

IN PURSUIT OF EQUITY: AN EXAMINATION OF CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERSHIP

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Equity issues in urban K-12 educational settings are challenging because of ongoing achievement gaps, rising poverty, and increasing racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. Given these challenges, scholars have increasingly focused on the practices of senior district leaders, including superintendents, and the actions they take to introduce, promote, and scale a vision for equity. This qualitative case study explores the leadership practices of one senior leadership team located in a large urban Midwest school district to understand how members of the senior leadership team support the superintendent's vision for equity. The study is distinctive in that the district was served by a superintendent with a lengthy tenure. Data collection spanned one school year and included interviews and a review of pertinent district documents. The findings suggest that the senior leadership team operationalizes the superintendent's vision for equity through organizational processes, cross-functional collaboration, use of research-based best practices, and allocation of resources based on student needs. One can thus conclude that the superintendent is not solely responsible for being a champion of equity but rather shares this responsibility with the senior leadership team. Although this is a single case study, it provides insights into the relatively under-researched role of the senior leadership team as partners in equity work.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Ensuring that all public school students have access to a high-quality education system that supports their academic success has been a challenge for decades because of inadequate school funding, changes in academic standards, and general concerns about the quality of the teaching force. Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), there have been efforts to improve educational outcomes for American students, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status (SES) and students of color. Legislative initiatives like No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2001) and, more recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015) have been at the forefront of the accountability movement, which has sought to link poor academic performance with school sanctions. Since NCLB came into effect, school reform efforts have focused on annual testing of students, identification of “failing” schools by states, and the imposition of sanctions on schools and districts that do not meet mandated performance expectations. Despite efforts at the national level to improve education outcomes for students, student achievement in the United States continues to lag other developed countries (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 2016). Indeed, the data suggest that achievement inequities are a persistent feature of the American education system.

Though the United States does not have a single performance measure for its public schools, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) can be used to gauge performance across districts. Results from the NAEP suggest that achievement levels remain depressed for poor, minority, and linguistically diverse students. In 2015, NAEP assessment information indicated that overall math achievement for fourth and eighth grade students declined in 2015, while the results for reading were stagnant (Noguera, 2017). The performance gaps in

reading achievement between White and Black students and White and Hispanic students in the fourth and eighth grades were between 21 and 26 points. The performance gap between 12th grade White and Black students was 30 points; the gaps in mathematics are similar (NCES, 2018). Furthermore, students living in poverty are “nearly four times as likely to fail in mathematics as their wealthiest peers” (Barth, 2016, p. 3). Education reform efforts have not improved outcomes for all students or closed the achievement gap. Nowhere is that gap more persistent than in urban communities, particularly between Black and White students.

The NCES analyzed NAEP achievement data and school demographics to study the Black-White achievement gap (Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, & Chan, 2015). The analysis also revealed that high-density Black schools were located in the south and Midwest and concentrated in cities (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). In terms of achievement, the research found that “achievement for both Black and White students was lower in the highest Black student density schools than in the lowest density schools. However, the achievement gap was not different” (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). Thus, the achievement gap between White and Black students persists regardless of the density factor.

There are several contributors to the persistence of the achievement gap between different groups of students. Some of these factors are within the control of school systems, but others are not. Factors that can be controlled by school systems include the allocation of education funding, the quality of a district’s curricula, and the distribution of effective teachers (Barth, 2016; Riley & Coleman, 2011). Yet, research suggests that many districts either not considered these factors or not implemented solutions to address them. For example, school funding research indicates schools with the highest poverty rates receive about \$1,800 per student less than schools with the lowest rates (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). Additionally, studies of teacher quality suggest that

high-poverty schools have teachers with less experience or without adequate certification requirements (Barth, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2010a; Riley & Coleman, 2011). Finally, research indicates that Black students often have limited access to advanced courses in secondary schools because some educators have lower academic expectations of these students (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Each of these factors has been widely discussed in the context of urban education and its influence on the achievement gap. To address these factors, districts must engage in complex and systemic reform efforts to dismantle inequities and close the achievement gap. As such, superintendents and district leaders are in a position to help facilitate the systemic change necessary to increase equity and student success.

There is a substantial scholarly literature on equity and the achievement gap at the school level. Indeed, research on principal leadership has considered the needs of diverse student populations as a primary focus for what these leaders should do regarding students with disabilities, English language learners, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Furman & Shields, 2005; Jean-Marie, 2008; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Santamaría, 2014; Theoharis, 2008; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Scholars have largely assumed that principal leadership is essential for improving achievement, second only to effective teachers (Theoharis, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Principals, however, have a limited role in addressing the factors that contribute to inequity outside their schools, as these matters are controlled by central office administrators and fall under the superintendent's vision for a district. Large urban school districts are complex organizations in which superintendents and leadership teams serve as "organizational catalysts" who initiate and sustain change (Whitt, Scheurich, & Skrla, 2015). Thus, it is important to understand how superintendents communicate and central office administrators enact a vision



for equity in their district. This includes consideration of resources and programs and the articulation of beliefs about the work that educators must do to serve all students.

### **Overview of Relevant Literature**

School funding shapes the ways in which a school district can effectively meet students' educational needs. Depending on the economic or political context of a local community or state, significant disparities in funding can exist. For instance, The Education Trust (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018) reported that “across the country, the highest poverty districts receive about \$1,000, or 7 percent, less per pupil in state and local funding than the lowest poverty districts” (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). More affluent students enter school more academically prepared than their lower-SES peers; gaps in funding can help eliminate disparities in academic readiness (Darling-Hammond, 2010a; Lawton, Philpott, & Furey, 2011; Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). On the whole, school districts educating the largest proportion of low-income students have fewer resources, and state school funding arrangements often distribute funds in ways that adversely affect these districts. Thus, redistributing resources to serve students with the greatest educational needs is one option for superintendents and their central administrative teams, but they may in some cases be dealing with fewer overall dollars than some of their peers.

Funding disparities also contribute to differences in other educational conditions that must be addressed to ensure equity. For example, funding influences how schools are staffed and by whom, and funding and expenditures have been shown to correlate with measures of teacher quality and retention (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 2016; Morgan, & Amerikaner, 2018). Teacher quality, as assessed by knowledge, experience, and teaching credentials, impacts student learning outcomes (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 2016). Students in high-poverty schools are more likely to

receive instruction from less experienced or inadequately certified teachers (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). Teacher qualifications and experience correspond to student success in schools with high poverty rates (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Thus, superintendents and executives should consider actions that improve access to quality teachers for the lowest performing, least affluent students.

Lower levels of teacher retention are often attributed to less desirable working conditions and salary inequities (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Working conditions, which include school leadership, staff cohesion, instructional materials, and opportunities to participate in professional development, contribute to teacher satisfaction and thus teachers' willingness to remain in their current schools (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Fullan, 2016; Lawton et al., 2011). The Education Trust reported that "school leaders who demonstrate instructional leadership and build a school culture that values professional growth" were essential to teacher satisfaction (Almy, Sarah & Tooley, Melissa, 2012, p. 3). Research also indicates that school demographics contribute to teacher satisfaction and retention, but not to the same degree as working conditions and salary (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Fullan, 2016). Given the population served by many urban school districts, a large proportion of teachers remain in their positions for a short time before seeking employment at schools in more desirable locations. Adamson and Darling-Hammond (2012) reported that school districts with low teacher salaries "disproportionately serve much larger proportions of students of color and ELLs [English language learners] than districts offering the most competitive salaries" (p. 22). Replacing experienced teachers decreases the instructional time for students and increases district costs in terms of recruiting, hiring, and orienting novice teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010a). Thus, high turnover

among teachers has both financial and educational implications for schools and the students they serve.

Superintendents and their central office leadership teams are responsible for developing and enacting a district-wide vision that responds to these challenging circumstances. Prior research identifies leadership behaviors, responsibilities, and processes aligned with effective team functioning as essential to the successful operation of school districts (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004; Higgins et al., 2012). Traditionally, leadership studies have defined three essential behaviors for leadership action: direction setting, managing team operations, and developing team capacity (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Day et al., 2004). Superintendents are responsible for implementing these actions at the district level, and their central office leadership teams are responsible for implementing them in their respective functional areas. Superintendents thus shape a district's culture and the core values articulated by the organization. This is essential in a learning organization like a school district, where the leaders provide vision, establish mutually agreed goals, and develop the knowledge and skills of stakeholders to achieve those goals (Hirsh, Psencik, & Brown, 2014; Schlechty, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006). In the present study, I assume that creating and maintaining a system tailored to the success of all students involves leaders who are not only focused on district improvement but also broadly committed to equity.

Efforts to address equity in school systems are often interwoven with a district's systemic improvement efforts, which typically focus on raising academic performance and eliminating achievement gaps. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) note that "leaders often focus on recognizing policies and procedures that perpetuate inequity" (p. 846). District leaders' actions aimed at raising student academic achievement include reallocating resources, improving

instruction, and developing inclusive structures (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Welborn, 2019). The present study examines three components of district improvement: the change process, district priorities, and teaching and learning. Each component is discussed in the context of improving and sustaining student success. It is believed that leaders who prioritize teaching and learning will advocate for resources, which range quality curriculum and instruction, assessments of and for learning, and professional learning (Fullan, 2016; Hirsh et al., 2014; McKenzie & Locke, 2009; Noguera, 2017; Schlechty, 2009). While district-wide improvement is complicated, priorities aligned to district goals to improve student outcomes will always be central in such efforts.

Recognizing the equity motivations for urban school leaders, scholars have increasingly sought to describe how leaders pursue equity-focused work. Their research suggests that equity-focused leadership generally involves advocating for traditionally marginalized people and promoting practices and policies that are culturally responsive and seek to dismantle educational inequities (Khalifa et al., 2016; Santamaría, 2014; Theoharis, 2007a). DeMatthews, Izquierdo, and Knight (2017) investigated how a superintendent enacted social justice principles to reform district policies and practices to promote dual language education for bilingual students. They used a theoretical framework that identified two essential components in the superintendent's social justice leadership: situational awareness and advocacy (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Situational awareness refers to a leader's knowledge of and sensitivity to internal and external politics and the priorities of the school system, while advocacy calls on effective communication skills to convey ideas, analyze and summarize information, and develop collaborative solutions that benefit traditionally marginalized students (DeMatthews et al., 2017). These two leadership components

were reflected in the superintendent's knowledge, behaviors, and decisions, which led to the implementation of dual language education as a mechanism to address inequity.

Urban education and social justice research identifies four concepts linked to addressing equity in diverse school systems. First, there is an examination of the educational setting and factors that contribute to the challenges of urban education (Darling-Hammond, 2010a; Riley & Coleman, 2011), with district size, poverty, and linguistic and cultural diversity all adding to the complexity of educating students in many urban districts (Barth, 2016; Riley & Coleman, 2011). Additional factors include federal and state legislation, inequitable school funding, and quality disparities in among teaching staff (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012). The second concept is district leadership. Large school districts employ a senior leadership team (SLT) who are supposed to work collaboratively with the superintendent (Day et al., 2004). The knowledge and skills of its members influence the team's overall effectiveness. Third, district improvement with a focus on teaching and learning is essential (Fullan, 2016; Schlechty, 2009). The final concept, social justice leadership to achieve equity, reveals leaders with a social justice disposition who are culturally responsive and inclined to pursue issues of inequity (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016). These concepts establish a foundation for examining how district leaders identify and address issues of equity.

## **Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine how the SLT in an urban Midwestern school district enacts a long-serving superintendent's vision for equity. Specifically, it considers how senior leaders seek to embed the superintendent's vision in district improvement efforts through the allocation of resources and establishment of programs to support historically

marginalized and traditionally underserved students. The study investigates three research questions:

1. What factors, if any, influence the central office leaders' adoption and enactment of the superintendent's vision?
2. How, if at all, is the superintendent's vision for equity reflected in the district's current allocation of resources and deployment of educational programs?
3. How, if at all, do senior district leaders in the central office adopt and enact the superintendent's vision for equity in the allocation of resources or deployment of educational programs?

## **Significance**

There is a substantial literature on school improvement, principal leadership, and inequity in educational settings (Darling-Hammond, 2010a; Fullan, 2016; Schlechty, 2009; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). However, empirical studies of superintendent leadership, particularly when social justice is involved, have been relatively rare. This is even more true regarding the ways in which central office administrators undertake social justice leadership. Importantly, then, the present study examines how a school district's SLT enacts the district superintendent's vision for equity. The study is timely, as students served by public schools are becoming more and more diverse due to long-term demographic trends throughout the United States (NCES, 2018). Persistent inequity in education funding, resources, and staffing has resulted in a cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement of marginalized segments of the population (Darling-Hammond, 2010a). Young adults who drop out of school or receive an inadequate education are more likely to be incarcerated or use public assistance (Darling-Hammond, 2010a). Leaders must think critically about how to achieve educational equity and how their leadership actions support the conditions

for students to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to be proactive citizens in a global society. The study is thus motivated by a desire to help districts and schools move toward more equitable outcomes for all students.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

Educating all students to become productive citizens is a fundamental responsibility of public schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010a). Research on the achievement gap reveals persistent disparities for traditionally marginalized students (Darling-Hammond, 2010b; Lawton et al., 2011). Leadership research examines the behaviors, skills, and attitudes of principals who improve academic outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse student populations (Fullan, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). However, scholarship that examines superintendent and senior system-level leaders is not as prevalent. This literature review summarizes what is currently known about superintendent and system-level leadership in the context of social justice. First, it discusses the urban education context, including descriptions of the changing demographics in urban systems, funding disparities, and the challenges associated with resource availability, including teacher retention and public confidence. Second, research related to district leadership is examined, specifically regarding the superintendent's role and responsibilities. Third, school district improvement research is considered. District improvement focuses on the change process, district priorities, and a given district's emphasis on teaching and learning. Finally, social justice leadership is discussed. This section defines social justice leadership, explains the relationship between social justice and equity, and describes the notion of cultural responsiveness.

#### **The Urban Education Context**

Public education and especially urban school districts have undergone considerable change in the last 25 years. Examples include school reform efforts established through federal policies



such as NCLB (2001), Race to the Top (2009), and ESSA (2015) have resulted in a myriad of state and local efforts to meet accountability requirements. In addition to responding to these policy requirements, school systems must adapt to deal with internal and external evolution. This section of the literature review provides an overview of the data and research that impact school districts: demographic shifts, disparities in school funding, staffing and teacher retention, and public confidence. Each of these issues contributes to the complex setting in which district leaders are expected to foster change.

### **Changing School District Demographics**

The racial and ethnic composition of public schools continues to evolve and contributes to the complex nature of urban education. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) forecasts by that 2025 there will be significant shifts in public school student enrollment (Hussar & Bailey, 2017). American Indian, Alaska Native, and White enrollment will decrease, African American enrollment will remain the same, and multi-racial, Asian, and Hispanic enrollment will increase by 18%–23% (Hussar, 2017). Elementary and secondary school students identified as either English learners or having an exceptionality have also grown over the last 15 years (NCES, 2018).

Urban public school systems are characterized by three contextual factors: high concentrations of diverse and low-income students, disparities in funding, and issues of educator quality and retention (Darling-Hammond, 2010a; Lawton et al., 2011; Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018; NCES, 2018). These characteristics contribute to persistently lower educational outcomes for students, on average.

The NCES (2018) reported that 30% of U.S. elementary and secondary school students attended a city school, two thirds of whom were enrolled in high- to mid-high poverty schools (NCES, 2018). By comparison, only 39% of suburban students attended high or mid-high poverty schools (NCES, 2018). At least 50% of students at with high and mid-high poverty rates meet the requirement to receive free or reduced-price meals. Additional data reveal that 14% of urban students meet English Language Learner criteria, and almost 4% qualify as homeless. Nationally, 13% of students meet the requirements to receive special education services; the figure for African American students is 16% (NCES, 2018). The diverse academic and social needs of students in urban settings creates challenges, and the added obstacle of inequitable funding makes it more challenging to meet student needs.

### **Lack of Public Confidence in Educational Delivery**

Public confidence in education reflects the beliefs of the coalitions that are in positions of authority. Public confidence in education was examined by Klugman and Xu (2008), who used General Social Survey data from 1974 to 2002. Using multivariate order logit regression, the authors showed that race, SES, educational attainment, and political affiliation are indicators of confidence in education. Overall, African Americans had more confidence in public education than White Americans. The data also revealed that lower-income and less-educated African Americans maintained a belief in public education. At the same time, African Americans with higher educational levels and income showed less confidence in public education (Klugman & Xu, 2008).

Research also indicates that political affiliation influenced confidence in public education: “White Americans tend to have higher levels of income, conservatism and tend to be Republicans and evangelical Protestants—all traits that are correlated with lower levels of confidence in

education” (Klugman & Xu, 2008, p. 173). Their study’s data substantiate that African Americans with limited educational attainment view education as a path to upward social and economic mobility, while better-educated African Americans and Whites are less confident in education. As a result of this lack of confidence, they identify other educational options and are less supportive of public education (Klugman & Xu, 2008).

Parents and community demographics influence confidence in public education (Klugman & Xu, 2008). Superintendents and SLTs need to be cognizant of community dynamics and create opportunities to engage parents, students, and community members by fostering relationships (Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2007). Advocating for traditionally marginalized student groups while continuing to meet the needs of more affluent students creates a challenge for many district leaders (Noguera, 2001).

### **Research on District Leadership**

Large school districts are complex organizations that place significant demands on their senior leaders. The superintendent and key executives, who collectively comprise an SLT, are responsible for designing and executing policies and processes that will achieve district goals. Members of SLTs have specific areas of expertise like finances, human resources, curriculum and instruction, and even school law. Examining the role of SLTs in “sustaining reform efforts” is appropriate when analyzing superintendents’ leadership in large school districts (Higgins et al., 2010). SLTs serve an essential role in complex organizations. In collaboration with the superintendent, SLT members address challenges associated with improving organizational outcomes (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Day et al., 2004). The next section identifies leadership team research and how it correlates with central office leadership.

## **Effective District Leadership**

Superintendents are responsible for creating a vision for their districts and achieving those goals in collaboration with SLTs (Fullan, 2016; Schlechty, 2009). Previous research has identified concepts and strategies to promote effective team leadership performance (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Day et al., 2004); those that are relevant for this study are the superintendent's role and responsibilities and SLT functioning (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Day et al., 2004; Schlechty, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006). This section uses the literature to establish a framework for SLTs.

**Superintendent's leadership role.** Superintendents enact their leadership in three ways: establishing district goals, setting a direction, and supporting the district's leadership team. Waters and Marzano (2006) examined superintendent leadership in school districts that performed successfully and found that superintendents were responsible for establishing goals and monitoring progress toward those goals. Goal development was most often collaborative and included board members, SLT representatives, and principals. Once established, goals became non-negotiable commitments in relation to teaching and student learning targets. Efforts to support high expectations result in the allocation of resources to achieve district goals. Lastly, Waters and Marzano (2006) found a statistically significant correlation between superintendent tenure and positive student achievement. Superintendent leadership is vital to the direction of any school district. From a social justice perspective, superintendents must be able to articulate equity and social justice goals as part of their vision and then communicate those goals to subordinates throughout the organization.

Later research has examined the role of a superintendent in a bureaucracy as opposed to a learning organization. Schlechty (2009), for example, discusses school transformation and organizational purpose based on that distinction; bureaucracies are characterized as organizations

where work is routine or quickly learned and driven by compliance. Bureaucracies are not adaptive and do not encourage creativity. Learning organizations, however, are more flexible. They allow their members to creatively deploy their knowledge and skills. It is not only acceptable but also encouraged to improve one's knowledge, skills, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs in a learning organization. The goal is to increase individual and collective capacity through the creation of a nurturing environment, and the focus is on learning for both adults and students (Schlechty, 2009). Hirsh et al. (2014) describe the role and responsibilities of superintendents in transforming school districts into learning organizations. Superintendents and district leaders establish expectations and set goals, develop shared responsibility for student success, and create and facilitate professional development programs that improve educator capacity.

District leaders in learning organizations have been compared to leaders in bureaucratically structured districts. The former support and increase the capacity of building-level leaders to maintain the focus on district goals; in bureaucracies, by contrast, central office leaders manage or control the work of building leaders (Schlechty, 2009). Hirsh et al. (2014) state that central office leaders in learning organizations “focus on support and solutions through collaboration” (p. 62). Superintendents in bureaucracies are problem solvers; in learning organizations, they provide opportunities for others to participate in developing and implementing innovations to resolve challenges (Schlechty, 2009). Learning organizations are systems that value the individual development and interpersonal collaboration necessary to improve student outcomes. It is the superintendent who establishes the district's direction and works to maintain either a bureaucratic system or develop a learning organization.

Barnett and McCormick (2012) examined secondary school principal and assistant principal relationships and behaviors. Although they focused on principals and building leaders, the

concepts they present can be applied to superintendents and their SLTs. Their research revealed that principals perform three leadership functions within the team structure. First, principals establish direction, which involves collecting, analyzing, and making sense of the information necessary for organizational effectiveness. Second, they manage team operations by assembling a group whose members have the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities to work together (Barnett & McCormick, 2012). Team management also includes establishing role expectations, group norms, and communication patterns. Third, principals employ coaching skills to increase team leadership capacity, which is “a team’s collective ability to determine its current level of effectiveness, identify pressing challenges and resultant needs triggered in the team, select and execute appropriate leadership functions to address these needs” (Barnett & McCormick, 2012, p. 655). Coaching improves individual knowledge and skills, which contributes to group effectiveness. A principal's “development of team leadership capacity enables teams to handle complex tasks or controversial issues effectively” (Barnett & McCormick, 2012, p. 662). As a result of the limited amount research examining the superintendents’ role and their relationship with SLTs, their study’s findings can be employed in a central office setting, as they describe how a superintendent might create a team and lead it toward a specific goal.

**Concepts for leadership team functioning.** Superintendents are the primary leaders of school systems; however, in large systems, sheer size demands that superintendents work with an SLT. Day et al. (2004) examined the emergence and functioning of leadership within teams; they used organizational management theory to identify three concepts demonstrated by effective teams. The first is leadership development. A team’s ability to align individual behaviors, skills, and identities to meet collective goals illustrates capacity building within the group and results from leadership development. As Day et al. (2004) observed, “leadership is an outcome of social

processes within a team” (p. 860). Social processes include cooperation, shared ideas, and collective efficacy: “Team leadership is created by the team and results in social capital that enhances cooperation and resource exchange and adds value to teams and organizations” (Day et al., 2004, p. 860).

The second concept related to effective leadership teams is group information processing, which “involves how a group recognizes relevant and available information to perform intellectual tasks” (Day et al., 2004, p. 869). While group information processing is similar to how an individual processes information in many ways, the corporate knowledge that results comes from the “interactions between team members” and their individual knowledge and skills (Day et al., 2004, p. 869).

Team learning is the third concept: it is “the result of changes in knowledge, skills, and abilities produced by the shared experiences of the team members” and the “the process of reflection and action” (Day et al., 2004, p. 870). Additionally, conditions such as trust and psychological safety are essential for members to take the risks necessary to practice behaviors reflective of new learning. Team leadership capacity, group information processing, and team learning contribute to team effectiveness, and an SLT’s effectiveness positively influences district improvement (Day et al., 2004).

A second study examined the development of an executive leadership team in the health care industry (Otter & Paxton, 2017). The authors explored how a team transitions from being reactionary to proactively collaborating and collectively learning and identify three team characteristics that reinforce Day et al.’s conclusions. First, team learning, along with individual learning, generates knowledge within the team and supports improvement. Second, developing new competencies is the result of new behaviors stemming from new learning. Finally, leadership

through interaction is identified as “a shift from a leader-centric view of leadership to a relational one” (Otter & Paxton, 2017, p. 41). Effective leadership behaviors identified and described in these two studies substantiate the importance of team learning and the implementation of new knowledge to change practice and how a team functions.

My examination of the literature relevant to district leadership has revealed three key ideas. First, superintendents are paramount in district direction and management; they are responsible for collaboratively establishing a vision and goals, allocating resources to achieve those goals, and monitoring progress (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The superintendent must also be adaptive while creating conditions for other educators to enhance their knowledge and skills to resolve the challenges associated with improving student learning (Schlechty, 2009). Second, principals, SLTs, and superintendents have similar responsibilities when developing and leading teams. All leaders set directions, manage team functions, and facilitate team development (Barnett & McCormick, 2012). Finally, team leadership development, learning, and information processing contribute to a group’s ability to transition from individuals working in isolation to functioning collectively toward a common goal (Day et al., 2004). These responsibilities and behaviors create the foundation for district improvement.

### **District Improvement as a Basis for Equity Work**

School districts are evolving from bureaucratic organizations to educational organizations that focus on learning and teaching (Fullan, 2016; Schlechty, 2009). In bureaucratic systems, leaders focus on management and order (Schlechty, 2009). By contrast, learning organizations focus on direction setting and capacity building (Schlechty, 2009). The transformation from bureaucracy to learning organization is based on the belief that learning is essential to change and improvement (Fullan, 2016; Schlechty, 2009). While district



improvement is complicated, my experience as a central office administrator has taught me that three components are particularly valuable: a district's change processes, establishment of district priorities, and the quality of teaching and learning. These components establish a framework for leaders to determine strategies to achieve the district vision and goals.

**Change processes in districts.** Change is a constant in education and results from internal and external challenges. At the school level, teachers and principals engage in change processes to adjust instruction to meet the academic needs of students. As occurs with building-level change, district leaders engage in the change process as a result of a catalyst or external mandates.

The change process is iterative and has several stages (Fullan, 2016; Stroh, 2015). In the present study, the change process is examined from two perspectives. Stroh (2015) analyzes such processes as mechanisms for social change and uses a systems thinking approach. He began by identifying and describing four phases: building a foundation for change, facing current realities, making explicit choices, and bridging gaps. During the first phase, stakeholder engagement and a visioning process occur, and "building people's capacity to collaborate is developed" (Stroh, 2015, p. 75). Phase two serves to create an understanding of current realities and how they may have contributed to the situation. Developing stakeholder commitment is the purpose of phase three; leaders and stakeholders commit to the vision and recognize the challenges and benefits that may result from efforts to achieve the district's goals. The fourth phase involves bridging the gap between the current situation and the commitment made in phase three (Stroh, 2015, p. 77). Tasks in this phase include designing and revising a strategic plan for enactment aligned to goals. This change approach fosters collaboration, the shared development of a new vision, and

ongoing participation by and dialogue between stakeholders. Stroh's approach has certain similarities with the educationally situated change process that follows.

The change process has also been examined from an educational perspective. Fullan (2016) identified and described three stages: initiation, implementation, and continuation. Phase one requires a catalyst or some initiating challenge, the identification of and access to innovations, and the support of stakeholders. All activities leading up to implementation are part of the initiation stage. The second phase is the implementation of a proposed plan and activities. Factors that influence implementation are "characteristics of change such as need, clarity of goals, complexity, local characteristics, and external factors" (Fullan, 2016, p. 69). Continuation is phase three; it is during this period that innovation becomes institutionalized within the system or discarded. Factors that contribute to the continuation phase include the innovation's integration into the organizational system, sufficient support for the sustainability of innovations, and development of an onboarding process for new members of the organization (Fullan, 2016).

An application of the change process is illustrated in an article that examined Michigan schools (Meyers-Looze et al., 2019). Six comprehensive high schools used small learning communities as a mechanism to improve student achievement. The authors describe six elements involved in sustained change: identifying the problem, using a theory of change, focusing on student improvement as the primary goal, identifying and engaging stakeholders, creating an accountability process to create sustainability, and engaging in effective professional learning. Identification of the problem is explained as more than merely analyzing assessment data; it is discovering what happens in the classroom "between the teacher, student and the content" and exploring the instructional tasks students are asked to complete (Meyers-Looze et al., 2019, p. 172). Second, the desired change is described and explained using a theory of change. The third

element, student achievement, requires examining the professional learning needed to change adult practice. Professional learning is implied by Stroh (2015) and also discussed by Fullan (2016). Fourth, successful change initiatives require identification of appropriate stakeholders and the role they play, along with a shared sense of urgency (Meyers-Looze et al., 2019). Next, goals are achieved through organizational practices such as group norms, processes and procedures for interdepartmental collaboration, and decision-making protocols: “These practices will shape the leadership team’s work and create collective responsibility and accountability” (Meyers-Looze et al., 2019, p. 179). Sixth, professional learning is present throughout the change process. Professional learning supports teachers and principals to increase their knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions to sustain change (Meyers-Looze et al., 2019).

### **Establishing Priorities in District Change**

Change takes time and requires district priorities to align with district goals. This process is advanced through the collective responsibility of leaders (Hirsh et al., 2014). Having central office and school leaders focused on achieving common goals creates the coherence needed for change. The priorities and practices necessary to accomplish district goals are an element of district improvement. This section discusses leaders’ responsibility for goal setting and how goals and priorities influence the work of the district.

The purpose of establishing goals and priorities is considered from two perspectives in some recent studies. First, a research meta-analysis completed by Marzano and Waters (2006) identified goal setting as a superintendent’s responsibility. The goal-setting process was described as “collaborative and resulted in non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 15). For Schlecthy (2009), direction-setting goals provide clarity and continuity to organizational systems. Superordinate goals are related to how the core

business of schools is defined within a system (Schlechty, 2009). School systems that strive to be learning organizations focus on adult and student learning that supports ongoing intellectual and personal growth (Schlechty, 2009). Establishing and communicating the direction and goals of a school system is the foundation for change and district improvement. The primary purpose of elementary and secondary school systems is to educate students. The next section examines teaching and learning research as a component of district improvement.

**Focus on teaching and learning.** District leaders create a vision and develop goals to improve teaching and learning (Hirsh et al., 2014). Two articles that examined teaching and learning reveal that curricula, instruction, and professional learning improved academic outcomes for students (McKenzie & Locke, 2009; Noguera, 2017). First, McKenzie and Locke (2009) analyzed instructional leadership research and established a conceptual framework that identified instructional leadership for social justice, equity consciousness, and equity-oriented teaching skills as mechanisms that support improved student outcomes. Each component of this framework is vital to improving outcomes for students with diverse needs and aligns with the aspects of the present study; however, how leaders respond to teaching and learning was the most important finding. McKenzie and Locke revealed behaviors and responsibilities that put leaders close to teaching and learning through monitoring instruction, student progress, and supporting professional learning for teachers resulted in improved student outcomes. District and school leaders who improved student outcomes focused on high-quality teaching by and professional learning for teachers. The authors concluded that there are no “silver bullets” for improving student academic outcomes; however, leaders that kept classroom instruction and professional learning central to improvement efforts made progress (McKenzie & Locke, 2009).

The study conducted by Noguera (2017) examined three high schools in different settings, each of which shared the challenge of improving academic outcomes for traditionally marginalized student groups. The schools studied implemented deeper learning, an approach to teaching and learning that was designed to improve academic outcomes for all students, especially those who traditionally underperform in school (Noguera, 2017). Deeper learning engages students in authentic learning experiences that involve complex problems that require students to use critical thinking skills. Noguera identified three features of schools that adopt deeper learning and improve student outcomes. First, they focus on pedagogical practices that engage students in critical thinking and open-ended tasks. Second, schools prioritize effective use of time by maximizing the time allocated to instruction and by finding time for teachers' professional learning. Finally, schools continually monitor student learning and instructional practices. The deeper learning approach is the opposite of most traditional teaching and learning approaches but increases student academic outcomes by facilitating learning experiences that involve higher-level thinking and application of knowledge and skills while increasing student engagement (Noguera, 2017).

A sustained focus on teaching and learning indicates established priorities. District improvement focused on teaching and learning reflects goals related to curriculum and instruction, monitoring student learning, and teachers' professional learning (McKenzie & Locke, 2009; Noguera, 2017). Curricula and instruction that engage students in complex problems and provide authentic learning experiences are essential to increasing student engagement (Noguera, 2017). Understanding how superintendents and SLTs focus on teaching and learning is a key element in moving toward equity.

### **Social Justice Leadership: A Framework for Understanding District Leadership**

Educational leaders are responsible for creating conditions that enable students to succeed academically, so a focus on teaching and learning is central to improving student achievement. Creating a climate conducive for all students to achieve at high levels entails the participation of teachers, parents, and the community. Political agendas and community characteristics can distract educators from teaching and learning (Honig, 2012). Educational leaders need certain attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors to create the conditions needed to improve academic outcomes for diverse students (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). This section examines leadership research, which describes the relationship between social justice and equity (Santamaría, 2014; Theoharis, 2007); the characteristics of social justice leaders are also outlined (Khalifa et al., 2016).

**Defining social justice leadership.** At its root, social justice leadership removes systemic and organizational barriers to access and opportunities for advancement. Theoharis's (2007) qualitative study examined social justice leadership among seven principals in urban Midwestern districts. His findings revealed how principals enacted social justice, which resulted in positive outcomes for students. They did so in four ways: raising student achievement, improving school structures, recentering and enhancing staff capacity, and strengthening school culture and community (Theoharis, 2007, p. 231). He found that principals' decisions and behaviors lead to "ways they enacted social justice" (2007, p. 231); these actions were expansive and could include discontinuing pull-out and segregated programs for ELLs and special education students. The decisions made resulted in changes to school structures and "provided equity by shifting to heterogeneously grouped instruction" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 233). Facilitating teachers' professional learning to increase capacity on issues of race and developing equity, as well as ELLs, was another example of enacting social justice. Most strikingly, Theoharis

demonstrated that social justice leaders' behaviors and decisions ultimately created environments that promoted equity. This appears to be foundational to the enactment of social justice leadership and reflects the widely held view that social justice is the process by which equity is achieved (Theoharis, 2007).

**Cultural responsiveness.** Social justice leadership also depends on the enactment of culturally responsive behaviors, which are closely aligned with and supportive of equity goals for all students, especially traditionally marginalized students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Santamaría, 2014; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Beliefs and attitudes are reflected in policies and processes instituted inside an organization. Policies and procedures indicate the skills and behaviors necessary to achieve district goals, and culturally responsive behaviors enable leaders to achieve equity goals (Santamaría, 2014; Shields, 2017).

Social justice leaders are characterized as culturally responsive (Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2007). Changing demographics and the achievement and discipline gaps in public schools indicate the need for culturally responsive behaviors and practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally responsive school leadership has been defined as “the ability of school leadership to create school contexts and curriculum that responds effectively to the educational, social, political and cultural needs of students” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1278). Culturally responsive leaders' behaviors and expectations influence students, teachers, and the community at large. Leaders influence school culture and climate and student achievement.

Khalifa et al. (2016) found four attributes exhibited by culturally responsive leaders: critical self-awareness, promoting culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, fostering culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and engaging students and

parents in community contexts. Each attribute is interconnected and is a component of the broader trait of cultural responsiveness.

The first attribute, critical self-awareness, is described as having an appropriate understanding of one's self, values, beliefs, and dispositions (Khalifa et al., 2016). Being consciously reflective of values extends to behaviors, resulting in actions that align with values. Behaviors that reflect critical self-awareness include the use of equity audits, data to modify practices, and commitment to continuous learning about cultures (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016). Self-reflection is a mechanism used to direct behaviors aligned with a leader's moral purpose.

A second attribute is enhancing teacher capacity to incorporate culturally responsive instructional practices. Ongoing professional development and inclusive recruitment and hiring practices are mechanisms leaders use to build teacher capacity (Jean-Marie, 2008; Khalifa et al., 2016). Developing teacher knowledge and skills to improve curriculum and instruction exemplifies how instructional leadership helps meet the needs of diverse students.

Fostering an inclusive school environment that respects diversity represents a third characteristic of culturally responsive leaders. Celebrating student diversity and eliminating exclusionary practices are hallmarks of organizations led by culturally responsive leaders. Behaviors and practices include building relationships and minimizing pull-out programs for special education students and ELLs (Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Leadership is key to creating an inclusive culture to reduce student isolation and tracking.

Establishing positive leaders and community relationships is the fourth culturally responsive attribute identified in the research (Khalifa et al., 2016). School and community



relationships are reflective of a community's diversity. Creating communication systems for families whose primary language is not English and strategies to help families actively engage in their children's education are just two examples of positive relationships between a school system and its community (Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Deconstructing cultural responsiveness into four strands emphasizes how the interrelation of leadership characteristics helps move toward the overall goal of improving marginalized students' academic outcomes: "Culturally responsive leadership occurs when administrators function in their roles as public intellectuals, curriculum innovators and social activists" (Johnson, 2006, p. 354).

## **Summary**

This literature review has discussed concepts that identify what superintendents and senior district leaders must do to enact leadership that supports the development of an equity agenda aimed at improving their district's student outcomes. Indeed, one of the review's central findings is that an achievement gap between Black and White students persists and that scholars continue to debate what actions superintendents can take to address it.

Importantly, urban school districts are complex organizational settings that necessitate understanding how leaders enact their leadership in response to key organizational challenges. This complexity is often amplified in urban school systems, as they have a high concentration of culturally diverse and/or low-income students (Darling-Hammond, 2010a; NCES, 2018). Additional factors that contribute to the achievement gap and the complexity of urban education include funding disparities and teacher quality and retention (Lawton et al., 2011; Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). Trained personnel and appropriate resources are needed to meet the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse student populations.

This has clear implications for district improvement, which depends on the superintendent and SLT. Superintendents provide leadership and create conditions for SLT members to increase their capacity to effect change. A district whose priority is to close the achievement gap and improve academic outcomes for students requires an emphasis on teaching and learning. Teaching and learning are central to the allocation of district resources necessary to acquire and sustain curriculum and instructional practices, assessments for student learning and professional learning (Fullan et al., 2018; Hirsh et al., 2014; McKenzie & Locke, 2009).

Finally, and most importantly, much of our understanding about superintendent leadership depends on how we conceptualize the actions they take to improve opportunities for students. In this study, I situate my inquiry in the context of social justice leadership. Social justice theory identifies the behaviors and attitudes used to create conditions conducive to improving outcomes for traditionally marginalized students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Santamaría, 2014; Theoharis, 2007). Equity-oriented leaders use social justice as a vehicle to propel their equity-oriented agendas. Culturally responsive behaviors and attitudes identified and described in the research include critical self-awareness, promoting culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, fostering inclusive school environments, and engaging students and parents. Equity-oriented leaders employ social justice, including cultural responsiveness, to advance an equity agenda. As such, this model serves as a working conceptualization of the superintendent's actions that are of interest in this study.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Methods**

This study seeks to understand the ways in which a central office leadership team enacts a district superintendent's vision for equity through the allocation of resources and deployment of programs. A participatory action learning design, which is "distinctively concerned with enhancing social justice through embracing diversity and generating understanding of one's own role in contributing to a more inclusive and democratic society" (Wood, 2000, p. 29), informed the trajectory of the research process and outcomes. This design makes it possible for a researcher to serve simultaneously as an organizational participant. The participatory action learning design enabled the documentation of the leadership actions of a superintendent and SLT members employed by a large, urban school district in the Midwest where I, as the researcher, was also employed as an SLT member. This orientation allowed me to explore our collective experience in implementing the superintendent's vision for equity. Interviews and retrieval of salient documents served as the primary methods of data collection. An iterative analysis resulted in the production of themes that were responsive to the research questions.

### **Research Setting**

This study takes place in a large urban Midwestern school district that operates 50 school sites: 30 elementary schools, one intermediate school, 11 middle schools, five comprehensive high schools, a career technical center, and an alternative school. The district enrolls approximately 29,600 students from pre-K through twelfth grade. Consistent with similar districts, its student population is diverse, with more than half of students identifying as a racial or ethnic minority. In

addition to this racial and ethnic diversity, 10% of the students do not speak English as their dominant home language, and 16% of students qualify for special education services. District-wide, nearly two thirds (62%) of students receive free or reduced-price meals. Student diversity reflects data obtained from the State Department of Education website (2019). Compared to student enrollment, professional staff, which comprises teachers and administrators, is not diverse. The Department of Education reported that 89% of teachers employed in the district are White, slightly higher than the national average of 80% reported by the NCES (2018). At the time of this study, the district had 4,000 employees, of whom about 1,900 are teachers.

### **Research Participants**

This study included a convenience sample of five members of the school district's SLT; all were central office administrators. The superintendent was an African-American woman who had previously served as a teacher, principal, and central office administrator in Ford City Schools. The other members of the team included chief of family and community engagement (FACE), chief financial officer, chief operations officer, and chief of school leadership. The chief of FACE is an African American woman and has served the district for 40 years. She had previously served as a teacher, counselor, principal, and assistant superintendent. The chief financial officer is a White female and has led the district's business and finance departments for almost 20 years. Before her leadership position with the district, she worked in the corporate world and city government. The chief operations officer is an African American male. He joined the district 11 years ago, after 20 years of experience in human resources and the media. The chief of school leadership is a female of Chinese heritage. She joined the district 25 years ago and served as a teacher, principal, and central office administrator before being promoted to her current role. All

SLT members but one are graduates of one of the district high schools. Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics.

Table 1.  
Characteristics of Study Participants

<b>Leadership position</b>	<b>District tenure</b>	<b>Race or ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>District HS graduate?</b>	<b>Prior experience</b>
<b>Superintendent</b>	41 years total; last 16 in current position	African American	Female	Yes	Served as a teacher, principal, and central office administrator in the district.
<b>Chief of FACE</b>	40 years	African American	Female	Yes	Served as a teacher, counselor, principal, and assistant superintendent in the district.
<b>Chief Financial Officer</b>	20 years	White	Female	Yes	Worked in the corporate sector and city government before joining the district.
<b>Chief Operations Officer</b>	11 years	African American	Male	Yes	Twenty years of experience in human resources and the media prior to joining the district.
<b>Chief of School Leadership</b>	25 years	Chinese	Female	No	Served as a teacher, principal, and central office administrator before being promoted to her current role one year before the study was conducted.

Participants were selected for this study for three reasons. First, as a researcher-practitioner, I had existing relationships with them and access to valuable data, including a wide range of documents. Second, these leaders had the positional authority to sponsor district-wide initiatives and so were well positioned to describe how these initiatives came about. All participants were contacted personally and via email to participate in the study (Appendix G). Once they agreed to participate, each member of the SLT was provided with and signed an informed consent statement (Appendix A) prior to the initial interviews. Finally, the district's student demographics are diverse, and these participants represent the diversity of the district.

### **Researcher Perspective**

My identity as an African American woman, educator, and district employee informs my perspective as a practitioner-scholar and has shaped how I have collected, interpreted, and reported the data. Additionally, I served as the chief academic officer and was a member of the senior leadership team for seven years. For me as a practitioner-scholar, equity is an important issue. I believe that education is a vehicle for overcoming poverty and that improving academic outcomes for traditionally marginalized students is essential to dismantling inequity. My experience as an educator informs my view that systemic inequities are perpetuated through educational systems. Two factors contribute to this belief: public education funding structures and school improvement efforts. First, those funding structures rely on property values and reinforce inequities (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Lawton et al., 2011). Most states use a funding formula to allocate revenue for elementary and secondary education. The federal government provides approximately 8% of education funding, state revenues 47%, and local revenues 43% (Cornman et al., 2017). In my experience, communities with high property values have access to enough funds to support schools, and communities with low property values have less funding to support education. High-

poverty communities and schools with fewer resources and whose children have more challenges thus have to overcome more obstacles with less financial support. As to district improvement efforts, they are aimed at improving student success; however, without sufficient resources, such attempts are futile: “Rather than trying to eliminate these biases or ‘subjectivities,’ it is essential to identify them and monitor them in relation to the theoretical framework” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16).

### **Data Collection**

To complete this study, participant interviews and district documents served as data sources

**Interviews.** All interviews were completed onsite at times scheduled for participant convenience. Three interviews were conducted with each participant in the study. Interview questions were aligned with the conceptual framework and sought to identify actions that related to the implementation of the superintendent’s vision for equity (appendix B). In broad strokes, the first interview focused on the district context and leadership structure, the second interview dealt with the district’s improvement agenda, and the final interview focused on social justice and leadership for equity. Conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Recordings provided opportunities for active listening and supported preparation for follow-up questions when appropriate (Turner, 2010). Each participant was provided with a copy of the interview transcript to review before the next interview. The participants were encouraged to clarify statements or make corrections that they felt were necessary.

**Documents and artifacts.** In addition to interviews, a wide range of documents were collected to illustrate district policies and procedures that aligned with its efforts to pursue equity. Documents collected include district presentations, budget reports, state-reported data, school

board policies, district policies and procedures, meeting agendas, minutes, and accompanying documents and information posted on the district website (Appendices E and F).

## **Data Analysis**

I completed a thematic analysis of the data following procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved transcribing the data, loading them into MaxQDA, applying multiple rounds of descriptive codes, aggregating codes into categories, and finally reading across categories to develop themes. Throughout this process, memos were attached to artifacts and other data sources to articulate contextually relevant information. The first cycle of coding was largely iterative and involved NVivo coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In this phase, I focused on participants' words or phrases that might be responsive to the research questions or otherwise significant for the research. For example, I located a provisional definition of equity and examples of how equity was enacted; I coded these phrases with codes such as "definition of equity" and "equity initiatives." This approach had the benefit of reducing the data corpus to make further inquiry more efficient.

Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006), I applied a second cycle of coding that included descriptive codes with a higher level of inference. These codes spoke to my interpretations of the statements and thus were directly aligned with the study's research questions. Analysis of these descriptive codes led to the production of categories and ultimately the consolidation of categories into themes that were responsive to the research questions. Broad themes were supported by my analysis of the literature on district leadership (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Day et al., 2004; Higgins et al., 2012; Hirsh et al., 2014; Schlechty, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006), district improvement (Fullan, 2016; Hirsh et al., 2014; Honig, 2008; McKenzie & Locke, 2009; Meyers-Looze et al., 2019; Noguera, 2017; Schlechty, 2009; Stroh, 2015) and social justice leadership and



educational equity (Khalifa et al., 2016; Santamaría, 2014; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). Broadly, the three themes indicate a shared understanding of equity, how district priorities are determined and reflect equity, and how the allocation of resources reflects the commitment of the superintendent and senior leadership to equity. The final themes are presented in the findings section.

### **Ensuring Reliability and Trustworthiness**

The present study includes measures to improve reliability and trustworthiness in both data collection and analysis. First, I immersed myself in the research setting with participants by collecting data and understanding the organizational context, with which I was already familiar (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Second, data sources were triangulated (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation involves identifying how sources of data correspond with one another. Generally, findings in qualitative research that are supported across multiple datasets and/or participant perspectives are considered more trustworthy. Third, member-checking was undertaken with all participants to allow them to review and make any necessary corrections to the interview transcripts (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following the completion of the analysis, participants also had a chance to review preliminary patterns or themes to ensure that they reflected the reality in the district and their interpretations of the district’s equity work.

### **Limitations**

This study was situated in a single school district and reports on the experience of a limited number of SLT members. As such, its context is bound to the organization, and the conclusions may not transfer to other districts that might serve similar students but approach equity issues in

different ways. Furthermore, this study did not include interviews with central office directors, supervised by the SLT nor were principals interviewed. Nonetheless, the study provides valuable insights into how this district's leadership team enacted their superintendent's vision for equity and what processes, structures, and initiatives were used to support that work. This information could be informative to leaders in other settings and provide insights into how a social justice vision is enacted at by senior district-level administrators. It might thus be of value for other superintendents seeking to take on social justice issues.

## Chapter 4

### Research Findings

This study takes place in Ford City Schools (pseudonym), an urban district in the Midwest. The district enrolls approximately 29,000 students and operates 50 schools. The former superintendent led the school system for 17 years before her retirement and was responsible for cultivating many of the district's initiatives, including those related to equity. During her tenure, the superintendent led the district to adopt equity practices; however, there is no board-approved vision for equity. Rather, that vision is encapsulated within the district's larger vision statement, which is that "Ford City Schools will be the school system of choice and a source of community pride." The statement emphasizes "choice" and "community pride" but does not specifically mention equity. Nevertheless, equity is asserted in the district's core values, one of which reads as follows: "We value student achievement as the heart of our work; equity in educational opportunities; and the diversity and uniqueness of our district and community." Here, the commitment to "equity in educational opportunity" is just as evident as the district's recognition of its "diversity and uniqueness." Another goal states that the district will "achieve and maintain academic excellence [and] eliminate the achievement gap among all groups of students by maximizing the achievement of all." Dr. Cindy Smith (pseudonym), the superintendent, describes additional values that inform the district's commitment to equity, which

goes back to the concept of the moral purpose and the Triple P. You look at the fact that your employees, your students. First of all, what's the vision we're trying to have for where we want people to go? And our whole vision is kids graduate, being productive, responsible citizens. Triple P, the personalization, precision professional learning, and

then “all means all” in the middle. What does all that mean, as we plan stuff? That's why the triple P was so important.

As Dr. Smith explains, the “moral purpose and triple P” refers to the district’s core beliefs and vision, which rest on the values of personalization, precision, and professional learning. The core value is a commitment to equity, which is represented by three words: “all means all.” The values emphasize that students will be provided “personalized” support, educators will use data to identify “precise” needs, and staff will be provided with “professional learning” to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for achieving the vision. These values support the superintendent’s vision for equity.

Further analysis suggests that SLT members work as stewards of the superintendent’s vision. Two SLT members explained how the superintendent’s and school board adopted mission, vision, and goals are interconnected and broadly support the district’s equity commitments. First, William (pseudonym), Chief Operations Officer, explains how the school board’s vision, mission and goals influenced the superintendent’s equity vision:

The board establishes or has established a mission and vision. And once the board has set those broad parameters, the superintendent works within those parameters to make sure that what she or he is trying to accomplish, how it fits. So essentially the superintendent's vision is reflected in the district’s mission and vision.

William suggests that the superintendent’s vision mirrors the values established by the board. The superintendent’s responsibility is to operate within those guidelines. The board-adopted policies provide a basis for the superintendent’s equity-related work. This view of the district’s mission, vision, and goals reflecting the superintendent’s vision was reiterated by Carrie (pseudonym), the

Chief Financial Officer: “All the district’s priorities should be within the goals that have been set out. Let me back up; the priorities would lead to the goals. So whatever the priorities are would have to fit in with the superintendent’s vision for the district.” Carrie is referring to three board-adopted goals, which state that the Ford City Schools will “Achieve and maintain academic excellence, engage parents and the community, and operate effectively with integrity and fiscal responsibility.” Carrie’s statement that priorities have to fit with the superintendent’s vision suggests that those priorities—although they are intended to achieve board-approved goals—are crafted in a manner that accords with the superintendent’s vision. These guiding values articulate the district’s beliefs and thus support the superintendent’s leadership in identifying and enacting the district’s vision for equity. Indeed, phrases such as "value student achievement, equity of opportunities, and diversity and uniqueness of district community" indicate that, on some level, discussions of equity have occurred and that the superintendent’s vision might be contributing to this perspective and commitment.

### **Establishing a Collective Understanding of Equity**

Dr. Cindy Smith is a long-serving superintendent and an exception to traditional superintendents, particularly in urban settings. She is a Black female serving in a role predominantly held by White men. Her career as an educator in the same district spanned more than 40 years and included time as a teacher, principal, and administrator in various roles. Most notably, she served as the district’s superintendent for fourteen years, a remarkably long tenure compared with other superintendents. Finally, her background as an urban educator has contributed to her efforts to ensure diversity among the district’s SLT and to promote work related to equity. Indeed, she has sought to create a senior team that seeks to institutionalize a commitment

to equity while being responsive to the community and its political realities. Dr. Smith saw her efforts as characterized by a commitment to “collective accountability,” which she defined as

the whole concept that this entire district, everybody in this district knew they have a role in making sure that we had the right environment and we’re doing the right thing for kids. Everyone had a role. I knew what mine was. But that leadership has to be shared and people have to realize what their role in leadership is supposed to be.

Dr. Smith suggests that creating conditions to support student success was an organizational expectation. Additionally, when she states that “leadership has to be shared,” she illustrates that she allowed others to engage in leadership and did not exclude them from helping to set the direction of the district.

The data suggest that the superintendent and SLT thus developed a collective understanding of equity that informed their shared leadership practice. This understanding served as a focus for their efforts to develop programs responsive to the needs of the diverse community they serve. The district codified this commitment in a written statement, which was obtained during the completion of this study. It states, for example, the district commits to educating “all students to high standards through the implementation and monitoring of systems and structures that address the individual academic, emotional, and social needs of students, families, and staff supported by differentiated resources and processes.” This statement broadly encapsulates the district’s approach to ensuring that all students are provided with the resources and supports necessary to achieve academically. Further, it motivates the district’s SLT to adopt initiatives and deploy resources to equitably support students. Key administrators collectively created the equity statement, and it anchors how the commitment to equity is approached.

The data also suggest that Dr. Smith's professional and personal experiences influence her conception of equity and bind SLT members with one another. For example, Dr. Smith said that her family was considered poor but was rich in love. Her description of her childhood was an especially frequent topic in her first interview; it contributed to how she approaches her leadership role and shapes her purpose as an educator: "I was supposed to go find more (children) to give them what I had, which was the way out for me was education." Her explanation suggests an education can indeed be a path out of poverty. The equity commitment prepared by the superintendent and her SLT reflects a concept for equity, which Dr. Smith explains as follows:

For me, equity is you don't give every child the same; equity is translated into a plan for every child. You fill in and support; you provide the right resources and make sure that every child has the opportunity to get as far as they can get.

Dr. Smith's statement illustrates how equity involves providing opportunities and resources for students while also understanding that each student has his or her own strengths and challenges. The analysis also suggests that the superintendent's experiences and beliefs likely informed the written equity statement and perhaps the initiatives to improve student success. In the third interview, Dr. Smith continued to share her definition of equity and elaborated on it as follows:

I think it's the fact that it's almost like Malcolm [Malcolm X] said: "by any means necessary." I mean, I think that equity of resources and time and talent and everything else, you take every child where they are; you have a clear idea of where they need to get to be successful, which obviously you're going to have to adjust as time goes on. Then, you provide the right resources and support to make sure that every child has the opportunity to get as far as they can get. Now, we set a low bar; you got to graduate. So the minimum

for kids is to be able to graduate, but then after they graduate, they can't do anything with the degree. Then, all we've done is gotten them out of the school system, you know, by counting credits. So, then the idea of equity—that's why it's so hard to define because you have to have a commitment that wherever the child is, wherever the culture with all the stuff they bring, you're going to fill in and support.

Collectively, these quotes suggest equity-focused leaders are committed to reform and allocate resources differently to meet diverse student needs and acknowledge a wide range of backgrounds. Additionally, the reference to “equity of resources and time and talent and everything else” needed to help a child succeed suggests that these district leaders take a highly differentiated approach to resource allocation. In fact, this vision is encapsulated in the work that SLT members have undertaken in their own areas.

Interviews with other SLT members suggest that they hold similar views about equity and share a comparable interpretation of the district's values. A review of the district SLT's backgrounds revealed that Dr. Smith hired three of the four SLT members who participated in this study. They shared similar personal and professional backgrounds and spoke to a similar hope for the district. All saw their leadership in the district as connected to the superintendent's vision for equity. Mary, the SLT member with the longest tenure and the individual who is responsible for programs that support homeless students and families, enrollment services, and counselors and social workers, explained equity as follows:

Equity involves ensuring that all students receive what they need; not ensuring that everybody has the same thing, but making sure that we know what the needs are. One



student may have greater needs than another, but whatever their need is... we need to make sure that we are providing that.

Mary's explanation reveals an awareness of the importance of customizing students' academic, social, and emotional support to achieve success. In addition, her statement indicates a first-hand knowledge of the challenges of students and families. Mary continued to share her understanding of equity and how it influences the work of leaders:

When you think about equity, [children] who didn't have what other kids had at home and because you're monitoring so closely, you're able to catch and realize they really can't do this work. They just haven't had the opportunity to do the work. And if we put the right kinds of interventions in place, all of those kids can succeed.

Mary's statement suggests that the diversity of Ford City Schools students influences district initiatives, as is shown by recognizing students' varied backgrounds and emphasizing the academic needs of students with fewer resources. Carrie, the Chief Financial Officer, also offered an understanding of equity as reflected in the programs and services the district provides for students:

We want to make sure that all students have the same opportunity for educational programs, no matter what school they go to, so that they have access to the arts and to music and high-ability activities or learning. It wouldn't matter what school a child goes to, or what their race is, or what their disability is; they would all have access to the same kind of education.

Carrie's description of equity suggests that students should have access to a well-rounded educational experience, regardless of neighborhood or school, and the school district is responsible

for fostering those experiences. Additionally, Carrie's understanding of equity and how it influences discussions becomes clear in this remark:

I will say in any conversation we've ever had about how to support a school, whether it be with administration or additional staffing, it's always been done in a way that has been equitable based on the needs of a school and without favoritism. I guess I want to say it wouldn't be based on the loudest voice or the nicest person; it's based on what is the right thing to do for each individual school to make sure that we can have an equitable outcome.

Carrie's remarks suggest that individual building needs are a consideration when determining the allocation of resources. Collectively, these leaders acknowledge need-based support for student success. Finally, Jane, the SLT member who supervises principals, described the superintendent's vision and indirectly equity by discussing schools with students who have significant challenges:

I appreciate the fact that Dr. Smith had that inward moral compass of equity for all students. And that was my moral compass also. It was a strong moral compass to ensure that all students had access to a high-quality education. And I really appreciate that about this district; while we may not be the most high-performing district in the state, I know for a fact that we have a moral imperative to make sure that we do what's best for students and that we address our students' needs as best we can.

Here, Jane nicely captures the superintendent's equity motivation. The term "moral compass" suggests the superintendent's equity motivation is intrinsic and based on her core values. Additionally, Jane describes her understanding of equity in the context of student support based on need, which was a perspective shared by all the SLT members:

We always try to find what we can do to support our groups of students who need extra help; those were always forefront in her [Dr. Smith's] mind: let's put our resources in with our Title I schools; let's make sure that we help those students who need the most help first.

Jane's statement suggests that students attending schools identified as high need are a priority, whether based on poverty rankings or poor academic performance. Being in priority status means a school may be considered for supplemental resources, including funding, to assist with its students' academic, social, and emotional needs. In summary, Dr. Smith and the SLT collectively have a common understanding of equity and its importance in Ford City Schools that is rooted in differential student needs and a shared desire to promote academic success in a tailored but ultimately equitable manner.

### **Advancing the Superintendent's Vision through District Initiatives**

To operationalize their vision for equity, participants described instituting various initiatives that were led by members of the SLT and often closely aligned with their individual areas of responsibility. Dr. Smith offered one overarching description of her approach, which was supported by other members of the SLT. Using a facilities-related example, she recalled establishing a baseline to which all schools would be held:

I think the first thing that I had to do when I became superintendent was, "Where's the line I'm not going below?" So let's stop jerking around. Some of the buildings are absolutely unfit. I wouldn't want to go to school there. So let's set a standard, which is why we got into the referendum. Some of the materials that we're using... it depends on where you are. So let's establish a curriculum that sets a standard for what the curriculum

should look like. Technology: look at all the changes we made with technology. This school has all the technology in the world. This one has none. No, that's why you have the tech committee. What's the standard—not based on who cries the loudest or who is a tech freak—but what is it that we want to have happen? And so when you look at all of those—the physical resources, curriculum resources, and then all the tech resources—what's the standard that equity plays a part?

The quote suggests that district expectations in curricular materials, technology, and school facilities were developed during Dr. Smith's tenure as superintendent with the target of establishing minimums that would serve every child. To facilitate this, she asked the community to approve funding for updating school facilities. This was a commitment she and the community made to provide all students with a positive learning environment, regardless of neighborhood.

To support these minimum standards, the SLT was charged with identifying initiatives, programs, and services to address specific student needs. Three of the four SLT members suggested that the SLT's process for determining priorities was important to identifying equity initiatives. William, Chief of Operations, described the process when an initiative is considered:

The superintendent discusses with someone at our level, one of the chiefs. When we are establishing priorities, we have a process, the project management process, where we go through a thorough vetting of what it is we're trying to accomplish. We refine the idea until we have a clear objective, a timeline, the resources necessary. Who will be in charge at a day-to-day level? Who is the cabinet sponsor? And then the cabinet sponsor will bring reports back to the cabinet. So, it's a thorough process.

His description suggests that SLT members conduct a comprehensive analysis when identifying new initiatives. The SLT considers the needs of traditionally marginalized students and families during the analysis and vetting of proposed initiatives. There are no formal protocols to guide these conversations; however, each SLT member is free to raise questions or challenge initiatives as part of the vetting process. When the SLT reaches a consensus in support of an initiative, the lead SLT member for the initiative is responsible for convening an interdepartmental team to start the planning process. This means that resources from across the district are often brought to bear in service of the equity goals identified.

The process for identifying district initiatives is one in which senior leaders collaborate to leverage resources from other district divisions. The superintendent establishes this norm, but the SLT members carry out the vision in their respective areas. Mary, for example, described how she knows district initiatives have been successful and what she thinks contributes to their success:

So level collaboration, department collaboration, administrator collaboration, when we were doing that and having conversations and really looking at data as a department or as a team, as QIT [Quality Improvement Team], then we saw movement because everybody's having the same conversation.

Mary's description suggests that collaboration at various levels in the organization is vital and thus expected for the successful implementation of initiatives. She also referred to collaboration between departments involved in curriculum and instruction, human resources, technology, and special education. Mary's description indicates that collaboration among multiple departments and levels around equity initiatives has concrete benefits. To facilitate these processes, a review of district planning documents suggests interdepartmental teams are convened and sometimes consist

of coordinators or directors from other departments who will have a role in implementing or monitoring an initiative. This cross-functional approach is central to advancing the superintendent's vision and to ensuring that responsibility for it is distributed.

The distributed nature of the process was echoed across SLT members. For example, Carrie, the Chief of Schools, described participating in allocating personnel and supplemental funds to schools with diverse needs. She shared how collaboration influences her efforts to achieve equity at the school level:

I also love the fact that we all have a strong voice in each other's work; we've modeled such a sense of interdependence with one another and in our work, and we pushed back on each other. We don't always agree, but we always get back together and solve our problems; that model, that whole idea of inclusive thinking and flexible mindset that we want to see in our schools.

Carrie's statement indicates that interdepartmental collaboration is expected and shapes the direction of initiatives. For instance, planning one of the district's initiatives—developing and implementing a multi-tiered system of support—involved representatives from the special education department, student services, and the coordinators of Positive Behavior Intervention Supports. The planning and implementation team members included men, women, individuals with disabilities, and people from different racial and ethnic groups. A review of district planning documents indicates that the configuration of the planning team provided the kind of inclusive and divergent thinking that Carrie described. The collaborative nature of this work broadly supported the district's commitment to equity and was principally facilitated by the superintendent and the SLT. In conclusion, in conjunction with the SLT, the superintendent established district

expectations and developed a vetting and planning process that is collaborative and centered on addressing student needs.

The data analysis suggests that the district's equity initiatives are often multi-dimensional and focus on students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Indeed, students' academic success is central to the Ford City Schools vision and mission. The superintendent and three of the four SLT members referred to improved student achievement as a goal for the district, which has clear implications for equity. Carrie, the Chief of Schools, said the district goal is to "ensure that all students had access to a high-quality education." Her statement indicates that teaching and learning are essential to promoting equity. Mary, the Chief of FACE, stated that "academic achievement is, and always has been for all superintendents, our number one priority." Her statement and subsequent comments indicate that although leaders may change, student achievement is critical to SLT goals and thus may be an enduring part of a superintendent's legacy. Jane, the Chief of Financial Officer, noted that academic achievement prompted the district to make changes "to curriculum or curriculum writing" as one way to improve instructional delivery. Jane's statement indicates that writing and revising curricula is an initiative to influence teaching by providing district-wide instructional strategies. The SLT's commitment to student success was operationalized by an initiative to develop a district curriculum and instructional support that involved professional learning and instructional coaching.

Beyond academic achievement, the district's initiatives have expanded to consider the conditions for learning, such as students' and families' physical, social, and emotional needs. Some basic needs and social and emotional needs are considered essential to improving student success. Mary, Chief of FACE, is responsible for the district's student support services, which are located

at the FACE Center. Mary described the purpose of the FACE Center and how it connects to the equity commitment as follows:

FACE is the quality service arm of this district. FACE is supposed to be the one-stop shop. They [staff] don't realize whether that parent has transportation or not, or what [type of] struggle it was for them to get to the place they ended up.

Mary's description shows that the FACE Center is a focal point for parents and families. The term "one-stop-shop" indicates that parents and families can address multiple student issues in a single context. District strategic planning documents indicate the following services and programs are available at FACE: immunizations, registration and enrollment, access to college and career support, resources and support for homeless families, and social and emotional support with access to counselors and therapists. Her comment that "they don't realize whether that parent has transportation not, or what [type of] struggle it was for them" proposes that some Ford City Schools staff are not fully apprised of every student's situation. Mary explained that her role, social justice, and equity are interconnected: "When I think about my modeling social justice, I am starting to put things back in people's lap and saying, well, whose job is that? Let's do something about it." The statement about modeling social justice and "starting to put things back in people's lap" suggests Mary holds other staff accountable for providing equitable services. In addition to discussing the non-academic needs of students that are addressed at the FACE Center, Mary also noted how the equity work centered on students' academic experiences in the classroom:

When I think about serving parents and students, I think about an obligation to ensure that their students are learning at high levels and graduating at high levels and receiving a



rigorous curriculum and powerful pedagogy. I think it was always around student achievement and moving those scores.

Her statement illustrates how teachers and principals create positive learning environments that include a “rigorous curriculum and powerful pedagogy” that can potentially improve students’ chances of learning at a high level. It also indirectly implies how “serving parents and students” may include conditions for learning outside the classroom. An analysis of planning documents and presentations suggests that the district initiative to provide a range of services at the FACE Center aligns with the commitment articulated in the district’s collective equity statement. The availability of clothing, personal care items, immunization, and healthcare referrals at the FACE Center shows that it serves the “individual academic, emotional, and social needs of students, and families ... supported by differentiated resources.”

Each SLT member acknowledges that the superintendent’s vision is implemented through initiatives to provide equity and improve student success. However, two SLT members had different perspectives on the initiatives. Carrie stated, “I don’t think there was ever an initiative that Cindy Smith came upon that she didn’t like if she knew it was going to help students achieve.” Carrie’s comment has three implications. First, it acknowledges that Dr. Smith’s vision and purpose were clear, and that student success is important. Second, it communicates that there was a significant degree of vetting and analysis of any initiative before it was implemented. Finally, it indicates that the superintendent and SLT attempted a several initiatives and did not limit their equity approach to a single effort. Carrie’s description implies that multiple best-practice initiatives could be implemented but might result in a lack of focus. Mary’s perspective on the vision and initiatives is slightly different:

So I felt like we were more cohesive. I think everybody understood her vision, and I don't think they thought it was a philosophical vision. I think some people later on began to feel like we're doing all this philosophical talk up here. You know, even though we have these models and everything like that, it really is a philosophical conversation. Back when we were making great gains, it was a grassroots conversation.

Mary's statement hints that there was a change over time, with her reference to "later on." This reflective position continues with her remark about great gains and a grassroots conversation. These two statements propose that the vision and grassroots work involve staff at multiple organizational levels and are necessary for student success. Finally, Mary's statement, coupled with a previous comment that "when we get to a place where we're not monitoring closely, then we lose that equity lens," suggests that linking the vision to accountability throughout the organization results in student success. Carrie's and Mary's description of the vision and initiatives suggests that the vision was clearly understood; however, over time, changing initiatives might have contributed to the perception that the district's commitment to equity was becoming hazier. However, analysis suggests that this may be because the district is leveraging external partners and other assets, as I discuss below.

### **Using External Partners to Advance Equity Goals**

External partners were often enlisted to support the district's equity initiatives and help advance work in situations where SLT members did not have the requisite knowledge or skills to lead that work on their own. For example, the SLT recognized the need to use research-informed best practices to better serve the needs of students, improve responsiveness to student and family needs, and meet state and federal accountability requirements. In an interview describing district

initiatives, Carrie, the Chief of Schools, stated, “one of the district priorities was to connect globally with research.” To achieve this aim, Ford City Schools leveraged relationships with external partners to examine how other school systems were addressing equity for traditionally marginalized populations. For example, the district took advantage of connections with external partners like Learning Forward, Michael Fullan, and the Wallace Foundation to provide district-level professional learning and support focused on best practices for reducing inequities. This learning helped build the district’s overall capacity for equity work.

The external partners enlisted by the district offered access to strategies used by other school systems to achieve improved outcomes in areas that impact equity goals. Learning Forward, for example, was selected as an external partner because of its focus on facilitating professional learning and supporting school systems to improve teacher practice. The superintendent’s prior experience with Michael Fullan’s research and strategies regarding systems thinking was a catalyst for the Ford City Schools partnership with New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL). When discussing district initiatives and partnerships, Mary noted the following: “I do think Deep Learning is one of those initiatives that is culturally responsive because it really provides an education strategy that cuts through socioeconomic status. It cuts through ethnicity and provides a rigorous, solid pedagogy for all students.” NPDL’s framework for working with stakeholders to create learning conditions that will increase student engagement and success influences how Ford City Schools approaches teaching and learning. The NPDL framework focuses on four areas: digital, pedagogical practices, learning environments, and learning partnerships. The NPDL partnership was one strategy used by the district to provide equitable instruction for a diverse student population and ideally improve students’ academic success.

The Wallace Foundation, which is known for its leadership development research, contributed to the district's efforts to recruit a diverse leadership pipeline. Ford City Schools was awarded two grants and additional support to design leadership programs for principals. The Ford City Schools aspiring leader program was influenced by Wallace Foundation-supported research. During his second interview, William described district initiatives aligned with the superintendent's equity commitment: "We were working with the Wallace Foundation, but prior to working with the Wallace Foundation, probably four years ago maybe, we had started working on equity, and we wrestled with it." William's statement suggests that the research and support provided by the Wallace Foundation assisted in the district's "work" to address equity. My analysis indicated that the initiatives established by the superintendent and SLT are bolstered by external partnerships that directly or indirectly support the superintendent's commitment to equity.

### **Initiatives that Support Equity Are Interrelated**

Reviewing the interviews and documents made it clear that the superintendent's vision depends to a significant degree on the senior leaders' ability to implement equity initiatives that are interrelated and seek to address multiple aspects of student needs. Ford City Schools' leaders have conceptualized their equity work across departments, system levels, and diverse constituencies. One such effort involves the Pyramid for Success, a district-wide framework focused on students' readiness to learn. The superintendent explained it:

The priorities for a district like Ford City Schools have to be set through the lens of the Pyramid for Success, with the readiness to learn on one side and the academics on the other. Our concept of readiness to learn, knowing that there's the social-emotional aspect, you know, when kids come from diverse

backgrounds and have diverse needs has to be as strong as the academics because you can't teach them until you know them. They can't perform academically until they overcome some of the gaps they bring.

As this comment makes clear, the district has taken a systematic approach to addressing equity needs, as is reflected in the language on the district website: "Our system to ensure that all students are successful is called the Pyramid for Success. The Pyramid comprises three tiers of supports that become more intense and personalized for students who need remediation or to be challenged further." The pyramid includes components such as universal screening related to the student's academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs. As stated on the website, "whatever the student's current level is, our goal is to assist and challenge him or her to increase his or her level of success." The pyramid for success is similar to the Multi-Tiered System of Supports described in research but reflects the superintendent's vision for equity. It blends support for different student needs with a commitment to ensure opportunity for underserved students. Indeed, the district has situated some of its initiatives in the pyramid of success. Strategic planning documents and the district website show that all students are provided "universal" or district-wide instruction and support while also receiving additional resources based on their "current level." The pyramid of success provides a loose framework for situating initiatives aligned with a Multi-Tiered System of Support.

District initiatives support the development of personalized plans for student success. Personalization is an important predictor of equity. For example, an initiative to respond to students' and families' social, emotional, and behavioral needs includes deploying a social-emotional curriculum, providing therapists in elementary schools, and adding school counselors at middle and high schools. A review of district documents reveals that a standard social-emotional

curriculum is provided to all schools. The data reviewed show that some students need additional behavioral or social-emotional support. The addition of counselors and therapists to provide small-group or individual support aligns with the tiered support described by the pyramid of success. A review and analysis of planning documents and meeting notes show that the successful implementation of this initiative led to improved school climate data in areas like “suspensions, expulsions, due process requests and number of students in alternative programs.” My analysis of the data indicates that the SLT perceives the Pyramid of Success as a system that includes “the readiness to learn and academic supports” needed to facilitate a personalized plan based on a student’s “current level” to assist each student “increase his or her level of success.”

In general, initiatives central to social-emotional well-being and academic success are addressed simultaneously because the superintendent and SLT believe that adopting that approach will help students achieve at higher levels because affective and academic needs are interconnected. Even as these needs of students were being addressed, another initiative was introduced and supported by the superintendent and the SLT. It required eighth grade students to take algebra, which was described by a consultant as a “gateway” course during a meeting with the SLT. He explained that students’ success in Algebra would influence whether they went on to participate and be successful in higher-level mathematics courses. Prior to this initiative, Algebra began in the ninth grade, and course data analysis indicated that many students did not take rigorous mathematics courses once they completed algebra. Dr. Smith’s description of this initiative is as follows:

We started the initiative to have all eighth graders taking algebra, which is some of those structural things because you can’t just talk about a philosophy without putting structures

in place, and then define that cultural, the lack of cultural responsiveness and understanding of the adults, and particularly the ones teaching algebra were such a strong roadblock.

Dr. Smith's description reflects an organizational-level change to accelerate the mathematics course progression with the aim of increasing students' access to high-level mathematics courses. Her remarks also reveal the need to address the beliefs and expectations adults have about students' ability to be successful in mathematics: for her, district leaders need to "define that [culture]" and respond to "the lack of cultural responsiveness and understanding of the adults." Finally, her statement suggests that structural changes in an organization may also necessitate shifting the expectations of its members.

Mary also acknowledged the algebra initiative as a mechanism to improve student success and move toward equity. She was asked to discuss how the superintendent and SLT addressed equity:

[Dr. Smith] talked about kids who were not getting what they needed as a support. And so I think people understood that her vision was to have equitable access and to have kids in AP courses and graduating at high [levels]; you know, getting scholarships and things like that. So I think that was her way. This whole deal was eighth grade algebra. That was one way to level the playing field.

Mary's statement shows that access to high-level courses, academic support, and tutoring was not available to all students; some students' requirements were not being met. Dr. Smith and the SLT advocated for and then required schools to provide extended learning time to support student participation in challenging courses. Algebra I is an example of an initiative aligned with the commitment of the superintendent and the SLT to equity by accelerating the course progression

and providing additional instructional support to increase students' likelihood of academic success. This initiative and the superintendent's description also suggest that organizational changes may be needed to support improved success for students. Another organizational shift suggested by the data is resource allocation. The following section focuses on how resource allocations are connected to and support district initiatives in the service of equity.

### **Allocating Resources Strategically to Support Equity-Focused Work**

The preceding analysis speaks to a larger approach to supporting equity-focused work. Notably, Ford City Schools' initiatives necessitated strategic resource allocation to support the district's equity commitment. The district achieved this aim through the implementation of systems and structures that address the individual academic, emotional, and social needs of students, families, and staff, supported by differentiated resources and processes. The initiatives discussed above—additional counselors and therapists, social-emotional needs, Algebra I, and professional learning—required reallocating human and financial resources.

The district's financial documentation suggests that student diversity and academic needs influence resources. Personnel and instructional resources reflect most of the Ford City Schools budget. Carrie, the Chief Financial Officer, noted that equity influences the allocation of resources by shaping how base-level resources are deployed and then augmented with additional resources directly connected to equity: "There's a first layer of resources that are equal. And then there's another layer that provides equity." Carrie's statement shows that the district allocates resources to ensure that all students have access to the same fundamental programs and services. However, the diverse needs of students often necessitate different resources that are then added to the first layer. For example, an ELL receives both core instruction and instruction for language acquisition.



Students who qualify for special education services will also receive specialized instruction to meet their individual education plan goals. Other students might receive core and small-group instruction with Title I support and additional instructional time after school or in a Saturday School program. These examples suggest that the needs of individual buildings or students are considered by the SLT when making staff and funding decisions. This consideration is sometimes referred to as the district's internal complexity determination. An examination of how the internal complexity determination is applied shows that is used more often to schools that are designated to receive Title I funds. Carrie continued her description of when equity-based resources are provided:

The resource allocation; there's the baseline, and then there's ELL added, and special ed added, and there's an additional administrative assistant because a school has high poverty, and there's case managers in elementary schools, or there's counselors in high school that can help a lot. Some of that is done equally, and some of that is done based on the complexity of a school. Our internal complexity index included what percentage of the student body is special ed, what percentage was functional skills, and what percentage was ELL. Did they have a high population in the building compared to a smaller school? So therefore, that's why they would need more.

Carrie's statement illuminates how school complexity is considered within the broader context of the district's funding process. "School complexity" is used to describe the diversity of students in a given school setting and the challenges associated with providing education. The state provides complexity funding. However, my analysis shows that Ford City Schools has an informal internal process to determine whether a school has needs above the funding allocated by the state. Carrie's statement confirms that there is a base funding allocation that all schools receive; however, the

more diverse the student population, the more resources or funding a school can receive. Another example Carrie cited was case managers in elementary schools. These professionals facilitate communication between schools and parents or guardians, recommending community agency support or resources when necessary; they are like a school social worker and provide an additional connection between schools and parents and families. Schools with extensive special education enrollment sometimes need additional teaching assistants or equipment. Those additional staff or materials may not be completely funded by state appropriations. Ford City Schools applied for and was awarded three multi-year competitive federal grants worth a total of more than \$16 million. Ford City Schools may have applied for grants to address gaps in funding. A budget planning and monitoring document shows that these financial resources facilitated equity-based resource allocations. The funds were used to add staff, provide professional learning, and support specialized instructional programs. Carrie's description indicates an informal, internally determined complexity mechanism that was used to enable bringing in additional personnel and equipment and help address equity issues.

### **Supporting Equity Work in Ford City Schools Through Recruiting, Hiring, and Professional Learning**

One of the overarching strategies employed by the district is to support equity-focused work through the strategic deployment of additional staffing and the use of professional learning to improve practice. SLT members consider the professional learning needs of district educators, community partnerships, and staff recruitment and hiring to be key measures of equity. This is particularly important given the chronic turnover in urban schools and the widespread recognition that less experienced teachers often staff schools serving significant proportions of lower-SES students. As Carrie noted, “a principal at a school who had a very young staff, I suppose there’s

pluses and minuses to that, but that could also create some inequities.” These inequities reveal the need for all schools have staff with the necessary skills and experience to meet the diverse needs of students. Professional learning to increase teachers’ knowledge and skills that can fulfill students’ academic and social-emotional needs is thus a significant investment. School improvement plans collected from the district indicate that more than half of Oak Street Elementary School’s (pseudonym) teaching staff had less than five years of teaching at the time of the study. The school has additional professional learning and curriculum support for the school’s teachers. The principal’s request was granted, and the necessary funds and time were allotted. As Carrie noted, “in the professional learning that we facilitate, I think [Dr. Smith’s] vision for equity is something that is integral in whatever initiatives we decide to pursue; it’s integral in how we allocate resources.” Carrie’s statement is yet more evidence that the superintendent’s commitment to equity led to concrete results. For example, providing algebra for all eighth grade students was an initiative that necessitated professional learning for middle school mathematics teachers during the summer and throughout the school year. It also required the purchase of additional curriculum materials. As a result, teachers were compensated for working during the summer while learning to write curricula while consultants facilitated curriculum development and trained teachers to use new instructional resources.

The SLT members also described how professional learning, subject area, and social-emotional curriculum implementation all support equity-based initiatives in Ford City Schools. For example, Mary described how the district’s efforts to develop a rigorous curriculum are coupled with professional learning: “The work we’re doing around curriculum; you know, how we are we making sure that all students are having a high-quality education that starts with what are we teaching them and how are we teaching them.” Her statement demonstrates that curriculum

development and professional learning to identify and support instruction are central to ensuring that all students have equitable access to the courses they need and that teachers have effective instructional strategies. For example, the district provided three weeks of summer professional learning in which over 300 teachers collaboratively designed a curriculum and identified strategies to facilitate instruction; they were compensated for engaging in the work. The curriculum development initiative exemplifies how leaders address equity by providing all students with core instruction. In addition to writing core curriculum content, the teachers also identified tier two intervention strategies to provide for “the individual academic needs of students, supported by differentiated resources.” My analysis shows that the curriculum development initiative was perceived by the SLT as a mechanism for addressing equity and illustrates how district resources, funding, and time were allocated. In addition, Jane described how professional learning supports educators’ effectiveness and their ability to help students. Finally, she referred to the role of resources and professional learning in developing educators’ knowledge and skills:

The resources mainly go-to professional learning for our teachers and for our principals. They are requesting professional leave to be a better educator, and that they are, addressing the individual needs of their student body; it is not only about making themselves a better educator but ensuring that they get the resources and professional learning that they need, that the students will benefit from the learning that they prove that they participated in.

Jane’s remarks confirm that resources are distributed to support staff engagement in professional learning based on a given school’s specific needs. In summary, three of four SLT members describe how professional learning is used by the SLT to support initiatives and facilitate change in educator practice and, ultimately, to meet the diverse needs of students.

School and community partnerships are also central to advancing the district’s work related to equity. The district engages community partners in programs to assist in student success. Mary, Chief of FACE, explains how using district personnel to support community partnerships and programs aid in student success. The purpose of community partnerships is to provide differentiated resources and support. She described resource allocations as follows: “So when I think about resources, mine has really been more in the way of personnel; finding ways to get personnel to certain places, to do training for staff, outside of us, that work with our kids.” Mary supports the district’s role as a partner with community organizations in educating students. Department planning documents show that partnerships with community organizations may demand additional district personnel to facilitate connections and opportunities so students can engage in education-related activities. For example, Ford City Schools has a partnership with The Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA, and other youth-focused organizations. These partnerships provide tutoring, before- and after-school care, and access to programs to support credit recovery. Another Ford City Schools program engages community partners to contribute resources that ensure that all interested students can access musical instruments and a certified music teacher. A third program cultivates partnerships with area companies; it allows employees to tutor or mentor students during business hours. These programs all have dedicated Ford City Schools employees who facilitate these partnerships and activities. Lastly, district leaders support “training” for external partners related to best educational practices. For example, tutors are trained to help students with reading or mathematics. Personnel in the district are designated to foster partnerships with community partners to support students. My analysis reveals that the community partnership approach is a mechanism to address the individual academic, emotional, and social needs of students and families.

Hiring practices are an area where the district has intentionally focused equity efforts. William, Chief Operations Officer and a former Director of Human Resources, shared his perspective on hiring staff: “My initial thoughts were to refine the hiring process and improve the quality of candidates that we recruited to work at the school district.” This shows that recruiting and hiring personnel are essential to effective educational programs and maximizing services for students. William’s reference to the quality of candidates, combined with Carrie’s remark about of inequities resulting from staff inexperience, is clear evidence that SLT members are cognizant of the need to hire staff with the specific knowledge and skills to address the academic, emotional and social needs of students and families. During his description of recruiting and hiring personnel, William also cited the need to use strategies to increase diversity among the staff, thus making it more reflective of the student population. These are his thoughts on an administrator intern and principal selection processes:

We have an aspiring leaders program, and what that program is teachers that want to become administrators go through a process, and they become interns. After their yearlong internship, they can become an assistant principal. There were some inherent biases in the process because people who were very familiar with some teachers and some principals couldn’t always distinguish their biases in the process of hiring the interns. So the first thing that we did was we removed, we reduced that group of people’s involvement in the hiring process of interns. Then we work with Battelle for Kids to develop the funnel. And so, we had a starting process and an ending process and a scoring process so that we could more have more data points. We have added a principal insight screener. We added a writing prompt. We added an equity portion to that. We added to the interview process. We added the chiefs, the HR director, and the professional learning director. That was the

interview team. The reason why we did that is we didn't know those people. We had rubrics. We did a lot of work on refining that process. And then at the end of the process, we selected the strongest candidates and put them into the internship program. I think what that did was it gave us a wider group of candidates, and it also expanded the type of candidates that we wound up with. We wound up with 10 candidates, eight women—no, nine women—and an African American male. Then we applied that funnel process to internal candidates who finished the internship program. And two people became principals: a woman and a Hispanic man, who I don't think would have become principals if we didn't have that thorough process. So we improved our diversity; we have equity. That was a part of the work we were trying to accomplish in equity, because our staff does not reflect our student population. We are a minority-majority district, so 52% of the kids are either African American, Hispanic, Burmese, Serbian, and 42% is Anglo White. That's not the way our administrators and teachers look.

William's description helps illuminate the process the district uses to identify and hire interns and to identify leaders for open positions. William's reference to inherent biases indicates that the process was not initially designed to limit biases that could influence the selection process, even if those biases were unconscious. His description shows that the former process involved leaders with significant knowledge and experience of building staff and thus may not have been completely objective in the selection process. The identification and selection process redesign for interns and principals included a funnel to reduce evaluator bias and supported a more equitable approach. The funnel included a leadership assessment tool, writing prompts, responses to scenarios, and the use of rubrics in the interview process. Additionally, each candidate was assigned a number instead of attaching names to candidates. By using the assessment tool and

rubrics, the focus was on determining which candidates had the prerequisite knowledge and skills to become a principal or assistant principal by employing mechanisms to decrease the potential for bias and subjective perceptions. Creating a less biased identification and selection process for potential leaders was perceived as more equitable by William and other SLT members who supported changing the process. Finally, William's acknowledgement that the staff of the district does not look like the community it serves makes it clear that the SLT recognized the challenges of hiring a more diverse staff. The internship and aspiring leaders programs are two examples of addressing equity in the recruitment and hiring process. My analysis also reveals that the planning and implementation of this program involved financial and time commitments by district leaders.

### **Chapter Summary**

Based on the analyses presented above, the SLT approaches equity as a collective responsibility that is driven by the long-time superintendent's vision and commitment. Dr. Smith led the district's equity work but depended on the SLT's capacity to bring multiple initiatives together and pursue a shared vision for equity. The success of this effort depends on a common understanding of equity, the identification and implementation of initiatives to advance equity goals, and the deployment of sufficient resources. These initiatives related to academic programming, social-emotional learning needs, and family engagement. In sum, these actions created conditions in the district that both enable responses to inequities across its operations while supporting a coherent understanding of equity as a personal duty for each SLT member.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The data and analyses presented in this thesis show that the superintendent's and SLT's shared understanding of equity were operationalized through interrelated initiatives that were sometimes supported by external partners and usually sustained through the strategic allocation of district resources. These initiatives were not narrowly focused on equity but rather aimed at the broader academic and social emotional needs of students and families. The district's SLT supported these efforts through recruitment, hiring, and professional learning. What is clear from the analysis is that the enactment of their shared vision required a collaborative relationship among SLT members, who worked as partners to identify existing initiatives or develop new ones in the service of equity. Overall, these findings suggests that equity-focused leadership at the district level may be more widely distributed than previously thought and that the superintendent and SLT collectively enact equity-focused leadership and collaboratively operationalize that leadership in the service of equity.

### **Connections to the Literature**

Public education is changing rapidly. Student enrollment is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse; in urban districts, there is rising economic and linguistic differentiation. Researchers have found that urban school systems are characterized by educator quality and retention issues, shifting demographics, and inequalities in funding (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lawton et al., 2011; Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018; NCES, 2018). These challenges contribute to the disparities in educational outcomes for students and thus drive the need for superintendents and their SLTs to enact leadership that focuses directly on combatting inequities. The findings in

the present study have connections to three distinct bodies of literature: district leadership, district improvement research, and social justice leadership. The following section discusses how these three themes and the findings are connected to scholarship.

### **District leadership.**

Research on district leadership prioritizes the importance of superintendents as central actors in most district decisions (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Superintendents cultivate a commitment to a variety of issues, including equity, through the development of district-wide goals and the strategic direction they set. This view is well documented by Waters and Marzano (2006), who describe how the superintendent enacts leadership by collaboratively establishing goals, setting direction, and supporting the district's leadership team. In the present study, Dr. Smith and members of the SLT shared beliefs about and held a collective understanding of equity that functioned like a framework for enacting the district's commitment to equity. This finding also reflects the SLT relationships, behaviors, and team functioning described in the district leadership literature (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Day et al., 2004). Indeed, previous research indicates that leaders set direction and manage team operations by establishing expectations, norms, and processes for communication (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Day et al., 2004). What is striking about the leadership demonstrated in this case study is that it occurred in a cross-departmental team structure. These teams were convened and worked together to design work plans to implement initiatives. This structure mirrors the best practices found in leadership research, which compares learning organizations and bureaucratic organizations and finds the former to be flexible and to create a supportive environment for both students and adults (Hirsh et al., 2014; Schlechty, 2009). The SLT's commitment to providing differentiated support for students and the importance of professional learning to change educator practices point to Ford City Schools as a learning

organization, so these behavioral attributes may be important for the implementation of equity initiatives at the district's senior level. In the present study, examples of differentiated student support included academic tier intervention built into the district curriculum, supplemental instruction such as tutoring programs with community partners, the addition of counselors and mental health professionals, and the development of the FACE Center and its various services. Staff were provided with professional learning to facilitate instructional differentiation and learn strategies to address students' social-emotional needs. Each of these accomplishments resulted from the SLT's commitment and directly support equity. Finally, although much of the literature focuses on the superintendent's role, my primary finding is that the SLT and superintendent share leadership for equity, especially in terms of its implementation. Further research is needed to understand how this sharing occurs and can be cultivated where it does not yet exist.

**District improvement.** Equity is also important for district improvement goals. Improvement research focuses on change processes, establishing district goals, and the quality of teaching and learning. As previously mentioned, district priorities were determined by the superintendent and the SLT. The findings show that the Ford City Schools priorities emerged through a district-wide change process. The literature has shown that change processes have multiple stages, including identifying a need, engaging stakeholders, and focusing on improvement through implementation and monitoring (Fullan, 2016; Meyers-Looze et al., 2019; Stroh, 2012). The findings in the present study point to the importance of this being a collaborative process. This process requires introducing and implementing initiatives *across* rather than *within* units. This practice could speak to future directions in educational leadership, which have increasingly emphasized the importance of networks in shepherding large-scale reforms. However, given the

limitations and scope of this study, more work is needed to understand whether this is true or if this district is a case of a networked organization.

**Social justice leadership in service of equity.** Finally, this study makes an additional contribution to the district-level research on social justice leadership by showing that the team's behaviors and decisions were grounded in social justice and culturally responsive principles and that social justice leadership became the operative ethos of the SLT. George Theoharis (2007) describes four strategies that socially just leaders enact: raising student achievement, improving school structures, recentering and enhancing staff capacity, and strengthening the school culture and community. The superintendent and SLT jointly engaged in all four social justice behaviors. Specifically, they improved district (school) structures, enhanced staff capacity, strengthened the district culture and community by responding and reaching out to families and community actors, and employed a number of strategies to improve student achievement, sometimes with the assistance of outside organizations. Two examples of improved structures are interdepartmental collaboration and changing the mathematics progression. Collaboration was a norm established by the superintendent and enacted by the SLT and the departments that reported to them. Collaboration occurred at multiple levels in the organization in the planning and implementing of initiatives in the service of equity.

Next, allocating district resources to support need-based staffing and professional learning was employed to address the differentiated needs of schools and to increase staff capacity. District diversity was the catalyst for the FACE Center, hiring additional staff based on school needs, and engaging in increased interdepartmental collaboration. The superintendent's and SLT's appreciation of and respect for diversity were evidenced by strategies to create an inclusive environment that would meet the diverse needs of students, families, and staff. Specific strategies

included providing interpreters, language translation services for families, and revamping hiring processes to be more inclusive. Finally, although there are no data to substantiate improved student achievement, the curriculum and instruction initiatives employed by the SLT were aimed at that goal. Specifically, the development of a district-wide curriculum, the adoption of common instructional strategies, and the use of the deep learning framework supported improved student achievement. In summary, these activities speak to a demonstration of social justice leadership in practice; thus, this study offers further documentation of the potential shape that these actions might take in a large urban school system.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The SLT and superintendent employed leadership behaviors loosely reflective of those discussed in the district improvement and social justice leadership research. My findings also indicate that shared leadership was largely undertaken in service of equity. The team used an informal but rigorous process to identify and vet initiatives to improve student outcomes. Many district initiatives focused on students' and families' academic and social-emotional needs. Initiatives were planned and implemented in a collaborative approach and included a diverse team of district leaders. External partners also provided guidance and insight when appropriate. Additionally, the allocation of district resources supported district initiatives to address equity. It is noted that Ford City Schools had significant external resources to support this work and its experience may differ from a district with fewer resources. Funding for need-based staffing and professional learning was central to resource allocation and equity goals. These findings offer clear implications for practitioners, including the following:

- Setting and maintaining a commitment to equity is vital for district leadership

- Sharing leadership in support of equity initiatives enhances the district’s ability to achieve equity at all levels
- Creating initiatives may be less important than identifying and linking those that already exist
- Centering the conversation on student and family needs requires structures that allow the district to identify and document those needs over time

In conclusion, the findings from this research largely affirm existing interpretations of social justice leadership but expand on them to showcase how SLT members can—and perhaps must—be involved. Future research is needed to understand how these initiatives are maintained across units and whether they improve student outcomes while also contributing to equity. It was noted that monitoring and evaluation elements of the change process were not evident and thus knowing how districts develop these systems would be beneficial in future research. Further study of the initiatives’ implementation, monitoring, and evaluation might reveal their effectiveness—or lack thereof—while providing insight into the leadership behaviors that are necessary for sustainability. There is a clear, even urgent, need to understand how a variety of complex dynamics influence equity-focused leadership in large districts.

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## Appendix A

### INDIANA UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR RESEARCH

#### **In Pursuit of Equity: An Examination of Leadership for Equity**

**Tracy R. Williams-Reed**

#### **ABOUT THIS RESEARCH**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Scientists conduct research to answer important questions which might help change or improve the way we do things in the future.

This consent form will give you information about the study to help you decide whether you want to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

#### **TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY IS VOLUNTARY**

You may choose not to take part in the study or may choose to leave the study at any time. Deciding not to participate, or deciding to leave the study later, will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled and will not affect your relationship with the district or the researcher.

#### **WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?**

The purpose of this study is to determine how a superintendent and district leadership team identify and respond to issues of equity.

You were selected as a possible participant because you have been identified as a senior leadership team member or related district administrator in the district where the study is being conducted.

The study is being conducted by Tracy R. Williams-Reed, a doctoral student at Indiana University Bloomington, under the direct supervision of her faculty advisor, Dr. Chad Lochmiller, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership.

#### **HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL TAKE PART?**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of seven participants taking part in this study.

#### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THE STUDY?**

If you agree to take part in the study, your involvement will consist of the following:

- You will be asked to participate in three interviews at locations and times that are convenient for you. The interviews will be recorded and will each take 45–60 minutes.

- I will observe you during public meetings. Notes will be taken and participants' comments will be collected in written format that does not include personally identifiable information.
- I will collect documents that serve as representations of our collective work. These include presentations, handouts, memos, board policies, district policies, and other documentation pertaining to district processes.

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?**

While participating in the study, the risks, side effects, and/or discomforts may include the items below.

Involvement may put the school district and participants in a vulnerable position. Data collection may reveal decisions or behaviors that have unintended outcomes. Another consequence of participation is the time commitment and possible disruption to schedules.

Additional risks include:

- A risk of completing the interviews is being uncomfortable answering the questions.
- There is a risk of loss of confidentiality.

To minimize risks and maintain district and individual confidentiality, I will use pseudonyms in place of your name and the district's name. Additionally, interviews will be scheduled at times agreeable to the participants, and interview questions will be provided prior to the interview sessions. Finally, during the interview, you can tell me whether you feel uncomfortable or if you do not want to answer a particular question.

**WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?**

We do not expect you to receive any direct benefit from taking part in this study, but we hope to learn things that will help school personnel and researchers in the future.

**HOW WILL MY INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?**

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential, but we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Audio recordings will be accessible to the researcher and transcriptionist, and the recordings will be maintained for three years on a secure server. No information that could identify you will be shared in publications about this study.

**WILL MY INFORMATION BE USED FOR RESEARCH IN THE FUTURE?**

Data from this study may appear in practitioner publications and published research.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATION?**

You will not be paid for participating in this study.

**WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO PARTICIPATE?**

There is no cost to you for taking part in this study.

**WHO SHOULD I CALL WITH QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?**

For questions about the study, please contact Tracy Williams-Reed at [trxxxxx.net](mailto:trxxxxx.net) or 216-965-XXXX. After business hours, please call 216-965-XXXX. In addition, you may contact Dr. Chad Lochmiller via email ([clochmil@indiana.edu](mailto:clochmil@indiana.edu)) or by phone at 812-856-XXXX.

In the event of an emergency, you may contact Tracy Williams-Reed at 216-965-XXXX. You may also contact the Human Subjects Office by phone at 800-696-2949 or by email at [irb@iu.edu](mailto:irb@iu.edu).

For questions about your rights as a research participant, to discuss problems, complaints, or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information or offer input, please contact the IU Human Subjects Office by phone at 800-696-2949 or by email at [irb@iu.edu](mailto:irb@iu.edu).

**CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you can change your mind and decide to leave the study at any time in the future. The study team will help you safely withdraw from the study. If you decide to withdraw, please submit your request to terminate participation in writing to the researcher. There is no penalty or negative consequence to the participant of withdrawing from the study.

**PARTICIPANT’S CONSENT**

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

**Participant’s Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant’s Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix B**

### **Senior Leadership Team Interview Protocol**

The researcher will conduct interviews with all senior leadership team members. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Each team member will receive a copy of the written transcript to review, provide clarification, and recommend modifications.

#### **Introduction**

Hello. My name is Tracy Williams, and I am a doctoral student at Indiana University Bloomington. My study considers how senior leadership team members implement the superintendent's vision for equity within and across our functional areas. As a member of the senior leadership team, I hope my research helps us understand our work and the practices we are undertaking to respond to persistent inequities in our district.

Before I begin my interview, do you have any questions about the purpose of this research study? May I record this interview? (The recording begins only if the participant grants permission).

#### **Interview 1: Organizational Context and District Leadership**

##### **Personal Background and Experience**

**Leading Questions:** First, what motivated you to become an educator (i.e., classroom teacher)?

##### **Follow-Up Questions**

What motivated you to become an educational leader?

What did (do) you hope to accomplish as an educational leader?

**Leading Question:** What is your experience as a member of the district's senior leadership team?

**Follow-Up Questions**

What is your role on the leadership team?

What responsibilities do you have?

How have your role and responsibilities changed over time?

Why were you interested in becoming a member of the leadership team?

**Leading Question:** Within your work as a senior leadership team member, how does the superintendent's vision influence your work to achieve district's priorities?

**Follow-Up Questions**

What other factors influence your thinking?

How, if at all, do the parents and families we serve influence your thinking?

How, if at all, does student diversity influence your thinking?

How, if at all, do concerns about poverty and/or our students' socioeconomic status influence your thinking?

**Leading Question:** How do state and federal accountability expectations influence your decisions or shape district priorities, if at all?

**Follow-Up Questions**

Are there other factors that influence your thinking as a member of the senior leadership team? If so, what are they?

To what extent are conversations about equity and accountability related?

Do you think accountability pressures inform the team's conversations about equity? If so, how?

## **Interview 2: District Priorities and Superintendent's Equity Vision**

**Leading Question:** How are district priorities are determined?

### **Follow-Up Questions**

To what extent do the district's priorities or strategic initiatives reflect the superintendent's vision for the district?

How do you think students, parents, or community members are served by these initiatives or priorities?

How do you know when district initiatives are successful?

What contributes to the success or failure of a district initiative?

**Leading Question:** What is the superintendent's vision for equity in this district?

### **Follow-Up Questions**

How is the superintendent's vision for equity reflected in the district's strategic priorities and/or initiatives?

How are you working to enact or implement the superintendent's vision for equity in your practice and/or the area you supervise?

How would you describe our efforts as a senior leadership team to enact or implement the superintendent's vision for equity?

From your perspective, how have schools or building leaders begun to implement or enact the superintendent's vision for equity?

### **Interview 3: Social Justice Leadership and Equity Agenda**

**Leading Question:** Within your own practice, how do you define social justice as it relates to your work in this district?

#### **Follow-up Questions**

How do you think your leadership is (or is not) addressing social justice in this district?

In what ways, if any, do you model social justice in your leadership practice?

Can you recall one situation in which you modeled social justice?

How, if at all, do you think social justice is reflected in the district's priorities and align with the superintendent's vision for equity?

**Leading Question:** What culturally responsive initiatives are employed in the school district?

#### **Follow-Up Questions**

How does the superintendent's vision for equity endorse cultural responsiveness?

What culturally responsive behaviors or strategies do you use in your own practice?

How does cultural responsiveness influence your leadership?

Give me an example of a situation that benefited from your use of culturally responsive strategies?

How is cultural responsiveness reflected in district improvement priorities?

**Leading Question:** How do you define equity and address equity issues?

#### **Follow-up Questions**

What is your definition of equity?

Is there a district definition?

How are equity issues within the district identified?

What equity issues have been identified?

In what way does the superintendent's vision take into account equity issues?

What strategies or initiatives have been implemented to resolve equity issues or enact the superintendent's vision for equity?

Do you use your position to promote equity? Describe how you allocate resources or employ programs that promote equity.

How do students, parents, or community influence how you address equitable allocation of district resources?

Give me an example of how the SLT successfully allocated resources or employed programs which reflected the superintendent's vision for equity?

Is there anything additional you would like to share regarding how the SLT identifies and enacts the superintendent's vision?

## Appendix C

### **Title: In Pursuit of Equity: An Examination of Central Office Leadership**

#### **Observation Protocol**

##### **Description of the Observational Approach**

I will be completing observations during meetings and professional learning sessions to see what participants describe in the context of semi-structured interviews and what is identified in documents. During observation periods, I will make notes on my laptop computer that will be saved electronically and later uploaded to a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package. Files will be stored without reference to individual participants, and participant names will be replaced with pseudonyms. Additionally, as a participant-researcher, I will maintain a self-reflective journal. Using a researcher journal will aid transparency while also “acknowledging personal values, beliefs, as well as personal assumptions and goals” (Ortlipp, 2008).

**Date:**

**Start time:**

**End time:**

**Setting/Meeting type (professional learning, board meeting, etc.):**

**Presenter/Facilitator:**

**Topic/Goal:**

**Participants (list and include organizational role):**

**Notes:**

## Appendix D

### Research Timeline

Date	Event/Outcome
<b>Early spring 2020</b>	Research Proposal Defense
<b>Mid-spring 2020</b>	IRB Approval
<b>Spring 2020</b>	Document collection begins
<b>Fall 2020</b>	Interview 1 Interview questions are provided before each session
<b>Late Fall 2020</b>	Interview 2 (First interview transcript is provided prior to the second interview)
<b>Winter 2020</b>	Interview 3 (Second interview transcript is provided prior to the third interview)
<b>Summer 2020</b>	Data coding and analysis
<b>Fall 2021</b>	Chapters four and five, data analysis, and findings completed and submitted to dissertation chair for review
<b>Summer 2022</b>	Dissertation defense

## Appendix E

### Document Collection Protocol

To: Research Participants

From: Tracy Reed  
Doctoral Candidate, Indiana University

Subj: Documents Requested for Research Study

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The purpose of this study is to examine and understand how senior school district leaders enact a district superintendent's vision for equity. I am requesting that you provide copies of the following documents to assist me with my research. The documents should contain identifiable information. The information will be stored on a secure server hosted by Indiana University.

The types of documents to be collected are aligned with decisions and discussions associated with the allocation of district resources by senior leaders and include

- Meeting agendas and minutes
- Budget requests
- Staffing allocations or requests
- Professional learning plans and outcomes
- Department plans and priorities
- District memos and communications

The information can be sent to Tracy Williams-Reed via email as a PDF or in hard copy by U.S. Mail. Her contact information is provided below.

Tracy Williams-Reed  
Doctoral Candidate  
Xxxx XXX Cove  
Fort Wayne, IN 46835  
[wilitrr@iu.edu](mailto:wilitrr@iu.edu)  
216-965-XXXX

I sincerely appreciate your assistance with this research study. If you have questions or concerns, please contact Tracy Williams-Reed.



## **Appendix F**

### **Document Collection Guide**

I will collect the following documents throughout the research study. These documents will be used to corroborate participants' enactment of the superintendent's equity vision. Documents will be stored on a secure file server hosted by Indiana University. Personally identifiable information will be removed from the data prior to its being stored.

Examples of documents to be collected to support senior leaders' enactment of the superintendent's equity vision are as follows:

- Meeting agendas and minutes
- Budget requests
- Staffing allocations or requests
- Professional learning plans and outcomes
- Department plans and priorities
- District posters and definitions
- District memos or communications
- Rubrics used in observation or evaluation of staff
- Staff recruitment materials

## Appendix G

### Recruitment Email Message

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am working to complete a research study as a requirement for my doctorate with Indiana University at Bloomington. The qualitative research study seeks to examine and understand how senior district leaders enact a superintendent's vision for equity. To complete this study, I will be engaging Ford City School district leaders.

I identified you as a potential participant because of your position as a senior district leader. I would like to conduct three interviews of up to 45 minutes each with you. I may request an additional follow-up conversation for clarification, if needed. In addition, I may ask you to provide copies of artifacts from your leadership role and responsibilities (e.g., professional learning agendas, staffing and budget allocations, etc.) and/or to allow us to observe your meetings or professional learning sessions at a time that you select.

I have attached a study information sheet that provides additional information about your rights as a research participant. If you are interested in participating in this study, please let me know and provide a few times that might work for you to complete these interviews.

Thank you for your consideration.

Tracy Williams-Reed  
Indiana University Bloomington

## Resume

### Tracy R. Reed

**CAREER GOAL:** To obtain a senior leadership position in a diverse school district that will use my administration, urban education, instructional leadership, and collaboration skills to provide system leadership. My knowledge and skills will improve student outcomes to ensure graduates are ready for both college and careers.

**EXPERIENCE:** Senior administrator in public education from pre-K to 12th grade who has improved academic outcomes, reduced discipline challenges, advanced professional development, and enhanced instructional technology.

**LEADERSHIP:** Strategic thinker who has implemented diverse programs to upgrade curricula and improve outcomes for students with disabilities and English learners.

### KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

- Strategic planning
- Equity advocate
- Urban education
- Budget management
- Collaborative leader
- Community outreach
- Curriculum development
- Data-driven management
- Program implementation and monitoring

### CAREER ACHIEVEMENTS

- Built high-achieving faculty and administrative teams over more than 15 years.
- Delivered improved academic outcomes in all areas, including Title I and ELL.
- Enhanced instructional technology with a goal of 1:1 access.
- Applied for and was awarded grants to support new programs.
- Earned Title III Distinguished School District Award (March 2018)

### EXPERIENCE

#### SANDUSKY CITY SCHOOLS, Sandusky, OH, 2021–present

##### CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER

**Executive Leadership:** A senior leadership team member accountable for academic leadership aligned with the district’s strategic vision. Academic leadership is focused on providing a rigorous and relevant curriculum while using instructional strategies and allocating resources to personalize learning for all students. Direct initiatives and activities associated with curricula, assessments, school improvement, and EMIS.

- Create and support initiatives to improve district leaders’ instructional leadership capacity.
- Oversee the development and implementation of extended learning opportunities for students.

- Engage with community partners to ensure working relationships that benefit students, families, and staff.
- Present to the school board, community groups, and media.
- Participate in human resource management and negotiating SEA contract.
- Facilitate the alignment of district improvement and school improvement efforts.
- Monitor and adjust Title I, Title II, and school improvement grant budgets to support initiatives to improve academic achievement.
- Plan and facilitate district-wide professional learning for principals, teachers, and support staff.
- Collaborate with the superintendent and other leaders to analyze data and update processes and policies.
- Supervise and evaluate principals and district coaches.

## **FORT WAYNE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, Fort Wayne, IN, 2014–2021**

### **CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER**

**Executive Leadership:** Oversaw curricula, assessment, instruction, special education departments, Title I, Title III, English learners, and instructional technology programs in a district with 29,000 students, 50 schools (26 Title I), and over 70 languages spoken. Played a lead role in the superintendent’s cabinet that developed the strategic plan and goals for achievement, professional development, and equity. Collaborated with the superintendent and other leaders to analyze data and update academic policy. Ensured that district and building leaders had the resources and skills they needed to improve student outcomes.

- Led presentations to the school board, community groups, and media.
- Instituted the district’s first summer program in several years, covering eight sites.
- Demonstrated commitment to equity and cultural competency in outreach to migrant populations through family and community events.
- Increased participation and success in AP programs by providing teachers with professional development through the College Board.
- Developed a strategic plan in collaboration with the special education director that improved principals’ legal understanding and increased teachers’ ability to write IEPs.
- Standardized technology across classrooms through a plan that achieved 1:1 access in 2020.
- Gained experience in human resource management and negotiating union contracts.
- Reorganized department, revised job descriptions, and hired staff.

**Academic Leadership:** Supervised a team that included a director of curriculum, director of special education, manager of ELL, and Title I manager. Mentored staff to improve their leadership skills. Ensured that federal and state guidelines were followed across programs and

the grant reporting requirements were met. Managed a \$22 million budget for Title I, special education, ELLs, and refugee grants.

- Implemented and directed new curricula to meet state standards across 50 schools, working with 350 teachers and administrators and an outside facilitator to ensure consistency.
- Developed a walk-through tool to assess and revise the curriculum.
- Led the technology team in the implementation of an LMS Power School.
- Led the implementation of a new local assessment system during the 2020–2021 academic year.
- Established consistency across pre-K programs to improve curricula, enhance instructional technology, and address equity issues; instituted three full-day programs.

### **BENTON HARBOR AREA SCHOOLS, Benton Harbor, MI, 2012–2014**

#### **ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT OF CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION**

Directed principals, special education supervisors, Title I, and ELL managers in a district with 3,000 students, 83% of whom are economically disadvantaged. Supported the superintendent in improving K-12 academic achievement by making data-informed decisions. Visited schools on a daily basis to assess teaching and support all stakeholders, including students and families. Identified professional development needs and the resources required to deliver them. Managed a \$4 million budget for Title I and 31A grants.

- Took over daily management of district operations while the Superintendent focused on severe financial challenges.
- Wrote a successful application for a 21st Century Community Learning Grant and developed related curricula and programs.
- Modified and implemented a district-wide improvement plan that included a focus on Title III.
- Led a high school turnaround, served as interim principal, interviewed staff, instituted measures to increase academic success, reduce discipline challenges, and improve attendance.
- Launched New Tech Academy (a school within a school), which involved remodeling facilities and hiring new staff to carry out training and program management.

### **MILKOVICH MIDDLE SCHOOL, Maple Heights, OH, 2005–2011**

#### **PRINCIPAL**

- Led instruction and operations at a school in an economically challenged district.
- Developed and instituted a school improvement plan.
- Improved school ranking two levels from Academic Watch to Effective.
- Reduced referrals 50% during the first year of a school-wide positive support (PBIS) system and a 20% reduction in the second year.
- Facilitated the launch of a program for gifted students.

- Built an administrative team and faculty with strong academic leadership skills, a respect for collaboration, and a passion for teaching.

## **EARLY CAREER**

Elementary Interim Principal, Cleveland Municipal School District (2004–2005)

Middle School Assistant Principal, Cleveland Municipal School District (2000–2004)

Sixth Grade Teacher, Cleveland Municipal School District (1993–2000)

## **EDUCATION**

- Educational Doctorate, K-12 Leadership with a Minor in School Law, University of Indiana Bloomington, August 2022
- Superintendent Certification Program, Cleveland State University, 2009
- Principal Certification Program, Cleveland State University, 2002
- Master of Education, Cleveland State University, 1996
- Bachelor of Science, Education, University of Cincinnati, 1990

## **TRAINING**

- Ohio Principal Evaluation System
- Ohio Teacher Evaluation System
- Crucial Conversations Leadership

## **LICENSURE**

- Superintendent: Ohio (current), Michigan (current), Indiana (conditional)
- Ohio Administrative (current)
- Ohio Teaching, Elementary K-8 (current)

## **RESEARCH**

- Deep Learning Conference (Toronto, 2019)
- Hosted Michael Fullan and staff from New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (Fort Wayne, 2019)
- Academies of Nashville Virtual Conference (March 2021)
- Maryland Assessment Group Conference (presentation)

## **AFFILIATIONS**

- AASA Aspiring Superintendent Academy for Women (2021)
- Sandusky (OH) and Fort Wayne (IN) Rotary
- Board Member, Junior Achievement
- Michigan Curriculum Leaders Institute
- MiExcel Superintendents Institute