a measure of its resources, giving it a ranking of fourth of the six districts\(^2\), but participants there still voiced several areas of tension and roadblocks in describing interactions between the central office staff and school administrators. Data also led to the finding that positive, supportive relationships were found more often in small school districts than in large ones. This seems to make sense given the fact that face-to-face interactions are important for

\(^2\) Districts ranked with 1 having the smallest number of resources and 6 having the highest.
developing trusting, collaborative relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Chhuon et al., 2007; Daly & Finnigan, 2012).

Table 3

Roadblocks by District

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<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
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Central Office Staff as “Glue”

A second finding was that central office staff was in a unique position to bring school leaders from across the district together around areas of practice. In all districts studied, participants voiced this theme. In Districts A, C and E, this took the form of regular meetings attended by all school and district administrators, collaborative problem-solving and sharing of data, and a general sense that everyone was pulling in the same direction toward valuable goals. In District B, participants voiced a desire for district staff to do more of this type of work. By voicing concern about the lack of cohesion provided by their central office, they conveyed that they felt district staff could, in fact, provide that type of support. Similar thoughts were voiced by participants from
Districts D and E. While central office staff in those districts did not always provide the means for school leaders to collaborate and work together, they did provide a clear focus on well-articulated goals. Staff in these two districts also described positive interactions with former central office staff that did provide such support. In general, participants clearly conveyed that they felt central office staff could or did play an important role in bringing school leaders together around instructional leadership. This is consistent with the supportive practice described in the conceptual framework of this study.

**Lack of Consistent Strategy**

A third finding centered on the fact that district staff played a minor role, if any, around instructional strategies utilized in classrooms. Most districts engaged in some kind of work around curriculum and assessment, even when it wasn’t perceived to be of high quality. School administrators either loved or hated what was in place. But around strategy, the conversation was very different. Few voiced issues with district-recommended strategies. In fact, few mentioned instructional strategies at all, even though my study protocols included specific questions about them. Some districts actively guarded against recommending specific practices, instead giving teachers the autonomy to make those choices on their own. Some simply had not waded into those waters, either due to concerns about “rocking the boat,” lack of resources, or lack of expertise.

In two districts, Districts C and E, central office and school administrators often specifically spoke about their avoidance of such recommendations or mandates, instead feeling that teachers needed complete autonomy to design instruction as they saw fit as individuals. It is worth noting that Districts C and E had both small size and adequate
access to resources. One wonders if, under such conditions, hiring experienced, expert teachers and maintaining coherence across and within schools might be easier to achieve without central office support.

Only in district B did participants discuss district expectations or work around instructional strategies. District B did the most work with school administrators when it came to supporting effective instructional practices and being explicit with both teachers and leaders about what effective practice should look like in classrooms. A major initiative around instructional strategies in District B centered on learning targets. All twenty-two participants from District B mentioned this initiative at one point or another during their interviews. School administrators shared that the initiative was helpful to them in supporting change and growth in teacher practices around instruction. District B also mandated that all schools form an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). This, too, was mentioned by all twenty-two participants as a structure that helped them shape instructional practice in classrooms. Given that District B was by far the largest in this study with eighteen schools as opposed to the two to four found in other participant districts, it would seem that maintaining consistency across district schools around instructional strategies was a bigger focus in District B than in other districts. It would also seem that District B used a more authoritative approach to mandating particular strategies and structures than did the other, smaller districts.

Role Reversal – Central Office as Instructional Leaders in Schools

In smaller school districts such as Districts C and D, central office and school administrators reported far more direct interaction between central office administrators and teachers than was found in districts with a larger number of schools. Districts C and
D had one of each type of school be they elementary, middle, or high school. They also had two central office administrators, one of whom was primarily responsible for curriculum and instruction. Districts A, B, and F had multiple schools at each level from elementary to high school. District E had one of each type of school but also only had one central office administrator whose role involved far more than curriculum and instruction. It would seem that central office administrators in districts with fewer schools and school administrators worked more directly with teachers than those with more. One wonders what impact this may have on the role of principal and/or assistant principal as instructional leader. Has this role been shifted to the central office in these small districts?

There were two main areas in which the central office worked directly with teachers on a regular basis in these three districts, professional development and curriculum. One example comes from District C where a central office administrator described this aspect of his work. “I go into their faculty meetings and present what was upcoming and what’s on the horizon” (District C CO2, Interview, April 29, 2016). He led the district’s professional development team and cited his goals for their work. “When I came here I never had an in-service day where teachers were leading. So I wanted to get back to that piece” (District C CO2, Interview, April 29, 2016).

Others confirmed that the central office does, in fact, guide most of the work in District C around curriculum and professional development. A school administrator shared this thought. “All of the professional development [central office administrator] coordinated in terms of talking about the rubric, the process, the orientation. Those were a year long series of professional development experiences the year prior to last year”
Regarding curriculum development, one school administrator shared, “[Central office administrator] is a very big driving force behind that as far as making sure that if we're going to go out and spend on curriculum...we're getting the right stuff, and so he really makes the team sit down” (District C AP2, Interview, June 23, 2016).

Direct work with teachers was also common for central office staff in District D. Like District C, District D had two central office administrators. Both interacted with teachers on a regular basis. A school administrator in District D described one such interaction around curriculum.

I'm seeing [central office administrator] take more of a district leadership level role...sometimes he'll talk to teachers and I don't know he's had those meetings to talk to them about piloting math. He'll think he said something to me and he hasn't. Just making sure we stay on the same page, so that the teachers see us on the same page. (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016)

While it is clear from this statement that the central office did, in fact, work directly with teachers, it also speaks to the possibility that school administrators are potentially viewed less as instructional leaders than they might be when the central office has less of a direct role or that the role might become confusing for teachers.

As part of his professional development work, this central office administrator described his role in overseeing the school-based professional learning communities (PLCs). “I also lead PLC meetings at the high school and at the elementary school” (District D CO2, Interview, April 14, 2016). This regular interaction with teachers as a form of professional development represented a very direct involvement by the central office with classroom teachers in District D. Central office administrators also planned most of the district’s professional development. One school administrator described the
amount of responsibility for professional development held by the district and school administrators by sharing, “I would say last year it was 70-30, district more than us” (District D P1, Interview, June 7, 2016).

It would seem that the central office played a more direct role with teachers in two of the districts in this study than they did in the other four. Given this role, which school administrators generally viewed as helpful, one wonders whether the work of instructional leadership for school administrators might look different in some districts than in others. Since one of these districts is generally high achieving and the other moderately so, further research would be needed to begin to parse out which aspects of each type of instructional leadership were related to student success.

**Conclusion**

This study uncovered some key functions of central office staff in working with school leaders around leadership for teaching and learning. One, as recommended by several researchers, is that central office staff provide face-to-face, in person, direct communication with school administrators (Saphier & Durkin, 2011). The central office can also ensure that all schools in a district work coherently to achieve the goals of the district as a whole and to ensure that students receive a well-planned, coherent education as they progress through a school system (Saphier & Durkin, 2011). Finally, insofar as it is possible, the central office should advocate for the provision of adequate resources for school districts. Without such resources, it is a challenge for staff to effectively support quality teaching and learning. This research pointed to some previously unknown aspects of the role of the central office in one area of Pennsylvania. This information is
immediately useful to me as a practitioner and to others in similar roles. While these findings are elicited from a relatively small sample of public school districts in one state, making generalizations difficult, they are a source of new knowledge for practitioners and point to directions for future research.

Several limitations should be noted regarding this study. One involves the research sample. Given that there was only one urban district that had far more schools than any other nearby district, I was not able to compare it to any similar districts. In comparing it to nearby districts, all of which were much smaller and in rural and suburban communities, my findings noted marked differences between it and the other districts. Such differences may have been less pronounced had I been able to include at least one other large, urban district in the study.

A second limitation surrounds data collection. I relied heavily on interview data, which was appropriate given the nature of my research questions but still presents challenges inherent to self-reporting. Observational data, while impractical for this study, would have provided useful information regarding the interactions between district and school administrators. Third, as a doctoral student engaged with primarily solitary research, this study did not have the benefit of a team of researchers who could confirm or refute findings. While I was able to utilize members of my graduate cohort and my dissertation committee in most aspects of this research, I did not have the ability to work with a team of individuals who could confirm or refute my methods and analysis. Yet despite these limitations, the experience has been useful for me and has yielded information that is of interest to others in the field.
Additional research is recommended to uncover more information about the important work of instructional leadership in schools and school districts. Future research could shed more light on the interactions between district and school staff. More could be learned by engaging in similar research in other areas of the state and/or nation. As mentioned previously, observational data was absent from this study. Future research could focus on aspects of district-school interactions such as frequency of interactions, emotional tone of interactions, or team dynamics within districts. Researchers might also wish to examine more closely the quality of the curriculum, assessments, strategies, and professional development provided by the central office of public school districts and how it might impact student achievement. It is my hope that this small, exploratory piece of research will provide a starting point for future study.

As a practitioner researcher, I derived great benefit from engaging with this study. I learned much that I will bring to my daily work and that I will share with colleagues. The presence of the central office in a public school district does not, in and of itself, result in a high quality system of support for the instructional leadership of school administrators. However, done well, the work of the central office can and does make school administrators more effective as they guide the teaching and learning that takes place in their schools each day. The central office can be a vital source of support in the form of expertise, provision of a coherent, quality curriculum, bringing together principals as colleagues to share practice, and managing conflicts with parents and other members of the community. In districts without a central office, school administrators are faced with the choice of either managing their school as a stand-alone entity separate from other district schools or taking on the work of coherence and collaboration on their
own. This is unlikely to happen given the already busy and varied nature of the principal role. And in its absence, students are left to make those connections and transitions on their own, even as they move between elementary, middle, and high school in the same district. Our students deserve to have school leaders who keep a close eye on the big picture so that their experience as they move from kindergarten to graduation is as smooth, thoughtfully planned, and rigorous as possible. When that is the case, students can concentrate on the task of fulfilling their potential and maximizing their growth.
APPENDIX A

Superintendents’ Letter of Support

March 31, 2016

To Whom It May Concern:

I grant permission for Leslee Hutchinson to conduct research in our school district for purposes of her dissertation according to the following parameters:

**Study Purpose/Topic**

The purpose of this project is to learn more about the ways that central office supports or hinders the instructional leadership of school administrators. The researcher also seeks to learn if there are differences in the way central office supports or hinders based on school district size, type, and access to resources. This study is the foundation of the researcher’s dissertation.

**Participants**

Participants have been selected from six districts in IU5. These districts vary by size, type, and access to resources. In each district, all central office staff involved in teaching and learning, including district superintendents, will be invited to participate in this study. In addition to district staff, school principals and assistant principals will be invited to participate. In all cases, participation is completely voluntary. Participation will take the form of consenting to a one-on-one, in-person interview and the sharing of documents related to instructional leadership.
**Timeframe**

The study will begin in the spring of 2016 and will finish by fall of 2016. Participants will be asked to spend approximately 1 – 2 hours participating in an interview and some additional time sharing documents relevant to instructional leadership.

**Location of Interviews and Document Reviews**

Interviews and document collection will take place at a site of each participant’s choosing, most likely at the participant’s office or school. Participants will be asked to consent to a one-on-one, in-person interview and to share documents, such as curriculum maps or district/school strategic plans, relevant to instructional leadership. Interviews will be audiotaped; recordings will only be accessible by the researcher and will not be shared with others.

**Informed Consent**

All participants who wish to participate in this study will be asked to sign an informed consent form that describes the study and includes contact information for both the researcher and the university.

**Contact Information**

I understand that the researcher, Leslee Hutchinson, can be reached by phone at (814) 722-9547. She can also be reached via e-mail at leslee@gse.upenn.edu.

Sincerely,

______________________________________________  Date ____________

Signature
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol for Principals and Assistant Principals

Date:

Site ____________________________________________________________
District Name __________________________________________________
Participant Name ____________________________
Participant Job Title ____________________________________________
District ____________________________
Rural Suburban Urban
Small Medium Large
Low Resource High Resource

Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me today. I am working on my doctoral
dissertation, and this interview will be very helpful to me as I try to answer my research
questions. Please remember that if at any point during the interview I ask a question that
makes you feel uncomfortable, you are welcome to decline to answer or to end the
interview. My study deals with the role of central office in shaping the instructional
leadership of school administrators. I want to learn more about that from the perspective
of those who actually work in schools and districts every day. Our views are important,
and my hope is that this study teaches all of us more about how we can do our work
better and benefit our students.

1. For how many years have you been in your current role?

2. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience in the field of education?

3. My study is about instructional leadership. When you hear that term, what comes
to mind for you?

4. Can you give some examples of ways you enact instructional leadership?

   a. What does instructional leadership look like “in action” to you?

   b. What are some of the things you do in your day-to-day work that
demonstrate instructional leadership?
5. Principals often say that it’s impossible for them to do all of the tasks of instructional leadership that they feel are important. Can you talk to me about how you prioritize your time and daily tasks?

6. Of the tasks you need to perform on a daily basis, which do you feel are the most important for growing student achievement?

7. Can you talk to me about the curriculum you use in your school and/or district?
   a. How do you help to ensure that all teachers in your school understand what is to be taught?
   b. Are there structures in place – meeting times, communication tools, etc. – to help ensure that all of your school stakeholders have an understanding of the curriculum?
   c. How is your central office involved in your school’s curriculum?
   d. How do you balance the need curriculum coherence with teacher autonomy and student interest? Is there space for both?

8. Can you tell me about the instructional strategies that teachers in your school are expected to use as they teach the curriculum you have in place?
   a. How do you help to ensure that all teachers in your school understand how to choose and utilize effective instructional strategies?
   b. How do you try to help your teachers share effective instructional strategies with one another?
   c. How do your teachers choose which instructional strategies to use in their classrooms?
d. How have you used different types of feedback to shape your teachers’ instructional practice?

e. How is your central office involved in shaping the instructional practices your teachers use?

9. What kinds of assessments do you use to ensure that students are learning what your curriculum intends that they learn?

   a. How do you use the results of these assessments to shape curriculum and/or instructional practices?

10. Who are the people in your central office who are formally responsible for supporting your instructional leadership?

11. How have those central office leaders communicated to you about your practice of instructional leadership?

   a. How has central office communicated with you about their expectations for your instructional leadership?

   b. Have you ever disagreed with central office about which aspects of instructional leadership that you should spend time enacting? Can you describe what happened?

12. In what ways has the central office staff with whom you’ve worked, past and/or present, shaped your practice of instructional leadership?

   a. Can you describe some ways that central office has provided you with support to help you enact instructional leadership effectively?

   b. Can you describe some ways that central office may have made your practice of instructional leadership more difficult?
c. Are there other ways that you’ve interacted with central office on this topic? If so, can you describe some of those situations/interactions?

13. Can you describe some ways that you think central office could improve in their support for your work?
APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol for Central Office Staff

Date:

Site ____________________________________________
District Name _____________________________________
Participant Name _____________________
Participant Job Title ____________________________
District School
Rural Suburban Urban
Small Medium Large
Low Resource High Resource

Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me today. I am working on my doctoral dissertation, and this interview will be very helpful to me as I try to answer my research questions. Please remember that if at any point during the interview I ask a question that makes you feel uncomfortable, you are welcome to decline to answer or to end the interview. My study deals with the role of central office in shaping the instructional leadership of school administrators. I want to learn more about that from the perspective of those who actually work in schools and districts every day. Our views are important, and my hope is that this study teaches all of us more about how we can do our work better and benefit our students.

1. For how many years have you been in your current role?

2. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience in the field of education?

3. My study is about instructional leadership. When you hear that term, what comes to mind for you?

4. What is your role in supporting and developing the instructional leadership of school administrators?

5. Can you give me some examples of things you do to ensure that your school principals and assistant principals are effective instructional leaders?
a. Do you have an example of where there was a tension between you and a school administrator about their practice of instructional leadership? Would you describe that?

6. Central office staff often say that their job is multi-faceted and that it’s impossible for them to devote as much attention to either their own instructional leadership or the instructional leadership of their school administrators as they would like. Can you talk to me about how you prioritize your time and daily tasks so that you achieve your district’s goals around student learning?

7. Can you talk to me about the curriculum you use in your district?
   a. Can you describe your role in supporting the district’s curriculum?
   b. What role do you expect school administrators to play in shaping their school’s and/or the district’s curriculum?
   c. How have you communicated these expectations to school administrators?
   d. How do you help to ensure that all teachers in your district understand what is to be taught?
   e. Are there structures in place – meeting times, communication tools, etc. – to help ensure that all of your district stakeholders have an understanding of the curriculum?
   f. How do you balance the need curriculum coherence with teacher autonomy and student interest? Is there space for both?

8. Can you tell me about the instructional strategies that teachers in your district are expected to use as they teach the curriculum you have in place?
a. What is your role in helping to ensure that all teachers in your district understand how to choose and utilize effective instructional strategies?

b. What role do you expect school administrators to play in shaping teacher practices?

c. How have you communicated these expectations to school administrators?

d. How do you try to help your teachers share effective instructional strategies with one another?

e. How have you used different types of feedback to shape school administrators’ instructional leadership practices?

9. What kinds of assessments do you use to ensure that students are learning what your curriculum intends that they learn?

   a. How do you expect school administrators to use the results of these assessments to shape curriculum and/or instructional practices?

Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to speak with me today. If you think of anything else you’d like to share, please be in touch with me using the contact information on my card. (Provide participant with a business card.)
APPENDIX D

Informed Consent Form

You are being invited to take part in a research project about central office’s role in shaping the instructional leadership of school principals and assistant principals. Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate or not to participate there will be no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Before you make a decision you will need to know the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits of being in the study and what you will have to do if decide to participate.

If you do not understand what you are reading, do not sign it. Please ask the researcher to explain anything you do not understand, including any language contained in this form. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and a copy will be given to you. Keep this form; in it you will find contact information and answers to questions about the study.

If you have questions or want to talk more about the study before deciding whether or not to participate, please call Leslee Hutchinson, the researcher, at 814-722-9547 or by e-mail at leslee@gse.upenn.edu anytime. If you decide that you will participate, please contact me either by phone or by e-mail so that we can schedule an interview at at time that is convenient for you.

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this project is to learn more about the ways that central office supports or hinders the instructional leadership of school administrators. I also seek to learn if there are differences in the way central office supports or hinders based on school district size, type, and access to resources. This study is the foundation of my dissertation.

Why was I asked to participate in the study?
You are being asked to join this study because you have an important perspective on your work that is useful for this study.

How long will I be in the study?
The study will begin in the spring of 2016 and will finish by fall of 2016. You will be asked to spend approximately 1 – 2 hours participating in interviews and some additional time sharing documents relevant to instructional leadership.

Where will the study take place?
Interviews and document collection will take place at a site of your choosing, most likely at your office or school.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be asked to participate in interviews and to share documents, such as curriculum maps or district/school strategic plans, relevant to instructional leadership. Interviews will be audiotaped; recordings will only be accessible by me and will not be shared with others.
Confidentiality

Any notes and audio-recordings of observations and interviews will be housed in password-protected files and only I will have access to these notes. Pseudonyms will be used throughout the study to keep participant names, student names, and school names as confidential as possible. However, I cannot promise complete privacy and confidentiality.

What do I get out of it? Do I have to participate?

Your participation could help educators understand more about the role of central office in supporting the work of school administrators, which may help improve practice in the field. You do not have to participate if you do not want to, and there will be no penalty for not participating. If you decide that you want to participate now but change your mind later, just let me know and you can stop participating.

Who do I call if I have questions or complaints?

You can call Leslee Hutchinson at 814-722-9547 for more information. If you can’t reach me or want to talk to someone else, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania with any questions, concerns, or complaints. Their phone number is 215-898-2614.

When you sign this document, you are agreeing to participate in this research study. If you have any questions or there is something you do not understand, please ask. You will receive a copy of this consent document.

Please print your name: ____________________________________________________________

Signature: _________________________________________________________________________

Date: __________________________

District Name ________________________________

School Name (principals and assistant principals) _________________________________

Your job title ________________________________

Your contact information:

Phone number ________________________________

e-mail address ____________________________________________

Preferred Method of contact (please circle all that apply)

phone ____________________________ email ____________________________ either
APPENDIX E

Initial Code List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition: Descriptions of…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IL-P</td>
<td>Instructional Leadership for principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- EXP</td>
<td>high expectations for student achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- PED</td>
<td>knowledge of effective pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- CURR</td>
<td>knowledge of rigorous curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- FB</td>
<td>quality feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ACC- I</td>
<td>individual accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ACC – C</td>
<td>collective accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- TCC</td>
<td>trusting, collaborative culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- GOAL – S</td>
<td>student performance goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- GOAL – T</td>
<td>teacher performance goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- PD</td>
<td>teacher professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- RA</td>
<td>resource allocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL-CO</td>
<td>instructional leadership support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- CF</td>
<td>communicate focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- SA</td>
<td>student achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- CI</td>
<td>curriculum and instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- PCB</td>
<td>professional, collegial behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ACC</td>
<td>accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- PD</td>
<td>professional development opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- RA</td>
<td>resource allocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COR-P</td>
<td>central office role – principal’s perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COR-CO</td>
<td>central office role – central office perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COS – P</td>
<td>central office supports – principal’s perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPS-CO</td>
<td>central office supports – central office perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COR – P</td>
<td>central office roadblocks – principal’s perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COR – CO</td>
<td>central office roadblocks – central office perspective</td>
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## APPENDIX F

### Final Code List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition: Descriptions of…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A v C: autonomy v coherence</td>
<td>the need or desire for autonomy vs. a need to maintain consistency and coherence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC: accountability</td>
<td>admin holding individuals or groups accountable for performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASS-assessment</td>
<td>achievement and learning, including mention of assessments of any kind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C&amp;I work</td>
<td>interactions or information dealing with some aspect of curriculum and/or instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHANGE</td>
<td>initiating or managing change, some kind of collaboration with professional staff (teacher-teacher, teacher-admin, admin-admin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLL-collaboration</td>
<td>CO or school admin working with the outside community (ex. parents, community leaders)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM I-community involvement</td>
<td>how central office or school expectations are communicated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMM-communication</td>
<td>creating a collaborative culture by bringing school admins together around district work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CON – connecting</td>
<td>remaining consistent over time with expectations, focus, etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONSIST-consistency</td>
<td>guiding, mandating, providing curriculum, assessments, and/or work with assessment data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CURR – curriculum work</td>
<td>the use of any type of data (achievement, discipline, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATA-data use</td>
<td>ways participants define IL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEFINE IL-definition of IL</td>
<td>school admins sharing leadership with school staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISC-student discipline</td>
<td>expectations for staff and/or school performance/outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISTRIBUTE-distributed leadership</td>
<td>feedback given to/received from administrators (CO and school) about practice, expectations, performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXP-expectations</td>
<td>expectations for staff and/or school performance/outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEED:A-feedback to/from admins</td>
<td>expectations for staff and/or school performance/outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Definition: Descriptions of…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEED:T</td>
<td>feedback to/from teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CO or School admin provides feedback to teachers about practice, expectations, performance or receives feedback from teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOCUS</td>
<td>focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>efforts to maintain a focus and/or reduce distractions for staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAN-mandate</td>
<td>mandate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mandates directed at schools, teachers or principals from higher in the hierarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANAGE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>managerial aspects of leadership, such as scheduling, paperwork, reports, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOTIVATE:S</td>
<td>motivation of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>motivating students as part of IL</td>
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<tr>
<td>PD CO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>professional development provided by the central office to teachers, admins, or both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD:P</td>
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<td></td>
<td>professional development provided to principals by the central office</td>
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<td></td>
<td>professional development provided to teachers by the central office or school admins</td>
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<td>PLAN</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>planning by CO or school admins</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRIOR EXP</td>
<td>prior experience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prior experience by participant</td>
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<tr>
<td>REL</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the role of relationships between people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESOURCE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>both resource allocation and the role of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROAD</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>roadblocks created or removed by CO or admins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROLE DIST</td>
<td>district role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>various roles played by the district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROLE: CONCEPT</td>
<td>conceptualization of their role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the way that admins conceptualize their own roles or the roles of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROLE:TIME</td>
<td>amount of time in current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>amount of time in current role</td>
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<tr>
<td>SKILL</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>skill building</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mentoring and other one-on-one supports that allow principals to learn, reflect, and grow in their practice and sometimes career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM V LG</td>
<td>small vs. large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>differences based on size as mentioned by participants</td>
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<td>TENSION</td>
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<td></td>
<td>areas of tension between/among CO and school admins</td>
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<td>TRUST</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the role of trust</td>
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<td>UNION</td>
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<td>the role of teachers’ unions</td>
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BIBLIOGRAPHY


