SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERSHIP: A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN
CENTRAL OFFICE AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

By

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ABSTRACT

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School reform efforts and accountability movements have shifted the responsibilities of central office leadership toward teaching and learning (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012). Those responsibilities have encouraged central office leaders to take a more active role in ensuring improved outcomes for students (Center for Education Policy, 2004; Honig & Rainey, 2015). Recent research has investigated practices related to supporting teaching and learning from a central office level, and some common themes have emerged. They include leadership practices and structures that develop a shared focus on teaching and learning, an emphasis on ongoing staff development, processes for continuous growth, and alignment of resources to a teaching and learning mission (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the working relationships between school and district leaders by investigating the research question: How can central office administration connect to schools in ways that support teaching and learning?

The study took place in a school district that recently established a partnership model in which each school principal was assigned a central office partner for the school year. Professional learning was structured to help central office leaders better understand schools and
also provide opportunities for leaders to gain insight into each others’ leadership roles to support a district continuous improvement process. Based on interviews three themes emerged: The partnership model helped build relationships between leaders through shared learning experiences; conditions that support relationships between leaders could lead to increased collaboration; and leaders need structures to help them develop and sustain the type of relationships that could affect student learning.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Background for the Study

School districts share a common mission of providing the best possible outcomes for students. In response to school reform efforts and accountability movements, school district leadership, in the form of the central office, has taken increased responsibility for that mission (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012). That responsibility has encouraged central office leadership to be more tightly linked with teaching and learning in efforts to support better student outcomes (Center for Education Policy, 2004; Honig & Rainey, 2015). This shift in responsibility has created an opportunity for research to help school districts better understand effective structures and practices of central office leadership that could affect teaching and learning.

This study built on existing research by exploring one district’s model for connecting school and district leaders. This model was constructed with several important structures about district leadership from the research in mind. The research suggested it was important for districts to have a shared focus on teaching and learning, ongoing professional development, and a continuous improvement system (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Honig et al., 2010; Leithwood & Louis, 2011). Practices that supported those structures began with strong relationships between district and school leaders (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010) that included key components of open communication (Hallinger & Heck, 2009), shared leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012), and collaborative learning (Honig & Rainey, 2015).

A partnership model was designed by the studied district using these main ideas from research about school district leadership. The partnership model sought to provide a structure for
school and district leaders to come together to develop and help sustain relationships. The hope was that the model would build on research by creating conditions that emphasized key components that seemed to make a positive difference for effective school districts. These components were a shared focus on teaching and learning, ongoing opportunities for professional learning, a continuous improvement model, and a focus on the relationships between school and district leaders.

**Developing a Partnership Model**

The work of ensuring that each student is served is challenging and looks different today than in years past. Students are being asked to meet high academic standards and do so with critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills (Hewlett Foundation, 2012). These new expectations for student success require school districts to develop leadership practices that can help school systems evolve to support student need.

**A shared focus on teaching and learning.** The studied district constructed a model that connected a central office administrator with a school principal for a one-year partnership. Partners were expected to meet with each other two times per month and used an agenda for learning about schools. This learning served as a frame for partner conversations. The learning agenda was designed to provide a point of discussion for leaders to help central office administrators better understand the nuances of running a school. The idea was to create a structure that regularly brought school and district leaders together for dialogue centered on the mission of schools: teaching and learning. A common focus on teaching and learning was consistently found to be an attribute of effective districts in the research (Honig et al., 2010; Leithwood & Louis, 2011).
Ongoing professional learning. Each month, central office administrators came together in district cabinet meetings to discuss what they learned about their partnered schools. They also discussed what they learned about the role of principal. Time in existing district meetings was set aside for partners to interact and to discuss leadership topics. Conversations at the partnership and cabinet levels were designed to be ongoing professional learning experiences for leaders who were focused on the work of schools and common leadership practices. Investing in the ongoing development of staff was an important component of effective districts (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). These types of collaborative learning experiences designed to help develop staff were identified as important leverage points for improvements because they helped identify possible gaps in the system (Honig & Rainey, 2015).

A system of continuous improvement. Research suggests that the alignment of district resources to a shared mission is an attribute of successful districts (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015). Potential practices for working toward this kind of alignment included focused decision making and reflection with the goal of achieving system coherence. Johnson et al. (2015) defined system coherence as a state of system-wide agreement about the work, structures, and support needed to achieve strategic goals. Meaningful relationships between central office leaders and school leaders support the development of system coherence, development of common language, and understanding about the direction in which the district is headed (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Johnson et al., 2015).

An outcome from the partnership model was to better connect school and district leaders. These connections could lead to greater system coherence. The partnership could be viewed as a shared leadership opportunity for the district by giving school and district leaders the chance to work and learn together. Research suggests that engaging leaders with shared responsibilities can
help develop people and empower them to help a district evolve over time, a critical result if reform efforts are to succeed (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Louis et al., 2010). The partnership model could create shared opportunities for leaders to mutually consider system improvements.

The hope for the partnership model was to provide a structure that gave opportunities for leaders to discuss their shared purpose of student learning, learn from each other, and use their experiences in the model to help them affect the greater school system in a positive way. Another important component of the partnership model was a focus on developing and sustaining relationships between school and district leaders.

**Mutually beneficial partnerships.** Relationships between school and district leaders matter (Louis et al., 2010). Both groups of leaders are responsible for ensuring that each student is successful. It was important that the partnership model be built on that mutual outcome. It was also important that both school and central office leaders see value in developing a partner relationship. Johnson et al. (2015) found that relationships between school and district leaders were valued when there was a realization that their success was dependent on the “good-faith actions of the other” (p. 91). They also claim, when both school and district leaders believe they influence the direction of the district and understand and appreciate others’ roles of influence, organizational distance between the central office and schools narrows.

Developing appreciation for other leaders has also been seen as a condition that increases organizational trust. Tschannen-Moran (2001) emphasized the importance of organizational trust if districts are to authentically engage in collaborative processes, a necessary part of reform efforts in schools. The partnership model was designed to encourage relationship development by creating the space for leaders to get to know more about each other and each other’s work, resulting in greater appreciation and, ideally, increased organizational trust.
Context and Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted in an effort to better understand the dynamic relationships between school district leaders, and how central office could be connected to schools in ways that supported teaching and learning. The idea was to use the district’s recently established partnership model as a way to explore how district and school leaders perceived their working relationships. The study was designed to allow the researcher to learn how district leadership might better connect with schools by exploring the relationships that were developed in the partnership model.

This study was conducted in a medium-sized school district in the state of Washington. The study took place over a 6-month period that began in August of 2016 with initial interviews and concluded in January with a final round of interviews. Eleven partnerships were established between a central office administrator and a school principal. Of those 11 partnerships, three were explored with an initial interview, a mid-study survey, and a final interview. Six additional leaders were interviewed at the conclusion of the study to discern whether partnership experiences were similar across the district.

A theoretical framework was developed to organize themes from the research and to provide a consistent lens for data analysis throughout the study. This framework, shown on Figure 1, builds from the systemic conditions of a shared mission focused on teaching and learning, systems for ongoing staff development, and continuous improvement. Throughout the analysis process, the framework served as a tool to help organize data collected during the study in terms of themes from the research regarding effective district leadership practices.
Three primary rounds of data collection and analysis were woven together during the study, which created a recursive learning process with the data (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). A combination of techniques including descriptive and In Vivo were used during the initial coding process (Miles et al., 2014). These initial codes were then organized into pattern codes to help the researcher look for emergent themes. Learning from the different stages of data analysis was organized through the use of analytic memos and contact summary sheets (Merriam, 2009). The analytic memos from the three data sets were used to frame themes that emerged and evolved from the data to help tell the story of the partnership model through the perspective of school and district leaders. Emergent themes were identified and analyzed in relationship to themes in the research, resulting in three general findings.

**Summary**

This study examined one district’s attempt to better connect school and district leaders through a partnership model. Three main themes emerged from participant experiences with the model:
1. A partnership model could help build relationships between central office and school leaders by providing common language and shared learning experiences;

2. Conditions that support relationships between central office and school leaders could lead to more collaboration in a school district; and

3. School and district leaders need structures to help them develop and sustain the type of relationships with each other that could affect student learning.

The partnership model provided new opportunities for central office and school leaders to interact. Shared learning experiences were framed around a learning agenda focused on developing a better understanding of the work of schools. These learning experiences created common experiences and common language for administrators across the district. The learning experiences also seemed to help leaders recognize a shared sense of purpose that focused on the mission of serving students.

Although no evidence suggested that the partnership model significantly increased or enhanced collaboration between central office and school leaders, evidence did suggest that the model affected conditions that could contribute to greater organizational trust. The partnership model seemed to build from a shared sense of purpose and to increase appreciation among leaders. This effect was particularly evident in perspectives offered by central office administrators regarding the role of principal. Spending time with principals and learning about schools provided central office administrators with new insight and appreciation for principal leadership. Opportunities made available through the partnership model helped leaders get to know each other better on both a personal and a professional level. Participants reported that they had greater appreciation for other leaders, which could lead to greater trust, an important prerequisite for authentic collaboration (Tschannen-Moran, 2001).
The partnership model provided a structure that allowed district and school leaders to regularly meet and get to know each other better. Without an intentional focus, relationships between central office administrators and school principals are often left to develop on their own. The expectation of monthly meetings prioritized these relationships in the studied district. Participants shared that they appreciated the opportunity to connect with other leaders and, for the most part, made the time to do so. The connections formed during the partnership seemed to lead to greater understanding of the different roles within a school district and to more opportunities for collaborative work. This type of collaboration might result in more informed decision making, and as a result have an impact on student learning outcomes.

These themes are explored in greater detail and in terms of possible implications for district leaders. The hope is that by sharing this district’s experience, other districts may use that learning to further develop models that support central office leaders’ having a greater impact on student learning outcomes in their districts.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

It is safe to assume that every school district has the goal of increasing student learning. Districts use varying methods to achieve that goal. The role of central office contributes to that variance in terms of the way in which organizational and leadership responsibilities are defined and distributed across the district. Variance can also be found in the relationships between central office leaders and school leaders. This literature review will help build a framework for a theory of action that strives to ensure that central office administration is connected to schools in a way that supports teaching and learning.

Central to developing a theory of action regarding the work of central office leaders is the question “Does school district leadership at the central office level even make a difference for its students?” To better understand that question, researchers must consider the role of a school district’s central office in the past, the present, and the possible future. The idea of central office may bring up images of administrators in meetings, directing work that ensures working conditions are safe, buses arrive on time, staff is paid, and all of the other operational functions of a school district. These functions are critical to the day-to-day running of schools, but the roles of central office leaders have evolved into something that is much more complex.

Central office leadership structures were originally created to manage basic business functions for rapidly growing school systems (Honig et al., 2010). In discussing public education in the 1960s and ‘70s, Firestone (2015) described a system of loose coupling where teachers were allowed a great deal of freedom in how they chose to serve students, defining what was to be learned as well as the supporting instructional practices. Firestone and Honig et al. both described systems in which the responsibility of teaching and learning primarily rested with
teachers, while the organizational structure of the district was focused on operational functions. This organizational model could create efficiencies in operational services but also create challenges in the kinds of outcomes students experience.

The organizational structure of loose coupling as described by Firestone (2015) “became associated with two problems in American education” (p. 48): insufficient contribution to a productive economy and equity gaps among students across the country. Addressing these problems created a push to “tighten” the coupling between school districts and what happened in the classroom on a daily basis. Firestone provided a historical timeline in his work related to tightened coupling. He described two main approaches for tightened coupling: a focus on the culture of the workplace and accountability for student achievement. In general, the education community supported tightened coupling moving toward a more collaborative workplace culture for teachers.

As school cultures evolved to become more collaborative, the research began to focus on the development of professional community in schools (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995). Rooted in the literature on professionalism, where shared common understandings of practice underscore the norms and values of work and the literature on community that includes foci on communal relationships among members, professional community was hypothesized to provide both a structure for teachers’ work and clear normative outcomes of that work. Professional teacher collaboration centered on reflective teacher dialogue about student learning outcomes (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996). Additional research suggests that collective efficacy and trust supported teachers’ collaborative engagement. As Firestone (2015) noted, teacher collaboration meant a shift in the workplace, moving away from teachers working in isolation toward teachers working together. Instead of trying to figure out how to best teach on
their own, teachers were expected to collectively discuss and share the responsibility of learning for all students with the intent of bringing a more systemic approach to teaching and learning.

A second approach toward improving school systems through tightened coupling focused on examining the role of the classroom teacher as the sole evaluator of student learning. Traditionally, a teacher’s assessment of what a student knew was not measured beyond the classroom. Learning standards and assessments linked to those standards added external review of student learning to school systems. Firestone (2015) explained, “As if responding to the popular critique of loose coupling as well as elite demands for greater productivity, the accountability movement centralized authority over education, not at the school or district level but in state and federal government” (p. 51). Again, Firestone provided a history of how this approach evolved over the past 40 or more years, highlighting the standards movement and the No Child Left Behind Act. Moreover, responding to accountability measures connected central office leadership to student achievement, and collective leadership efforts between school and central office leadership have linked schools and central offices more tightly in school reform efforts (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012).

Employing accountability as an approach to tightened coupling added the responsibility of translating federal and state policy to the role of central office (Firestone, 2015). Interpreting rules and regulations, and ensuring compliance changed the dynamic between central office and school leadership. The accountability focus put pressure on central office leadership to be more tightly linked with teaching and learning to produce better student achievement results (Center for Education Policy, 2004; Honig & Rainey, 2015).

In sum, the evolution toward more collective responsibility for student learning in school districts has created an opportunity for researchers to contribute data about the role of central
office leadership and about the relationship between central office leadership and school leadership. Most of the existing research comes from analyzing datasets about characteristics that appear to be associated with positive outcomes at the school level (Honig & Rainey, 2015). This type of analysis yielded findings in broad terms, such as leadership, vision, or policy alignment, but failed to provide insight into specific central office leadership actions or structures that made a difference. Johnson et al. (2015) discussed the existence of research about school leadership and central office management but found little about interactions between the school and the central office that could improve student learning. A review of the relevant literature reveals common agreement regarding the notion that district leadership makes a difference; but understanding how leadership makes a difference can be challenging. Whether it concerns the leadership structure or the relationship between central office and school leadership, much remains to be understood about how central office leadership can make a difference in school districts.

Given that the role of the central office has changed with more collective responsibility for student learning, what are best practices for central office leadership? This review of literature will first explore district leadership conditions that seem to have the most potential for affecting student learning. These conditions can be thought of as systemic structures or policies that should be considered by districts. The review will then explore the relationship between the central office and school leadership to develop a framework for creating and sustaining a partnership between the two. This section focuses on the practices of leadership that could make a difference for students’ learning. Employing the commonly held notion that leadership matters, the purpose of the review is to better understand school district leadership rather than to attempt to make the challenging connection between that leadership and student learning.
District Leadership Practices and Student Learning

Many factors contribute to effectively supporting and enhancing student learning. These factors include teacher, principal, district, and community leadership. In fact, Leithwood and Louis (2011) reported that leadership focused on student learning is second only to classroom instruction in influencing student learning. However, making connections between factors such as school or district leadership and student learning is challenging because of the indirect nature of the relationship. District leaders are not working with students as directly as teachers. District leaders can, at best, influence conditions that affect teachers and students.

Other researchers are investigating the kinds of district leadership structures that might positively influence student learning and the kinds of conditions that support such work (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Common to all these studies are foci that include rallying the system around a shared focus on teaching and learning, placing an emphasis on ongoing staff development, creating and sustaining a process for continuous growth at a systems level, and focusing resources on the mission of teaching and learning. Each will be discussed below.

Developing a Shared Focus on Teaching and Learning

The literature stresses the importance of a strong, shared, district focus on teaching and learning. Leithwood and Louis (2011) suggested that establishing a standard for effective instruction as a district can influence what happens in classrooms. A district focus on teaching and learning might be evident in nonnegotiable district goals focused on instruction (Waters & Marzano, 2007) or in how work is organized through central office staff to emphasize the goal of quality instruction in every classroom (Honig et al., 2010).
A focus on teaching and learning that is shared across a district establishes conditions that support good instruction in the classroom. According to Honig et al. (2010), everyone’s work should be “fundamentally reoriented” toward the shared focus on teaching and learning (p. 127). Furthermore, a wide-spanning study about leadership of improvement, written in 2010 by Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson and popularly known as the Wallace Study, suggested that when district leadership prioritizes a focus on teaching and learning, “a special environment within which teachers work together to improve their practice and improve student learning” (p. 37) can be created. Focusing on teaching and learning establishes a standard for instruction in a district and can create a sense of community, with all working together toward that goal.

To achieve a district-wide focus on teaching and learning requires a common mission and vision. Once established, the vision must be shared across the district (Hallinger & Heck, 2009). Leithwood and Jantzi (2012) suggested that a shared approach to leadership can have significant effects on teachers by providing supportive school conditions that build knowledge and skill development, and can increase motivation. Moreover, research (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Louis et al., 2010) suggests that engaging a range of stakeholders with shared responsibilities for outcomes can help align the district’s mission, develop people within the organization, and empower those people to help the organization evolve over time. Hallinger and Heck (2010) asserted that “improved communication of mission and goals, better alignment of resources and structures to support students, more active engaged professional learning among staff, and the ability to maintain a focus on innovations in teaching and learning” (p. 871) were critical for sustaining reform efforts.
Providing Ongoing Staff Development

Kotter’s (2007) work on organizations emphasized the importance of using a common purpose to build organizational capacity. Yet, as Kotter suggested, having a common, shared mission alone is inadequate for fostering change. Organizations must establish policy and practice designed to build organizational capacity (Johnson & Kruse, 2009). Schools have found that if capacity is to be developed, faculty and staff must be provided with professional learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Kruse & Louis, 2009). David and Shields (2001) and the Wallace Study (Louis et al., 2010) found that providing professional learning support can help develop instructional skills, establish consistent practices across a system, and create a sense of efficacy among staff. Additional research concerning ongoing development of staff suggests that creating learning cultures that support collaboration, effective practices, and high expectations for their application across settings can have a positive effect on student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood, 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

In research on school district leadership and its role in improvement, Massell (2000) highlighted the importance of building staff through professional development opportunities. Massel argued that using student learning data to discern gaps in student learning and then connecting those gaps to staff development could lead to greater alignment of curriculum and instruction. Working from a shared, district vision of teaching and learning can help facilitate instructional and curricular gap identification and orient a district’s professional learning in consistent ways. Honig and Rainey (2015) emphasized the importance of collaborative learning in identifying “capacity gaps and promising points of leverage for broader improvements in teaching and learning” (p. 11).
Providing “a strong, in-house, systemically aligned, professional development program” can positively shape what happens in the classroom and in the broader system (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 26). It can also engage staff and connect them to each other as they work toward the shared mission of teaching and learning (Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2000–04; Firestone, 2015). In sum, research suggests that a shared mission concerning teaching and learning and a commitment to professional development are important factors that can contribute to student learning. They also are conditions necessary for the next important component of effective central office leadership: establishing a model for continuous improvement.

**Developing a System of Continuous Improvement**

When a common mission for teaching and learning is present and staff are engaged in ongoing professional learning, opportunities are needed for staff to contribute their ideas at a systems level. Contributing ideas to help the system improve is a process of continuous improvement. Park, Carver, Nordstrum, and Hironaka (2013) defined continuous improvement as “the act of integrating quality improvement into the daily work of individuals in the system” (p. 5). As the authors of the Wallace Study work asserted, leadership in high performing districts “communicated a strong belief in the capacity of teachers and principals to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and in the district’s capacity to develop the organizational conditions needed for that to happen” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 197).

In foundational organizational leadership research, Senge and Sterman (1990) offered the idea of learning organizations as a way toward a continuous improvement system. Learning organizations have firm foundations grounded in shared outcomes and direction that supports growth (Collinson & Cook 2007; Leithwood, 2004). Furthermore, numerous studies stress that the use of data is essential to organizational learning and can focus continuous improvement
Data has been posited as a tool for framing reflective discussions and identifying needs within an organization, thereby providing critical formative information related to the organization’s effectiveness. Consistently using data to engage staff in reflective cycles can help a school district learn and grow together in its pursuit of the teaching and learning mission (Park & Datnow, 2009).

Organizations often start with a purpose, then set goals, and finally develop action steps for meeting that purpose. Conducting a cyclical review of data related to the mission helps individuals in the organization to determine which actions or strategies are beneficial. In this way, individual and organizational learning loops staff back through decisions to learn from the intended and unintended outcomes. The goal is to apply that learning moving forward. This process can help refine teaching and learning practices in a school system, but may not be ample to evolve the actual system as a whole.

Learning organizations create the capacity for systemic growth through what researchers describe as double loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Collinson & Cook, 2007; Daft & Weick, 1984). Double loop learning takes place when an organization can get beyond defending existing structures and truly question the assumptions that support those structures. This dynamic creates a second loop back to allow staff to reflect on the effectiveness of the organization. In this type of a learning organization, staff have the ability to improve practices within the system—the single loop—and they also have the ability to improve the entire system—the double loop (Weick, 1995). District leadership that establishes a mission focused on teaching and learning and then provides professional development to support progress toward that mission can create conditions that make a difference for learning. When district leaders develop systems
intended to stimulate continuous improvement, they provide opportunities for staff to help
determine how to best achieve that mission. Doing purposeful work aligned with a mission in a
continuous improvement system can make a difference for learning, because of the ongoing
process of reflection and review about how to effectively support students (Leithwood & Louis,
2011).

A summary of the research to this point highlights three important foundational steps that
appear to be critical if district leadership is to be successful. First, school district leadership
should define and encourage staff to work toward a common mission of teaching and learning.
Second, school district leaders do well to develop and sustain systems that support staff with
professional learning. Finally, school district leadership should provide opportunities for
experimentation and innovation in a continuous improvement system focused on how to best
support student learning. This foundation, framed by the district through central office
leadership, can help create conditions that can enhance learning.

A Framework for Central Office Leadership

Leithwood (2004) suggested that setting the foundation of a shared direction, developing
people, and redesigning the organization are rarely sufficient to significantly improve student
learning, “but without them, not much would happen” (p. 8). Much remains to be learned about
how central office personnel can lead in a way that maximizes the office’s effect on school
districts and student learning. A variety of leadership approaches can be listed that describe the
relationship between the central office and school leadership and that help to balance a natural
tension present between the central office and the school leadership in the context of decision
making and authority.
Weick (1995) described this tension using the terms *tight* and *loose coupling*. Weick posited that tight coupling occurs when the pathway to clearly defined organizational outcomes is prescribed and applied across the system, making action steps and decision-making more standardized. Loose coupling can have the same clear outcomes, but offers more autonomy in terms of how the outcomes are achieved. When addressing this same tension, Fullan (1992) employed the terms *centralized* and *decentralized*, noting that both had limits and suggesting that a balance between central office control and school level autonomy could be helpful. Fullan suggested that efficiencies can be found with a centralized model but added that too much standardization can also stifle creativity and innovation. In contrast, Ouchi (2003) argued that sharing the responsibility for decision making was an important way to help balance the tension between centralization and decentralization. Additionally, the tension between a centralized and a decentralized approach to district leadership is even more nuanced in the light of Murphy’s (1989) argument that successful decentralization requires that some aspects of the organization have strong centralization. Therefore, centralization and decentralization are dependent on each other. Consistent across these perspectives is the importance of a district considering the balance between centralized and decentralized leadership practices and the resulting implications for the relationship between the central office and the school leadership.

It seems logical that for partnerships to work, some sort of mutual benefit for both school and central office leadership must be available. Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, and Grossman (2015) found that relationships between principals and central office administrators were valued when “both groups seemed to realize that their fortunes were interdependent and that the success of each depended on the good-faith actions of the other” (p. 91). A mutual
benefit could be established through a shared mission of teaching and learning with flexibility in determining the best way to get there.

As was previously referenced, public education in the 1960s and ‘70s was a loosely coupled system that offered a great deal of teacher freedom in terms of what and how to teach (Firestone, 2015). More recently, a more centralized approach regarding what to teach and how it should be taught has become prevalent. Accountability measures have contributed to tighter coupling between federal and state policies and school districts through learning standards and assessments (Firestone, 2015). Additionally, the learning of today and of the future looks different than it did 40 years ago. Students are being asked to engage in deeper learning, which combines core academic content with critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills (Hewlett Foundation, 2012). Given new expectations for student success, central offices need to develop leadership practices that can better support school leadership.

The responsibilities of the central office leadership have evolved over the years (Honig et al., 2010). Again, research on organizations can help describe the type of central office leadership that might be needed. Heifetz (2009) defined adaptive leadership as the “practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (p. 14). This is the kind of work being demanded of school systems today. Heifetz described two types of problems—technical and adaptive—that help illustrate the evolution of central office leadership. He defined a technical problem as one that can be clearly defined and has a clear and known solution. For central office leadership, a technical problem might be the process of analyzing enrollment and assigning staffing to schools based on the number of students. School district leaders also face adaptive types of problems. For them, figuring out how to ensure that each student meets the academic standard while trying to overcome poverty with limited time and resources is an adaptive
problem. These types of problems can be difficult to define without clear pathways toward solutions.

Often leaders can solve technical problems by exercising authority while working through adaptive problems; to do so, Heifetz (2009) advised leaders, “[You must connect with] the values, beliefs, and anxieties of the people you are trying to move” (p. 38). To overcome adaptive challenges, Heifetz argues organizations need to develop leadership capacity, reflect, and continuously learn and grow. Leithwood (2004) echoed the importance of developing adaptive leadership, writing, “We need to be developing leaders with large repertoires of practices and the capacity to choose from that repertoire as needed” (p. 10).

Developing a partnership between district and school leadership that is built on a systemic foundation of a shared mission, a professional learning system, and a continuous improvement model is an important first step. Effectively leading from that foundation requires thoughtful consideration of the balance between a centralized and a decentralized model and the relationship between the central office and the school leadership. That relationship can be a critical support allowing adaptive leadership practices to arise. Finding a way to support each student with deeper learning is a complex, nuanced challenge. Adaptive leadership practices can help districts prioritize the demands of limited resources in meeting that challenge while continuing to evolve to meet future student need. At a systems level, adaptive leadership requires that leaders apply leadership approaches consistently to unique situations across the district. This strategy can be supported by aligned leadership practices.

**Aligned Leadership**

Aligned leadership can help to consistently reinforce the foundation of a common mission, professional learning structures, and a continuous improvement system (Honig &
Aligned leadership can be described in multiple ways. Honig and Rainey used the term *performance alignment* to signify providing a lens to look at all aspects of the work of a school district. A main element of performance alignment is enabling district resources and activities to be connected to a school’s learning efforts. Johnson et al. (2015) investigated five high-performing districts to better understand the relationship between the central office and the schools. These districts had aligned leadership that concentrated the resources and energy in the system on agreed-upon outcomes that were focused on student learning. Aligned leadership was focused on developing system coherence, in which “people agree on the work that needs to be done in order to achieve strategic goals and what resources support that work and which systems and structures facilitate it” (p. 12). Performance alignment and system coherence share a similar perspective in that they prioritize the work of a school system so that connections to the classroom are strong.

Aligned leadership offers insight into how central office leadership can make a difference for student learning. Given the foundation of a shared mission, a professional learning system, and a continuous improvement model, central office leadership does well to ensure that time and other resources are aligned with the pursuit of that mission. Each decision needs the continuous scrutiny of aligned leadership to ensure that actions and priorities reinforce progress toward a mission centered on teaching and learning (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Johnson et al., 2015). Aligned leadership means focusing on what Honig and Rainey (2015) called the *right work*: work that supports the efforts of principals and teachers so that each student can realize “ambitious” learning goals (p. 2). Honig and Rainey argued that *deeper learning*, requires aligned leadership (Hewlett Foundation, 2012). In this kind of a model, district and school leadership have a close relationship focused on the connection between resources and action at
the school level. Johnson et al. (2015) argued that aligned leadership was a critical factor when considering how districts best utilized support structures such as staffing, budgeting, and academic programming. Making effective decisions about how to best use these resources often requires adaptive leadership practices. In districts where leadership was indirectly yet positively linked to student learning, structures and resources were aligned through strategies focused on meeting shared teaching and learning goals (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Johnson et al., 2015).

A Partnership Between Central Office and School Administrators

Given the evolution of district responsibility, central office leadership teams must adaptively lead with coherence to ensure deeper learning for students. Strong connections to the work of teaching and learning and a partnership between the central office and the schools can support adaptive leadership with coherence. In Johnson and Chrispeels’s (2010) study of school reform efforts, the authors highlighted the importance of fostering relational linkages between central office and school leadership when initiating any type of reform effort. In short, relationships made a difference. Districts can support the development of relationships between central office and school leaders through a shared purpose and decision making related to resources, systems, and structures (Johnson et al., 2015).

Johnson et al. (2015) examined the relationship between central office and school leadership by considering five districts that were striving for improvement and how they approached the partnership. The authors highlighted the benefit of district and school leaders’ working in reciprocal relationship, where both parties had a say in how the district worked. A reciprocal relationship promoted “greater acceptance of and respect for the district’s role, and there was greater coherence across its policies and practices” (p. 63). Alignment between
structure and practice helped bridge the organizational distance between central office and school leadership (p. 80).

If a growing school district is to ensure that central office administrators are connected to schools in a way that supports teaching and learning, that district must focus intentionally on their relationship with principals. Honig et al. (2010) looked at the role of district leadership through the central office structure. The study examined three large school systems, how they were organized, the work they did, and the relationship they had with school leaders. Their assertion was that school district leaders need to fundamentally reorient around the goal of student learning. Honig et al. described important dimensions of district leadership that could affect student learning. Two of the dimensions were directly related to the relationship between central office and school leadership. Their findings prioritized a learning-focused partnership between school and district leaders that developed instructional leadership. They also highlighted the importance of and attention to the ongoing development of the relationship between schools and the district.

The Wallace Study (Louis et al., 2010) further described the nuances of a symbiotic relationship between district and school leadership that balanced stability and change as districts sought to carry out the day-to-day operations efficiently and consistently while also providing opportunities for doing things differently to better serve students. The authors offered evidence suggesting that strong relationships between district and school leaders can help support that kind of balance. Central office leaders were more connected to teaching and learning in schools when they took case management and project management approaches. Similarly, in Honig et al.’s 2010 work, findings suggested that case management required that central office administrators “work closely with individual schools to understand their goals, identify barriers
to teaching and learning improvement in schools, and address those barriers, even if they fell beyond the purview of their particular central office units” (p. 71). A focus on project management required that central office leaders “shift their work from delivering services that they controlled to taking responsibility for work projects and marshaling resources from throughout and sometimes beyond the central office to address them” (Honig et al., 2010, p. 73).

Both of these approaches made a difference for the studied districts. Assigning responsibility for developing and sustaining a relationship with school leaders to central office administrators oriented the “work in meaningful ways toward supporting the development of schools’ capacity for high-quality teaching and expanding students’ opportunities to learn” (Honig et al., 2010, p. 118). Intentionally structuring partnerships between central office and school leadership enabled districts to build from a policy foundation centered on a shared mission and ongoing development to adaptive leadership practices. Partnerships created roles and responsibilities intended to positively frame the relationship between school and district leaders in a collaborative and supportive way.

**Summary**

The literature about central office leadership surfaced themes related to a clear and sustained focus on student learning at all levels of the organization; communicative relationships; reflective communication; and articulated, agreed-upon measures of success. These themes manifest in policy and practice. Policy is grounded in a shared mission focused on teaching and learning. Developing system-wide structures that help develop staff practices and build capacity for staff to influence the system in a continuous improvement model is critical if learners’ needs are to be met. This policy foundation provides structure for central office leadership practices that maximize the central office’s effect on teaching and learning.
Research suggests that leaders should ensure that resources are aligned with the school district’s mission through vigilant decision making and focused reflection (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Honig et al., 2010; Louis et al., 2010; Leithwood & Louis, 2011). It is critical that central office leaders develop meaningful relationships with school leaders that create opportunities for reflective progress and system-monitoring dialogue (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Johnson et al., 2015; Louis et al., 2010). The relationship between the central office and the school leadership should support adaptive leadership practices that can evolve and grow with learning needs.

This study was designed to enhance understanding of the relationships between the central office and the school leadership through examination of a partnership model. Central office administrators were asked to take a new approach to their relationship with school leadership. Each central office administrator was assigned a school principal partner with the hope of developing a relationship that promoted increased empathy between principals and central office leadership. With a focus on the relationships between school and district leaders, and the goal of increased school and system understanding, the hope was that the central office would be able to better support teaching and learning. At the heart of this research and work is the importance of mutual respect and understanding between school and district leadership. Furthermore, it places at the center of leadership’s dialogue a focus on meeting the mission of teaching and learning for each student.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This study investigated the dynamic and complex relationships that arise as central office administrators and school principals work together. The researcher sought to better understand how central office administration could be connected to schools in ways that supported teaching and learning. The goal was to explore how central office administrators and principals perceived their working relationships in the context of reorganization. The reorganization focused on shifting the practice of central office administrators to a more personalized approach to connection with schools. Partnerships were created between district and school leaders so that these partnerships could help district leaders better support teaching and learning. The study was designed to discern how district leadership can better connect with school leadership by exploring the relationship between central office administrators and school principals from the perspective of both parties. This chapter describes the research design of this qualitative study about central office and school leadership. This study may contribute to the body of research related to school district improvement that addresses the impact leadership structures and practices might have on a school district (Honig et al., 2010).

A Qualitative Study

This research investigated the relationships of a sample of newly paired central office administrators and school principals in ways designed to focus attention on teaching and student learning. The research sought to inform the question of how central office administration can be more deeply connected to schools in a way that supports teaching and learning in a growing school district. The goal was to allow for a better understanding of how central office
administrators and principals perceive the work involved in school and district improvement and of the roles both parties play.

Research can take many different forms, but they all share the idea of systematic inquiry or investigation of a topic (Merriam, 2009). Some research designs that are commonly used to inform and improve practice in education are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. The mixed methods approach is often described as a combination of both qualitative and quantitative practices (Creswell, 2014). Research focused on improving practice, on understanding how something might be done better, is called applied research. The purpose of improving practice is at the heart of educational research and is the focus of this study.

Qualitative research uses words to frame an investigation, whereas quantitative research uses a numerical approach. This difference, the words to numbers continuum, contributes to a more open-ended exploration on the qualitative side (Creswell, 2014). A qualitative approach is more focused on “uncovering a phenomenon” than necessarily determining “cause and effect” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Qualitative research often takes an interpretive or constructivist view of knowledge. The idea is to try to understand, describe, and interpret people’s experiences and then make meaning from them (Merriam, 2009). In the realm of educational research, the use of qualitative methods has increased (Creswell, 2014). Education is a complex endeavor with many variables that affect outcomes. Understanding the work through observation and the descriptive words of those involved can offer great insight into how to improve practice. As Merriam (2009) stated, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). By using a qualitative approach, the researcher gains the opportunity to
observe and interpret social dynamics while collecting data adding depth to the qualitative research (Creswell, 2009; Stake, 2010).

Merriam (2009) explained that qualitative research is designed to better understand the complex interactions that take place through the perspectives of those involved. It is about generating hypotheses and offering richly descriptive narratives that provide context and opportunities to learn from the experiences of others. Qualitative research aligns with the complex interactions of education. Every learning experience involves multiple variables from both learners and teacher that dynamically interact with each other. A qualitative approach can capture the nuances of teaching and learning in a way that quantitative research cannot. Qualitative research provides us with an opportunity to go inside the learning experience, exploring the thoughts and decisions of those involved. Research offers evidence that can inform the actions of education leaders. This evidence can provide helpful insight to educators and policymakers as they assess and evolve systems to better serve students (Creswell, 2018).

An understanding of qualitative research provided the foundation for exploring how the relationship between school and district leaders might be structured to enhance district leadership outcomes. In exploring the thinking of school leaders using interviews, observations, and document review, the researcher employed qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Merriam (2009) wrote that qualitative research can provide a rich story that helps describe the phenomenon of the working relationship between school and district leaders and can enrich readers’ understanding of the relationship building, thereby establishing a knowledge base primed for future research (Merriam, 2009). The intention behind the study was to do just that.

It is important for studies to be defined through established boundaries of exploration and context (Yin, 2003). Boundaries might define who is involved in the study or the duration of the
study in a way that frames the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This study examined principals and central office administrators over a 6-month period, exploring their relationships through interviews and documents.

The leadership framework used for the study was developed from previous research as summarized in chapters one and two. A theoretical framework “provides an overall orienting lens for the study” (Creswell, 2014, p. 64). The theoretical framework for this study emerged from research on school district leadership and learning organizations. The framework focused on systemic conditions and leadership practices. Systemic structures help establish foundational conditions that support leadership practices, which then can influence student outcomes. The key to this framework is the relationship between central office and principal leaders. Relationships can support adaptive and aligned leadership practices. Given the importance of these relationships, it seems reasonable for districts to consider how to support their development and sustainability. This consideration led to the development of the partnership model, the focus of this study (see Figure 1).

Using a qualitative approach to research has limitations. Because this study focused on a single district, generalizability is compromised. The specific context of the study provided for a rich, descriptive story, but makes applying whatever learning comes from the story to other contexts more challenging (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative studies provide a story grounded in a specific situation that offers depth in the human experience. Erickson (1985) pointed out that qualitative research allows readers to determine what aspects of the study transfer given their context, rather than following conclusions provided by the researcher.
Context

The study took place in the Hamilton School District, a mid-sized school district in the state of Washington. Hamilton is a pseudonym that is used to protect the confidentiality of the district's participants. The Hamilton School District has experienced significant growth over the last decade, with more than a thirty percent increase in enrollment. This growth led to an increase in the number of schools and staff in the district. Table 1 shows district demographics from May 2006 to May 2016.

Table 1

Hamilton School District Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Classroom Teachers</th>
<th>Free &amp; Reduced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 2006</td>
<td>5275</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2016</td>
<td>6932</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The district has been challenged to develop practices that provide consistency across the district while maintaining the relationships and feel of a small district “where everyone knows your name.” The school district’s growth, with new staff and schools, provided an appropriate context to explore the kind of structures that support interactions between school and district leaders.

Researcher’s Position

It is important to consider the researcher’s position in qualitative research because bias, dispositions, and assumptions can influence findings (Merriam, 2009). I am interested in developing district systems that support district and school improvement. I have been a public
school teacher, principal, and central office administrator for over twenty years. These roles have helped shape my vision of an effective school district.

My experiences as a teacher and principal took place in a medium sized school district with just over 20,000 students. I sometimes felt frustration in the role of principal, because I perceived a lack of understanding from central office about the needs I had as a principal. From that experience came an assumption that better communication between central office and school leadership could help principals be more effective in their roles.

I have spent the past five years in the role of central office administrator working with school principals in a small school district. The size difference between the two districts I have experienced is important, because as a central office administrator in a small district it was possible to develop a relationship with each of the principals in the district. This would have been more challenging to do in a district with more than 25 principals. I believe the relationships I have been able to develop with principals reinforced my assumption of the importance of central office and school leader relationships.

This study was conducted in a school district with which I have intimate knowledge. I had previously worked with most of the participants as colleagues. This type of relationship obviously presents challenges to the study. Because of my connection to study participants, I took great care to ensure they understood their participation was optional and that they could opt out at any time. It was also important for study participants to understand that information shared in the study was focused on district improvement, not on individual performance. Relationships between central office and school leaders can be challenging simply because of time constraints. I wanted to reassure participants that there was not judgment about the current quality of those relationships. The goal was to better understand how those relationships might be enhanced.
through a structure like the partnership model. I was mindful of these challenges throughout the study and used a reflexive journal to help acknowledge them (Pillow, 2003).

The themes that emerged from my reflexive journal were related to my experiences as an administrator and my relationship with the district. My leadership disposition is one that favors strong connections between central office and schools. I wanted the partnership model to be effective, because I believe that central office and school leader relationships can make a difference for school learning across the district. This may have created a bias to favor positive data related to the model. I also have a collegial relationship with many of the participants in the study. I wanted to maintain those relationships. This desire may have played a role in the study by limiting my ability to probe deeply during the interview process. A more disconnected researcher may have been able to press further with questioning, and participants may have responded differently with someone they did not know through a previous relationship.

Being closely connected to the studied district also provided unique opportunities. My existing relationship with participants provided rapport that facilitated their willingness to share more information. I was able to work with cabinet-level administrators to explore the research problem and problem statement and help develop the idea of a partnership. This dynamic provided me with an opportunity to investigate how a reorganization of structures that support the relationship of school and district leaders worked in a qualitative study.

**Research Design**

In this study, I sought to explore the relationship between the central office and school leadership by answering the question: How can the central office administration connect to schools in ways that support teaching and learning?
The partnership model was designed with the leadership conditions and practices and framework, as described in Figure 1. Systemic conditions, such as a shared mission and a system for ongoing staff development, were built into the frame of the model. The purpose for the partnership model was communicated as a “shift in the practice of central office administrators to personalize services to schools” so that the district office could “better support teaching and learning.” The model was designed to create professional development opportunities for leaders. The hope was that the model could create a structure that served as part of a continuous improvement system as leaders became better informed about each other and about how the district functioned as a whole. The interactions between the central office and school leaders would support relationship development and allow leaders to explore leadership practices with the goal of improving practice and eventually affecting student learning outcomes.

Each principal was assigned a cabinet-level administrative partner for a total of 11 partnerships. Cabinet-level administrators included positions such as the finance, human resources, technology, and operations directors. Cabinet administrators were expected to meet with their partner principal and visit the school at least monthly. Follow-up, reflective discussion with cabinet administrators took place in cabinet meetings each month. The discussion focused on what the cabinet administrators had learned about their partnered schools related to monthly themes. Cabinet administrators were expected to speak out in meetings about topics such as educational programming, school communication, and the daily operation of the school. Cabinet administrators were also asked to share some of the details of their work and focus areas with their principal partner.

The working relationship of principals and central office administrators was investigated through a series of individual interviews over a period of 6 months. In the studied district, six
principals had served in their current role for more than three years. Three principals were selected from this group for two interviews: one at the beginning of the school year and one near the end of the 6-month study. Their central office partner was interviewed on a similar schedule. These three partnerships included the human resources director and an elementary principal, the business director and an elementary principal, and an assistant superintendent and a high school principal.

In addition to the initial interviews, a 3-month check-in was conducted with these partnerships via an e-mail questionnaire. Further, other partners were interviewed near the end of the 6-month period to broaden the perspectives gathered through the prior procedures. These interviews included the other three principals with more than three years’ experience. The goal was to get as many different perspectives as possible about how the principal and central office partnership worked and could develop. In total, 18 interviews were conducted and six e-mail questionnaires were collected. In all, 12 of 22 cabinet and school leaders were interviewed. Data from each interview were used to look for themes and patterns in the school and district leader relationships (Miles et al., 2014). A summary of participant engagement in the partnership model is included in Table 2. The table describes the study participants, their role, the number of interviews they participated in for the study, and the frequency at which they engaged with their partner over the six months of the study.
Table 2

Participant Study Engagement Frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Partnership Check-in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lola Davenport</td>
<td>HR Director</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brett Roberts</td>
<td>Business Director</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>twice per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie Gragg</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>twice per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aiden Thomas</td>
<td>Technology Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>twice per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JoAnn Thornton</td>
<td>Capital Programs Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug Oman</td>
<td>Elementary School Principal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Lee</td>
<td>Elementary School Principal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>twice per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan Jackson</td>
<td>High School Principal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>twice per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christy Baldwin</td>
<td>Elementary School Principal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>twice per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzie Miller</td>
<td>Elementary School Principal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>twice per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mackenzie Stephens</td>
<td>High School Principal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>once per study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

Interviews. The largest data source in this study was interviews with all building principals and central office administrators. Interviews are powerful tools for capturing the human experience. The interview gave participants an opportunity to describe their experiences. As Seidman (2013) noted, “At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language” (p. 8). Interviews provided an opportunity to focus and prompt reflection on the part of participants related to specific aspects of their relationship (Creswell, 2014).
An interview pilot was conducted using a convenience sample of cabinet-level administrators in a different school district using the protocol. Piloting an interview process is an important part of the qualitative research process (Seidman, 2006). The pilot provided insight into the interview process and helped refine questions, making them clearer and more focused on the research questions. The interview questions were designed with the intent of better understanding the participants’ perspectives on collaboration, continuous improvement, professional learning, and their working relationship with their partner. Semistructured interviews with central office administrators and principals were used in this study. Semistructured interviews were chosen because they all for follow-up questions during the interview to help provide rich descriptions from experience of the principal and the central office administrators (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2013).

Interviews were designed to get participants to describe their experiences using stories to reconstruct their experiences (Seidman, 2013). First-round interviews included questions that asked interviewees to offer examples of times when collaboration was helpful or to describe what happened on a good day. The framework for the first round of interviews with starting questions can be found in Appendix A. The goal for the first round was to develop an understanding of how this group of leaders worked, of their preferences and priorities. Initial contact sheets were used after each interview to organize information from the interview into logistical and thematic ideas. This process included acquiring background information about each participant and elements about such topics as collaboration, purpose, and daily work responsibilities.

Reviewing interviews using a contact sheet and the transcription text facilitated the refinement of the interview questions and technique to minimize confusion and collect data more
aligned with research questions in subsequent interviews (Miles et al., 2014). An example of this process occurred after the first interview with Principal Michelle Lee. I asked about some specific examples of collaboration and was told a wonderful story describing how teachers and parents worked together in support of an educational program. Even though this was a great example of collaboration, it wasn’t connected to the focus of the study, the central office and school principal relationship. In later interviews, I provided participants with more specificity in the questions, which yielded examples that were more connected to the focus of the study. The initial analysis undertaken through the contact sheet process provided a series of data collection and analysis experiences. Moving intermittently between data collection and analysis can be an effective way to conduct qualitative research. I used a process of cycling "back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new, often better, data” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 70).

Each interview was transcribed and then returned to the interviewee for member checking to ensure accuracy (Miles et al., 2014). This process provided participants with an opportunity to review and edit transcriptions before they became a part of the study. The first round of interviews yielded a total of 273 minutes of recorded material. These data provided a baseline for how principals and central office leaders viewed their role and relationship with other leaders. The original plan for the study was to interview the initial six again during the middle phase. Achieving this proved to be problematic as inclement weather led to four school cancellations and affected the interview schedule. It was important to have a mid-study check-in, so an e-mail questionnaire was used to ensure timely data collection. In this way, a minimum of time elapsed between contacts with participants. The e-mail questionnaire included the following questions:

- Describe your partnership with your principal/central office partner.
• What kinds of interactions do you have? How has the partnership evolved?
• What have you learned from your partner?
• What do you think your partner has learned from you?
• What are your thoughts about next steps for continuing to evolve a partnership model between school and district leadership?
• Any other thoughts?

The study concluded with the partner teams being interviewed again, along with six additional cabinet administrators and principals. The additional interviewed cabinet administrators and principals added data that helped the study reach a saturation point, where similar trends consistently surfaced (Seidman, 2013). Interview questions were informed by the previous two rounds of data collection. The focus for the interview was on the partnership and how it had evolved over time; it included questions such as asking participants to reflect on the partnership. If the partnership influenced their work, participants were asked to describe the impact and what made a difference. The final round of interviews yielded a total of 378 minutes of text. A similar member check process was used with these transcriptions as well.

Artifacts. In addition to interview text, artifacts were used to help triangulate patterns in the study, establishing what Yin (2003) described as converging lines of evidence. Artifact sources included cabinet meeting agendas, reflections from cabinet members about their partner schools, and a reflective journal kept by the researcher throughout the study.

Cabinet meeting agendas included documentation of when the Hamilton School District central office leaders discussed the school partnership model. For example, the October 26, 2016 agenda included an item called “Sharing about our Schools.” The prompt for this item was:
Take a minute to consider a story to tell about the teaching and learning that happens at your school. Make it a 3-minute or less story that conveys caring, quality, and growth. We’ll get into pairs or trios to share. (Appendix B)

**Observations.** Observations from cabinet meetings were kept in a reflective journal that included entries from cabinet meeting discussion. Some examples of discussion recorded were a cabinet member talking about how they were able to help out with lunches on the first day at school, and another describing the level of excitement and confusion with kids and parents everywhere. Another described opening up juice boxes and helping students get out to the playground for recess.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative research is inductive; therefore, the data analysis process is recursive and often begins during data collection (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). This study involved three primary rounds of data collection, with data analysis woven in between (Miles et al., 2014). A theoretical framework organized around district conditions and practice was developed to provide a consistent lens for data analysis throughout the study. This framework emerged from a review of research related to central office leadership. The Conditions and Practices Leadership Framework (see Figure 1) served as a guide for the analysis of interview transcripts.

The transcripts were read, re-read, and annotated, allowing for the development of preliminary findings and reflection and leading to the creation of a contact sheet. Initial review led to data being sorted into categories related to work experience, purpose for work, collaboration, and the central office principal partnership on the contact summary sheets. Contact summary sheets were used to record the most salient data from interview (Miles et al., 2014). Quotes were highlighted that captured the spirit of information shared. For example, when asked
to define collaboration, a participant said, “Having the words to be able to describe what does it mean to collaborate is important. That’s why I got to that very simple definition of ‘We are in our work together and we feel mutually accountability for the results.’” This process was an important part of the analysis process in that it helped build familiarity with the data, and with asking questions, commenting, and reflecting on the meaning of the data in a conversational way (Merriam, 2009).

After the initial analysis had been completed, coding was used to organize the data into chunks. Coding is the process of using words or short phrases to help organize qualitative data into similar themes and essential elements of the research story (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Miles et al., 2014). A combination of descriptive coding, where a word or short phrase is used to summarize a particular description, and In Vivo coding, which uses a word or phrase from the participant’s language to summarize the description, was used for this initial coding process (Miles et al., 2014). Some examples of the initial codes that were used included phrases such as connecting with kids, a shared journey, family culture, and value-added time.

These initial codes were organized into two groups: principals and central office administrators. After I had established codes from the first review, I conducted a second review of the transcript data and codes. This was a back-and-forth process of reading through the codes, being alert to possible themes, and adding notes to the codes for clarification. An example of the back-and-forth process was the code feeling connected to the work. A note added to this code was the description focus on the mission of serving students, which came from the transcription data. This process resulted in my identifying potential pattern codes to describe emerging themes that were connected to the purpose of the study (Miles et al., 2014). To increase reliability, I defined pattern codes and then applied them to the initial codes to organize the data consistently.
(Creswell, 2013). This iterative process of trying to organize and better understand the data yielded five major themes: students, leadership, challenges, collaboration, and the partnership model. Table 3 summarizes definitions for the pattern codes used for the interview data from round 1.

The process of organizing the initial codes into pattern codes produced summary data and a general sense of themes from participants that were reflected in the interview data. For example, almost 51% of the codes (123/242) were related to practices, structures, or systems that help the leader meet his or her intended outcomes. These elements were organized under the leadership code. This group of codes seemed to be important for both principals and central office administrators.

Some codes didn’t seem to fit into any of the categories. These codes represented important thoughts from participants that were indirectly connected to the study. Examples of these types of codes included ideas that related to participants’ previous experiences or to other aspects of their responsibilities, such working with parents or partnerships outside of the school district. After pattern codes were assigned to the data, they were reviewed once again to determine whether they should be included with a theme or left outside of the pattern code set. If left outside the set, these data were used to provide context about the participants’ roles, responsibilities, and relationships.

Table 3

*Pattern Codes from Round 1 Data Collection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>Ideas related to student outcomes, student learning, or student experiences received the ‘students’ code. Examples: connecting with kids, student engagement, serving students, student outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Leadership 50.8%  
Ideas related to practices, structures, or systems that facilitate the leader meeting their outcomes received the *leadership* code.  
Examples: making connections, developing leadership, evolving best practices, value-based decision-making, using conflict

Challenges 14.5%  
Ideas related to barriers, challenges, things that were viewed as getting in the way of the leaders’ meeting their outcomes received the *challenges* code.  
Examples: dealing with conflict, feeling alone, competing interests, balancing the budget, collaboration v. efficiency, reactive leadership

Collaboration 16.5%  
Ideas related to working together with others toward a shared outcome received the *collaboration* code.  
Examples: shared decision-making, mutually beneficial, finding common ground, shifting thinking

Partnership 9.5%  
The relationship between central office administrator and assigned school principal. Comments related to this relationship received the *partnership* code.  
Examples: taking responsibility, shared understanding, common experiences, working together

After organizing the data using the contact summary and coding process, I read the transcripts once again. This time quotes that connected to themes or just caught my attention were highlighted. After I had highlighting quotes, I printed each one on a separate strip of paper. Then I read these quotes again and organized them into themes by placing them into a corresponding envelope labeled with the theme.

The final step of analysis was writing an analytic memo to organize and summarize thoughts about what the data meant related to the research question. Beyond providing a summary, the process of writing memos helped me synthesize my thinking into a higher level of systemic analysis critical to a qualitative study (Miles et al., 2014). The entire data analysis process, from initial coding to an analytic memo, was repeated for data collected from the mid-
study check and the final round of interviews. The analytic memos from these three data sets helped to create a trail of reflection within stages of the study. The memos helped frame themes that emerged and evolved from the research regarding the relationship between school and district leadership. An example of emergent themes can be seen in the subtle differences between pattern codes used in the three rounds of analysis. Initially, data focused on leadership practices and challenges, and then they started to shift to more specific experiences from the partnership model.

The analysis process described was conducted for each phase of the study: beginning, middle, and end. The beginning phase consisted of six interviews with the identified partner teams. In the middle stage, e-mail questionnaires were sent to each of the six subjects initially interviewed in the beginning phase. The study concluded with the partner teams being interviewed again and six additional cabinet administrators and principals also being interviewed. After the interview data from each phase were analyzed, the three phases were analyzed together to allow me to look for patterns, trends, and anomalies. Artifact and observational data were included in this final analysis. For the entire study, a total of 18 interviews were held with 12 school and central office leaders, for a total of 651 minutes of recorded material.

After all data had been collected and analyzed, a final review of the analytical memos was completed that focused on the research question: How can the central office administration connect to schools in ways that support teaching and learning? Three major themes emerged from my analysis of the data.

1. A partnership model could help build relationships between central office and school leaders by providing common language and shared learning experiences;
2. Conditions that support relationships between central office and school leaders could lead to increased collaboration in a school district; and

3. School and district leaders need structures to help them develop and sustain the type of relationships with each other that could enhance student learning.

I reviewed quotes from each round of data analysis once again and organized them into the themes by reading each strip, adding any contextual notes, and then adding them to an envelope labeled with a corresponding theme. These quotes were used in chapter four to provide specific examples for the identified themes.

**Validity and Reliability**

Validity and reliability are critical components of any study that moves the collective research community’s learning forward (Merriam, 2009). Validity in qualitative research is maximized by using a set of procedures to demonstrate the accuracy of the findings and to convince readers of that accuracy (Creswell, 2014). Procedures used for this study included offering rich descriptions, engaging in member checking, clarifying bias, presenting discrepant information, and triangulating data sources.

Reliability in qualitative research is built on consistency of practice within the study. Sharing the procedures for the study and consistently applying those procedures are important components of reliability (Creswell, 2014). An example of this consistency occurred in working through each round of analysis. Codes were initially established based on the first round of analysis using the Leadership Conditions and Practices Framework (see Figure 1). Comparing data with the codes and writing memos about the process can help prevent a drift in definition and focus, an important part of reliable analysis (Creswell, 2014).
Conducting this study in the district in which I am employed brought bias into my findings. I have experience with the current system and am familiar with the expectations of the processes within the system. Because of my experience in the district and my relationships with staff, I brought assumptions to the interview process that included expectations for how people behaved and the residue of past experiences with them. During the interview process, I sought to capture rich, thick, descriptions by weaving together the experiences of partners. My goal in building these descriptions was to provide a shared experience for the reader based on the stories participants told about the partnerships. After the interviews were transcribed, I employed a member check process to help minimize the impact of my bias during the interview process (Miles et al., 2014). The transcription of each interview was provided to the relevant subject for review, after which the subject was asked for feedback to make sure the interview accurately captured their thinking. Member checking helped participants ensure their story was told accurately.

Using research to construct a leadership framework for central office and school relationships also factored into my data analysis. Terms associated with the framework stood out to me. I have strong beliefs about district leadership and its influence on a district’s culture and direction. I believe a district should support the professional development of its staff and proactively develop communication structures that allow staff to feel connected to a district’s continuous improvement plan. A large volume of data associated with growth and communication was captured in the interview process. There is a risk that the data collected were skewed toward those strong beliefs simply because of my philosophical filter about the district leadership.
I kept a reflexive journal to share my thinking throughout the study in an effort to keep my bias and my role as an instrument in the research visible (Merriam, 2009; Pillow, 2003). What surfaced in this journal was my strong desire to connect central office leadership with school leadership. A stronger connection between the district and schools creates a greater capacity to maximize a leadership effect on learning. Problem-solving and decision-making are positively affected when there is a focus on, and an understanding of what happens in the classroom (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Johnson et al., 2015; Louis et al., 2010). My desire was to better understand structures that could help develop strong central office and school relationships. I collected the data with a focus on fulfilling that desire.

As a result, the 6-month window for the study did not focus on a static partnership model. Instead, the model evolved based on feedback from principals and central office administrators. An example of this evolution came from an interview as a participant shared her appreciation for her central office partner, and observed that not all of her colleagues had a partner that visited their school as often as he did. Based on that feedback, a required minimum number of visits to schools was established for central office administrators in December. This change shifted the partnership model and as a result influenced the study. To mitigate these types of influences, I used a reflective journal to document these influences and maintain a focus on the research problem of how to support strong connections between school and district leaders. Making adjustments to the partnership model was not the focus of the study. Instead, the focus was on the larger idea of creating a partnership program that better connected school and district leadership, and on understanding how the partnership affected their relationship.

Data collection and data analysis are critical to ensure both validity and reliability. The goal was for readers to be able to understand the study and, if they chose, replicate aspects of the
partnership and design in their own districts. Providing data collection structures and data analysis processes creates transparency about the process, an important aspect of qualitative research (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Miles et al., 2014).

**Study Limitations**

A convenience sample was used in selecting the school district for the study. Conducting a case study of one district’s experience presents opportunities and challenges. There is an opportunity to provide consistency to the study by using one theory of action in one district. This configuration is problematic, though, for generalizing beyond the experiences of the studied district. The purpose of using a qualitative case study approach is to build on existing theory and to give practical insight by sharing one story (Yin, 2003). The voices in this story may provide insight for other district leaders who are considering how to organize structures that support connections between district and school leadership.

Another study limitation was my dual role as the researcher and also being connected to the district. My connections could have influenced those interviewed to provide information that was not necessarily about their own experiences or feelings, but what they perhaps thought would reflect better on our district. I tried to ensure that the parameters for the interviews made participants feel respected and safe so that they could share their thinking without judgment (Merriam, 2009). I also sought out the expertise of my committee. Their advice and feedback helped refine the research design and allowed me to conduct a study that, ideally, will add texture to thinking about school-district leadership.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between central office leaders and school principals by answering the question: How can central office administration connect with schools in ways that support teaching and learning? Central to this study was a desire to better understand how central office administration and principals work together.

The literature about central office leadership highlighted the importance of having a clear and sustained focus on student learning at all levels of the organization; communicative relationships; reflective communication; and articulated, agreed-upon measures of success (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Honig et al., 2010; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Johnson et al., 2015; Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Louis et al., 2010). Research suggested that central office leaders should develop meaningful relationships with school leaders that help create opportunities for reflection and discussion about system-monitoring progress and support growth in leadership practices (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Johnson et al., 2015; Louis et al., 2010). These themes informed the development of a model for partnership between principals and central office administrators in the Hamilton School District. Central office administrators were asked to take a new approach to their relationship with school leaders by forming a partnership with a principal and learning more about the school and about the principal’s work.

Using the partnership model as the focus for this study, I investigated central office administrators’ and principals’ perceptions about their roles and working relationships through a series of interviews, observations, and artifacts. This chapter presents the findings associated with data generated using those tools.
It is important to provide additional context concerning the administrator partnerships interviewed for this study. Data were collected from each of these participants three times over the course of the study. Central office administrator Lola Davenport played many roles in school systems during her career, including those of secretary, teacher, coach, building administrator, to now human resources director. A veteran of the Hamilton School District, Mrs. Davenport is well known throughout the district by students, staff, and the community. Partnered with Mrs. Davenport was elementary principal Doug Oman. Doug had been a principal for more than 10 years when this study was conducted, for the previous 4 in the Hamilton School District. He previously served as a teacher and a principal in a larger school district and at the time of the study was principal of a K–5 elementary school with about 600 students.

Business director Brett Roberts was in his first year in the Hamilton School District. He had more than twenty years of finance experience and was excited about putting that experience to work in a school system. Brett’s principal partner was Michelle Lee. Michelle was the longest tenured principal in the Hamilton School District. She had previous experience in other school districts and had served at all levels. She was an elementary principal with a student population of about 450 students when the study was conducted.

The final focus partnership included Ryan Jackson, a twenty-plus year veteran, who had spent the previous 7 years as principal of a comprehensive high school with more than two thousand students. Ryan previously worked in a large district as a teacher and a building administrator. His partner was assistant superintendent Natalie Gragg. Natalie’s responsibilities were centered on teaching and learning for the Hamilton School District. She supported teacher leaders and principals with school improvement. She had previously worked in a large district as a central office administrator.
In addition to the individuals in these three partnerships, other administrators were interviewed for the final round of data collection. They were Technology Director Aiden Thomas, a long-time Hamilton School District staff member who had worked his way up through the technology team to director; Capital Programs Director JoAnn Thornton, who was overseeing the building of two new schools and multiple other projects; elementary principals Christy Baldwin, Jodi Ross, and Mackenzie Stephens; and high school principal Suzie Miller.

Initial analysis of the data provided insight into how school and district leaders viewed their roles, responsibilities, and relationships with one another. After the initial analysis, data about the partnership model were collected and analyzed as the model was being implemented in the Hamilton School District. Three major themes emerged from analysis of the data related to the research question: How can central office administration connect to schools in ways that support teaching and learning? These themes were:

1. A partnership model could potentially help build relationships between central office and school leaders by providing common language and shared learning experiences;
2. Conditions that support relationships between central office and school leaders could lead to more collaboration in a school district; and
3. School and district leaders need structures to help them develop and sustain the type of relationships with each other that could impact student learning.

**Theme 1: Building Relationships**

When exploring the relationship between school and district leaders, it was important to better understand participants’ thinking about their own leadership and the challenges and opportunities they encountered in pursuit of school and district goals. In considering how relationships between the two groups might be developed and sustained, I sought to understand
what central office and school leaders had in common, what was unique to each, and how they worked together.

Initial analysis yielded five central areas that described how participants viewed their roles, responsibilities, and relationships. These areas included a focus on students, leadership, challenges, collaboration, and the partnership. The areas could provide common ground needed to build relationships between the district and the school levels of leadership. (See Table 2 for an overview of these data.)

**A focus on the mission of serving students.** Focusing on the mission of enhancing student learning and developing an understanding of the roles needed to carry out that mission may provide a foundation for a common language for school and district leaders. The *students* code arose least frequently in the coding process but was often used to frame the reason each participant believed his or her work was important. Natalie Gragg, assistant superintendent, provided an example of this: “I actually have to know what’s going on with students to do what I think I do, serve students, helping create structures and processes towards improving how we support them.” Framing the work around student learning was where participants started the conversation, promoting discussion related to the nuances of their role and work in supporting student learning.

Both groups of leaders expressed that there were two primary levels of responsibility in their work. The first area was an evolved sense of greater responsibility for student learning. Both central office leaders and school leaders mentioned this theme. The second level of responsibility was more specific to each leader and was where differences between leaders began to emerge. These responsibilities were linked more closely to each leader’s role.
Principals seemed to share a common focus on managing the school and ensuring safety and security, and then a primary responsibility of supporting teaching and learning. Principal Ryan Jackson commented, “The two realms of the job that come to mind would be management of facilities and people, and then also the instructional leadership responsibilities.” Principal Doug Oman shared a similar view of his responsibilities: “Safety and learning are the primary focuses, obviously—making sure students are safe and your school community is safe. You can’t learn if you don’t have those things in place.” Principal Suzie Miller added, “Everything I do is in service of students, which I think is the ultimate goal of the district—to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn and grow.”

Even though central office leaders are more removed from students than school leaders, it was important to them to know that their work supported student learning as well. Business director Brett Roberts emphasized that he was in the business of teaching and learning and how remembering that guided his work: “I think in order to make good recommendations or decisions about any organization; you really have to know what your business is doing.” Lola Davenport, human resource director, reinforced this idea, saying, “I view my primary responsibilities as clearing the barriers for teachers to teach.” Central office administrator Natalie Gragg added that her purpose was to “look at different department systems and roles and determine how we connect them in a way that is still all about serving the needs of kids in classrooms.”

Participants consistently spoke about the importance of student learning. It is possible that the partnership model itself prompted some of this focus. The model was shared with school and district leaders as a way of better connecting the district office to school in support of teaching and learning. What is important about the consistency of the comments is that leaders in the Hamilton School District appeared to be using a common language to frame their work. This
common language has the potential to provide common ground for developing and sustaining relationships. For some, this common language was already being used as a way of initiating discussion. Technology director Aiden Thomas noted that he and his partner had an agreed-upon focus on students. He continued, “We start our conversation with our best intentions of students in mind and kind of understand that we’re both working toward that.” For Mr. Thomas, that approach helped move discussion forward in a positive way. For others, the discussion was relatively new and had yet to materialize beyond a statement of the “right words.” Yet, it could be posited that even as these ideas were beginning to surface, awareness was being built that would aid in the development of deeper understandings concerning the core purposes of shared work.

Leadership practices and challenges. Each leader suggested distinctive ways in which he or she contributed to the mission of student learning. A majority of codes from the interview data were grouped under leadership. These ideas were related to practices, structures, or systems that helped the leader carry out his or her role. These roles included specialized services that required skills and expertise that were different from those of other leaders, such as business office functions. All the leaders suggested differences in their sets of responsibilities and a corresponding set of skills or expertise that facilitated their meeting those responsibilities.

Brett Roberts, finance director, described the specialization of his work in support of the school district, explaining, “You have the routine accounts payable and purchase orders, and then the overall development management of the school district budget.” Even with distinctive skills and responsibilities, a common challenge for leaders emerged related to communicating purpose and understanding with other leaders. Mr. Roberts described this as he continued, “So it’s a support service that I’m providing, and the challenge is getting folks to understand why
something might be good for the kids, but maybe we can’t afford it. So you’re always pushed with this challenge of communicating why.”

For principals, rising to the challenge of supporting teaching and learning at the school level was an essential leadership practice. Elementary principal Michelle Lee discussed the importance of supporting teachers in her work, observing, “What makes my school work and makes my school special and what makes us effective are our teachers, so my job to be a support to them is number one.” Overall, she stated, it was about building and sustaining a culture of collaboration focused on learning at her school, but within that system each teacher had specific needs. She continued, “You try to anticipate what teachers need, make yourself available, and be a cheerleader so they can do it.” Identifying these needs and being able to respond to them was a skill set that was different from that of her partner. Yet, it should be noted that even as these differences emerged, two points of clarity were also present. First, leaders could agree that even though the tools they employed differed, they shared the goal of making schools the best places they could be for students and learning. Second, communication of the goal was at the core of each leader’s work, as was linking specific management tasks to student learning objectives and outcomes.

Central to this shared focus on serving students was the idea of bringing people together and helping them move forward, no matter the service they provided. For Mrs. Gragg, this meant “investing in each other to bring some synergy to how we can do these things better.” Lola Davenport stated that she was trying to help develop a better working relationship between her staff and the business office team: “I’m trying to help them see how we can more effectively provide services together.” Principal Jackson spoke about working with teacher leaders and
trying move together with shared focus: “I want to help them have ownership of their professional learning while ensuring we’re working on things that support students.”

Another example that emerged from the data was the challenge of trying to effectively support adults. Principal Lee described the challenge thus: “The things that really challenge my skill set have to do with conflict, mostly among adults, whether that’s adults within our school system or conflicts with adults that are outside the system.” Mrs. Lee’s partner Brett Roberts expressed that he faced similar challenges when having to say no, stating,

We’re here to try and do what we can, and no is an answer, but no with empathy is there’s an understanding of why and it’s in how you say it, and it’s in how you listen to their perspective, how you value what they’re telling you.

For Principal Jackson, working with adults sometimes could be a problem when priorities seemed to be out of alignment. “Unfortunately,” he noted, “when we talk about culture, adults sometimes drive a culture that is adult based, and the challenge is to get it back to [being] student based.”

Developing and sustaining a collaborative culture focused on students was an important leadership skill that arose in the interviews with school and district leaders. Assistant superintendent Gragg talked about developing culture as tending to the “repeated patterns of behavior that build an expectation about how it is to be someone in that place.” She added that creating the expectation that staff would work together around common student outcomes was an important way to help adults be aligned with a student focus. Principal Lee shared a similar focus on expectations, adding, “I think to have collaboration amongst the staff, you have to set expectations about that and you have to set the culture of that’s how we do our work, that’s how
we’re the strongest, and you can’t take that for granted.” Principal Lee continued to speak about the importance of paying attention to culture as a leader:

How do I make sure the culture of the things I control mirrors and respects and to some degree helps people feel responsible for carrying out that mission? It’s not someone else’s mission. There’s no them and they going on. It’s us and our, and I think you have to be cognizant of that at all times.

Helping teams work toward a culture of “us and our” is challenging for leaders. This shared challenge could provide a great opportunity for central office and school leaders to come together and learn from each other. This common focus on developing and sustaining a culture where staff can collectively work together toward shared goals is important. It provides a set of common leadership practices that can be explored across the different leadership roles within a school district.

There were other similarities in how participants described leadership and the challenges leaders face. It did not come as a surprise that a common challenge related to time; there does not seem to be enough of it. Principal Oman said of this challenge, “You know, things just get going at warp speed and I’m trying to be very intentional about that [his leadership], but the most difficult piece of that is our time.” He talked about trying to fit important professional development into a 40-minute staff meeting. In speaking about her role, human resource director Davenport spoke of the struggle of getting out of her office because there are always e-mails, phone calls, and documents, but said she valued connecting with staff: “I don’t really have time to do that, but I try to make time, and when I do it’s always the highlight of my week.”

Having limited time contributed to another challenge: not feeling connected to others. Principal Lee described the challenge by saying, “When I need something now, often I’ll just
feel alone and I try to solve it, and you just got to get through it as there’s just not enough time to even seek someone out.” Principal Oman talked about this challenge as well, noting, “I think a challenging day is when you just don’t feel connected.” For him, not feeling connected was “when you just feel scattered and you’re running and you’re putting out fires.” Because of being so busy, there was a sense across building leadership that there was never a chance to pause and reflect or connect with others to talk about what was happening.

Making connections was a challenge for central office leaders as well. Several felt the tension between completing essential tasks and making time to connect outside of their team. It was too easy, they said, to fill a day working through those tasks and never leave the office. Business director Roberts explained, “It’s difficult to get out there to decentralized locations when you’re still trying to learn the ropes internally within the district office.” Central office administrator, JoAnn Thornton said she had to prioritize time to connect with her partner: “I just have a lot to do. If I don’t make the time to connect, it won’t happen.”

Engaging with school leaders can be complicated for central office administrators. It takes time to establish an open and collaborative partnership with someone, and to do that Lola Davenport felt that principals should have confidence in her ability to deliver for them. She describe that there was often a press for a quick answer when questions arose, but she expressed the need to balance that press with making sure she answered questions correctly. This meant taking time to do research, investigating contracts and regulations to provide the direction and expertise principals needed. Lola stated, “Part of that is wanting them to feel confident that I know what I’m doing, so protecting my lack of knowledge sometimes is important to me.”

Having the confidence of other leaders arose as an important theme in other parts of the data as well. Brett Roberts offered an example of working with several principals in sorting
through a funding challenge and wanting them to be confident in him. “I want them to know they can trust me and that I can help us get to a good outcome,” he stated. Principal Jodi Ross talked about the importance of relationships and confidence, asserting, “I value a whole lot that relationship piece and having people recognize that I work hard and really am passionate about serving our students.” Working together in a partnership model might provide more opportunities for leaders to feel validated by one another.

**Shared learning experiences.** The Hamilton School District developed a partnership model with a goal of increasing connections between school and central office leadership through shared learning and collaboration. An overview of the model was shared with staff through a presentation in August (Appendix C). Sample slides from the August presentation described the model.

![Figure 2. Example slides introducing partnership model.](image)

The partnership model centered on an identified problem of practice and theory of action for the Hamilton School District. The problem of practice was: Given that the school district was growing, how could leadership ensure central office administration was connected to schools in a way that supported teaching and learning? The theory of action to address this problem focused on intentional connections. The district posited that if they could shift the practice of central office administrators to personalize services to schools through “case management” and to focus
on problem-solving through “project management,” then central office would be better able to
support teaching and learning.

The goal of the partnership model was to help leaders in a growing district stay
connected. Principal Lee said of this challenge,

The bigger we get; the more district office loses track of what things are like on the
ground. We’re shifting from a small, autonomous district to something that’s more
central, with some more commonality, and most of the time I think that’s a good thing.

This study took place during the first 6 months of implementation of the model. Perhaps because
of the model’s recent implementation, the focus for the partnership seemed to be more about
partners getting to know each other, the schools, and leadership responsibilities rather than a
“case” or “project” management approach. The data suggest that, at this juncture, it remains to be
seen whether, in fact, this model has the ability to foster and sustain a focus that would allow
leaders to learn from each other and to approach problems of practice in shared ways.

Nonetheless, cabinet administrators were expected to meet with their partner principal
and visit the school at least monthly for a total of two interactions. The meetings could consist of
a conversation, some sort of collaboration, an observation, or just some assistance. Cabinet
members were given a table of contents (Appendix D) that served as a learning agenda for the
shared learning of the partnership. Each month, a theme from the table of contents was
discussed. For example, at the Cabinet Meeting on September 14, 2016, cabinet members
discussed what they had learned about the start of the year at their schools. Administrator JoAnn
Thornton reported,
I got to observe their back-to-school training. I was really impressed with the thought that the principal put into putting it together. Everything connected back to what we talked about in our admin retreat and was also really about their school.

Another administrator, Brett Roberts, said of the first day, “There was a whole lot of excitement and confusion, with kids and parents everywhere. I opened some juice boxes and helped students get out to the playground for recess.” These types of comments were typical from central office administrators. They were discovering new learning about their principal partners and the work they did. In many ways, this was perhaps the most powerful outcome of the partnership model. Central office leaders become more aware and respectful of the work of building principals. In addition, both parties were better able to understand the pressures each other faced and the ways in which they demonstrated expertise.

For example, in November, the cabinet learned about community engagement at their schools. One administrator attended a family movie night and was excited to tell her colleagues about the experience: “Wow, there was so much going on, kids in pajamas, popcorn from the PTA, parents around the border, lots of excitement.” As the year progressed, cabinet members shared more information about their partner schools, using the learning agenda provided by the table of contents as a guide.

The shared learning experiences enriched cabinet members’ understanding of schools and of the role of principal. Assistant superintendent Gragg observed, “I continue to learn that a very large school is a complex and living organism. I’ve learned that every encounter really does matter.” Business director Roberts added, “I just didn’t have an appreciation for all of those things that a principal does to make that school operate effectively.” JoAnn Thornton, capital program manager, talked about a shift the partnership model had made for her.
I’ve talked to principals and interviewed them related to how it impacts my job, and I never really thought about how it impacts their job. So it was really helpful just to see what she does all day long and how involved it is, how complicated it is, what a leader she is, how many people report to her, what variety of issues she has to address. It just gave me a better feel for the complexity of the job, which was very helpful I thought.

For Mrs. Thornton, this was a different way of looking at the role of principal. Having people at roles differently was one of the reasons for facilitating shared learning experiences between school and district leaders in the partnership model. Having central office leaders learn about schools by spending time with principals seemed to build an appreciation for the role of the principal and better understanding of their work in schools. Appreciation will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter as a possible pre-condition for collaboration.

In summary, school and district leaders in the Hamilton School District offered similar perspectives on the purpose of their work and the leadership necessary to meet that purpose. Participants consistently discussed a focus on student learning as the district’s mission. The importance of leadership practices that helped support the development and sustainment of a collaborative culture focused on that mission was also a common idea expressed by school and district leaders. Leaders in the Hamilton School District also had unique differences in responsibilities, skills, and expertise. Several participants expressed a desire to feel connected to and appreciated by other leaders in the district. Providing shared learning experiences to talk about the purpose of the district’s work, learn about schools and each other’s roles and responsibilities, and discuss leadership practices and challenges might help develop a common language among leaders in the Hamilton School District. A common language could be a way to help build and sustain relationships between central office and school leaders.
The partnership model in the Hamilton School District was created in an effort to, first, develop better relationships between school and central office leaders. Evidence suggested that in the first 6 months of implementation, the model had done this to some extent. Relationships were developed through shared learning experiences that happened as a result of the partnership model. There is a general consensus that better relationships are a positive attribute for any organization. The goal for the partnership model was not just to improve relationships. The goal was also to better support teaching and learning in the district through central office and school leadership connections. The next theme begins to explore participant ideas about moving from better relationships to using those relationships to affect teaching and learning.

**Theme 2: From Relationships to Collaboration**

One strand of data that surfaced from interviews related to participants’ perceptions about collaboration. These ideas were collected using the *collaboration* code. Principals and central office administrators expressed some similar views. Collaboration seemed to work best when there was agreement about the purpose or outcome for coming together, when there were opportunities for shared decision-making, and when mutual accountability was accepted for the process. For principal Lee, “Collaboration is shared decision making and being able to bounce ideas back and forth and look for the pros and identify the cons and have a plan for those eventualities in case you need it.” Her partner Brett Roberts offered a similar description, saying, “Collaboration for me is making a better decision because you’ve got a multitude of groups and inputs.” According to participants, collaboration could help them make better decisions, and it also could be used to help reach shared outcomes. Assistant superintendent Gragg added, “When we are in our work together, we feel mutual accountability for the results.”
It seemed that for participants, coming together to make decisions or accomplish shared tasks with mutual accountability shifted shared learning to collaboration.

Participant feedback led to a summarized definition of collaboration as the process of engaging with others with the intent to achieve an agreed-upon outcome such as making a decision or completing a task. Participants expressed the opinion that some sort of action needed to result from collaboration. For most, that action took the form of a decision or product. For principal Doug Oman, an outcome of collaboration could be a shift in learning. According to Doug, action may or may not follow from that shift in learning, but it was still collaboration. He stated, “True collaboration gets you to shift your thinking.” However, this statement stood out as an exception to how other participants viewed collaboration, as will be evidenced in the following discussion.

If the partnership model is to consistently impact teaching and learning in the Hamilton School District, it might need to enhance collaboration. Using the definition that arose from analysis of the data, participants, in general, didn’t provide examples that the partnership model increased collaboration in the Hamilton School District. The partnership model created rich, shared learning experiences, but did not necessarily prompt the agreed-upon outcomes or actions that are necessary for collaboration. Participant descriptions of interactions they had with their partner centered on the learning agenda for learning about the school rather than on collaboration that addressed how learning might be enhanced, for which student improvements might be required, or other more specific concerns and issues.

There were exceptions to this pattern, such as when partners already had a collaborative experience in place outside of the partnership. For example, Mrs. Thornton was partnered with elementary principal Jodi Ross. They were in the process of designing a new elementary school
and because of that shared outcome, some of their experiences as partners would be categorized as collaboration. Jodi described how working with JoAnn as a partner was impacting the shared outcome of building a new school:

Well because you know we are building a design with a focus on student learning, so her coming in and seeing kids and seeing how we use our current building and how we’d like to use our new school—some of our decisions stretched because she had a different understanding and she stood up for those decisions.

Evidence of that type of collaboration was not found in other partnerships. Additionally, data did not offer deep or rich explanations regarding how these discussions resulted in real change. Again, perhaps because of the limited time frame for data collection, these results were not evident. Perhaps it could be said that a promising foundation has been laid for future work that is truly collaborative. The next section discusses those possibilities.

The third round of data collection focused on the partnership experience. If there wasn’t evidence of enhanced collaboration as a result of the partnership model, perhaps there was evidence of an impact to conditions that could lead to collaboration. After 6 months of implementation, participants had a good sense of the partnership model and its possible impact on learning. Similar to the procedure used in the first two rounds of data collection, ideas from transcription data went through two cycles of coding to elevate common themes. These themes included ideas about appreciation, trust, shared outcomes, and accountability. Codes were used to categorize ideas expressed specifically about the partnership model. These were sorted into two themes. One focused on existing strengths of the partnership model, and the other was focused on opportunities to improve or expand the partnership model. This data is summarized in Table 4.
Table 4

*Pattern Codes from Round 3 of Data Collection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation &amp; Trust</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>Ideas related to developing and sustaining relationships between leaders received the <em>appreciation &amp; trust</em> code. Examples included: knowing your partner, trusting decisions, being vulnerable, acquired perspective, showing you care, reciprocal relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared outcomes</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>Ideas related to outcomes that involved system coordination received the <em>shared outcomes</em> code. Examples included: cohesive organization, sustainable improvement, informed decisions, academic success, building a story, student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>Ideas related to tracking progress or shared decision-making received the <em>accountability</em> code. Examples included: decisions close to learning, accountability, inquiry based, checkpoints or benchmarks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Strengths & Opportunities of the Partnership Model*

| Partnership Strengths    | 50.3%     | Any idea related to the partnership model that was expressed as a positive experience received the *partnership strengths* code. Examples included: entry into deeper conversations, organic relationship, curious conversations, personal connection, expanding experiences |
| Partnership Opportunities | 49.7%     | Any idea related to the partnership model that was expressed as an opportunity to improve or do something differently with the model received the *partnership opportunities* code. Examples included: reciprocal learning, prescriptive edge, clarity about outcomes, positional and relational authority |

The partnership model was intended to bring central office and school leaders closer together through shared learning experiences, and then leverage that relationship to impact teaching and learning. The partnership model affected some conditions that participants viewed as positive in building connections between school and district leadership. Four conditions stood out from participant data: appreciation, trust, shared outcomes, and accountability. The structure
of the partnership model created an opportunity for leaders to engage with each other. In learning about their assigned school, each central office cabinet member had to reach out to principals each month. They attended staff meetings, school events, and classes, and had conversations with principals.

**Appreciation and trust.** The implementation of the partnership model in the Hamilton School District created an opportunity for leaders to get to know each other at a different level. Lola Davenport, human resources director, said, “I was able to show him—with whom I seldom even spoke before this year—that I have passion and skills to share with his staff.” Mrs. Davenport’s partner, principal Doug Oman, echoed those thoughts: “We had this little bit of knowing who each other was, but never really worked closely with each other.” He continued, “I feel like I hit the jackpot. She’s coming in and helping with students and we’re having great conversations about how to work through things and move forward.” An example of this collaboration took place when Mr. Oman was working through a hiring situation and Mrs. Davenport helped him understand how the situation was affecting other buildings.

Other participants expressed similar sentiments about the opportunity to get know each other. Principal Michelle Lee talked about increased trust, observing,

I think there’s potential for the school to have more trust and faith that students are at the center of the decisions being made above you because you know these people and you know what they’re about and made of because you spend more time with them.

She continued, “I feel more validated. The fact that Brett feels the principal role is so complex and he knows that, that calms some of the frustration I can feel in my role.” Her partner, Brett Roberts, added, “I think that presence in the building and showing that you care about them, that
you value the work that they do, and you respect that work that they do, can only make them better at whatever they’re doing.”

The partnership model created opportunities for discussion, observation, and relationship development. Mrs. Thornton said she believed her relationship with principal Ross was enhanced through the partnership model: “It's allowed me to have a little bit deeper relationship, which is nice because I like her a lot and she’s a very talented person.” Mrs. Thornton was struck by the how principal Ross balanced all of the responsibilities and did so while always remaining focused on students. Technology director Aiden Thomas expressed similar sentiments, relating, “We call each other ‘building buddies,’ and I’ll get an e-mail: ‘Hey building buddy, can you help me?’” Aiden laughed and continued, “It just puts that relationship in a different level.”

In addition to a relationship with another leader, the model also created learning capacity that could lead to greater appreciation for each other. Principal Mackenzie Stephens reinforced this idea, noting, “I think it’s always good to put yourself in someone else’s shoes to realize what’s going on in their role. I have a general idea, but to be with them and experience what they’re doing is always valuable.” Principal Ryan Jackson extended this idea in thinking about the model and its potential impact. He stated,

I think this is a key strategy in central office transformation for two reasons. It reinforces that central office exists to serve schools, rather than vice-versa. It brings a “real-life” awareness about the realities of the schools we serve so that we can learn to serve them better.

In general, appreciation for one another seemed to increase as a result of the partnerships because of these types of experiences. Principal Jackson noted that a relationship can develop over time and create greater understanding of each other’s roles and responsibilities:
A building principal faces an array of issues, from teaching and learning to operational issues to student discipline to athletics to public relations. It is not that she was unaware of these realities and responsibilities. I just think that it is a natural learning process to understand what a person in another leadership role deals with every day when you consistently work with that person over time.

Natalie Gragg, assistant superintendent, said, “I’ve gotten to know Ryan better by spending more time with him. That’s helped our relationship grow. That’ll be helpful when we’re working together on challenging things.” A general appreciation for partners was acknowledged across participants. Building greater appreciation for one another seems to contribute to greater organizational trust.

Tschannen-Moran (2001) posited five key components when considering trust between principal and teachers at the school level. Although the focus of this study is on the principal and central office level, it seems reasonable to consider these components. Tschannen-Moran asserted, “A person who desires to be regarded as trustworthy will need to demonstrate benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness” (p. 314). It seems from participant comments related to appreciation for each other that the partnership model created opportunities for leaders in the Hamilton School District to enhance these elements and thereby increase trust. This is important because “although collaborative processes are increasingly called for as part of reform efforts in schools, these processes will not come about in an authentic form if the people involved do not trust one another” (p. 314).

**Shared outcomes and accountability.** According to participants, shared learning moves toward collaboration when there is some type of agreed-upon outcome and mutual accountability for meeting that outcome. At this point of the study, there was not consistent evidence suggesting
that the partnership model had supported the development of shared outcomes or accountability. Participants did suggest that the model could create shared outcomes and accountability for those outcomes.

Several offered both the belief that better understanding of different perspectives would lead to more effective decision-making and the hope that the partnership model would effect this because of its collaborative approach. Principal Lee suggested, “I judge success of this partnership by the ability for the cabinet to be more informed when making decisions about elementary needs and impact.” Principal Lee expressed the hope that as cabinet members were making decisions, they would draw upon their experiences in schools and the shared learning that took place with principals.

Central office leaders reinforced this notion by saying they hoped that, by being better connected to schools, they would make more informed decisions about how best to provide support. Human Resource Director Lola Davenport described a kind of advocacy role when thinking about her partner: “I’ve met with him specifically to glean responses to share at cabinet, and through that conversation I know him better and understand how to approach questions I have for him.” Assistant Superintendent Natalie Gragg summarized this commitment and challenge:

For me to see evidence that the work I’m doing is connected to that ultimate outcome of kids, I can’t be in my office devising solutions that are pure and fit within my perfectly pale, yellow walls, right? So when I’m thinking about the problem, sometimes the help I might need is in understanding the context of the problem.

The general belief expressed was that having a better understanding of other leaders’ context would help everyone make better decisions. For principals, this could mean
understanding how a decision might affect other schools, not just their own. For central office leaders, this might mean having a better understanding of why a school needs differentiated support. Principal Lee, who had worked with her parent-teacher organization to establish a partnership that enriched art instruction at her school, offered a great example of this. The partnership had multilayered funding sources, which made it challenging to manage, and Principal Lee sometimes felt as if she needed to apologize for creating a complicated process. She explained, “I need them to be just as excited about this cool thing, and I want them to have that knowledge for what I’m building out of nothing instead of feeling like I have to apologize for [making] extra work.” She added that this project was delivering unique learning opportunities for students and that it was frustrating to feel guilty about the extra work the project might have created for the central office.

The partnership model was initiated in the Hamilton School District with the goal of bringing central office and school leaders closer together to better support teaching and learning. Participants identified greater appreciation for each other as a result of their shared learning experiences. Lola Davenport said,

Honestly, I didn’t know my partner at all, and have come to know him, a bit about his family, and what he holds dear to his heart. I appreciate how concerned he is about his staff’s mental health and stress levels the most.

Aiden Thomas stated, “I got to know my principal and see how he managed his staff. He is a master at getting input and reaching common ground. I have a lot of respect for him and the staff.” Principal Lee described how this model might lead to greater trust:
I think there’s potential for the school to have more trust and faith that students are at the center of decisions being made because you know these people and you know what they’re about and made of because you spend more time with them.

Her partner, Brett Roberts, offered similar sentiments: “The partnership provided a reason to develop a deeper connection with education on a student level, rather than a theoretical level. It increased trust between the schools and front office because we have been given the opportunity to care.”

Participants reported the partnership model might affect conditions that support the way district leaders collaborate. These conditions included helping to develop shared outcomes and accountability between district and school leaders. At this point in the model there was insufficient evidence that collaboration itself was affected. There was optimism expressed by participants that in the future collaboration could be positively affected. Natalie Gragg described the potential for future impact because of a stronger relationship: “I’ve gotten to know Ryan better by spending time with him. That’s helped our relationship grow. That’ll be helpful when we’re working together on challenging things in the future.”

**Theme 3: Connecting Leaders Through a Partnership Model**

The partnership model provided opportunities for school and district leaders to establish a common language based on the mission of supporting student learning, sharing leadership practices and challenges, and sharing learning experiences. The model helped leaders develop an appreciation for each other, which could potentially help increase trust amongst leaders and possibly lead to greater collaboration. Prior to the implementation of the model, connections between central office and school leaders were left to develop without any formal structure. The partnership model was invented with the goal of intentionally developing those relationships.
Participants seemed to be aware of this goal. Principal Ryan Jackson said, “It [the model] reinforces that central office exists to serve schools and brings a real-life awareness about the realities of the schools we serve so that we can serve them better.” Michelle Lee observed that the main purpose of the model was to “take a district growing bigger and still feel small, still feel known, not to feel like you’re a cog in this big wheel, which is how I felt when I worked for a big district.” Data from participants provided insight into how effective the partnership model was in accomplishing those goals.

**Structure and flexibility.** The partnership model was structured using a learning agenda designed to help central office administrators learn more about schools. The learning agenda framed interactions for central office administrators when they met with principals and visiting schools. JoAnn Thornton noted that this helped, saying, “I appreciated the original list of topics provided to us. It gave me a platform for conversation. Sometimes it’s hard to begin a conversation without such a framework.” Each month, central office cabinet members were expected to visit their school or with their principal at least twice and then to report back at a cabinet meeting. The reporting back provided some accountability for central office administrators; as Lola Davenport put it, “Being responsible for reporting out helped frame the first few conversations because we had a common focus.” She continued, “Not knowing someone and being thrust into a partnership with them would have been much more awkward for me personally had I not had a point of reference from which to start.”

Having a learning agenda also had an impact on some of the principals. Several mentioned appreciating not having to do any preparation for meetings with central office administrators. Principal Jodi Ross recalled, “It always was a conversation.” She talked about her partner coming in with specific questions and then the two of them setting time to discuss the
questions, once over dinner. When asked whether the model created more preparation work, principal Mackenzie Stephens replied, “No, it was just more of a conversation. . . . it’s been nothing on my part really.”

Participants liked the structure of the partnership model, but they also appreciated flexibility. JoAnn Thornton reinforced this idea: “It was nice for my partner and I [sic] to find our way together, sharing common interests, rather than having the entire interaction to be scripted.” Principal Christy Baldwin stated, “You can’t prescribe a relationship. The questions helped guide us, but we also needed freedom to talk about what we were interested in or what was relevant at the time.”

Even with the expectation of partner visits two times per month, the frequency of visits varied across the 11 partnerships. Assistant superintendent Natalie Gragg explained, “There’s a certain frequency needed to build a relationship with someone.” For her, she said, that frequency needed to be at least weekly, but it was challenging to find the time. She noted that she appreciated opportunities to connect with her partner at leadership meetings scheduled at central office. Several times during the study, time was set aside during these meetings for partners to connect. For example, the January 27, 2017, meeting agenda started with time to connect with partners and provide an update on recent happenings. For principal Christy Baldwin, one meeting per month was enough unless she might be working on a project with her partner; “then the frequency will increase and you just allow that to drive the frequency of the meeting.” JoAnn Thornton suggested that it was important to connect with her partner at least once per week, because “I felt that if I didn’t do that I wouldn’t be consistent and I felt a need to be consistent; otherwise things just get away from you, and she’s busy and I’m busy.” The variance in the frequency of meetings provided flexibility for partners to develop their relationship in
ways that worked for them. It also presented challenges to the partnership model’s goal of providing better support for teaching and learning.

**Challenges.** The frequency of meeting times for partners varied from four times per month to only once or twice during the 6 months of the study. For principal Suzie Miller, not getting to meet with her partner as often as she hoped was disappointing. She said, “I was excited about the opportunity because I think there are so many things that somebody from the outside can come and be a part of.” She continued, “It’s almost harder knowing that this was expected but I’m not of value enough, or my time isn’t, or my building isn’t.” Pressed further, Suzie explained that she had reached out to her partner several times and they were unable to connect and that she didn’t have time to keep trying. Having a principal feel less connected was the exact opposite of the intended outcome for the partnership model. Principal Miller’s partner was not randomly selected as a participant for the study, so it is not known if the two partners shared a perspective. All cabinet members were asked to discuss what was happening in schools, but that did not necessarily require that they meet twice per month with their partner. The three partnerships who were interviewed multiple times during the study met the two-times-per-month visit expectation. Perhaps having the additional accountability of being interviewed helped those partnerships stay on track with visits.

Another challenge that surfaced in the data came from central office administrators who were already connected to teaching and learning. For those who didn’t have teaching and learning responsibilities in their role, there was a natural curiosity regarding learning about schools. Brett Roberts noted that he had not been in a classroom since he was a student. His partner Michelle Lee recognized his curiosity about schools as an opportunity: “He was excited
to learn because it was all so new to him. That helped me think about the experiences that would help him learn more about our school and my role.”

Assistant superintendent Natalie Gragg stated that her work already so connected to supporting teaching and learning at her partner’s school that she found it hard to approach the partnership with the same curiosity others were. She speculated, “I wonder if I know too much to be able to be that partner that’s coming in with a different view.” She added that it was difficult to separate out what was the partnership model and what was a part of her existing role. Her partner, Ryan Jackson, shared similar thoughts, noting, “My partner is in my school a lot. Her presence has helped us with our work of developing teacher leaders. It’s not necessarily connected to being my partner though.” In these kinds of situations, where partners were already connected, it would be important to consider whether the partnership model was adding any value to the relationship.

**Opportunities.** The partnership model seemed to provide a good starting point for thinking differently about central office and school leaders’ relationships. It seemed to help leaders develop an appreciation for each another. Principal Stephens talked about the value of gaining understanding about other leadership roles in the district, noting, “I think it’s always good to put yourself in someone else’s shoes to realize what’s going on in their role. I have a general idea, but to be with them and experience what they’re doing is valuable.” It was clear that opportunities were available to enhance the partnership model as well.

**Consistent experiences.** Participants’ experiences during the first 6 months of implementation varied. Standardizing the frequency of visits could help each school and district leader feel a part of the partnership model. Carving out more time from existing district meetings seems a logical place to start. Principal Michelle Lee commented, “Getting time in August to
meet with my partner at admin meetings was helpful. I’d like more of that throughout the year.”
Assistant Superintendent Natalie Gragg shared similar thoughts: “Having regular time in administrative meetings during the year would help us establish some routine to our partnership.” There might also need to be regular check-ins on partnership connections outside of those district meetings. Principal Suzie Miller had a disappointing experience because those connections weren’t taking place for her. Perhaps with some type of check-in, the challenges of connecting could be mitigated and each partnership would have at least two interactions per month.

Focused learning. The partnership model had a learning agenda for learning about schools, with monthly themes framing discussions at the central office cabinet level. Several participants shared ideas about how to build on these discussions. Natalie Gragg spoke about this, saying, “What if instead of just learning about our school, we were tasked with specific focus areas for the month that might help us with part of our strategic plan?” She continued, “We’re looking at our systems with an equity lens, so what if cabinet members were supposed to visit schools and bring back information using that lens?” Using the partnership model as a tool for bringing more information and voice to cabinet level discussions might better inform decision making.

The focus during the first 6 months of the partnership model was primarily on central office administrators learning more about schools. Several participants were also interested in learning about central office. Principal Jodi Miller observed, “I’m interested in learning more about what central office leaders do. Over time I’d like to get to work with other leaders and learn more about their areas of expertise.” Principal Mackenzie Stephens echoed this thought: “I do think it would be good as a system to understand how everybody is working and their role.” Assistant superintendent Natalie Gragg thought it would be helpful if cabinet members were to
consider what they would want to share about their role with principals and to “generate some possible questions principals might want to know.” This foundation could then create an agenda for learning about central office roles similar to the one used for learning about schools.

**Collaboration.** It seems reasonable to assume that more collaboration between central office and school leaders could lead to better support of teaching and learning in schools. At this point in the partnership model, there was not evidence that the model increased collaboration. Moving forward, perhaps intentionally planned collaboration using partnerships could take the partnerships to a deeper level. A comment from Lola Davenport reinforced this idea:

“Collaboration is an area that wasn’t very strong between my partner and I [sic]. Probably missed opportunities on my part.” Nonetheless, she added,

I hope our model continues—with same or different partner—so we can try again. I see definite value in these partnerships for both partners and for our district as a whole when we can collaboratively work together on tough problems.

**Summary**

The partnership model attempted to help central office administrators better connect with schools in service of teaching and learning. Three main themes emerged from the study of this model.

1. A partnership model could help build relationships between central office and school leaders by providing common language and shared learning experiences;

2. Conditions that support relationships between central office and school leaders could lead to more collaboration in a school district; and

3. School and district leaders need structures to help them develop and sustain the type of relationships with each other that could impact student learning.
Overall, participants reported that they had had a positive experience with the partnership model. The model helped both central office and school leaders develop new appreciation for each other. It also helped central office leaders better understand schools and be more comfortable in them. Finance director Brett Roberts summed it up, saying of the partnership, “For me, it’s broke down barriers, connecting some communication lines that even though we’re in the same community, sometimes the district office and the school, a few blocks away can seem like they’re miles apart.”

The ultimate goal for any school district program is to have a positive impact on student learning. Even though assessing whether that goal was met is far beyond the scope of this study, participants did provide their perspective. Natalie Gragg saw potential: “I think that that’s more in terms of the opportunity of growing this approach, which is how do we now really think about what is the information we want.” Using the partnership model as a tool to collect information could help the district grow, but the district would need to embrace tough conversations about how to best use that information. Natalie Gragg continued, “How do we make sure our conversations are open enough that we’re being real about the work and can handle the tension that comes out when we are being real and trying to move forward?”

Lola Davenport shared some similar thoughts about the possible impact of the model: I think the more people feel comfortable, the better they can do their work. I think it’s easy to be arrogant in either direction, either from the building perspective saying, “Oh, those people at district office, they don't know what it’s like to be in the classroom.” We can do the same thing—“Oh, those principals don’t understand the pressures,” or “They don’t get the big picture,” or whatever. If we can understand each other in that way and understand the systems approach, then our kids will benefit. Our teachers will benefit.
Our principals will make better decisions and we’ll make better decisions because we have a more complete understanding of what the Hamilton School District is and what it can become.

The partnership model created new opportunities for learning in the Hamilton School District. That learning fostered mutual appreciation between school and district leaders. It remains to be seen how that appreciation can be used to leverage outcomes that, ideally, will impact student learning.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to better understand the relationship between district central office and school administrators. The role of central office has evolved over the past fifty years from responsibilities that were primarily focused on managing basic business functions to a broader focus that now includes an emphasis on improving student learning. The responsibility of improved student learning pushed central offices to work differently and connect in new ways to schools (Honig et al., 2010). The focus for this study was one district’s attempt to help connect district and school leaders more closely. The partnership model teamed a central office administrator with a school principal for the school year. Central office administrators served on the district’s cabinet team and reported back what they learned about schools and their principal partner in monthly cabinet meetings.

A Partnership Model

The partnership model was developed as a structure to help better connect school and district leaders. The model was based on school reform research that highlighted the importance of fostering relationships between central office and school leadership through a shared purpose (Johnson & Chrispeel, 2010; Johnson et al., 2015). At a systems or policy level it seems important for district leaders to ensure that school and central office leadership engage with each other. This type of consistent engagement could lead to opportunities for regular progress monitoring dialogue between leaders about the district’s mission of serving students with the goal of leveraging that dialogue to make system improvements (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Johnson et al., 2015; Louis et al., 2010).
A framework for considering key structures of district leadership emerged from the literature reviewed in chapter two (see Figure 1). This framework focused on systemic conditions that could lead to more aligned and adaptive leadership practices, which in turn could impact student learning. The partnership model sought to incorporate the systemic conditions in this framework.

In an effort to put the necessary systemic conditions for shared practice in place, the process began by having participants focus on their shared mission of teaching and learning and explore leaders’ unique roles in carrying out that mission. The partnership provided a professional learning program in a one to one setting that connected schools and central office leaders. It was hoped that the partnership model could become a key part of a continuous improvement system. Evidence from the study supports that the model did affect the first two systemic conditions—enhancing a shared mission focused on teaching and learning and developing systems for ongoing staff development. However, there was insufficient evidence that the model affected a system of continuous improvement in the district. It is also important to note that in this study staff development was limited to district and school leadership. There was no evidence that the partnership model affected other district staff in any way.

The framework also emphasized the importance of leader relationships in school districts. These relationships are dynamic, and if grounded in systemic conditions, better relationships could lead to improved leadership practice. It was intended that leadership practices would emerge that have the potential to impact the way teaching and learning is organized and implemented in a school district. As research suggests (Leithwood & Louis, 2012), impacting teaching and learning practices is a direct way of improving student learning outcomes, which was the expressed purpose of both school and district leaders in the Hamilton School District.
Research Question and Themes

The study focused on the primary research question: how can central office administration connect to schools in ways that support teaching and learning? The qualitative study took place in a school district with approximately 7,000 students in Washington State. Interviews were conducted with principals and central office administrators at the beginning and conclusion of the six-month study. Interview data, combined with observations and document analysis, provided insight into the partnership model and relationships between central office and school leaders. The following themes emerged:

1. A partnership model could potentially help build relationships between central office and school leaders by providing common language and shared learning experiences;
2. Conditions that support relationships between central office and school leaders could lead to more collaboration in a school district; and
3. School and district leaders need structures to help them develop and sustain the type of relationships with each other that could impact student learning.

Building relationships. The partnership model provided a structure for leaders to connect in new ways. The expectation of visiting and learning about schools created monthly opportunities for interactions and discussion amongst leaders. Shared learning experiences were framed through an agenda for learning designed to help central office leaders learn about schools. The agenda for learning included monthly topics such as community engagement, professional learning, or daily operations that allowed cabinet members to better understand all that goes into effectively running a school. Cabinet members met with their partner principals to learn more about the monthly topic and then were expected to share their learning with colleagues in cabinet meetings. Sometimes the learning was done through a conversation.
Sometimes the learning included participation in activities such as a back to school night or observation of events like school dismissal. This cycle of learning was designed to develop a better understanding of life at a school and to establish a common language to describe it. The cycle also provided an opportunity for both school and district leaders to recognize a shared sense of purpose. Whether leadership occurred at the school or at district office, participants in the study claimed the reason for their work was student learning. Being able to talk about this shared purpose seemed to contribute to a greater sense of appreciation for different leadership roles.

Additionally, the opportunity to connect developed a greater sense of appreciation between partners. Partners expressed similar leadership challenges including bringing people together and helping them move forward in their collective effort to serve. In conversation and observation, participants reported a greater appreciation for their partner after spending time together in shared learning experiences. This was particularly evident in central office administrators’ stated appreciation for the role of principal. Central office participants consistently reported a newfound understanding of the varied responsibilities of a principal and great respect for how the principals were meeting those responsibilities.

**From relationships to collaboration.** Shared purpose and appreciation for each other’s roles led to the second emergent theme. The partnership model seemed to support conditions that could lead to greater collaboration in a school district. Appreciation is important as it can potentially impact the feeling of trust within an organization. Trust, as described by Tschannen-Moran (2001), is an essential prerequisite for authentic collaboration to occur, and collaboration is a necessary process for schools to meet the evolving needs of students. Participants in this study described collaboration as a process that involved shared outcomes for coming together,
opportunities for shared decision-making, and mutual accountability. In this way, it remains to be seen if these new bonds can survive the test of, for example, organizational crisis. However, at this juncture, a foundation has been built that would allow for further and deeper connections.

In general, participants recognized a shared sense of purpose, and discussed greater appreciation and trust for each other through their experiences with the partnership model. The partnership model itself did not provide increased opportunities for shared decision-making or mutual accountability for collaborative efforts. Participants communicated that recognizing a shared purpose and increasing organizational trust could affect the way leaders collaborate in the future. This opportunity arose as a result of better connections with each other. Understanding the school district from different perspectives could potentially provide leaders with better information for problem-solving and decision-making.

An example of an opportunity for increased collaboration occurred in the partnership between the business director and an elementary school principal. The business director shared he had a better understanding of the actions and outcomes associated with a particularly complex program. The program was complex from his perspective because it was a partnership with different funding sources and expenditures. The principal also spoke about this program. She shared she was frustrated because the financial logistics of the program often made her feel like a burden to the business department even though the program was highly successful with students. The partnership gave both leaders insight about each other’s challenges. Even though the partnership model itself did not lead to a better system for managing the program, this was the type of example that could have the potential to benefit from a partnership model in the future.

Increased transparency and better communication amongst district and school leaders through a partnership model could have many potential benefits, but it could also lead to
unintended consequences. Better understanding of how systems work could lead to potential criticism of those systems. Certain roles in school districts, such as human resources or business services, are highly specialized. This specialization can create benefits for a school district with efficiencies and expertise. Explaining all of the nuances of the specialization to everyone who has an idea about how to do it better could lead to extra time and effort. It could also lead to improvement. A school district should consider both intended and unintended consequences associated with better relationships and increased collaboration between central office and school leaders.

**Connecting leaders through the partnership model.** Time is a valued resource in a school district. Without structure and an allocation of time, relationships between central office and school administrators are left to develop on their own. Carving out time for the partnership model is an important decision for a district to consider. The leaders interviewed in this study shared that they valued the opportunity to connect with other leaders, but it was difficult to find the time to do it. When interactions did happen, they were often reactive to some sort of challenge that required collaboration. By setting the expectation of implementing the partnership model, the district provided a structure for district and school leaders to meet regularly, which participants reported they appreciated. The partnership model created a new opportunity to get to know another leader and to learn with them. The investment of time in the partnership model structure seemed to be worthwhile to the Hamilton School district for the six months of this study.

With structure also comes the need for flexibility. The partnership model focused on developing relationships, which are difficult to prescribe. Participants reported that they needed flexibility in developing a relationship with their partner. They needed time and space to get to
know each other and establish a connection. They appreciated the agenda for learning for learning about schools, and also liked the freedom to be curious and focus on shared areas of interest.

An example of the balance between structure and flexibility was the expectation of partnership connections at least twice per month. This expectation was met differently across the district. Some partners had conversations off site; others scheduled observations or participated in building activities. Some central office leaders shared they were very comfortable going into classrooms and participating in staff activities. Others shared that they preferred meeting with the principal for a conversation. Partners were able to meet expectations in ways that worked for them and also aligned with areas of interest or need. Based on participant feedback, it seemed that if each partnership had been required to develop their relationship a specific way there might have been more resistance.

The tension between flexibility and structure requires constant monitoring and adjusting. One of the studied partnerships seemed to need more structure. This team did not connect on their own outside of district meeting time. Consequently, the principal partner interviewed had a negative experience of the model. She shared that she felt left out of experiences that her colleagues were having in their partnerships. The goal of the model was to bring district and school leaders closer together, not further apart. To develop greater organizational trust through the partnership model it seems to be important for there to be some kind of agreed upon, baseline, experience that is consistent for each district or school leader. Consistent experiences could provide a foundation for increasing organizational trust by ensuring each leader at a minimum had that baseline experience.
The agenda for learning for learning about schools created focused learning experiences for partners. These learning experiences could provide a good entry for partnership discussions by removing the challenge of figuring out what to talk about. The learning experiences also might help establish a common language through district-wide discussion. During this study, the focused learning was concentrated on developing central office understanding about schools. Participants shared an appreciation for that learning and also a desire from principals to learn more about central office activities and responsibilities.

**Implications for Practice**

The partnership model yielded shared learning experiences between school and district leaders. Participants shared that learning together with their partner encouraged greater appreciation and trust amongst leaders. The model potentially laid the groundwork for leadership practices with school and district leaders. The partnership model could use this groundwork to move towards a continuous growth system with some intentional modifications.

The shared experience of learning more about schools was a key part of the partnership model. A next step might be to expand partner shared learning experiences to include a focus on learning more about central office systems. Learning about central office systems was a desire expressed by multiple principals. Drawing on lessons learned from the first six months of the model, it would be important to provide some structure to the learning experience, perhaps by framing overarching questions about how those systems support schools or interconnect with others. It could also mean providing time for partner discussion to occur at already scheduled district meetings.

Focused learning could also be used as a way to unite leaders through a strategic planning lens. Many districts in Washington State are currently looking at equity and access as a result of
disproportionality in student achievement and discipline data. The partnership model could be used to put an equity filter on whatever learning was taking place by the use of guiding questions. Questions could prompt leaders to reflect on their learning about systems and practices by assessing how they addressed equity. Questions could explore who is being served or not served or who has and does not have access and be connected to indicators on a strategic plan. The partnership model could potentially enhance this type of process for a district. As partners explore and build shared learning equity could be a continuing theme. In looking at the learning agenda used during this study adding a focus on equity could bring richness to the dialogue and inform leaders on a more consistent basis.

To extend this example, focused learning could also be used at the cabinet level for decision making purposes. Cabinet members could be asked to check in with their partner and gather specific information to help inform an upcoming decision using an equity filter. An example of this might be a decision to move forward with a new food service or payment program. Cabinet members could generate possible questions related to the impact of moving forward with a program on students, families, and staff at the school level. They then could engage with their partner to collect information that could be brought back and included with other more typical data such as cost and training. That process could help make more informed decisions aligned with strategic planning goals of closing equity gaps. Having a partner relationship may provide a foundation for shared data collection and analysis. Through the partnership model cabinet members might have a better understanding of the school and potential impact. Having a strong, existing relationship with school leaders might also enable more honest discussion of possible implications for the decision.
By the end of the study, the partnership model did not increase collaboration in the Hamilton School District, but it did present some possibilities for the future. One possibility is for a district to look for natural places for partners to collaborate. For the leaders involved in this study, collaboration occurred when there were mutual outcomes and accountability. One natural place to explore with shared outcomes could be the district and school improvement planning process. Finding intersections in improvement work between central office and schools could lead to increased collaborative opportunities. Again, it would be important for district leadership to structure experiences that would support partners finding authentic intersection points. A possible intersection could come in the way district and school improvement plans are utilizing progress monitoring. Understanding if people are growing in their practice was a shared leadership challenge expressed by both central office and school leaders. It is sometimes challenging because it is difficult to describe what growth looks like. The partnership model could provide an opportunity for leaders to work through this challenge together. Having partners explore the idea of progress monitoring together with a lens of district and school improvement could provide partners with a mutual outcome and might lead to more collaborative experiences for partners.

Implications for Future Research

Connecting district leadership with school leadership is an important challenge for any school district. A district hires and develops leaders aligned to a mission of student learning and then in the busy world of a public school system tries to keep those leaders connected to that mission and each other. As a superintendent, I believe it is critical that those connections are strong and consistent. This study has informed my thinking about ways to connect school and
district leaders. There is a fine line to walk between highly structured and flexible experiences when trying to create conditions that support developing and sustaining relationships.

The first six months of the partnership model demonstrated the power of creating structures that intentionally bring leaders together. For the most part, leaders know more about each other and their work than they did six months ago. This knowledge has increased leadership appreciation and has set the stage for the next iteration of the model. Moving forward it will be important to provide leaders with a vision of what the model can become.

My hope is that the structure could evolve into a tool that provides regular professional learning for school and district leaders, and also become an important part of a continuous growth system. Of course, there are other programs and models out there that could accomplish the same goals. Exploring these programs could be a good focus for future research and might provide insight into key components that consistently appear in the ways districts support leadership connections.

Continuing the partnership model in the Hamilton School District could also provide a good opportunity for future research. Six months into a model provides a good introduction into implementation, but certainly does not provide enough information to evaluate the model’s effectiveness. As the model evolves, there would be more opportunities to assess whether relationships were sustained and if they led to increased collaboration in the district. Continuing to examine the partnership model could also provide insight into the balance between structure and flexibility and how districts can effectively manage that balance in moving towards more collaborative experiences.
Conclusion

Conducting this study has helped me form several recommendations that I will apply to my practice and may be useful to other district leaders. The first is to not leave the relationships between central office and school leaders to chance. A district relies on these leaders to sustain and evolve the culture and practices that serve students. Having leaders connected to the mission of the school district and each other is critical to the success of the district. It is important to communicate this priority with leaders and the reason behind it. The second recommendation is to develop structures that prioritize and focus time for leaders to connect with one another. Without these types of structures in place, everyone seems to be too busy to connect. It is important to hold leaders accountable to these structures by actively monitoring them. The third recommendation is to engage central office and school leaders in the conversation that defines the structured part of the partnership. It seems like it would be important to leave some flexibility for individual curiosity, while creating common experiences for each leader. It also might be important to get leaders input into what matters to them and where they need support. This could build a sense of ownership in the structure. Because time is always at a premium, finding natural intersections amongst leaders’ interests and using those common points as the basis for the experiences of the model could help participants feel like the partnership was not another thing to do, but something that would help them accomplish their existing responsibilities. Finally, to move the structure from a shared learning experience towards a more collaborative experience would require the structure to have some authority to impact the district. This could be done by determining the kind of decisions that might benefit from exploration by the partnership model that could connect central office and school administrators. Providing clarity for leaders about how their learning might affect the district’s decision making processes and following through
with those commitments would be a critical component of using the partnership model in this way.

It is important for school districts to consider learning for everyone, students, staff, and the community a school district serves. The partnership model was a structure that created intentional learning opportunities for district and school leaders. The opportunities were designed to push leaders outside of their comfort zone and learn through their partner’s perspective and experiences. As previously mentioned, time is always at a premium in any organization. The investment of time in the partnership model created opportunities for relationship development and professional learning. It remains to be seen how that investment might make a difference for the students of Hamilton School District.

It is my hope that this study will inform others who serve in our public school systems. For public schools to be successful we need to bring together the collective talents of each staff member. That can only be done if we can bring together the collective talents of our leaders to ensure we are working together in service of our students.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

ROUND I INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Round I Interview Questions

Interview I - Principals

1. Can you tell me about the different positions you’ve held in your career?
2. Tell me about your work for the district. Follow up - what are your primary responsibilities?
3. What do you love best about your job? What does a “good day” look like? How about a “bad day”?
4. When I say “challenging,” what does that mean to you?
5. What challenges you most about your job?
6. Where do you go for help? What do you expect when you ask for help - is it an answer, brainstorming, something else?
7. What does collaboration mean to you?
8. Can you give an example of a time collaboration helped you? A collaborative project you’ve worked on that you learned a lot from...
9. Tell me about the culture of your school. What are your hopes?
10. What does collaboration look like at your school? How do you support collaboration at your school?
11. When do you seek help from central office administrators?
12. Can you give an example of an interaction with central office that helped you perform your duties as principal?
13. Can you give me an example of when central office needed your help? When do central office administrators seek help from you?
14. What are some things you’re currently working on and/or are coming up?

Interview I - Cabinet

1. Can you tell me about the different positions you’ve held in your career?
2. Tell me about your work for the district. Follow up - what are your primary responsibilities?
3. What do you love best about your job? What does a “good day” look like? How about a “bad day”?
4. When I say “challenging,” what does that mean to you?
5. What challenges you most about your job?
6. Where do you go for help? What do you expect when you ask for help - is it an answer, brainstorming, something else?

7. What does collaboration mean to you?

8. Can you give an example of a time collaboration helped you? A collaborative project you’ve worked on that you learned a lot from…

9. Tell me about the culture of your team. How do you support collaboration in your department?

10. When do you seek help from principals?

11. Can you give an example of an interaction with principals that helped you perform your duties as a cabinet member?

12. Can you give an example of when a school principal needed your help? When do principals seek help from you?

13. What are some things you’re currently working on and/or are coming up?
APPENDIX B

CABINET MEETING AGENDA
Cabinet Meeting Agenda

10/26/16 Cabinet Meeting Agenda

Agreements

Recognition - card, email, phone call, personal visit

Sharing about our Schools - November SHARE OUT - take a minute to consider a story to tell about the teaching and learning that happens at your school. Make it a 3 minute or less story that conveys caring, quality, and growth. We’ll get into 2’s or 3’s to share.

Educational Programming

• Special Services
  • Programs
  • Learning support
  • Staffing
  • IEP/Re-evaluation meetings

• Educational Programming
  • Instructional Framework – what are hallmarks of instruction at the school?
  • Theory of Action - possibility? Wait and see on this one
  • Curriculum Adoption
  • Learning Walks
  • Technology

Collaboration: I’ve got a topic that would benefit from our work together and would like to schedule for the next workshop

Consultation: I’m presenting an idea and need some feedback. Who’s taking action and what’s the decision-making process?

Check-in/FYI: just wanted you to know

OSPI Bulletins LINK
Homeless Student Stability and Opportunity Gap Act
The 2016 Legislature passed Third Substitute House Bill (3SHB) 1682, the Homeless Student Stability and Opportunity Gap Act, to amend state laws related to improving educational outcomes for homeless students through increased identification services, in-school supports, and housing stability.

• B057-16 - Bulletin

• Attach 1 - Template to Collect Secondary School Liaisons Contacts

• Attach 2 - Sample Informed Consent for Health Care Notification Form

Communication out:

• Email policy

• How to Raise an Adult book study
APPENDIX C

INTRODUCING THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL
Introducing the Partnership Model

All Leadership Team Meeting 8/11/16
Outline of Slides

Problem of Practice:
In a growing school district, how can we ensure central office administration is connected to schools in a way that supports teaching and learning?

Theory of Action:
If we can shift the practice of central office administrators to personalize services to schools through “case management” and to focus on problem-solving through “project management” then central office will be able to better support teaching and learning.

Definitions:
Case management refers to efforts to help central office administrators work closely with individual schools to understand their goals, identify barriers to teaching and learning improvement in schools, and address those barriers, even if they fell beyond the purview of their particular central office units… “Customer service” orientation (Honig, 2010, p. 71)

Project management, in broad terms, called on central office administrators to shift their work from delivering services that they controlled to taking responsibility for work projects and marshaling resources from throughout and sometimes beyond the central office to address them. (Honig 2010, p. 73)

Why:
- Our growth
- New faces
- Stronger connections between central office and school leaders
- Our WHY

What does it look like?
- A Cabinet/School partnership
- Monthly check-ins
- Conversation/Collaborative/Observation/Help
- Monthly Cabinet reflection

What will we talk about?
- Celebrations/Challenges
- Questions and ideas
- Your school
- Your work
APPENDIX D

SCHOOL LEARNING AGENDA
School Learning Agenda

School/Central Office Partnership ~ Cabinet Partner Learning Agenda

**Purpose** – increase connections between central office/schools, develop foundation for collaborative problem solving

**September Conversation: Get to Know You**
- Challenge/Celebration
- Start of the Year connection – learn about the start of the year at your school
- Can you offer a support?

Are there other items that should be on the list below?

**Table of Contents - School Learning Agenda**
- Transportation
  - Arrival
  - Dismissal
- Food Services
  - Breakfast
  - Lunch
  - Staff
- Budget
  - MSOC
  - Grants
  - PTA
  - ASB
- Human Resources
  - Hiring – classified/certificated
  - Evaluation – classified/certificated
  - Substitutes
- Special Services
  - Programs
  - Learning support
  - Staffing
  - IEP/Re-evaluation meetings
- Building & Grounds Maintenance & Improvement
  - Building and Grounds Use
• Educational Programming
  • Instructional Framework – what are hallmarks of instruction at the school?
  • Theory of Action - possibility? Wait and see on this one
  • Curriculum Adoption
  • Learning Walks
  • Technology

• Community Engagement
  • How does the school connect with the community? Tools, frequency
  • How often is the building in use and who uses it?

• Staff Development
  • How does the principal help staff grow?
  • What does a staff meeting look like?
  • What does learning community time look like?

How does your work support their work?

What do you want them to know about your work?
APPENDIX E

ROUND II INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Round II Interview Questions

Interview II Questions PRINCIPAL

1. How are you doing?

2. Tell me about how you see your role as a part of the district mission of serving students?
   a. Are we seeing connections across work?
   b. Is there a sense of a shared focus on teaching and learning?

3. How would you describe the partnership model to a colleague from another district? What’s the purpose? What’s it been like for you? Dig for specifics, how much time? Was it beneficial? How often did you meet?

4. What’s worked for you with the partnership model?

5. What hasn’t? Dig for structures, accountability, aspects of the model that could be included/excluded in a program.

6. From the first round of interviews challenges for principals often centered on working with adults, limited resources, competing interests & priorities, and handling the volume of work. There was a general sense of frustration when principals felt like they had to lead reactively and were alone in facing challenges. Has the partnership model affected these challenges? If yes, how so? If no, how come?

7. Tell me about your relationship with your partner?
   a. Describe a recent interaction as an example of that relationship. Has the relationship changed over time?
   b. Is the relationship different than you expected?

8. What kinds of support has your partner been able to provide?

9. Can you give an example of an interaction that helped you with your work?
10. Has there been any hesitation in asking for help?

11. What have you learned from your partner?

12. What do you think you’ve taught your partner?

13. What if any impact might the partnership model have on student learning?

14. What’s a logical next step you’d like to see happen to improve this model?

**Interview II Questions CABINET**

1. How are you doing?

2. Tell me about how you see your role as a part of the district mission of serving students?
   a. Are we seeing connections across work?
   b. Is there a sense of a shared focus on teaching and learning?

3. How would you describe the partnership model to a colleague from another district?
   a. What’s the purpose?
   b. What’s it been like for you? Dig for specifics, how much time? Was it beneficial? How often did you meet?

4. What’s worked for you with the partnership model? What hasn’t? Dig for structures, accountability, aspects of the model that could be included/excluded in a program.

5. From the first round of interviews challenges described by central office administrators often were related to making connections in their work. They discussed finding entry points to engage with principals and support their work. There was a balance between being efficient and making time for collaboration. Central office administrators shared a pressure they felt of representing the district. Has the partnership model affected these challenges? If yes, how so? If no, how come?

6. Tell me about your relationship with your partner?
7. Describe a recent interaction as an example of that relationship.

8. Has the relationship changed over time? Is the relationship different than you expected?

9. What kinds of support has your partner been able to provide?

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14. What if any impact might the partnership model have on student learning?

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