A comparative study of leadership and management in rural schools achieving above predicted graduation outcomes

Brian David Rhode
University at Albany, State University of New York, brianrhode77@gmail.com

The University at Albany community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy- etd

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legacy Theses & Dissertations (2009 - 2024) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. Please see Terms of Use. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT IN RURAL SCHOOLS ACHIEVING ABOVE PREDICTED GRADUATION OUTCOMES

by

Brian Rhode

A Dissertation

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York

In Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education

Department of Educational Policy & Leadership

Spring 2020
ABSTRACT

School systems are expected to demonstrate outcomes that are equitable for all students. Despite an abundance of educational legislation aimed at raising all students’ achievement, gaps persist, especially among critical populations such as economically disadvantaged, English language learners, African-American and Hispanic/Latino students. This study is a comparative study of leadership and management in positive outlier schools and typically performing high schools, the first type has demonstrated a trend of above-predicted graduation outcomes for rural youth.

A review of relevant literature revealed that questions remain about leaders’ instructional leadership and management strategies that influence instructional success. Strategies include rational and symbolic management, tight and loose coupling, alignment and coherence, and educators’ sense-making. Based upon this review, the investigator developed four research questions: 1) What instructional leadership priorities do district central office and school level officials emphasize in their respective positive outlier schools school systems? 2) How do district central office and school level officials align their instructional leadership priorities? 3) How do these officials craft and maintain alignment and coherence around the instructional core? 4) How do frontline professionals make sense of district central office and school level officials’ instructional leadership?

A qualitative multiple case-study analysis was structured to address these research questions. The data comes from a larger set collected as part of a multiple casestudy from NYKids, a research-practice partnership housed at the University at Albany in New York State. Three New York State high schools, two called “positive outlier schools” and one typical performing school, served as the sample.
The several findings lend empirical support to seven conclusions. District office leaders and principals in positive outlier schools employ leadership and management strategies and emphasize discourses which are explicitly student-centered. These leaders also emphasize “agency”, i.e., having voice and choice, in two important populations: students and front-line professionals, especially teachers. Additionally, these district office leaders and principals hold themselves and others accountable for collaboration and timely communication, building trust and improving alignment and coherence in their loosely-coupled organizations. These same district office leaders and principals strategically blend tight and loose coupling mechanisms when they grant teachers and other front-line professionals discretionary authority, i.e., they enjoy choices regarding how they structure and perform their jobs. Finally, these same district central officers and principals emphasize “improvement mindsets” in tandem with adaptive, proactive leadership; serve as skillful resource managers and rely on data in all matters of direction-setting, priority establishment, and resource reallocations.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who helped make this dissertation possible, starting with my family. My wife, Kara Belgiano Rhode, remained a steadfast supporter and partner in this project. She encouraged me through the entirety of my research and writing. She also took on the additional responsibility of individually caring for our three children: Halla, Sammy, and Lila during the many days and nights that I had to dedicate to this process. This dissertation would have never been completed without her support. For that I wish to express my deep appreciation for her intellect, humor, motivation, patience, and endless love.

I am indebted to the collective efforts of the members who worked on the latest NYKids study. This dissertation utilizes design elements and data from that larger study and benefits from the impeccable work of those who brought it to fruition. Thank you to Kristen Wilcox the NYKids Principal Investigator and Research and Development Director. Thanks also to Co-Investigators on this latest study: Hal A. Lawson, Kathryn Schiller, and Francesca Durand. Thank you as well to others who worked on this latest project: Aaron Leo, NYKids Post-Doctoral Fellow; Catherine Kramer, NYKids Research Assistant; and finally, the many doctoral students who assisted in various capacities. My project would never have occurred without this important project. Thank you to NYKids and the important work you do.

This project also could not have been completed without the support of my dissertation committee co-chairs. Hal A. Lawson has been an unwavering supporter. He has guided not only my dissertation process, but my larger doctoral experience as well. Throughout the years he has spent countless hours helping me work through important ideas with wisdom and sensitivity. I always knew that Hal “heard” me. He gave words to my ideas, guidance to my efforts, and much needed motivation to help overcome struggles. He also worked to safeguard myself and my
family during this process, which I am extremely grateful for. Kristen Wilcox’s insightful
guidance and feedback has strengthened this dissertation immensely. I am also deeply thankful
for her incredible example as a qualitative researcher which I was able to observe firsthand on
two research trips as a doctoral assistant. Thank you both for your support.

I am also grateful to other wonderful professors who assisted me through this
dissertation. Lynn Lisy-Macan has guided both my career and this dissertation with her wisdom
and advice through many conversations over coffee. I am appreciative of her friendship,
mentorship, and her participation on my dissertation committee. Finally, thank you to Kathryn
Schiller for taking time to read and comment on my proposal in addition to volunteering time to
meet with me to offer her guidance and expertise.

Lastly, I am thankful for the many friends, co-workers, and fellow students who
encouraged me through this entire process. There are too many of you to mention individually,
but I am so thankful for your support. Whether it was to listen to me lament that I might never
actually finish, laugh with me to rejuvenate my spirit, or express your enthusiasm over my
research you all helped this project move from intention to reality.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ...................................................................................................................... iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS ........................................................................................................................ vi

List of Tables ......................................................................................................................................... xi

CHAPTER 1: THE IMPORTANCE FOR COMPARING LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Significance of the Study .......................................................................................................................... 2

Need for a Study on Leadership and Management ................................................................................ 4

Conceptual Framework ......................................................................................................................... 5

Leadership and Management as Phenomena of Interest .................................................................... 6

Organizational Contexts for Leadership and Management ..................................................................... 7

Sensemaking ........................................................................................................................................ 9

Research Questions ............................................................................................................................ 11

Definitions ......................................................................................................................................... 11

Loose Coupling ................................................................................................................................. 11

Tight Coupling .................................................................................................................................. 12

Rational Management ......................................................................................................................... 12

Symbolic Management ......................................................................................................................... 12

Alignment .......................................................................................................................................... 13

Coherence .......................................................................................................................................... 13

CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .............................................................................. 15

Literature for Research Question One .................................................................................................. 17
Rational Management ................................................................. 18
Symbolic Management ............................................................... 18
School Leadership Context: Contrasts Between
Symbolic Leadership and Rational Management ....................... 20
Educational Policy and Environmental Influences ..................... 21
Literature for Research Question Two ........................................... 22
Loose Coupling .......................................................................... 24
Tight Coupling ........................................................................... 26
Schools Organizational Context: Contrasts Between Loose
and Tight Coupling .................................................................... 26
Literature for Research Question Three ....................................... 30
Literature for Research Question Four ....................................... 33
The Importance of Research Methodology .................................. 36
Summary of Literature ............................................................... 38
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ....................................................... 40
Research Design .......................................................................... 40
Elements of the Larger Study ..................................................... 40
Larger Study: Lines of Inquiry ................................................... 41
Larger Study: Research Question and Sub-Questions .................. 43
Larger Study: Data Sources ....................................................... 44
Larger Study: Ethical Considerations ......................................... 45
Larger Study: Sample ............................................................... 46
Incorporating Elements of the Larger Study in the Current Study ... 48
Lines of Inquiry ............................................................................................................. 48
Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 50
Data Sources .................................................................................................................. 51
Ethical Considerations ................................................................................................. 51
Sample .......................................................................................................................... 52

Data Analysis and Measures to Address Credibility Threats in the Larger Study .......................................................................................................................... 54
Larger Study: Data Analysis ........................................................................................... 55
Larger Study: Measures to Address Credibility Threats ............................................. 56

Data Analysis and Measures to Address Credibility Threats in This Study ............ 57
The Import of Case Study Methodology ........................................................................... 57
This Study: Analysis Technique ....................................................................................... 57
First Cycle Coding ............................................................................................................... 58
Second Cycle Coding ......................................................................................................... 58
Cross-Case Analysis ......................................................................................................... 59

Measures to Address Credibility ................................................................................. 60
Threats to Credibility ........................................................................................................ 60
Limitations ....................................................................................................................... 62
Delimitations ..................................................................................................................... 63

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION ....................................................................... 65
Strengths Based Solution-Focused Discourses .............................................................. 65
Identifying and Capitalizing on Community Assets ...................................................... 67
List of Tables

Table 1. Literature Review and Method ................................................................. 16
Table 2. Larger Study Sample .............................................................................. 48
Table 3. Data Source Table .................................................................................. 52
Table 4. Sample Demographics Table ................................................................. 55
Table 5. Method Table ......................................................................................... 61
Chapter 1

The Importance for Comparing Leadership and Management

Today’s school systems face increasing pressure to demonstrate equitable outcomes for all students. To do this, schools-as-work organizations need to be reconfigured, led and managed effectively, and continuously improved.

District office leadership and school leadership, alone and together, are instrumental in schools’ organizational configurations, operations, and outcomes. Two kinds of outcomes are of interest: Student outcomes and workforce outcomes. Each influences the other.

The research and development agenda known as NYKids, a research-practice partnership funded by the state of New York and focused on improving student outcomes, provides a timely opportunity to investigate leadership phenomena in two kinds of high schools serving considerable numbers of students experiencing economic disadvantage. Schools called “positive outlier schools” perform better than predicted on state learning assessments taking into account school demographics while typically performing school peers perform as predicted. Comparisons of key leadership phenomena in these two kinds of schools promise to yield knowledge and understanding for district and school leadership practice, professional development, pre-service education, and educational policy.

Two specialized frameworks hold promise for a comparative study of leadership and management in positive outlier schools and typical high schools. One is known as symbolic leadership. The other is rational management. A study that compares and contrasts them in two kinds of New York high schools is timely and important.
This chapter is structured to highlight these questions’ significance, while providing a framework for this study. Operational definitions of symbolic leadership, rational management, coherence, and sensemaking pave the way for a detailed literature review in Chapter 2.

**Significance of the Study**

To reiterate: two categories of high schools are salient for this study. Positive outlier schools have better than expected graduation rates for several groups: economically disadvantaged, English language learners, African-American and Hispanic/Latino students (Wilcox, Schiller, Durand, Lawson, Kramer & Leo, 2018). Typically performing schools have predictable graduation rates for these same populations. When investigators compare and contrast these two kinds of schools, they are able to identify consequential differences with importance for practice, policy, and professional education.

District central office and school level leadership is the phenomenon of interest in this study. School leadership is a special priority where the instructional core is concerned. Understanding their interaction for student success is poignant and is part of this dissertation.

Leaders in schools matter, and their importance is illuminated when they make a difference (Gumus, S., Gumus, E., Bellibas, & Esen, 2018). Beyond people, school leadership also can be viewed as a function (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Leadership phenomena thus can be investigated in two ways: (1) With a focus on people and (2) With a focus on leadership mechanisms

Symbolic leadership offers directional guidance along with structured opportunities for teachers’ and other education professionals’ discretion. It is associated with loosely coupled school structures. Simply stated, loosely coupled organizations have distinctive features that contrast with tightly coupled ones. Schools with loose coupling arrangements influence teachers’
work orientations, relationships with each other and also with leaders, and practices. In loosely coupled organizations structured by symbolic leadership, front-line teachers and student support professionals enjoy considerable discretion (Weick, 1976). Meanwhile, school leaders maintain a dual priority for the present and the future.

Rational management contrasts with symbolic leadership. It is a form of managerial leadership borne out of Frederick Taylor’s scientific management theory. It also is manifest in Max Weber’s ideal-type for a public-sector bureaucracy (Gumus, et al., 2018). Where schools are concerned, rational management is efficiency-oriented and serves to maintain the status quo. As Gumus, et al. (2018) indicate: “The focus of this leadership model is on managing existing practices in schools rather than developing a vision beyond available practices” (p. 29).

Beyond comparisons of two leadership styles, structures, and strategies, their respective impact on teachers merits investigation. As Heifetz (2006) reminds researchers, leadership is a function that threads throughout an organization. Therefore, understanding leadership effectiveness is enriched by examining how leaders and teachers are united on organizational goals.

Special interest resides in two organizational phenomena. Alignment refers to structural consistence. Coherence refers to shared meanings, values, and priorities (Wilcox, et al., 2018). In ideal scenarios, both are evident, and they are connected.

Alignment and coherence vary across schools as organizations. Some of the manifest differences appear to be attributable to contrasting leaders and leadership. In other words, differences in leaders’ orientations, actions, and priorities, in tandem with unique organizational leadership structures, have demonstrable effects on teachers and their practices. A comparative
study of schools enables the identification of important commonalities, similarities, and differences.

Consider, for example, how leadership-influenced alignment and coherence may differ in the following school priorities: Academic goal formation and attainment for students, supporting students socially and emotionally, responding to student’s needs with curriculum and instruction, intervening to benefit students, and receiving appropriate professional development. Thus, it is timely to explore how leadership structures and strategies influence these several priorities in positive outlier schools and typically performing high schools.

**Need for a Study on Leadership and Management**

21st Century districts and constituent schools are charged with preparing students who are college and career ready without academic remediation. Economic development in particular depends in part on an education workforce with advanced competence beyond high school graduation standards and requirements. Education legislation of the past few years: No Child Left Behind (NCLB) from 2001 (Ladd, 2017), Race to the Top (RTTT) from 2009 (Weiss, 2014), and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 (Young, Winn, & Reedy, 2017) each sought to push American education in this direction.

New workforce development imperatives in tandem with policy innovations structured to transform industrial age schools into 21st Century educational institutions are especially important for districts that serve diverse, poverty-challenged student populations. Education legislation in the early 21st century as repeatedly attempted to close the achievement gaps between groups of traditionally advantaged and disadvantaged groups of students (Ladd, 2017; Young et al., 2017; Weiss, 2014). Additionally, the Promise Neighborhood Initiative (PNI) of 2010 made education central in combating both rural and urban poverty (Green, 2018; Horsford
& Sampson, 2014). Achievement gaps persist despite these actions. What needs to be done to improve student and school outcomes and close achievement gaps for critical populations of students?

At the heart of meeting the goals for students of the 21st century is effective educational leadership. Understanding leadership has long been a matter of concern with emphasis only increasing (Gumus, et al., 2018). Leadership in district offices, leadership in schools, and their relations are especially important because they enhance the knowledge base for leadership practice and educational policy development.

A priority, then, is finding and validating leadership models and strategies that enable schools to effectively educate and meet the needs of all students. What leaders prioritize and do is consequential for front line practice in classrooms and schools overall.

Finally, meeting the goals of 21st century students depends on educators’ abilities to respond to the needs of their students and make appropriate policy shifts. Significant research has focused on naming the best organizational structure for schools. It has also focused on how leaders, front line practitioners, and students all interact in order to best meet educational goals. Understanding how the organization of schools impacts the leadership strategies, what leaders prioritize and do, and how they align with front line practitioner strategies, is essential for preparing students who are ready for career and college after leaving their K-12 experiences.

Conceptual Framework

This research examines the priorities of leaders in positive outlier schools and typically performing schools—with special interest in how they impact teachers’ work. It explores whether leadership approaches resemble either loosely coupled or tightly coupled environments—and with special interest in whether differences help to account for a
particular school’s status as an outlier or a typical school.

**Leadership and Management as Phenomena of Interest**

Weick’s (1982) leadership recommendations for effective management in loosely coupled organizations are of central interest in this study. More about loose coupling theory is explained below, but first leadership is explored. Both leadership and management are important phenomena of interest because research shows that it is appropriate and necessary to intertwine the two for the purpose of organizational analysis.

Firestone and Martinez (2007) remind that leadership is difficult to define but, “it usually involves the exercise of social influence, often in the service of some collective end such as organizational productivity” (p. 4). Gumus, et al. (2018) claim that educational leadership refers to the tactics involved in activating people to internalize and work toward the common goals and intentions of a school. These definitions show alignment between leadership and management.

Spillane, Camburn, and Pareja (2007) suggest that management includes efforts to maintain current arrangements while leadership includes efforts to move to new arrangements. Spillane, et al. (2007) state that “In practice, leading and managing happen in tandem and are often intertwined; pulling them apart is difficult” (p. 105). Therefore, analyzing the management tactics of leaders in loosely or tightly coupled organizations will include leadership priorities and their impacts.

Leadership priorities for symbolic management and rational management tactics are especially salient. Rational management refers to the characteristics associated with creating order in a formal, tightly configured organization (Barker, 1993), such as a bureaucracy (Merton 1940). Rational management strategies focus leaders on managing the functions, behaviors, and tasks of people’s work in an organization in order to facilitate its goals (Gumus, et al., 2018).
And, this is mainly controlled through formal positions in a bureaucratic hierarchy (Gumus, et al., 2018). Rational management is a managerial form of leadership (Gumus, et al., 2018) utilized at times by leaders in schools.

Symbolic management is the performance of symbolic actions (Zott & Nguyen, 2007), frequently involving the use of symbolic language (Westphal & Zajac, 1998), to enhance organizational legitimacy (Westphal & Zajac, 1998). Leaders who enact symbolic management tactics interpret and reinterpret experience for their organizations to impart meaning and purpose (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Framing this in schools, they “rally the group to a set of ideals; to inculcate a way of life in the department or school; and to build loyalty and identity among teachers to this way of life” (Sergiovanni, 1981 p.12).

Both symbolic and rational management potentially appear in the schools included in this particular research. Special interest is paid to identifying how both types of management are evident among these sample schools. Further, it is important to discover if district central officers and school level leaders from the sample utilize strategies from each management method in an aligned fashion. Of import to this study is learning about the relationship between district office and school level leaders and the selection of rational or symbolic management strategies, and how they align among themselves, and the organizational outcomes these interactions yield.

**Organizational Contexts for Leadership and Management**

Weick’s (1982) organizational coupling framework provides guidance for the proposed study. Organizations, and events, that have responsive elements, but still retain separateness and independent identities are loosely coupled (Weick, 1976). In other words, educators in sample schools enjoy discretion; they are not implementation puppets. Discretion suggests that educators are viewed and act as professionals. Teachers in particular are afforded opportunities to make
consequential decisions about instruction and learning.

Concepts like loose coupling are sensitizing devices helping observers notice and question previously held norms regarding organizations (Weick, 1976). Analyzing organizations with the framework and language of loose coupling can help researchers discover features that have not been noticed before (Ibid).

Organizations as loosely coupled systems may not have been seen before because nobody believed in them or could afford to believe in them. It is conceivable that preoccupation with rationalized, tidy, efficient, coordinated structures has blinded many practitioners as well as researchers to some of the attractive and unexpected properties of less rationalized and less tightly related clusters of events (Weick, 1976, p. 3).

Weick (1982) suggests that leaders in loosely coupled systems should use symbolic management. He identifies characteristics or elements of symbolic management as “selective centralization, consistent articulation of common vision, interpretation of diverse actions in terms of common themes, providing a common language by which people can explain their own actions in meaningful ways and communicate with each other in similar terms” (p. 676).

The two sets of key concepts—rational management and symbolic leadership; and loosely-coupled versus tightly-coupled organizations—are joined in the current study. Relationships between district central officers (especially superintendents) and school leaders (especially principals) are research priorities. This study proceeds with the assumption that researchers are able to identify, describe, and explain differences between typically performing schools and positive outlier schools.


**Sensemaking**

Researchers interested in the effects of leadership and management must study the education professionals in school bureaucracies, especially teachers, to explore how configurations impact schools-as-organizations. Based upon prior research, sensemaking outcomes in positive outlier schools differ from those in typically performing schools. Educators in positive outlier schools presumably enjoy structured discretion and have voice and choice that influence leaders, again based upon prior research. This study analyzes sensemaking mechanisms in the sample schools to discover if similar findings to previous research are continued, or if teachers in these sample schools demonstrate different levels of voice, choice, and discretion as compared to previous research.

Therefore, how frontline professionals make sense of the priorities held by leaders is a central priority in this study. “Sensemaking theory is rooted in the insight that the meaning of information or events is not given, but is inherently problematic; individuals and groups must actively construct understandings and interpretations” (Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009 p. 1119). Further, research explains that people develop understandings by taking new information and combining it within preexisting frameworks (Coburn, et al., 2009). When individuals act on information or respond to the messages they are given by officials, it is only after they have compared it with previously held beliefs (Coburn, 2004). After this comparison, people will either broaden their responses and actions to include the new information, limit the information to make it fit with their previous actions/beliefs, or reject the message outright and maintain previous beliefs or action (Coburn, 2004). Sensemaking as it is explained above is a significant concept for this study.
Previous work offers guiding information about how officials in schools and district central office leaders can influence the way their frontline professionals will make sense of their messages. For example, Coburn (2001) and Coburn, et al. (2009) explains that members of school leadership can influence sensemaking by privileging certain messages that are disseminated to frontline professionals. Leaders can further influence sensemaking by increasing the amount particular messages are heard, or making sure new items are interwoven into previous messages (Coburn, 2004). Connecting teachers to messages by making sure they are communicated with high degrees of depth can influence sensemaking as well (Coburn, 2005). Attempting to manage sensemaking in frontline professionals is an important task for district central office and school officials and also an important part of this current study’s focus.

Sensemaking of messages among frontline professionals has the ability to significantly alter their impact. Further, how sensemaking develops has direct effect on the influence of messages from district central officers and school officials. Previous research on sensemaking has shown that teachers interact with new messages in their environments in different ways. In one study by Coburn (2001) when teachers did not perceive messages about new reading instruction approaches connecting with their held beliefs on effective instruction, they tended to complete tasks to appease their administration without making meaningful shifts to their instruction. Other research also demonstrated that teachers often incorporated and used new messages in ways that fit into their previous understandings, thus changing them (Coburn, 2005). Additionally, messages risk being lost if they are part of too many initiatives. “Once teachers constructed an understanding of what a given message was about, they either engaged with the idea or approach, or they dismissed it. In this way, teachers essentially selected some messages in and selected others out” (Coburn, 2001 p. 154). The positive outlier schools in this study are
analyzed in part to see how sensemaking is built by frontline professionals for the priorities held by their district central office and school level officials. The information found from this research adds to the understanding of how the positive outlier schools included experienced success with their students.

**Research Questions**

Drawing on the preceding rationale and emergent conceptual framework, this study is structured to address four related questions; and with special interest in positive outlier schools, typical schools, and salient commonalities, similarities, and differences between them.

- What instructional leadership priorities do district central office and school level officials emphasize in their respective positive outlier school systems?
- How do district central office and school level officials align their instructional leadership priorities?
- How do these officials craft and maintain alignment and coherence around the instructional core?
- How do frontline professionals make sense of district central office and school level officials’ instructional leadership?

**Definitions**

**Loose Coupling**

Loosely coupled organizations have several common characteristics (Weick, 1984): “1. unclear, diverse or ambiguous organizational means and goals. 2. low levels of coordination of employees’ productive activities. 3. low levels of organizational control: –high levels of employee autonomy. –low level of managerial authority” (p. 10). Organizations and systems, such as schools, that exhibit the characteristics listed above, whether they are planned or not, are
loosely coupled.

**Tight Coupling**

Tightly-coupled systems follow a traditional view of standardized organizations. Many theorists assume a rational organization is the most efficient way to coordinate large groups of people to accomplish big tasks (Ingersoll, 1992). These organizations utilize standardization, which is the antithesis of localized adaptation (Weick, 1976). Tightly coupled systems also use top-down command to control structures and centralize systems (Lance, 2002).

Weick’s (1982) characterization of tight coupling has rational elements centered on standardization. Tightly coupled organizations share four main characteristics: “1. There are rules, 2. There is agreement on what those rules are, 3. There is a system of inspection to see if compliance occurs, and 4. There is feedback designed to improve compliance” (p. 674).

**Rational Management**

Rational management works within tightly coupled organizational structure. As stated above, tightly coupled organizations are rational. The ideal type of rational organization is bureaucracy (Merton, 1940). It follows that Weber’s (2005) description of bureaucratic officials guides an understanding of rational management and is addressed more extensively in chapter 2.

**Symbolic Management**

Weick (1982) states that an effective administrator in a loosely coupled system, “makes full use of symbol management to tie the system together” (p. 675). The purpose of this is to give people a shared sense of direction on which to focus their efforts (Weick, 1982). This already exists in tightly coupled organizations, but it must be built in loosely coupled ones by leaders articulating common themes frequently and helping people to apply those themes as they interpret their work (Weick, 1982).
Alignment

It is important to understand how leaders use management techniques to align their instructional priorities in school systems. Alignment refers to structural consistence among all schools within a system (Wilcox, Leo, & Kramer, 2018). The school “structures” creating alignment are items such as goals and strategies (Fullan & Quinn, 2016) or components of schooling such as standards, curricula, assessments, or others that can be objectively aligned (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Aligned school components provide pathways by which independent actors can contribute to common organizational outcomes. To put this idea in terms of a metaphor, anatomy describes the aligned elements of the human body. The literal connectedness and collaborative work of tissues, organs, muscles, bones and other elements provide avenues by which the body achieves sub-goals, such as movement or food processing, that add to the larger goal of keeping it alive. Understanding how district central officers and school level officials align their instructional leadership priorities is significant to this dissertation.

Coherence

Central to loosely coupled or tightly coupled organizations is how officials craft coherence among staff for their leadership priorities. Honig and Hatch, (2004) define coherence as follows:

Crafting coherence includes schools setting school-wide goals and strategies that have particular features; schools using those goals and strategies to decide whether to bridge themselves to or buffer themselves from external demands; and school district central offices supporting these school-level processes (p. 16).

To continue with the metaphor from above, coherence in school systems is like the physiology of the human body. Systems may alter the way they work along aligned pathways depending upon
external demands. For example, the same set of organs that draw extra air into the lungs during physical stress will stop bringing air in if one is submerged in water. Or, the same pathway or used to bring food into the body may be utilized to send substance out if it is deemed harmful to the whole system. The anatomy keeps its alignment, tissues and organs do not change their positions or connections. However, depending on environmental demand they may change how they work together. The same is true for coherence in school systems. Understanding how district central officers and school level officials craft coherence around the instructional core is of import to this study.
Chapter 2

A Review of the Literature

Research to date provides a theoretical and empirical foundation for the proposed study. It attests to the importance of the research questions and provides guidance for the methodology. Included in this review are examples of literature that form the ‘pathway’ for designing the central questions, provide a rationale, and introduce the key ideas on which the study rests. The process used to gather literature included in this chapter is briefly described below.

Multiple strategies were used to accumulate a body of scientific literature that informed this dissertation. Initially, time was spent searching for articles with particular key words or phrases from databases held by SUNY at Albany’s libraries. Several databases were searched in order to cover the breadth of education related research available. Searches were limited to peer reviewed periodicals. Additional literature generated from the ten studies of positive outlier schools and typically performing schools dating back to 2005 were also included based upon relevance to this particular study. In some cases, sources cited lists from articles already collected were used to search for additional titles. Table 1 below gives an overview of this process.

Once articles were accumulated and organized into general topics, they were reviewed for their usefulness and relevance. Some items proved to have little connection to the central ideas of this dissertation besides cursory mentions of the key terms in the body of their texts. These articles were not included in the review of literature below but were kept for reference information. The same is true for articles that did not provide adequate information regarding the research methods they used to develop their claims. Once a final group of research literature was compiled it was thoroughly reviewed and is included below.
Table 1

Literature Review Method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Databases Used</th>
<th>Stipulation</th>
<th>Key Terms Searched</th>
<th>Article Totals by Generalized Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Full Text</td>
<td>All articles from peer reviewed</td>
<td>adaptive leadership, alignment in education, coherence, coherence and education,</td>
<td>“Leadership”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>periodicals</td>
<td>loose coupling, loose coupling and education, loosely coupled systems, loosely</td>
<td>Adaptive Leadership: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>coupled systems, loosely coupled systems and education, managerialism, new public</td>
<td>Impression Management: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>managerialism, rational management, sensemaking, symbolic leadership and education,</td>
<td>New Managerialism: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td></td>
<td>symbolic management, tight coupling, tight coupling and education, tight coupled</td>
<td>Rational Management: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td></td>
<td>policy and education</td>
<td>Symbolic Management: 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstracts</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Loose Coupling”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERIC [via EBSCO]</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dual Core Model of Loose Coupling: 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scopus</td>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership and Loose Coupling: 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Loose Coupling and Student Assessment: 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Loosely Coupled Organizations: 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reformating Schools in a Loosely Coupled Context: 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Schools as Loosely Coupled Organizations: 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Odds Beating Schools”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Odds Beating Schools: 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“School Leadership for Organizational Coherence and Capacity Development”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School Leadership…Development: 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Sensemaking”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sensemaking in Schools: 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“School Performance Success”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School Performance Success: 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Tight Coupling”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tight Coupling: 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This review is organized around the four central research questions. Past research and salient theory illuminate the importance of each question. This chapter concludes with implications for this dissertation’s methodology.
Literature for Research Question One

What instructional leadership priorities do district central office and school level officials emphasize in their respective positive outlier school systems?

By exploring instructional leadership this study adds to the body of knowledge about adaptive leadership. Knapp, Honig, Plecki, Portin, and Copland (2014) explain that instructional leadership fosters shared work and shared efforts among people in schools in order to respond to environmental demands. Environments surely shift and schools must be able to adapt to a changing landscape. Therefore, instructional leaders must be adaptive, too.

The need for schools to be adaptable organizations cannot be understated. This study enriches the understanding of the priorities of instructional leaders that enable schools to be adaptable organizations.

Adaptable schools require adaptive leadership. Heifetz (2006) argues that the traditional dynamic of having a leader and followers does not create the type of adaptable organization that can mobilize people to solve problems. In order to do this, adaptable leaders must view people as partners (Heifetz, 2006) and must rely on diversity and diverse views (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Discovering instructional leadership priorities that enhance partnerships in their many different forms adds strength to the notion of instructional leadership being adaptive leadership.

Symbolic leadership appears to fit within the frame of adaptive leadership. Weick (1982) describes the job of a school leader thus, “An educational administrator must perform this difficult balancing act – balancing between adaption and adaptability, between stability to handle present demands and flexibility to handle unanticipated demands” (p. 674). He recommends loose coupling to achieve this. Weick (1982) states that diversity in loosely coupled
organizations is a strength as “This very plurality makes for successful local accommodations” (p.675).

**Rational Management**

Rational management should not be conflated with adaptable leadership. Merton (1940) lays a foundation for understanding rational management in his description of bureaucracy. He states that “Official action ordinarily occurs within the framework of preexisting rules of the organization” (p. 560). The bureaucratic official works within a framework receiving their vocation through required and prescribed training, is appointed by a superior authority, and receives compensation for the type of work they do—not the amount they accomplish. Rational management emphasizes standardization within organizations.

Rational management also works to centralize organizational goals. Similarly, Bolman and Deal (2003) describe leadership for a bureaucracy as part of a structural frame. “Authorities—executives, managers, and supervisors—are officially charged with keeping activities aligned with goals” (p. 51). Their use of rewards and sanctions, evaluation, conflict resolution, decision making, and problem solving shapes and directs lower level organization members (Bolman & Deal, 2003). This managerial control allows organizations to limit localized adaptation and front-line professionals’ discretion, while also enabling goal clarity and specificity and facilitating tight coupling.

**Symbolic Management**

Symbolic Management is a type of diffuse leadership (Weick, 1982) and relies on employees’ voluntary commitments and mobilization more than prescription of duty. These features align it with Heifetz, et al.’s (2009) notion of adaptive leadership they describe as “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (p. 14). Further, “Symbolic
management scholars and institutional theorists have long argued that symbolic actions are most effective under conditions of ambiguity or uncertainty” (Westphal & Zajac, 1998 p. 130).

Ambiguity and uncertainty periodically pervade schools and require adaptable environments in order to get past them. As Heifetz (2006) reminds researchers, “…adaptive challenges demand leadership that engages people in facing changing realities and then changing those priorities, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to thrive in a changing world” (p. 76).

Symbolic leadership enriches actions taken in these situations by linking them to significant themes and values that underlie organizations (Weick, 1982). Bolman and Deal (2003) describe the “Symbolic Frame” as one that “sees organizations as cultures, propelled more by rituals, ceremonies, stories, heroes, and myths than by rules, policies, and managerial authority” (p. 15). They further state that within organizations viewed through the symbolic frame “Symbols embody and express an organization’s culture: the interwoven pattern of beliefs, values, practices, and artifacts that defines for members who they are and how they are to do things” (Bolman & Deal, 2003 p. 243).

Symbolic leadership frames another phenomenon of interest: How educators make sense of leadership and management directives. This is important when considering sensemaking in an organization as prioritized in the fourth research question for this study. Zott and Nguyen (2007) claim “Symbols represent an integral part of people’s knowledge structures and taken-for-granted assumptions that help them make sense of social reality” (p. 98). Having the skills to manage symbols and conduct appropriate management becomes very important when considering this organizational model.

Studying symbolic management and its leadership actions is important within the context of working in loosely coupled organizational systems. As Westphal and Zajac (1998) express:
while some symbolic management studies have examined how language is used symbolically, they typically have not examined organizational "de-coupling," in which formal structures are adopted in response to the demands of external stakeholders, but actual practices are tailored to the needs or demands of internal organization members (pp. 128-129).

School Leadership Context: Contrasts Between Symbolic Leadership and Rational Management

Weick’s (1982) claim that school leaders should utilize symbol management launched an impressive line of research. Studies about symbolic leadership follow those on loose coupling diverging on how functional a model it is for schools. Differences in the literature are important to acknowledge.

James, Mesler, and Zoltners (2011) claims that organizational routines will help standardize schools. The purpose of the standardization is to successfully link government regulation to classroom activities (James, et al., 2011). In this case, rational management is the solution for schools to couple them more tightly and successfully impact classroom activity.

Juhani Lahtero and Risku (2014) view symbolic leadership differently. They express the importance of symbolic leadership as an essential element for viable school culture. According to the authors, all leadership actions have symbolic elements no matter how rational a leader might try to be (Juhani Lahtero & Risku, 2014).

Puusa, Kuittinen, and Kuusela (2013) acknowledge the symbolic nature of creating school identity. The author does not specifically express elements of symbolic leadership. However, in the study, they point out the symbolic nature of a school’s identity (Puusa, et al., 2013).
Educational Policy and Environmental Influences

In a qualitative study James, et al. (2011) used multi-site case study with mixed methods to understand how school leaders can align government regulation with classroom teaching. In other words, they sought to find out how regulations were infused in formal school structures or the technical core of schooling (James, et al., 2011). They conclude that coupling government regulation to classroom instruction require organizational routines designed to standardize instructional programs (James, et al., 2011). Their study has import for the current proposed study as it emphasizes the use of standardization to influence classroom activities. It implies that bureaucratic methods are employed to align teaching/instruction and government regulation.

Juhani Lahtero and Risku (2014) used case study analysis with a phenomenological approach to investigate the symbolic leadership culture in one Finnish school. The leadership culture appeared to be based on equality, communality, appreciation, flow of information and humor (Juhani Lahtero & Risku, 2014). The authors claim that their analysis supports an important relationship—namely, the symbolic and cultural forces of leadership cannot be separated from technical, human educational forces (Juhani Lahtero & Risku, 2014). In this view, education professionals always will interpret leadership actions symbolically and culturally (Juhani Lahtero & Risku, 2014), also suggesting that their sensemaking is influenced by the symbols leaders employ.

Puusa, et al. (2013) used thematic template analysis and interpretive research paradigm to analyze how teaching staff members in the midst of organizational change interpret the organization’s identity. They also searched for inter-individual variability. They define organizational identity as “a social and symbolic construction whose purpose is to give meaning
to an experience. It is constructed in the interactions and by the perceptions of the involved actors” (Puusa, et al., 2013 p. 166).

This definition also emphasizes educators’ sensemaking and demonstrates the necessity of symbolic action in an organization to build culture. Sensemaking matters: The authors found that teachers and managers interpret issues related to identity differently (Puusa, et al., 2013). “Paradoxically, the change affects only the leadership at the behavioral level, but the personnel only at attitudinal level, because the conceptions for implementing the change were so different” (Puusa, et al., 2013 p. 175).

Further, Puusa, et al. (2013) acknowledges a disconnect between management and personnel notions of identity. Studying symbolic and rational leadership characteristics may provide understanding of which model helps unify school identity. Puusa, et al.’s (2013) study supports this current research aim to find leadership models that effectively link administrators and workers.

**Literature for Research Question Two**

- How do district central office and school level officials align their instructional leadership priorities?

This question offers the potential to enrich the understanding of leadership characteristics and behaviors that help to produce adaptable organizations. The concept of alignment is central to this line of research and theory development. It refers to structural consistency manifest at three organizational levels: district central office, school, and classroom.

District alignment increases chances of accomplishing goals and priorities, reduces distractions from those goals and priorities, provides staff with more confidence about the value of their work, facilitates collaboration among school leaders, clarifies
accountability, increases access to district support for school goals and priorities and
improves school planning (Leithwood & Mccullough, 2017 p. 9).

It is important to understand if the officials in schools such as the positive outliers included in
this study emphasize multi-level structural alignment; and, if so, how they employ leadership and
management strategies. Here, too, questions regarding rational management and symbolic
management are important.

Rational management characteristics, as mentioned above, are aligned with rational
organizations, which rely on standardization and goal alignment. Leadership is meant to focus
subordinates’ actions on meeting organizational goals through authoritative actions such as using
rewards and sanctions to increase compliance. Front-line professionals’ compliance implicates
standardization, together with minimal discretion granted to teachers and other front-line
professionals. While alignment may be achieved, particularly when a district office and school
leaders employ a rational management style, student learning outcomes and school outcomes
may not improve, and both schools and district central offices may sacrifice their ability to adapt
to changing needs and circumstances (Weick, 1976). Important research questions and
opportunities are associated with these claims.

Securing alignment via adaptive leadership strategies provides an alternative. Heifetz, et
al. (2009) recommends that adaptive leaders must differentiate between leadership and authority
and rid themselves of the illusion of broken systems. Durand, Lawson, Wilcox, and Schiller
(2016) also discovered special leadership strategies associated with alignment needs in positive
outlier schools.
**Loose Coupling**

How instructional leaders align their priorities is an important phenomenon of interest because it is associated with determinations of their schools as loosely- or tightly-coupled organizations. Loose coupling contrasts with tight coupling, and it suggests that education professionals enjoy some discretion in their formal duties. Debates continue regarding how much discretion is functional and appropriate. Some research to date suggests that the presence of loose coupling is not always a dysfunctional form of a rational organization. Ingersoll (1992), for example, suggests that organizations intentionally neglect to control their work processes for the positive effects that loose coupling can bring, “It serves to mask inconsistencies, irrationalities and inefficiencies--in short poor performance--which might undermine public faith in the organization” (p. 9). It also allows employees to feel more satisfaction and commitment, and it allows for more local input into organizational functioning without derailing the whole organization (Ingersoll, 1992).

Weick (1982) specifies particular environmental conditions that recommend loose coupling:

if local changes in the environment are continuous rather than discontinuous, transient rather than permanent, inconsequential rather than consequential, and if there are sufficient resources to permit local self-contained adaptations, then loosely coupled systems will be appropriate organizational forms and tightly coupled systems will make things worse (p. 674).

Organizations meeting this set of qualifiers benefit from loose coupling, according to some research. Weick (1982) identifies several advantages for schools. For example:
• They can adapt to small changes in an environment and detect these changes more quickly as departments retain their independence
• They allow schools to adapt quickly to conflicting demands
• Problems in one section of the organization do not necessarily impact the entire organization, they are “sealed off” from impacting the whole system
• Solutions to problems can be devised without involving the whole system so costs of coordination are lower
• Swift responses to small deviations or problems allow organizations to adapt and develop solutions before these issues overwhelm the whole system.

Weick (1982) also identifies disadvantages. For example, if a department cannot solve a problem on its own, the rest of the organization may not become aware of the issue until it grows and overwhelms the whole system. Additionally, large scale change is difficult to design and diffuse through a loosely coupled system.

Multiple researchers suggest that loose coupling is the appropriate type of organizational structure for schools (e.g., Daft, 1978; Deal, Meyer, & Scott, 1980; Weick, 1982; Orton & Weick, 1990). Weick (1982) suggests that schools are loosely coupled by their very nature, not because of dysfunction. “Loose coupling is the school model, not a broken form of the rational bureaucratic model” (Weick, 1982 p. 675), because schools are not like other organizations, and they must be managed differently.

When analyzing loosely coupled school organizations, Weick (1984) notes that researchers have traditionally divided them into two cores. One is the technical core--“educational activities within classrooms.” The other is the administrative core “administrative support functions out of classrooms.”
When working with school organizations one may need to consider their loosely coupled dual core nature and how those cores interact independently, and with each other. Examining the organizational structures, as indicated by orientation alignment between teachers and leaders, for positive outlier schools and typically performing schools from the newest NYKids study will serve to explore the extent that Weick’s assertions on structure manifest in these schools. School leaders bridge the gaps between these cores.

**Tight Coupling**

Schools may employ four elements to achieve tight coupling. “1. There are rules, 2. There is agreement on what those rules are, 3. There is a system of inspection to see if compliance occurs, and 4. There is feedback designed to improve compliance” (Weick, 1982 p. 674). Tightly coupled schools can utilize a bureaucratic model to align their organizations through the use of rigid structures.

Tight coupling also is associated with disadvantages. The use of “blunt standardized responses” in tightly coupled school systems, across too much of the organization, can magnify problems that might otherwise be small (Weick, 1982). Still, schools that have the four elements listed above in their structure are tightly coupled rational organizations.

**Schools Organizational Context: Contrasts Between Loose and Tight Coupling**

Since Weick’s (1976) assertion that schools are loosely coupled organizations more research has supported this view. Reviewing the literature shows a need to continue studying the organizational contrasts between loose and tight coupling. Weick (1976) implies that loose coupling is the proper organization for schools. Shen, Gao, and Xia (2017) claim that schools are loosely coupled because of non-alignment between schools and classrooms on the use of data.
This study paints a picture of loose coupling as potential organizational dysfunction requiring a solution to increase alignment.

Other studies frame loose coupling differently. Firestone (1984) and Hawkins and James (2017) view loose coupling as a natural organization model for schools. Firestone (1984), for example, created a survey tool to be used to identify elements of loose coupling and help schools adapt. Hawkins and James (2017) identify schools as complex systems that have loose linking structures. This literature implies that loose coupling is naturally occurring in schools because of their very organizational characteristics. Therefore, learning how to manage loose organizations is imperative to their success.

Furthermore, extant literature presents loose coupling as an avenue by which organizations can meet divergent needs. Aurini (2012) identifies loose coupling as an effect that occurs when organizations try to adapt to independent members. The author describes a rational organization, a for-profit tutoring company, which was designed to be tight with predictable procedures (Aurini, 2012). The teaching procedures became loose when tutors adapted lessons to satisfy independent customers (Aurini, 2012). This supports the notion that organizations seeking adaptability must loosen.

Goldspink (2007) and de Lima (2008) bolster the idea that loose coupling allows organizations to be more adaptable. Both of these studies explore schools that successfully reformed. For Goldspink (2007) it was a group of schools in South Australia. For de Lima (2008) is was one school in Portugal. Goldspink’s (2007) research reveals that schools are loosely coupled organizations and bureaucratic methods do not successfully reform them. de Lima (2008) agrees in part saying that schools must attain the proper combination of loose/tight
elements to successfully reform. Both studies acknowledge the need for schools to be treated as loosely coupled organizations.

Shen, et al. (2017) explored the use of data informed decision making (DIDM) in schools and classrooms to inform claims about the organizational structure of schools. Relying on nationally representative data and a quantitative two-level hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) method, Shen, et al. (2017) discovered that schools are loosely coupled organizations. They base this on weak correlations between teacher-level instructional DIDM and school-level DIDM. Their study has import for the current one as it bolsters the notion that school organizations include loosely coupled features. It implies that loose coupling is potentially dysfunctional because lack of alignment causes it. Still, this study shows that loose coupling occurs in school organizations and studying them as such is appropriate.

Firestone (1984) created a survey tool to identify and measure elements of loose coupling in schools and discovered characteristics that could lead to loosely coupled schools. These include school size, content specialization, and gender composition (Firestone, 1984). Additionally, Firestone (1984) offer several suggestions for future research concerning loose coupling including, “measuring the standardization of outcomes, exploring culture as a coupling mechanism, exploring the outcomes of different patterns of coupling, ‘leadership’ without direct supervision, and looking at variation in coupling within the school” (p. 18).

Hawkins and James (2017) investigated the notion that schools are complex, evolving, loosely linking systems (CELLS). They hope to specifically influence improvements in how school organizations are established, managed, and lead (Hawkins & James, 2017). With the use of a case study and complexity theory analysis through literature review Hawkins and James (2017) identified dimensions that would allow leaders to “see” where loose linking and evolution of a
complex system could occur. This study justifies a special research-oriented view: schools are loosely coupled organizations because of internal characteristics and this status is not an indicator of dysfunction.

Aurini (2012) explored tightly coupled organizations to extend knowledge of New Institutionalism. Using ethnographic methods at Ontario Learning Center (OLC), Aurini (2012) learned that, “compromises, priority, organizational goals, and reinterpreting OLC policies—are redrawn in the context of rule following…based on managers’ and instructors’ interpretations of…OLC Method and the need to maintain a strong customer base” (Aurini, 2012 p. 384). In other words, this tightly coupled rational organization became looser as workers broke from protocols to bolster customer satisfaction and retention. Here, too, loosely coupled organizations are portrayed as adaptive ones. Organizations must loosen in order to adapt to individual needs.

The contrast between loose coupling and tight coupling may be useful in social analysis, but they may not be mutually exclusive in practice. de Lima (2008) explored social networking analysis for developing improvement strategies in schools. Using case study analysis of two departments in a rural Portuguese school de Lima (2008) found that balance between loose and tight coupling in schools is vital for improvement. The right amount of loose and tight elements will preserve teacher professionalism while still creating the potential for improvement. Saying it another way, highly effective complex organizations must be both differentiated and well-integrated (de Lima, 2008). Departmentalization in schools potentially isolates teachers and disrupts efforts to integrate. Identifying a need for both loose and tight elements in effective schools has import for the current study. In it, both rational management and symbolic leadership characteristics are looked for. The potential exists of finding school organizations including
combinations of loose and tight coupling attributes. Having samples of schools from both positive outlier schools and typically performing ones enables comparisons. (de Lima, 2008).

**Literature for Research Question Three**

- How do these officials craft and maintain alignment and coherence around the instructional core?

While alignment refers to structural consistency, coherence refers to educators’ understanding of their work and their commitments to its requirements. Ideally, alignment and coherence co-occur. When they do, an adaptive organization is in evidence, and the probability increases that desirable outcomes will be achieved. In contrast, alignment without coherence and coherence absent alignment may predict a sub-optimal organization.

Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, and Bryk, (2001) define coherence in an instructional program as, “a set of interrelated programs for students and staff that are guided by a common framework for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and learning climate and that are pursued over a sustained period” (p. 297). Understanding how officials craft and maintain alignment and coherence around the instructional core potentially points toward the two models of leadership at the center of this dissertation’s focus.

Honig and Hatch (2004) examined the process of crafting coherence among school staff. By reviewing literature largely from outside education on decision-making, organizational-environmental relationships, and organizational learning, these researchers build an argument that crafting coherence must be thought of as a dynamic process involving continual work by district central offices. They state that district offices and schools must work together to continuously negotiate the fit between a school’s goals and strategies and the external demands they face.
In addition to arguing that goals and strategies in schools must have enough specific content and structure to guide actions of staff, Honig and Hatch (2004) argue that they should also provide guidance for when schools and district offices need to bridge or buffer themselves from external demands. This important literature review provides important guidance for this study as it seeks to discover if leaders in sample schools crafted and maintained coherence through a dynamic process, as Honig and Hatch (2004) recommend.

Durand, et al. (2016) investigated district central office leaders' brokering, bridging, and buffering strategies to craft coherence during disruptive policy innovation. Relying on a multi-site case study with mixed methods, they discovered that district office leader’s decision-making strategies during the implementation of CCSS in New York helped them navigate the RTTT changes (Durand, et al., 2016). Their use of bridging, buffering, and brokering allowed them to utilize proactive and adaptive leadership to the benefit of their districts (Durand, et al., 2016). This has import for the current study because its findings indicate that the positive outlier schools in the study sample had more success crafting coherence under leadership strategies that did not strictly emulate rational methods.

Symbolic leadership and rational management offer contrasting strategies to achieve alignment, coherence, and their relations. When symbolic leadership dominates, officials and frontline practitioners are assumed to have more freedom over practice.

In contrast, a rational manager would expect all members to work as their role within the organization demands and achieve alignment by holding that rigid structure. Discovering which of these leadership models were employed by officials in positive outlier schools enriches understanding of the leadership impacts on schools.

Previous studies of positive outlier schools and typically performing schools drew clear
distinctions between how frontline professionals in each type of schools were treated. In positive outlier schools, symbolic management appeared to be dominant. Teachers were treated more professionally receiving encouragement to make adaptations to innovations so as to fit their particular practice (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018).

Wilcox & Lawson (2018) explored teachers’ agency, efficacy, engagement, and emotional resilience when implementing disruptive policy innovations as part of the Race-to-the-Top (RTTT) improvement agenda. The policy innovations included Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Annual Professional Performance Reviews (APPR), and data-driven instruction (DDI) (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018). Employing multiple case study analysis, they found that innovation implementation aided by focusing on teachers’ agency, engagement, efficacy, and emotional resilience from the beginning. Teachers in positive outlier schools felt that they were treated as professionals (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018), while teachers in typically performing schools felt less like this where more bureaucratic methods were used (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018).

This difference in treatment effects agency. Top-down compliance-oriented leadership strategies lessen teacher agency (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018). On the other hand, leadership strategies that acknowledge frontline members’ professionalism by creating environments that value discretion and adaptation increase agency (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018).

Based on the descriptions of symbolic leadership and rational management provided above, it appears that symbolic leadership and rational management conceptions can be expanded. Symbolic leadership would craft coherence and maintain alignment with emphasis on themes while still allowing for discretion. Rational management would align members through formal systems meant to accomplish goals, but perhaps sacrifice coherence and teachers’ sense of agency. The first enhances professional commitments, while the second limits them.
Previous literature and research offer guidance for ‘seeing’ coherence building while analyzing schools included in this study. As mentioned above, leaders who engage in bridging, buffering, and brokering are building coherence among their staffs. The work of Fullan and Quinn (2016) outline coherence building ‘drivers’ when they state, “Coherence provides the remedy to the wrong driver approach. We have renamed the right drivers into an action framework consisting of four main components: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability” (p. 3). This dissertation will use the guidance of previous research work to explore the ways that district central and school officials build coherence in their schools. Past research suggests that coherence in schools is an essential element of success. Therefore, it is an important concept to this current study and is examined as well.

The final question of this study deals with sensemaking, which is important for developing and maintaining coherence. It is a mechanism by which educators craft and achieve coherence. Frontline professionals must engage in sensemaking both collectively and individually in order to achieve coherence. This makes sensemaking essential to understanding coherence building and important to this current study. The next section concentrates on the questions of sensemaking.

**Literature for Research Question Four**

- How do frontline professionals make sense of district central office and school level officials’ instructional leadership?

To understand the effectiveness of the leadership methods in question it is also important to understand how frontline professionals make meaning of the observed practices and leaders’ directives. The most effective instructional leaders build cultures that invite individuals to live
out shared norms and values according to a recent report by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2018). Therefore, leaders must encourage frontline professionals to ‘buy into’ the instructional leadership priorities they hold.

Consider the alternative. If frontline professionals do not work toward developing and meeting shared goals or hold a shared vision, they are like sailors on a rudderless ship whose captain lacks a map and a compass. Addressing this question will confirm that the instructional leadership of positive outlier schools officials does indeed serve to inform frontline professionals’ ‘meaning making.’ Or, if it is found that professionals at the frontline make sense of official’s initiatives by ignoring them, this finding also has significant implications for positive outlier schools.

Addressing this question has import for exploring loose or tight coupling in schools, and it expands the investigation to focus on district central office. As Coburn, et al. (2009) remind researchers, “District personnel often had quite different interpretations of appropriate solutions, which led to considerable negotiation and debate” (p. 1130). If officials choose to use rational management to impose the leadership initiatives frontline professionals may choose to make sense of this by ignoring such directives. On the other end, having an overabundance of autonomy through loose coupling can lead to a ‘silo’ structure (Coburn, et al., 2009) where alignment becomes more difficult.

Understanding how frontline professionals make sense of the instructional leadership priorities held by both district central office and school leaders in positive outlier schools adds to information about how district personnel work collectively. In previous studies, educators in the positive outlier schools valued adaptation among frontline professionals (Wilcox, et al., 2017).

A previous study of positive outlier schools work identified and described mechanisms
for sense-making development and crafting coherence. Lawson, Durand, Wilcox, Gregory, Schiller, and Zuckerman (2017) investigated the relationship between trust and communications, comparing and contrasting positive outlier schools and typical ones. Using a multi-site case study with mixed methods of analysis, this team of researchers learned that trust was a valued leadership characteristic. Two types of trust were identified and described: Relational trust among educators in sample schools and reciprocal trust between leaders in district central office and school professionals. The authors found that both kinds of trust aided innovation adoption and implementation (Lawson, et al., 2017).

Presumably trust and communication facilitate adaptive leadership in service of more effective school systems. Trust and communication also may be connected to sensemaking mechanisms and outcomes in sample schools.

Review of prior research on sensemaking elaborates on the influences at play over how policy messages potentially change or are adapted as they permeate schools. This is important for leaders to know as their attempts at building and sustaining coherence may be altered or even rendered benign in their impact on staff. To truly influence classroom practice leaders must account for sensemaking.

According to Coburn (2001), different factors affect how teachers co-construct meaning of policy and choose which messages to use in their classrooms. Further research points out that policy messages are influenced by actors that are outside of the governance framework for education (Coburn, 2005). Leaders can impact sensemaking among frontline professionals, but it requires prioritizing the exposure of preferred messages and also crafting their delivery in ways that successfully navigate the influences of system and non-system actors on teacher sensemaking.
Coburn (2001) explored how instructional policies often get changed or interpreted as they are put into practice by teachers. With the use of sustained observation, in-depth interviewing, and document analysis, Coburn was able to build an explanation for factors that affect sensemaking and lead to instructional policies getting adapted or changed at the school level. She also discusses the role of reform leadership in sensemaking by making several recommendations for how leaders might impact that process, mainly by facilitating the continued exposure and use of particular messages.

In a subsequent study, Coburn (2005) examined how non-system actors impact policy ideas as they make their way to teachers. A cross-case historical design was used to explore how teachers in two California elementary schools responded to changes in reading policy by the state between 1983 and 1999. She describes three non-system actors that influence policy ideas as they make their way into classroom: for-profit firms, membership organizations, and nonprofit organizations. Interactions between these non-system actors and the system actors, which are the people and organizations forming the state and local governance of education, influence sensemaking of teachers for policy. Discovering how district central officers and school level officials address non-system and system influences on teacher sensemaking by applying messages that align with Coburn recommendations are valuable in this current research project.

The Importance of Research Methodology

A review of Weick’s several contributions to the literature emphasizes the importance of using methodology that allows researchers to “see” loose coupling. According to Orton and Weick (1990) “loose coupling may lead researchers to study structure as something that organizations do, rather than merely as something they have” (p. 218). However, if researchers are not prepared to see this type of organizational structure they may apply “Impoverished
images to organizational settings” (Weick, 1976 p. 16). One reason for this limitation is that researchers are primarily trained to interpret organizations as predictable, tightly coupled realms (Weick 1976).

Researchers thus must work to see loose coupling as a strategy employed by organizations, and not simply the byproduct of a broken rational bureaucratic model (Weick 1982). “Researchers who invoke the concept of loose coupling can avoid simplifying it by specifying their assumptions more precisely” (Orton & Weick, 1990 p. 219).

Studies focusing on symbolic leadership, loosely coupled schools, and positive outlier schools lead to shared recommendations for the design and method of this current proposed dissertation. For example, nearly all the reviewed studies utilized qualitative methods, with exceptions occurring in Shen, et al. (2017) and Firestone (1984).

The review of literature justifies the choice of case study analysis to explore leadership models and school organization. Orton and Weick (1990) recommend case studies as a method of research with ample opportunity for the careful analysis needed to see loose coupling in organizations. Several reviewed studies used this method. Hawkins and James (2017) used case study analysis for their work on schools as CELLS. James et al. (2011) used multi-case study with mixed methods for their study, while Janice (2012) employed a case study approach that used longitudinal methods to support an ethnographic study. Avila de Lima (2007) used a case study of a Portuguese Basic Integrated School in a rural area of Portugal to conduct their research into school organizational structure. Finally, Goldspink (2007) relied on mixed methods for producing data for its case study analysis of schools in South Australia that implemented government reforms. These several relevant examples support the use of case study analysis for researching leadership and organizational models in schools.
Previous research focused on positive outlier schools also supports the methodology of this proposed study. For example, Lawson et al. (2017) and Durand et al. (2016) used multi-site case study approaches with mixed methods. Additionally, the new study relies on this method (Wilcox, et al., 2018).

Additionally, the positive outlier schools literature reviewed support’s this study’s analysis method for investigating leadership characteristics. Using a multi-site case study approach with mixed methods is appropriate for studying the characteristics of symbolic leadership and rational management in leaders in positive outlier schools and typically performing schools.

Summary of Literature

The review of literature affirms that this research project has identified an important area of investigation. Questions remain about the phenomena of interest that are central to this study.

The conceptual framework for this dissertation is justifiable and important. Questions remain about all of the key concepts—rational and symbolic management, tight and loose coupling, alignment and coherence, and educators’ sense-making. Investigating the priorities instructional leaders in positive outlier schools have and how they: create alignment among leadership levels, craft and maintain coherence around the instructional core, and navigate sensemaking within their staffs add discoveries to how they affect schools.

There is no substitution for thick descriptions of schools, extending to district central office influences, as a means for discovering their strengths and areas of need for researchers. Thus, case study methodology is an ideal way to proceed.

A study that focuses on schools-as-organizations in tandem with management and leadership strategies and how educators, particularly, make sense and craft coherence is timely
and important. The reviewed literature above clearly indicates the importance of leadership in schools. The current study is structured to add knowledge and understanding.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Framed by this study’s four main research questions, the literature review provided in Chapter 2 recommends a specialized qualitative research strategy: Case study methodology. In Yin’s (2014) view:

… “how” and “why” questions are more explanatory and likely to lead to the use of a case study, history, or experiment as the preferred research method. This is because such questions deal with operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence (p. 10).

The sample schools are viewed as cases, and comparisons promise to yield important commonalities, similarities and differences. Realizing this promise depends on an appropriate methodology. This chapter provides details.

Research Design

A qualitative multiple case-study analysis is fit for purpose with this dissertation’s four main research questions (Yin, 2014). Each can be viewed as both exploratory and explanatory. Each invite contextual-developmental analysis with special interest in what education professionals have prioritized, implemented, accomplished, and encountered along the way.

Such a study design holds promise for future research. Thick descriptions of the same schools hold promise for empirically based, theoretical propositions that invite further inquiry. Causal links among now-discrete phenomena, facilitating future research.

Elements of the Larger Study

The aforementioned, mixed method larger study provided the foundation for this embedded one.
**Larger Study: Lines of Inquiry**

The larger study was planned to yield knowledge about how people in positive outlier schools were preparing diverse youth for college or career (Wilcox, Leo & Kramer, 2018). As part of the design phase for this study a review of literature revealed two theoretical lenses to guide the study. Social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2009) and Performance adaptation theory (Baard, Rench & Kozlowski, 2014) were those “lenses.”

According to Wilcox, Schiller, Durand, Lawson, Kramer, and Leo, (2018), a social ecological perspective would yield important findings regarding the work of members of positive outlier schools:

From a social ecological perspective, proximal (most direct) processes and distal ones are related. These are enacted in systems nested within others (e.g. micro-level systems such as classrooms nested within exo-level systems such as schools) and each is understood to have variable impacts on individual and group outcomes. From this perspective, the affordances of the context and the ways individuals and collections of individuals interact within their environments over time are of import (p. 3).

To enrich their study design, the research team also applied performance adaptation theory as a complementary lens (Wilcox, et al., 2018). Baard, et al. (2014) offered a multilevel conceptual architecture identifying several interacting elements of performance adaptation: the type of change an adaptation requires (cognitive, affective/motivational, behavioral); the levels within an organization that must adapt (individuals, teams, or units); and, how complex the changes an adaptation demands are (component, coordinative, or dynamic) (Baard, et al., 2014). The result of Baard, et al.’s (2014) work also led them to define performance adaptation as “the
cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral modifications made in response to the demands of a new or changing environment or situational demands” (p. 50).

The research team used Baard, et al.’s (2014) multilevel conceptual framework to guide their work and to also expand upon previous findings. This included how units adapt within schools, “We were especially drawn to aspects of performance adaptation theory that focus attention on the units of supports in place (e.g. individual teachers, teams of teachers, and school- and district-wide supports to ease adaptation challenges)” (Wilcox, et al., 2018 p. 5). Further, they used performance adaptation theory to guide their research of adaptation in positive outlier schools in regard to the other two elements of Baard, et al.’s (2014) framework:

In addition, performance adaptation theory’s attention to the qualities of process mechanisms to support adaptations, particularly the emphasis on affective/motivational ones (i.e. goal orientations, self-efficacy, the emotions associated with all major changes, and anxiety), provided a helpful lens for this investigation” (Wilcox, et al., 2018 p. 5).

Further elements of performance adaption theory helped the research team:

Finally, performance adaptation theory’s attention to task complexity change issues, particularly those defined as “coordinative” and “dynamic” (i.e. the tasks that require linkages and sequencing of cues and actions to meet an aim) that would be expected to be of import in contexts requiring considerable adaptation. Several researchers have drawn upon theories and frameworks that consider the social, cultural, and ecological aspects of schools and districts and focused specifically on practices referred to as culturally responsive or culturally-sustaining, which address some of these “coordinative” and “dynamic” challenges. However, no research to our knowledge has
attempted to explain how all three task complexity issues explicitly are addressed and by whom in contexts where diverse students are achieving above-predicted levels” (Wilcox, et al., 2018 p. 5).

Taking into account these lenses, the research team developed a mixed methods study comparing positive outlier and typically performing schools (Wilcox, et al., 2018).

**Larger Study: Research Question and Sub-Questions**

The review of literature and previous research led the research team to explore one overall research question: “What accounts for the odds-beating schools’ comparatively better graduation outcomes among economically disadvantaged, African-American/Black, Hispanic/Latino and English Language Learner youth?” (Wilcox, et al., 2018 p. 5). They also explored a number of sub-questions:

1. What are the approaches, strategies, and competencies for school leadership and management, instructional supervision, and inclusive-facilitative leadership in these schools? Who is responsible for developing, aligning, improving, and sustaining them, and how do these individuals do this work?

2. What is the nature of parent/family and community agency engagement to support youth success in these schools? Who is responsible for developing aligning, improving, and sustaining it, and how do these individuals do this work?

3. What are the characteristics of organizational capacity (e.g. use of resources, staffing, processes, school-community agency partnerships) to meet critical needs students’ academic, social, and emotional needs in these schools. Who is responsible for developing aligning, improving, and sustaining this capacity and how do these individuals do this work?
(4) What is the nature of the school culture (i.e. norms, values, and beliefs) and climate (i.e. interpersonal relationships, safety, atmosphere) in these school? Who is responsible for developing aligning, improving, and sustaining it, and how do these individuals do this work?

(5) To what extent and how do educators (e.g. instructional leaders: district leaders, principals, instructional coaches, and mentors; teachers, support staff) provide guidance in service of culturally responsive and innovative curricula, instruction, and both in-school and out-of-school support services; and how do these individuals do this work?

(6) What measures (e.g. procedures, interventions, assessments) do educators use to ensure that critical needs students are systematically assessed, and their needs addressed—with a priority for their equitable treatment, social inclusion, and social integration? Who is responsible for this work and how do these individuals do this work?

(7) What characteristics of a cradle-to-career education system, specially adapted to the characteristics of students served (particularly critical needs ones), do these schools exhibit? Who is responsible for this work and how do these individuals do this work?

(Wilcox, et al., 2018 pp. 5-6).

Larger Study: Data Sources

The larger study from which the current study’s data are derived proceeded with multiple methods and data sources. For example:

1. Interviews and focus groups with teachers and school and district leaders…
   a. School Principal and/or Assistant Principal Interview
   b. School Department Chairs (ELA, mathematics, science, social studies, fine arts)

   Focus Groups
c. School Support Staff Focus Group (School Psychologist, Social Worker, Nurse, Parent Liaison) Focus Groups
d. School Guidance Counselor Interview or Focus Group
e. School Special Education Teacher Interview or Focus Group
f. School English New Language (ENL) Teacher Interview or Focus Group
g. School Mainstream Teacher (ELA, math, sci, ss, fine arts) Focus Group
h. School Building Leadership Team Focus Group
i. District Superintendent Interview
j. District Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Interview
k. District Director or Coordinator of Special Education or Director of Student/Pupil Services Interview
l. District Director or Coordinator of Bilingual/ENL Education
m. District Director of Student Services Interview
n. District Director of Assessment or Data/Assistant Superintendent for Assessment Interview (if not Asst. Super)
o. District Director of Human Resources Interview

2. School tour
3. Document collection

**Larger Studies: Ethical Considerations**

The following measures were taken to ensure ethical treatment of participants. Sample schools were chosen, a recruitment protocol was followed, and school site visits were arranged. A three-person research team visited each of the sample schools for two days to conduct
interviews and focus groups with district leaders, school leaders and teachers to explore how classroom, school and district practices and policies impact performance among the student groups. Focus groups and interviews were conducted by university faculty/researchers and with the help of doctoral students. All members were certified by the Institutional Review Board for human subjects research. The interviews and focus groups were audiotaped with the consent of those participating and a record of responses was kept on a laptop computer for later analysis and to also ensure accuracy. Audio files were transcribed by doctoral students and all individual participant names were stripped from the files. These files were stored on the university’s password-protected server (Wilcox, et al., 2018).

Further ethical considerations were used. Schools and districts that exemplify positive outlier performance were identified by name in subsequent writings with the permission of the superintendent and principal. Only the superintendent and principal were referenced by title. All other staff were referenced by their roles (e.g. district leader; school leader; support teacher; teacher). Schools and districts that represent typically performing schools were assigned pseudonyms. The consent of participants and the consents for document collection were acquired before data collection and by following the Institutional Review Board guidelines for human subjects (Wilcox, et al., 2018).

Larger Study: Sample

High school graduation rate served as the main academic characteristic used to determine the larger study sample. These rates were the percentages of a 9th grade cohort that earned either a Regents diploma or an advanced Regents diploma either four or five years later. The rates that the designated graduates earned regular or advanced Regents’ diplomas were attained from the New York State Department of Education’s Graduation Rate Database for 2014-15 and 2015-16.
Regents’ diploma rates were found for three successive cohorts of 9th graders – 2010, 2011 and 2012 (Wilcox, et al., 2018).

To refine the sample, regression analyses were then performed on the larger sample. Three independent variables were analyzed in each:

The same three independent variables were used in all the regression analyses, which were the proportion of students who are identified as economically disadvantaged, the proportion classified as English language learners, and the proportion identifying as either African-American or Latino/Hispanic (Wilcox, et al., 2018 p. 10).

Eventually, the NYKids team narrowed their sample even further while also determining which schools would be included in the final group.

First, only schools with Regents diploma data for at least one critical needs subgroup each year were classified, eliminating approximately 70 (6%) schools. Thus, the remaining 1,128 schools (about 60% located outside NYC) were classified based on results from 12 or more regression analyses. Schools with average scores between +/- 0.30 were classified as “typically performing,” (Wilcox, et al., 2018 p. 11)

The 116 schools with average scores over 0.8 were considered positive outliers. 40 of these 116 were located outside of NYC. According to Wilcox et al., (2018) “The goal of this study was to examine how the policies and practices in these two types of schools differed by visiting a small sample purposively selected to be diverse in geographic location” (p. 11). All of this work described above lead to the inclusion of ten schools, seven positive outliers and three typically performing schools. The list of schools are listed in Table 2 below.
Table 2

_Larger Study Sample_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Outliers</th>
<th>Typically Performing Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfred-Almond Junior-Senior High School</td>
<td>School 1 (Typically Performing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crown Point Central School</td>
<td>School 2 (Typically Performing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeport High School</td>
<td>School 3 (Typically Performing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maple Grove Junior/Senior High School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malverne High School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Chester High School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherburne-Earlville High School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Incorporating Elements of the Larger Study in the Current Study_

This study used several key elements from the larger study. These included a sample of schools taken from the larger sample, ethical considerations, and sources of data taken from the larger study. As a result, this study shares significant characteristics with the larger study such as methods for determining a sample of schools from all of those located in New York State. To these elements, this study applies new lines of inquiry and research questions. The lines of inquiry, research questions, data sources, ethical considerations, and sample are shared next.

**Lines of Inquiry**

This study examines the priorities leaders in positive outlier schools and typically performing schools hold with particular interest aimed at how they impact the work of teachers. It focuses upon whether leadership approaches resemble loosely coupled or tightly coupled
environments. It places special interest upon whether differences help to account for the status of the positive outlier schools or typically performing schools in the sample.

Leadership and management are one of the phenomena of interest to this study. Leadership and management are both important phenomena because past research has shown that both are present when conducting organizational analysis. Spillane, et al. (2007) states that management includes efforts to maintain current arrangements while leadership includes efforts to move to new arrangements. Further, leading and managing often happen in intertwined fashion within organizations (Spillane, et al., 2007). This is why analyzing management tactics of leaders in tightly or loosely coupled organizations includes leadership priorities and their impacts.

Priorities of leadership for symbolic management and rational management are of particular import. Rational management strategies create order within tightly configured organizations (Barker, 1993) by focusing leaders on managing the functions, behaviors, and tasks of people’s work in order to meet organizational goals (Gumus, et al., 2018). Symbolic management occurs as a result of leaders performing symbolic actions (Zott & Nguyen, 2007) usually with symbolic language (Westphal & Zajac, 1998). Leaders using symbolic management impart meaning and purpose to their organizations through the interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Looking for both of these types of management strategies within the relationships between the district central officers and school level leaders as a means of aligning themselves is a priority.

The organizational coupling framework outlined by the work of Karl Weick (1982) guides this proposed study. Loosely coupled organizations and events have responsive elements while still retaining independent identities and separateness (Weick, 1976). Tightly coupled
organizations are much more directed with elements being organized through more rigid systems that resemble a bureaucratic hierarchy (Gumus, et al., 2018). This study focuses on the differences between positive outlier schools and typically performing schools as a means to create insight into whether schools organize loosely, tightly, or with some combination of both.

This study also analyzes sensemaking mechanisms in the sample schools. The purpose is to discover if similar findings to previous research continue. To that end, how frontline professionals make sense of leadership priorities is a central priority. Sensemaking theory posits that meaning of information or events is co-constructed actively between individuals and groups (Coburn, et al., 2009). Officials in schools as well as district central officers can influence how frontline professionals make sense of their messages. The sample schools in this study are analyzed in part to see how sensemaking was built by frontline professionals for the priorities held by their leaders. The information found aids to the understanding of how the positive outlier schools experienced success with their students.

**Research Questions**

The lines of inquiry used to guide this study structure it to address four related research questions:

- What instructional leadership priorities do district central office and school level officials emphasize in their respective positive outlier schools school systems?
- How do district central office and school level officials align their instructional leadership priorities?
- How do these officials craft and maintain alignment and coherence around the instructional core?
How do frontline professionals make sense of district central office and school level officials’ instructional leadership?

Data Sources

The data analyzed in this study came from the larger study and was limited to the medium to large rural schools which included two positive outlier schools and one typically performing school. The data for the schools included came after recruitment protocols were followed and site visits were arranged (Wilcox, et al., 2018). Two days were then spent at each school to conduct interviews and focus groups ranging from half an hour to an hour with district administrators, principals, teachers, and other professionals (Wilcox, et al., 2018).

The purpose of these interviews was to “explore classroom, school and district policies and practices that impact performance among the student groups” (Wilcox, et al., 2018 p. 12). Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with the consent of participants for the use in creating transcripts for later analysis (Wilcox, et al., 2018). See Table 3 below for the transcripts used.

Ethical Considerations

Particular ethical considerations were taken in the design of this study. First, this researcher is certified by the Institutional Review Board for human subjects research. The data sources, which were transcripts of audio files recorded during sight visits, were stored on a password protected computer. Further, this study follows, and does not deviate from, the ethical considerations of the larger study including only identifying superintendents and principals from positive outlier school districts, referencing all other staff by role (e.g. district leader;
school leader; teacher; support staff), assigning the typically performing school in the sample a pseudonym, and only using data following Institutional Review Board guidelines for human subjects research (Wilcox, et al., 2018).

Table 3

Data Source Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Focus Groups</th>
<th>Interpretive Memos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alfred Almond:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSE Chair</td>
<td>Alfred Almond: Mainstream Teachers (five participants)</td>
<td>Alfred Almond: Interpretive Memo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Information Officer</td>
<td>Alfred Almond: SPED &amp; AIS Teachers (five participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Principal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent Technology Coordinator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sherburne-Earlville:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asst. Principal</td>
<td>Sherburne-Earlville: SPED Teachers (three participants)</td>
<td>Sherburne-Earlville: Interpreive Memo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asst. Superintendent</td>
<td>Sherburne-Earlville: Mainstream Teachers #1 (five participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPED Director</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Sherburne-Earlville: Mainstream Teachers #2 (six participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Sherburne-Earlville: Principals (two participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Typically Performing School:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPED Director</td>
<td>Typically Performing School: Admin Focus Group (three participants)</td>
<td>Typically Performing School: Interpretive Memo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Typically Performing School: Department Leaders (four participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Typically Performing School: Mainstream Teachers #1 (four participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Typically Performing School: Mainstream Teachers #2 (four participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Typically Performing School: Principals #1 (three participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Typically Performing School: Principals #2 (two participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Typically Performing School: SPED Teachers (four participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Interviews: 12  
Total Focus Groups: 13  
Total Interpretive Memos: 3

Sample

Two positive outlier schools were chosen because they represent medium to large rural schools and also serve similar percentages of economically disadvantaged students. This designation of “medium to large rural schools” was given to schools in the larger NYKids study classified as rural by New York State and that also have at least two or more buildings housing
their students, (see Table 4 for additional demographic information below). The larger size of the
two positive outlier schools promised to enhance the richness of the analysis and yield important
details regarding how leaders strive to align their priorities, while working to develop and
maintain coherence among staff.

Analyses of the two positive outlier schools allows for selective comparisons and with
special interest in commonalities, similarities and differences. Adding to the comparative nature
of this study is the addition of a typically performing rural school from the larger sample (see
table 4 for additional demographic information below). Together, the three schools afford a
manageable study undertaken by a sole researcher.

Rural schools in New York State and beyond are of special interest to the investigator
and offer a plethora of important research opportunities. Schafft (2016) points out that almost
one quarter of children attending public schools, more than 12 million children nationwide, go to
schools in rural places. However, rural schools oftentimes are overlooked by policy leaders and
researchers (Schafft, 2016).

A similar situation occurs in New York State. Showalter, Klein, Johnson, and Hartman
(2017) point out that New York State had one of the nation’s largest populations of students
attending schools in rural location in 2015-16. Yet, academic research into rural schooling in
New York State seems to follow the same trend mentioned above. Zuckerman, Wilcox, Schiller,
and Durand (2018) state that rural schools are largely overlooked by research that favors analysis
of schools in New York City or other urban areas.

The positive outlier schools in the study sample, Alfred-Almond and Sherburne-earlville,
are deemed comparable because they have similar ratios of economically disadvantaged students.
The difference between them is a modest nine percent. Maple Grove, the third medium to large
rural positive outlier schools high school from the larger study, has twelve percent less
economically disadvantaged students than Alfred-Almond and twenty one percent less than
Sherburne- Earlville. Therefore, it is not included in the sample of this study.

Data Analysis and Measures to Address Credibility Threats in the Larger Study

The larger study was designed to address threats to its credibility. Both its data analysis
technique as well as additional measures effectively mitigated credibility threats. This next
section describes those design elements.

Larger Study: Data Analysis

According to Wilcox, et al. (2018), the larger NYKids study used multiple coding steps
to analyze data. In the first coding cycle:

Data, including interpretive memos crafted by the site team, were coded in phases
beginning with a priori coding based upon the NYKids framework, which included major
code categories pertaining to curriculum and academic goals; staffing, leadership, and
capacity building; instructional programs and practices; monitoring and use of data; and
recognitions, interventions, and adjustments (pp. 14-15).

After analyses were complete, NYKids researchers created case studies for each individual
of the school selection criteria, demographics, context, and the survey results” (p. 15).

Wilcox, et al. (2018) also described additional coding cycles used by the NYKids team,
“In second and third cycles of coding, deductive, inductive, and abductive methods were used to
code and reorganize the data. To facilitate coding, recoding, and pattern matching, qualitative
software programs were utilized as in the first phase of coding” (p. 15). The NYKids team
Table 4

Sample Demographics Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alfred Almond</th>
<th>Sherburne-Earlville</th>
<th>Typically Performing School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfred-Almond Central School</td>
<td>Sherburne-Earlville is a rural district</td>
<td>The typically performing school in the sample is from a rural district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District is located in the southern</td>
<td>covering a large geographic area in the southern tier of New York. It is a mixed rural</td>
<td>covering 100 square miles of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tier of New York. It is a mixed rural community with one side being in</td>
<td>community where both agriculture and industry (a yogurt manufacturer</td>
<td>countryside in central New York.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>close proximity with several higher education institutions. The other side is more working class.</td>
<td>that distributes nationally) provide</td>
<td>The loss of manufacturing jobs over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rural community has changed over the years as evidenced by increasing populations of transient students as well as more students growing up in poverty (Wilcox, McBride, Gross, &amp; Yu, 2018).</td>
<td>employment options for residents</td>
<td>the recent past has left the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and graduates from Sherburne-Earlville’s high school. Issues such as student transience, mental health needs, poverty, and substance abuse are providing growing challenges to this rural community (Wilcox, Lawson, Leo, Cala-Ruud, &amp; Kramer, 2018).</td>
<td>district the region’s major employer. Increasing numbers of students dealing with mental health issues as well as economic disadvantage are some of the challenges facing this rural district.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

procedures supported a rigorous analysis that built upon theory and also created new theoretical insights (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Wilcox, et al., 2018). Further, the cross-case approach the team used for qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) procedures and matrices nurtured the comparability of particular aspects of the schools studied (Ragin, 2008; Wilcox, et al., 2018).

Larger Study: Measures to Address Credibility Threats

The NYKids study team took measures to address potential threats to the credibility of their study. This included making sure data gathered was done so consistently:

To ensure consistent data gathering across multiple sites, UAlbany PI or Co-I staff provided a 3-hour orientation for all field team leaders and coleaders. In this orientation, field team In phase one there was member checking for the larger data there was member checking…at least say something about the ethics that were
followed researchers were presented with an overview of the study and guidance on the content and use of instruments to guide interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, summary interpretations of school visits, and collection of documentary evidence. Newer field researchers were partnered with experienced UAlbany PI or Co-I staff to shadow on at least one visit before collecting data themselves (Wilcox, et al., 2018 pp. 11-12).

Steps were also taken to make sure researchers consistently understood how to use the instrumentation:

During the orientation, all the instrumentation was distributed in electronic formats and in a field manual. Researchers were strongly encouraged to review the manual’s detailed descriptions of data collection procedures for all aspects of the school visits and use the manual as reference material during and after the site visits. After the training sessions, each field team was assigned a supervisor that was either the PI or one of the CO-Is on the study. This person oversaw the writing of the case study (Wilcox, et al., 2018 p. 12).

Finally, steps to enhance the validity of the larger study were included in its design:

As is recommended in qualitative case study designs, multiple methods to attend to credibility threats were used including a) peer review/debrief of the data and process (through interpretive memoing and research team periodic and final debriefs), b) data, investigator, theory, methodological (i.e. source) triangulation, c) identifying negative cases (or disconfirming evidence) through the use of such tools as data matrices, d) clarifying bias (i.e. reflexivity) through investigator memoing and debriefing, and e) member checking the accuracy of case study reports with superintendents and
principals. If an inaccuracy was identified in the case report during member checking, the research team made the identified change (Wilcox, et al., 2018 p. 16).

**Data Analysis and Measure to Address Credibility Threats in This Study**

This study builds on the methodology in the parent study and includes measures to address threats to its credibility. Those measures include its design methodology and analysis technique. Further, steps taken to increase the validity of the study are included in the overall design. All are discussed next.

**The Import of Case Study Methodology**

According to Yin (2014) a case study method is preferred when contemporary events are being examined and the researcher cannot manipulate participants’ behaviors. Interviews of participants in positive outlier schools and a typically performing school compose the research sample for this project and help justify case study design.

A case study comparison design is also supported by the literature. Comparative studies (Weick, 1976) and case studies (Orton & Weick, 1990) are two methods recommended in literature for researching loose coupling. They offer researchers one way to “see” loose coupling (Weick 1976) and also interpret what is discovered (Orton & Weick, 1990).

**This Study: Analysis Technique**

The four research questions also lend structure to data analysis. A multi-step coding and analysis process is utilized. The purpose of the coding is to facilitate a cross-case analysis search for data which provide in-depth information about each case (Yin, 2014). To do this, a less structured approach (Maxwell, 2013) is used identifying segments of useful data. Table 5 below summarizes the data analysis technique used in this study.
First Cycle Coding

As recommended by Saldaña (2009), initial coding, is used in the first cycle to mark segments of useful data. “Initial Coding is breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences,” which is done in this project (Saldaña, 2009 p. 81).

Segments of data are picked as they relate to the four research questions in this study. Breaking the data into discrete parts with initial coding allows for close examination and eventual comparison of differences and similarities (Saldaña, 2009).

Initial coding is chosen as it helps provide analytic leads for downstream analysis (Saldaña, 2009). To make this process focused and useful the delimitating step of using initial codes that relate or connect to the four research questions at the center of this dissertation occurs.

Second Cycle Coding

Once attributes are set and appropriate segments of data identified, analyses aims to develop enhanced understanding of the study’s phenomena of interest. Toward this end, in the second cycle pattern coding (Saldaña, 2009), also known as pattern matching (Yin, 2014), is used. Pattern coding pulls a lot of material into parsed out units of analysis that are more meaningful (Saldaña, 2009).

Saldaña (2009) expresses a concise method for pattern coding that this research follows: “Review the First Cycle codes to assess their commonality and assign them a Pattern Code. Use the Pattern Code as a stimulus to develop a statement that describes a major theme, a pattern of action, a network of interrelationships, or a theoretical construct from the data” (p. 154). For Yin (2014), pattern matching sets up further analysis of data with “pattern-matching logic” or comparing patterns from case study findings with predicted patterns prior to research. For this
study the ‘predicted patterns’ are those observed prior to analysis in literature review and occur as a result of cross-case analysis (Saldaña, 2009). For example, cross-case analysis helps determine whether district central officers and school level leaders use methods for influencing sensemaking of messages to frontline professionals by prioritizing exposure of certain messages. Review of literature exposes this method of message prioritization (Coburn, 2001) as one that effectively influences sensemaking among staff.

Pattern coding fits with the analytical strategy of pattern matching. Yin (2014) recommends pattern matching logic as one of the most reliable strategies for case study analysis. To enhance the use of pattern matching this study utilizes explanation building, which Yin (2014) calls “a special type of pattern matching” (p. 147). “To ‘explain’ a phenomenon is to stipulate a presumed set of causal links about it, or ‘how’ or ‘why’ something happened” (Yin, 2014 p. 147). This analytical strategy helps connect patterns of symbolic or rational leadership characteristics to the phenomenon that are pre-determined in the sample for this study. Analyzing the patterns of leadership characteristics allows for links to how or why leadership characteristics may explain some schools beating the odds while others have not.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

To enrich the analysis and also offer thick descriptions of the schools involved in the study, a cross-case analysis is used (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2009). Yin (2014) describes the cross-case analysis that this dissertation utilizes:

The fourth and last format applies to multiple-case studies only. In this situation, there may be no separate chapters or sections devoted to the individual cases. Rather, your entire report may consist of the cross-case analysis, whether purely descriptive or also covering explanatory topics. In such a report, each chapter or section would be devoted
to a separate cross-case issue, and the information from the individual cases would be dispersed throughout each chapter or section (p. 186).

The ‘cross-case issues’ (Yin, 2014) for this study consist of the findings with regard to the four central research questions. Each analytic section is headed by one of the questions and the subsequent text expresses themes derived from pattern matching of the data along with evidence for each. Appropriate literature is employed to further match empirical patterns with instructional leadership priorities and alignment, the building/maintaining of coherence, and sensemaking among frontline professionals.

**Measures to Address Credibility**

This study uses three qualitative techniques to enhance its credibility. The first is use of rich, thick descriptions in the authorship of findings. This provides readers with adequate interconnected details so as to potentially transfer information from this project to other settings. It helps readers determine if its findings can be transferred to environments that share characteristics with those analyzed in this particular study (Creswell, 2013).

Additional validation, peer review and debriefing (Creswell, 2013), is used. The members of the committee overseeing this study were given ample opportunity to read, ask clarifying questions of the research, challenge the information as a “devil’s advocate,” and keep this researcher honest with feedback (Creswell, 2013).

**Threats to Credibility**

When using interviews of individuals there is a risk for inconsistency among various members’ descriptions of leaders’ priorities or organizational characteristics. The case study method offers a design advantage to minimize this threat. According to Yin (2014) a major
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenon of Interest</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Data Analysis Technique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional leadership priorities held by district central officers and school</td>
<td>Transcripts of interviews and focus groups from positive outlier schools and</td>
<td>First Cycle Coding: Initial coding (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>level officials in positive outlier schools and typically performing schools</td>
<td>a typically performing medium to large rural schools including: Superintendents, Assistant or Deputy Superintendents, Principals, Assistant Principals, Directors or Coordinators, Department Chair-people, regular education teachers, and SPED teachers.</td>
<td>Second Cycle Coding: Pattern Coding (Saldana, 2009)/Pattern Matching (Yin, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods used by officials to align their priorities in positive outlier schools and</td>
<td>Transcripts of interviews and focus groups from positive outlier schools and</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis: Cross-case analysis for multiple cases (Yin, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one typically performing school</td>
<td>a typically performing medium to large rural schools including: Superintendents, Assistant or Deputy Superintendents, Principals, Assistant Principals, Directors or Coordinators, Department Chair-people, regular education teachers, and SPED teachers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crafting and maintaining coherence in positive outlier schools and one typically</td>
<td>Transcripts of interviews and focus groups from positive outlier schools and</td>
<td>First Cycle Coding: Initial coding (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>performing school</td>
<td>a typically performing medium to large rural schools including: Superintendents, Assistant or Deputy Superintendents, Principals, Assistant Principals, Directors or Coordinators, Department Chair-people, regular education teachers, and SPED teachers.</td>
<td>Second Cycle Coding: Pattern Coding (Saldana, 2009)/Pattern Matching (Yin, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensemaking of officials’ leadership in positive outlier schools and one typically</td>
<td>Transcripts of interviews and focus groups from positive outlier schools and</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis: Cross-case analysis for multiple cases (Yin, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>performing school</td>
<td>a typically performing medium to large rural schools including: Superintendents, Assistant or Deputy Superintendents, Principals, Assistant Principals, Directors or Coordinators, Department Chair-people, regular education teachers, and SPED teachers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
strength of case study is the use of multiple sources of evidence. Where the current study is concerned, there are interviews from multiple leader and staff members across three different schools.

The use of these multiple data sources in this case study design allow for the development of converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2014). Using multiple data sources as part of this multiple case study design helps to neutralize this potential threat to credibility.

Another threat to consider develops from using data that was not collected specifically for this study. Since the questions asked during the interview process for the NYKids team’s study did not follow directly the lines of inquiry for this study, issues of coordinating data are inescapable.

Careful planning and advisement help mitigate this particular threat to the credibility of this research project. The design of the research questions as well as the process for data analysis is bolstered by using investigator triangulation (Yin, 2014). The co-chairs on this dissertation committee met multiple times along the way with this researcher to discuss and critique the central research questions and analytic method to create a ‘fit’ between the larger study and this project.

**Limitations**

Orton and Weick (1990) state that in addition to case studies, ethnographies and systematic observations are more effective methods for studying loose coupling. Further, Weick (1976) emphasizes the importance of longitudinal studies to discern loose coupling in schools. In contrast, the data for this dissertation study derives from two-day site visits. A limitation resulted in part from the constrained time frame for data collection. Since ten schools make up
the sample for the larger NYKids researchers only could spend two days in each district conducting interviews and focus groups. This limits the ability to potentially generalize about the views held by teachers at the school throughout the whole of the academic year that reveal further evidence of tight or loose coupling in schools.

The systematic observations and case study design elements of the larger NYKids study meet Orton and Weick’s (1990) recommendations for ways to “see” loose coupling. However, the inability to gather information over a longer period of time potentially limits this dissertation’s ability to observe loose coupling. This is potentially true when considering Weick’s (1976) recommendation for using longitudinal studies with regards to loose coupling in schools.

**Delimitations**

In order to create a study that is manageable within its scope and time frame intentional the research made decisions about selective omissions. As mentioned above, the sample for this study is limited to certain medium to large rural schools. This cuts down the bulk of information to analyze. It enhances the comparison of the schools as they share the characteristic of being rural and, in the case of the positive outlier schools, having similar ratios of students that are economically disadvantaged. For this purpose, the sample has been intentionally delimited.

Information focused on for analysis also is delimited. Regarding instructional leadership, only the priorities held by school level officials and district central offices are considered. Survey data from the larger NYKids study is intentionally omitted. Information collected by the NYKids team through case studies and systematic observations (Orton & Weick, 1990) are better suited for studying loose coupling, according to the research literature. Further, interviews, focus
groups, and interpretive memos offer richer analysis opportunity for the contemporary, qualitative, multiple-case study design (Saldaña, 2009; Yin, 2014) of this research.

Similar delimitations are made for the information analyzed regarding sensemaking and coherence. For coherence, the analysis concentrates on the instructional core. Coherence building around additional organizational elements such as social or emotional aspects are intentionally not examined.

Sensemaking investigative probes, which would be relevant for all elements of instructional leadership as they relate to frontline professionals, is limited to how members make sense of the priorities held by leaders in the sample schools. Again, the decision to limit these characteristics from the analysis is, in part, to maintain a manageable project. The characteristics chosen are done so in order to create a balanced study with regards to analyzing leadership priorities, alignment, coherence, and sensemaking in concise terms while still representing them as they are presented in literature.
Chapter 4

Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the research findings, which are organized by the four main research questions. Contrasts between positive outlier and typically performing schools are featured throughout. The chapter concludes with a selective discussion of these findings’ meaning and significance.

1. What instructional leadership priorities do district central officers and school level officials emphasize in their respective positive outlier school systems?

Strengths Based Solution-Focused Discourses

The instructional leaders from the positive outlier schools in the sample express belief in their students’ abilities to be academically successful. When talking about their students they are confident that they can experience success in academic environments that they might not typically choose to enter such as advanced placement courses or extracurricular activities that are academically enriching. Positive outlier leaders also plan to assist in making sure that students can participate in these opportunities whether it is in offering transportation after school or health and wellness items. Instructional leaders at the typically performing school appear to offer a contrasting viewpoint where opportunities are limited because they are perceived to potentially be outside of student abilities for success.

District central officers and school level officials in Alfred Almond encourage students to participate in academic opportunities they might not typically see themselves doing. Advanced placement (AP) courses are one example. In the words of one district leader: “So, what we’re trying to do is get kids in AP-level courses that maybe aren’t your typical AP kid, that they might
not get a 3, 4, 5, but that we’re introducing them to the rigor of that type of a class, you know, for going to college.”

The Alfred-Almond secondary principal shares a similar perspective:

_I see kiddos who I know very well are coming out of poverty, that their own expectations for themselves or their families were low and they may be kids are in foster homes, they may be kids who I know a lot of background and things, but...they are there, they are participating, they have expectations to be on a math team and be competing and believing in themselves._

At Sherburne-Earlville instructional leaders understand that students require support from the school to fulfill their potentials:

_We also have a lot of support for our kids. Having a four o’clock bus, having a five o’clock bus allows our kids who don’t have parents to take them home to participate in after-school activities, to be hooked and still have a ride. Breakfast, lunch – we’ve got a whole study hall room full of toiletry items that you can walk in and pick up your shampoo and hairbrush. There’s a whole closet full of clothes if you need something. Those types of things I think really matter, but they’re not the big things, they’re not getting our kids to pass the Regents’. But in terms of the kids that I see, they really help them._

Rideau’s superintendent shares a desire for students to push themselves academically but appear to temper hope with expressions of doubt in student ability. This rational appears to be further used as justification to not pursue an International Baccalaureate program at their high school:
And so, with having so few teachers, if we were to get into a Baccalaureate program, I just think we would be spread thin. And I'm not sure. I don't believe we have the numbers of students at that high of level. And maybe I'm wrong because you have to have high expectations for kids. But we haven't gone into that kind of level of rigor that you would see.

The positive outlier school instructional leaders appear to believe that if they provide opportunities and supports students will achieve, even if they are outside of their perceived typical abilities. They do not appear to need their students to express particular strengths before they create programs to push them and systems to support participation. The typically performing school leader appears to justify not pursuing academically enriching programming because it would be outside of their students’ abilities anyway.

**Identifying and Capitalizing on Community Assets**

Instructional leaders in the positive outlier school appear to create programs and nurture relationships which leverage the assets available in their communities. Working with community stake holders promotes community/school preparedness. Creating academic programs that help students enter their local economy after graduation also occurs. Similar rhetoric about leveraging community assets does not appear to be present at the typically performing school. Instead, educators discuss the challenge of motivating some students to access the college preparatory or BOCES tracts already offered.

At Sherburne-Earlville leaders appear proactive about working with their community stake holders:

*But you know we tend to collaborate closely with our local agencies. We have a great relationship with our local enforcement agencies, whether it’s the local village police,*
(name deleted) County Sheriffs, State Troopers. I have a meeting on Friday and we’re going to be meeting with the Fire Department and reviewing our safety plans especially with respect to bus emergencies and those types of things. So we’re all on the same page...I meet with the mayor at Rotary Club meetings. We make sure that we’re all on the same page and we’re all working on the same goals.

Also, in Sherburne-earlville instructional leaders design academic programs that match community opportunities:

We’re bringing back an Agricultural Science program, slowly but surely. So that’s another piece there, too, to meet the needs of our community because we are an agricultural community. And there is beginning a shift away from a lot of the big, industrial-sized farms to smaller, organic-type farms with people doing those types of things for the local economy. And I think providing students with some of those academic resources could certainly benefit our greater community in the long run also.

At the typically performing school students are directed to access BOCES programs, but apparently not with the same focus on leveraging community resources unique to the area:

Well it depends on who you talk to but part of the challenge is to break that cycle, and get them all to value education somehow; so we try to create as many opportunities for our kids as we can. We have some kids that leave with like 30 some credit hours of college credit, but then we also value the BOCES and Trades that they offer. So we try to get kids over to see what BOCES offers in 8th grade and 10th grade, so if that's something that they're interested in they can do that in 11th and 12th grade; cause it's not about just college ready, it's about getting the whole child ready for whatever they
choose to go in and arming them with the tools they need to be successful when they leave here, that is success.

At the positive outlier school, Sherburne-earlville, leaders appear to work to have relationships with their community. They appear to do this to be prepared in the event they must work together in some capacity. They also design academic programs that will help students to work within their local economy. at the typically performing school, there appears to be a desire to prepare students to access programs, such as at their BOCES, which will prepare them to work anywhere. There is not the same talk of connecting to the economy that Rideau is a part of.

Assessing Student Interests to Facilitate Engagement, Curriculum Design, and Instruction

District central office and school level instructional leaders at all three sample schools claimed to value student involvement in their school communities. At the positive outlier schools, educators rely on systems to determine what extracurriculars students were involved in, or if they had personal connection to an adult at the school. At Sherburne-earlville, courses are designed with student interest in mind, aiming to increase student connection to their school. At the typically performing school talk of the importance of student extracurriculars also occurs, but without the same talk of formal systems to really understand what students are participating in.

Leaders at the odds-beater Sherburne-earlville express the desire to include student interest into course design. According to one principal, “A couple of years ago we added a hunting and wilderness course. This is what they’re interested in, and so why aren’t we teaching – putting that in so the English Department found a literary piece that focus on hunting and outdoors and those ideas.”
According to the Alfred-Almond superintendent, the staff members use data analysis to determine whether new activities need to be created in order to reach students who are otherwise not connected outside of their school day:

*And you know we do a ton of things for all students. We look at every one of those participation data points. That’s the purpose and that’s why we have those things. If we aren’t hitting a percentage of our kids, our population, through one activity. We look and say, ‘ok how do we hit them? Can we go to another activity?’ because we know ultimately the more connected they are to the school the better they’re going to do.*

At Sherburne-Earlville, one teacher talks about being able to identify student connectedness and making sure that each student has someone they can see:

*So whether we’re talking about in the classroom or beyond that, most of the kids in the building, and actually we do look at this – this is another thing that came out of Links a few years ago – the idea of being able to identify the kids that don’t have the institutional connections. They’re not athletes, they don’t attend school very well, and making it an extra point to see who can hook up with them. Everybody here has got somebody that they can see.*

One Rideau teacher states that students are encouraged to be involved in many things, but there is no mention of systems used to find out what students are actually involved in:

*I think one of the... philosophies of the school is that we encourage the kids to be involved in many things. So, you'll have students that are playing softball but are also starring in the play and are also on the FFA team. So...even for a small school we try to offer a lot of things and have a lot of involvement.*
Thus, similar sentiments about student involvement are apparent in all three schools in the sample, but systems of action to ensure student connection differ. At the positive outlier schools systems for gauging student involvement inside and outside of the school day are mentioned. One positive outlier school even talked about designing curriculum based upon student interest. At the typically performing school the importance of student involvement in extracurriculars is also mentioned, along with the view that many things are offered to students. However, there is no talk of systems that allow staff to definitively know what students are participating in.

**Collective Efficacy with a Proactive, Adaptive Posture**

Adaptive leadership requires awareness of system weaknesses and potentials for better practice. At the positive outlier schools this appears to be accomplished, in part, through open lines of communication with frontline professionals and trusting their observations. It also appears to involve taking risks and finding programming blind spots. By contrast, the typically performing school in the sample appear to be wary of risk, even if potential program outcomes might benefit students.

One Sherburne-earlville teacher describes starting a course that they believed was needed to enhance the academic program for students. This information was accepted by instructional leaders and supported as it was developed:

_At the same time, (name deleted) and I were talking about starting a new technology course that expands our Computer Science program because we have pretty much nothing in school now. That’s been a pretty big push all the way up from our superintendent down to expand that, and we were able to start a new course that_
required ordering thousands of dollars in equipment for this. They supported it, they put it in the budget. They gave me free rein to create this course, and it’s been great so far.

This appears to have helped Sherburne-Earlville find a programming “blind spot” where data might not necessarily have revealed the same deficit.

In Alfred-Almond, the superintendent shares a hope to promote risk taking so as to find the best type of educational experience for all students across all content:

>You know, so there’re more confident to do things. I’d like to think that we promote risk taking as well in terms of our teachers. I spoke earlier about not liking cookie cutter education. We provide a huge, amount of ownership and responsibility in terms of the curriculum. You know, for teachers…we may have a grounding text. But we encourage differentiation and going off there. And I think that works very well in some cases with the people who’ll do the science as well as the art.

The typically performing school provides an important contrast. There appears to be a risk averse posture even if the proposed actions benefit students. According to the superintendent at Rideau:

>I see this need, and we've got the data. We do surveys...we see what kind of need we have. And I'm trying to get the board to approve this new position and they're scared to death to do anything because we don't have the money. And it's just so difficult and just the fear of we might get hit with another Draconian policy that just is what we feel is set out to bankrupt us and so how can we hire? How can we add? And my comment this year was how can we not?

Additionally, at the typically performing school there apparently is a feeling that certain hindrances are out of their control. Or, as the Rideau Interpretive Memo developed by the
research team states, “They see certain things ‘out of their control’— including the kinds of issues brought from poverty, drug use, mental health problems – part of the reason they pushed to get back the after school program that had been eliminated years ago.”

This implies a difference between the positive outlier schools and the typically performing school in the sample. At the positive outlier schools, educators take risks, make adaptations, and take a proactive approach when seeking solutions. At the typically performing school, a sense of not having control on external circumstances appear to fuel a strong aversion to taking programming risks even if they are demonstrated to be needed.

**District Central Office and School Level Instructional Leaders with Improvement Mindsets**

Both Alfred-Almond and Sherburne-Earlville instructional leaders share examples of their respective methods of improvement. Their responses are indicative of what might be called “improvement mindsets”. The positive outlier school leaders express finding new education practices that will fit into current systems. Also, formative data, or evaluating how things are going midstream, is a strategic element of improvement and exemplified by positive outlier school practices. The opposite is to rely solely on summative information that provides intel “after the fact” which the typically performing school has example of.

The superintendent at Alfred-Almond describes looking for new trends in education while making sure they will strategically fit into the practice of the larger district:

*I’m an avid reader. I make sure I read at least one professional book every two weeks in terms of that to see what the latest trends are and…sharing that information. In-service opportunities as well certainly in terms of conferences. But very targeted so that everything that we do will support the mission of the school. As opposed to shot gunning, you know throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping something sticks.*
Another instructional leader at Alfred-Almond confirms this ‘strategic lens’ for improvement.

Programs are sought for their established success:

> So last year I talked to... who is a principal through BOCES, and she said I’m really trying to develop this classroom called Project SEARCH. And...there is like five hundred of them across the United States and the Virgin Islands and other countries. But that’s the sort of thing when I went to... our superintendent and said, I really want us to be involved in this because you know the...percentage of kiddos that are employable after they are finished is eighty five percent.

At Sherburne-Earlville there is expressed commitment to letting their frontline professionals engage in improvement initiatives. According to a principal there:

> They’re branching out from their little team...And we’re committed to giving them the resources they need. We’ve covered classes, myself and the (position deleted), we’ve covered classes for them, so they can go watch someone else. Or we’ll rework a sub schedule so that we can have coverage so that their class will be attended to when it’s convenient so they can watch this lesson going on.

At Alfred Almond, one district leader describes reviewing student grades to understand if potential program changes are required to benefit students by identifying program deficits early:

> I can see the grades for every kid throughout the district any time I want. I have access to all of their grade books. So, when I look at this new teacher for example. There were three (grade deleted) graders that she’s working with that all while they were not failing a bunch of things, they’re names were on the list for some things. So, they’re on the radar. So then (name deleted) and I talked, and I went through and printed off all their grades for every class. And (name deleted) and I met with that teacher and the support
teacher that works... with (grade deleted) grade with reading support and so the (level deleted) team kind of met.

At the typically performing school the superintendent describes going to some frontline professionals to add context to something encouraging they found in end of year standardized testing data:

My teachers in (grade deleted) three through (grade deleted), I had five of them that were outperforming the state average by like 20 percent or more, and I went and talked... I congratulated them, and I went and spoke to them in the beginning of the year. And I asked them why? What's going on? What's working that your students are doing so well?

Educators in the three schools in the sample express differences in finding improvement. The positive outlier school leaders look for programs that will fit into current practice. They train teachers and also use formative data sources to monitor the success of academic programming. Frontline professionals at the typically performing school are able to provide helpful information to the superintendent, but since it was summative data it was not discovered until the academic year had ended.

**Frontline Professionals’ Adaption and Improvement Agency**

Viewing frontline professionals as partners of improvement in positive outlier schools appears to bolster a culture where sharing knowledge is regular and expected. In other words, teachers believe in their own agency as pivotal members for helping design or improve academic programs. Front-line professionals in positive outlier schools, particularly teachers, are afforded “voice and choice”—agency—in matters of school organization and continuous improvement. This affordance helps to distinguish positive outlier schools from the typically performing school
where a collegial culture of sharing professional practice appear less prevalent; and where outside trainers are used to assist with decision making.

During one teacher focus group at Sherburne-Earlville one member discusses collective work around choosing priority standards:

*We narrowed it down from the list of maybe thirty standards that the state provided. And if I remember right, this was a couple of years ago, we had our (grade deleted) through (grade deleted) department look at those by themselves. They chose out the ones they considered to be most essential. Then we had our (level deleted) school team do the same thing. They looked at them separately and chose out the ones they thought were most essential. Then we did the same at the (level deleted) school. When we had our big (grade deleted) through (grade deleted) subsequent meeting, we tabulated the areas of agreement. There were some areas that were very evident, like maybe three out of the five, everyone agreed on.*

One teacher at Sherburne-Earlville hints at a belief within the district where frontline professionals are viewed as improvement partners:

*Last year, to try to improve and better our leadership development program, the school district sent me for a week-long thing up into (location deleted) for leadership training in the (location deleted) wilderness, to try and foster and teach leaders to replicate themselves. So, the district, knowing that this is where we want to go with our leadership development program, sent me for that week, paid for that, and sent me so I can then replicate that with our leadership development.*

A district leader at Alfred-Almond shares an example that appear to support a similar culture of shared expertise among the frontline professionals in their positive outlier school:
But we have, you know, a turnkey person who’s the go to if you want some great ideas, and she’s willing to do that. She’s not me, she’s not administration, she’s a teacher, and she’s an expert on Promethean Boards. So, we have a lot of those people all around the building that are experts in what they piloted. They’ll do their presentation at a faculty meeting, and they’ll explain why this is great, what they did with it, and they help people.

A final example from Sherburne-Earlville implicates how formal meeting structures help bolster agency among frontline professionals. According to a district leader:

I also ask if a teacher goes out, if one of my (department deleted) staff go out to a training, I ask them to turn it around. We have monthly staff meetings for (department deleted) and (group name deleted). So, if I know someone went to a behavior improvement training, I ask them to come back and do a quick blurb. It’s not the full training, but at least somebody can say, ‘Oh they’re my expert, I better go talk to them.’

The typically performing school, Rideau, provides a contrast revealing a belief that their frontline professionals need outside professional intervention to assist program decisions. The superintendent shared that teachers bring in experts to help them work on standards, “That really is a result of our teachers working really hard, bringing in experts that know math, that know ELA and know the standards very well and just adapting and reshaping activities to make sure that they’re in line.”

Also, at Rideau formal efforts for frontline professionals to share their expertise does not appear to be a part of the regular culture:

We set up one of our staff days, we had all teachers within our building showing other teachers that – we had I think six different things set up of teachers using NearPod, using their SmartBoard, using their Seesaw App. We had them go through and other teachers
had to rotate through and see, ‘Okay this is teachers in the building, this is how they’re doing it. This is our staff pro on this. So, if you have questions or want to try it – see this person.’

Further, a comment by one teacher from Rideau appears to communicate a lack of belief that their teachers have important information to share with each other. According to the Rideau teacher:

At faculty meeting, people share, it’s not like ‘Oh my goodness, it’s so cool. I want to try that.’ It's more like [point to watch]. Last year, I think we were the last sharing group of the year, so I was like, I’m sorry. Who wants to stay in June? We had our whole thing presented; we were going to do a project, put them in the role of the kids. And then it was like the part before us was so long. It was like how are we going to cut this down in the next five minutes because everybody's looking against [point watch]. They just want to leave.

In positive outlier schools in the sample teachers appear to share examples of partnering in efforts to improve their schools. They express assisting in making decisions such as helping choose priority instructional standards to use, providing turnkey training on professional development, and also being willing to help colleagues solve instructional problems. By contrast, teachers from the typically performing school express apparently less buy-in for the effectiveness of collegial sharing of practice. The typically performing school leaders also express needing outside professionals to assist teachers with program decisions regarding academic standards.
2. How do district central officers and school level officials align their instructional leadership priorities?

Alignment and Coherence Building Discourses and Improvement Mechanisms

In the sample, instructional leaders at the positive outlier schools engage in formal and accountable discourses that help to organize goals and strategies achieving what they have defined as success. They also solicit the feedback of their frontline professionals so as to understand how they need to alter or ignore external demands upon their schools. At the typically performing school, the same level of formal accountable talk is not observed. Discourses about goals and strategies are informal and not consistent.

The Sherburne-Earlville school board develops their goals in collaboration with the superintendent of schools who then communicates those goals to others. According to Sherburne-Earlville’s superintendent, “But as far as a lot of the goals, the Board has goals that we tend to develop in collaboration, and I then communicate those goals, and we also collaborate on our own goals as far as how we are going to address say the mental health problems that we’re having.”

Sherburne-Earlville’s administrative team further utilizes their goals to align actions and build coherence among their school level officials and their instructional staff, “So, by working collaboratively as an administrative team, and then taking those goals and sharing and working those goals with the department leaders, it trickles down into the teachers…so that we’re all on the same page.”

Sherburne-Earlville’s superintendent speaks of regular monthly meetings as well as less formal conversations used to connect with principals in the district and provide opportunity for collaboration that builds alignment and coherence around common goals:
Well for our teachers, there’s certainly a formal mentoring piece, but we have administrative council meetings twice a month. I try to visit with each of my principals once a day or every other day the very least, whether it’s just a phone conversation about what’s going down, or I’m just sitting and talking with them about what’s going on.

Formal collaborative work around common goals at Sherburne-Earlville involves the front-line professionals. They work in collaboration with school officials and district officers. This configuration facilitates both alignment and coherence. According to a Sherburne-Earlville school leader:

*The Links Team is huge. It’s a whole, regional thing... We come together in the summer for three days and we talk about what our school needs to focus on. The Board sets an objective. So they’d like us to work on literacy. We talk about how we meet that and what are the other needs in our building, and it’s a teacher team. Teachers and counselors and staff. And they break out into sub-committees. They run with all of this. And I think that helps with buy-in because they’re the ones that know the most what they need in our classroom.*

Additionally, formal accountability guides frontline professionals. A principal from Sherburne-Earlville describes the formal follow-up process to the summer “Links” work that helps maintain coherence to their instructional plan:

*We also meet periodically throughout the year three or four times for follow up to Links. As the Links group, we have about fourteen people on our Links team in the (level deleted) school that kind of, we monitor that throughout the year – the progress of our plan. Sometimes we’ll meet in smaller groups and sub-committees of that larger group*
that are handling specific aspects of the plan, whether it’s academic-based, whether it’s socio-emotional needs, things of that nature, community building. So we'll meet in smaller groups more regularly to address those needs of the plan.

At Alfred-Almond goal development starts at the “top” with the board of education. One district leader at Alfred-Almond states, “Yeah, the Board of Ed comes up with our goals.” These goals appear to help align instructional priorities at Alfred Almond as this same district leader indicates:

Well, alright so our goals for our school is to...we want as many kids as we can to get to a 4-year college, and we want as many kids as we can to get the Regents diploma or a higher Regents. How do I know that? I’m the (title deleted) and I have all of the goals. I have all the school plans. How does we know that as a staff? It’s relayed to us by our principals

A principal from Alfred-Almond refers to regularly occurring meetings involving the administrative team as a whole, “And during the summer, we have summer leadership and the administrative retreats, we do administrative meetings pretty much on a weekly basis. (Name deleted) will have the core group of us and that’s where we, you know, kind of build each other up also and do that.” This regular formal meeting structure appears to offer opportunities to align leadership priorities and develop coherence among district and school level leadership.

In Alfred-Almond one district leader discusses extended communication involving multiple instructional leaders and teachers to develop a much-needed district RtI program:

We, we started talking, we did not have a really well developed RTI program at all. And so we spent the last two, two years ago meeting monthly as a team. Which was like
(name deleted), and (district leaders and school leaders) talking about what that would like and how it would roll out.

At Alfred-Almond there is a collaborative attitude with specific examples of how it plays into coherence building. As one principal expresses, “Collaboration, just the teamwork at Alfred-Almond, it’s huge. And, it is a district where we have that, and if you lose that, I think it would be very hard to be successful as a principal. I have a faculty that work with me.” Further, one teacher at this odds-beater offers an example of how collaboration works between frontline professionals and instructional leaders:

The (position deleted) just set me up with (program name deleted) teachers who teach (subject deleted). Because I’m teaching (subject deleted) here and they have 3 teachers that collaborate on their (subject deleted) class. I think it’s a (subjects deleted) are all working together to teach that one course. And so, I’m going to hopefully be arranging an opportunity to go observe how they’re running that class and communicating with our (subject deleted) teacher and seeing if it’s something that we can collaborate on here.

SO, that was just a single instance set up through our (position deleted), that’s BOCES, I believe.

At the typically performing school, Rideau, there is a less extensive formal collaborative process which ultimately guides some alignment. According to one administrator:

It's kind of a collaborative effort. Our board has overarching goals. They have four areas that we work within and then we work with the superintendent on the direction we're going, and he goes back to the board and builds them in. Then he expects our personal goals to fall under those four areas too. We kind of have layers of goals, I guess. We
have the district goals which are set by the board and our superintendent with input from us and then our personal goals were supposed to align with those goals.

When considering further alignment efforts, district central officers and school level officials at the typically performing school express examples of communication but with less expansive involvement:

*I think it's really important to have a positive culture. I try to make sure that I'm being healthy. What I mean by that is, that I'm affectively communicating with everybody around me, the board, the administration, teachers, all of that, key stake holders, that kind of thing. Communication is key. That's a big part of it.*

Rideau school level officials also describe less formal communication systems in general. For example, according to one of their school leaders, “I mean I’ll still say that the best curriculum development that we do is that we sit together at lunch and we talk about what’s working, where we’re going.” This offers an opportunity for regular communication, but the less formal format may allow non-leadership type communication to derail focus. Further, it is not a structure that is conducive to building alignment or coherence outside of the small group of people involved.

Teachers at Rideau also refer to less formal and less frequent collaborative processes. According to two Rideau teachers, a collaborative process occurs but it is hindered by a lack of formality and involvement from school level officials and district central officers:

*T1: I think within our own hallways and departments and things...that we talk. I think we do talk to each other, and not just about general instructional things, but talking about individual kids, maybe. I can't reach this one, but maybe I go and ask (name deleted). "how's it going? What's working for you? What kind of personality are you seeing? Any
ideas for me?" So, I think within the (level deleted) school especially, we do reach out to each other.

T2: It's informal.

T1: Yes. We don't have to wait for a meeting to have that take place, we just walk down to the next door.

There is a formal process of collaborative work in Rideau, but it appears to have a smaller impact and is not particularly interactive. One teacher explains, “At the faculty meetings once a month, a team will present or a group will present and they share something that's working in their class, but that's you sharing one once a year for maybe ten minutes.”

The positive outlier and the typically performing schools provide a contrast regarding how their respective leaders build alignment and coherence around common goals. Positive outlier instructional leaders use formal and accountable discourses to help organize goals and strategies for meeting goals. They solicit frontline professional feedback guide interacting with external demands leveled at their schools. The typically performing school does not appear to have examples of formal accountable talk. Discourses about goals and strategies appear much less formal and not consistent. Further, less collaboration between broader teams of Rideau’s frontline professionals appear less likely to build coherence around the instructional core.

**Co-requisite Resources for Alignment and Coherence**

Allocating regular time to align instructional priorities is key to bringing coherence to fruition. Using routines and accountability to focus that work on alignment and coherence building is of equal import. Instructional leaders at the positive outlier schools in the sample describe providing structured times to meet. They also express clear expectation for these
meetings being focused check-ins that appear to build coherence and alignment. At Rideau there is no evidence of this type of formal accountable meeting structure.

At Sherburne-Earlville the superintendent spoke about this issue and the importance of preserving time for their administrators to engage in collaboration:

*So, if they’re spending all their time dealing with crises situations, they’re unable to go and meet with teachers and to collaborate with teachers, and to sit-in and participate in those department meetings, those team meetings. Each of my administrators are a liaison to at least one or two departments. We’re all basically trying to share the same information, be on the same page, and we’re not just functioning as independent groups and sharing that information on.*

At Alfred-Almond one district leader emphasizes the accountability that makes meetings with staff opportunities for alignment and coherence building:

*But I get them, my teachers all have like a running list of, if your meetings this date this is what expect four weeks out. This what I expect three weeks out. This is what I expect two weeks out. You know we can communicate like that and I send reminders, ‘Ok remember your, meeting is in two weeks.*

One district leader at Rideau speaks about regular meetings with other instructional leaders. However, rather than describing a meeting time where they discuss progress on larger goals, it appears to be more of a time to air and strategize about more immediate issues:

*Myself, (names deleted) who you were just with – our (position deleted) and now our (position deleted), that’s a new position this year. But we meet every Wednesday morning. And generally, those meetings are where those types of things come up. The first person that has a brainstorm brings it here, we start to discuss it, the afterschool*
program lists something that we had when the budget cuts went really… when funding, we lost a lot of funding. I’m trying to think of what year it was.

District leaders at the three sample schools all discuss structures of meetings. At Sherburne-Earlville the superintendent refers to preserving time for administrators to collaborate. At Alfred-Almond one district leader describes the accountability element used with staff meetings. By contrast, a Rideau district leader speaks about regular instructional leadership meetings that focus on more immediate needs.

**Distributed Leadership**

Distributed leadership processes in theory increase alignment and enhance coherence. All such processes depend on trust and communications, particularly those focused on instructional leadership priorities. At the positive outlier school, Sherburne-Earlville, examples of trust-enhancing, communication work are apparent. At Rideau, at least one working relationship, between the board of education and the superintendent, is described as requiring management by one side.

At Sherburne-Earlville the superintendent of schools expresses collaborative trusting communications that they did not always believe in:

*We work very, very closely together. I know in the past, even when I was a principal – I use the word “silos” – we all function in our own silos. I was (level deleted) school, and I was very protective of the (level deleted) school, and everything that had to do with the (level deleted) school, I was all over but I didn’t really care what was going on in the (level deleted) school or the (level deleted) school. That’s changed. My administrators are working very closely together – working well with each other.*
A school leader at Sherburne-Earlville offers a companion view, “I’m lucky that (name deleted) and I work very close together and the Superintendent is very open to all the time.” These collaborative relationships among instructional leaders create potential for priority alignment and coherent actions.

By comparison, the superintendent at Rideau expresses the importance of managing their board:

*And I left off what I think is one of the most important roles of a superintendent, which is board management. I think it's really critical that superintendents are able to communicate effectively with their boards, that they are able to have a working relationship in which they can do professional development with them, that allows board members to keep an open mind.*

Distributed leadership depends on trusting communications. At Sherburne-Earlville the superintendent talks about working closely with other staff and no longer having a “siloes” mentality. Another leader refers to how closely they work with this superintendent. At the typically performing school the superintendent talks about needing to manage their board of education. This compliance orientation may not build and bolster organizational trust.

**Background Knowledge Consideration in Hiring**

Considerations for hiring staff are motivated differently between one of the positive outliers and the typically performing school in the sample. At Alfred-Almond the priority of hiring appeared to be for maintaining the integrity of the established philosophy. This was exemplified by talk of hiring staff with compatible professional backgrounds or even nurturing staff to take leadership roles from within the district. At the typically performing school, hiring practices appear firmly placed within the context of financial resources.
An Alfred-Almond secondary principal talks about the practice of hiring people into the administrative team with knowledge that already supports current instructional priorities:

*And then the secondary principal role became open, and I really felt that with the encouragement of (name deleted), who had been promoted principal to the district superintendent. The district has a strong commitment to having people with a background in special education and some of those key roles in order to further kind of our mission, and to have a role of a secondary principal, I felt like I could actually use my background and some of the knowledge to even further that mission and it’s not just students classified or with IEPs or 504’s, it becomes about meeting the needs of diverse learners. And that was, you know, really kind of both the challenge and a goal for me.*

Further, Alfred-Almond’s superintendent talks about an environment where leaders are brought up through the established organization:

*The formal superintendent who was also the former secondary principal, took both (name deleted) and I under his...wing and helped guide us. Alfred Almond, I think, and I have knock on wood, I’d like to believe this trend continues is outstanding in terms of providing an amazing array of in-service opportunities for their teachers, for their leaders and really targeting individuals for leadership. And trying to develop our next cadre of leaders.*

At Rideau one school leader talks about the financial considerations made when considering making hires or even retaining staff:

*It's kind of like, the money is an object, you know. Money is scare and you have to decide, where can you get the most bang for your buck? So, like I let go off the (title*
deleted) teacher, because we can't do that now. But we can do after-school and I feel like that's going to have a greater impact on kids. So, that's the direction we went.

Hiring is motivated differently between the odds-beater and the typically performing school in this section. At Alfred-Almond, there is discussion about intentionally hiring people with SPED backgrounds to maintain a philosophy of inclusive education in the district. At Rideau, there is not talk about the backgrounds of members who are hired, rather if there is the financial ability to go through with hiring a professional.

3. How do these officials craft and maintain alignment and coherence around the instructional core?

Instructional Standards

Instructional standards influence the work of members of all three schools in the sample. At the positive outlier schools a collaborative process is used to choose priority standards used by staff to plan and guide instruction. Alignment to these priority standards appears to get bolstered through data collection, which is meant to measure standards aligned instruction. An awareness of shifting state standards and the necessity to prepare for them is expressed at the positive outlier schools. At the typically performing school, it is expressed that standards are prioritized by their appearance on state assessments. Further, the awareness of new state standards is mentioned by study participants, but within a context where the expressed priority is still for Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

In Sherburne-Earlville priority standards are chosen collaboratively. A Sherburne-Earlville teacher explains how this process works:

We narrowed it down from the list of maybe thirty standards that the state provided...When we had our big (level deleted) through (level deleted) subsequent
meeting, we tabulated the areas of agreement. There were some areas that were very
evident, like maybe three out of the five, everyone agreed on.

A principal at Sherburne-Earlville describes how the information about priority standards is
being determined and documented:

I: I was hearing conversations about – the ELA folks had identified five essential
standards that they were going to focus on. Do you have any documents that represent
what your people have come up with and like these are the things that we think are really
important?

P: Yes. It’s going to take some time to scour through them because it would be in
department meeting minutes. It’s not centralized in a formal, one location. So, it would be
for each department. That’s something we could definitely get. And that’s also done
through the curriculum mapping software. There’s nowhere in there to say, these are the
priority standards or essential standards, but I could say to the (positions deleted), ‘Hey
could you send them to us?’

Also, at Sherburne-Earlville assessment data is used to track standards alignment. One
principal explains a formal system in which teachers must submit standards aligned assessment
data four times a year:

As part of the Links plan, they have to submit four assessments – one each marking
period and it has to be aligned, so that they’ll look at each question, what standard are
you measuring, Kessell learning for a lot of this – and how did you teach that standard?
Are you ready to go back and revisit next time you teach it if you find out that it wasn’t
effective? That’s step one, just four assessments this year, no observations
In one positive outlier school (Alfred-Almond) there is more than an awareness of new standards. Rather, there is an attitude of trying to get “ahead of the game” regarding shifting standards. According to a teacher at Alfred-Almond at least one colleague is already adjusting their practice to align with new standards, “And…we want to be ahead of the game, you know. In in in, social studies, you know (name deleted), he’s already ahead of the game for the new social studies standards that are changing.”

In the typically performing school a district leader talks about how state education policies effect staff interaction with standards:

Well, when you take – and I guess we will be moving to new standards now, but the Next Gen standards are not that different from the Common Core standards – so we have the standards broken apart as like our greens, our reds, and our yellows. And those greens are – we know these are going to be assessed on the Regents whether it’s 8th grade, the state assessments, or they’re going to be assessed on the Regents. These are the standards that – these are must-covers, these are must-dos, must-covers, must-hit, highly into mastery.

Also, at Rideau there is awareness of new standards that they must prepare for. One principal at Rideau summarizes the work ahead of them for shifting to new standards:

We are getting ready to roll out a new set of standards so making sure that everybody is up to date on the standards and that the curriculum aligns with the standards and where it doesn't align, adapting and modifying curriculum; making sure that everybody is up to date in their certifications and their trainings and coordinating a lot with our BOCES to receive trainings.
While there is clear expression of a plan to transition academic standards in this typically performing school, at least one mainstream teacher’s comments imply a belief that their current priority is still learning to use CCSS more deeply, “I think overall we are pushing more of those common core standards where they are sinking deeper than they were before.”

Instructional standards guide the work of members of all three schools in the sample but with differences. The positive outlier schools use a collaborative process with frontline professionals choosing priority standards and then working together to align them vertically through all grade levels. Formal assessments help guide standards aligned instruction. Staff also express awareness of new state standards and their use in planning. At Rideau, priority standards are chosen with external influence. Standards that show up in standardized tests are highlighted and prioritized. Also, CCSS are spoken about as being more directly used while awareness of new state standards is acknowledged along with plans for how to prepare for their use.

**Trust**

Leaders in the positive outlier schools express the trust they have in frontline professionals to responsibly work within the overall educational programs. The superintendent of schools at Alfred-Almond says that their teachers have active parts to play in the larger academic structure. Members of leadership talk about providing teachers with the supports they need to do their jobs. They also talk about listening to them regarding supports they preferred to have. At the typically performing school a staff member associates trust with left alone by the leadership in the school or district. The research team also notes that oversite resulting from Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) actions is a source of tension between the staff and leadership.
According to one Alfred-Almond district central officer, their job is to support staff by making sure they have what they need to meet their goals for students:

*We have done that by presenting the faculty the fact that here’s who we are as a culture. And here’s what our expectations are. And how you get there in your classroom that’s up to you. You know I’m the superintendent of schools you’re the (subject deleted) teacher. It’s your job to bring the kids from here to here. It’s my job to ensure with the help of our principals that we have the support of our community.*

The Sherburne-Earlville superintendent shares a similar sentiment of not needing to micromanage their staff. Instead, they make sure that they have the mentoring and coaching they need to be successful:

*Well a lot of it comes down to...providing them with coaching and mentorship and, I mean (name deleted) and I talk all the time, (name deleted) is veteran so she does a great job as far as what she’s doing in the (level deleted) school providing opportunities for training for her staff members...But a lot of it comes down to the fact that I don’t have to micromanage because these people are sharp. They’re good and they’re doing what’s correct. So, I’m kind of keeping a hand in it, but I’m not the type of person that is going to try to micromanage and try to direct everybody in every aspect of life because, quite frankly, I don’t have to because I have trust in them. They’re doing the right thing, and they’re smart people, and they look at things objectively, and they make sure we’re doing what’s right for the district and for our kids.*

At Sherburne-Earlville, a suggested initiative was not something frontline professionals felt they needed. The instructional leaders not only followed this feedback of their staff and
dropped the initiative, but they then provided formal training for what their staff wanted instead. According to a school leader:

*We want them to look at data, and they were like, “No we don’t want to do this. We don’t want to look at our tests and we don’t want to make our tests – like analyze the data based on the standard, based on how we taught it. We don’t want to do that. Can we just watch each other teach and talk about it?” “Like, okay, sure let’s do that.” So, this summer we’ll bring in a trainer from BOCES and give our Links Team some specific strategies to work on, and how they are going to increase discussion, how are they going to monitor student engagement?*

The frontline professionals of this positive outlier school plan to continue to develop this idea in their summer “Links Team” work. The school leader also says that they are very pleased with this initiative stating, “It was perfect, we couldn’t have led them to it, we weren’t leading them to it.”

Within the typically performing school trust appear equated to lack of oversite by instructional leaders. For example, a mainstream teacher from Rideau states that, “I think we're given a tremendous amount of autonomy and it's always been there, in 20 years of being here, the administration says, ‘we trust you guys. You're smart. Do what's going to work. Figure that out.’” They are left to “figure out” what is going to work.

Teachers in the typically performing school appear to accept this level of “trust” without oversite or guidance. An interpretive memo from members of the NYKids research team appears to provide support:

*Teachers’ perspectives on APPR create tension between administrations and teachers and negatively impact trust. Teachers didn’t mention the superintendent and principal*
providing instructional guidance. The teachers see each other as supports to improve instruction.

District central officers in the positive outlier schools express having trust in their frontline professionals to effectively instruct their students. They assist their staff by making sure they are provided with mentoring, coaching, or other supports by their school level officials. They also talk about taking feedback from their frontline professionals about the type of professional development they feel they need to improve. At Rideau, trust is spoken of in terms of being left alone to perform their teaching duties. Tension and the degrading of trust appear to exist as a result of oversite that came with the implementation of APPR at this typically performing school.

4. How do frontline professionals make sense of district central office and school level officials’ instructional leadership?

**Discretionary Authority**

In the positive outlier schools, discretionary authority given to frontline professionals within a larger formal system influences how they make sense of instructional leadership. Two examples from interviews in Sherburne-Earlvile and Alfred-Almond demonstrate how personal choice is part of a larger system of “directed” sensemaking. The frontline professionals are brought into a process of placing their roles into a district wide context. This allows them to see how their practice is part of larger district workings. This appears to be influential in how participants make sense of their roles in the district process. In the typically performing school from this sample teachers and leaders both describe instances where teacher autonomy is a significant consideration. They do not talk about coordinating efforts. Instead, frontline
professionals talk about valuing their autonomy and leaders acknowledge that significant autonomy is given to teachers even if they are not effective.

The superintendent at Sherburne-Earlville describes a process in which department meetings were broadened to include members from Kindergarten through twelfth grades:

*We have department chairs in the middle high, in the elementary school, but last year we began to have K-12 department meetings so that all of our teachers are trying to get a 48,000-foot above the ground view of things so we have more congruency between each of the years, and as a student goes through the years of school from kindergarten to twelfth, we can be more assured that they’re going to get a more continuous, congruent education. And we’re able to identify those gaps and overlaps and be able to address those, and then be able to focus on the essential standards that we want our students to really master before they leave.*

In Alfred-Almond a teacher describes compromising between personal choice and actions that are best for district initiatives:

*Meetings are set up and we sit down with the more resistant… teachers and we talk it out. And we figure out what we can do and what one is comfortable with us doing or not comfortable with us doing. And then we kind of move the meetings from there. Sometimes more extreme things will happen if we don’t feel this fills the needs of the students. Cause the needs of the students are always the most important.*

Personal choice is considered and honored as individual teachers make sense of larger district initiatives.
Frontline professionals in the typically performing school, Rideau, talk about the frustrations they have from their perception that APPR means they have less discretionary authority over their practices:

*T2: The APPR changed our interaction with administration...*

*T2: We had a very informal system before. We could self-evaluate. You could have classroom observations after you were tenured, you had all kinds of options and it worked.*

*T3: It did work, it was a trusting... it lent a, what I said before with autonomy.*

*T2: You had the interaction with the administration.*

*T3: You were treated like a professional, you were expected to be a professional, there was responsibility to do that. There definitely was a cultural atmospheric shift. For the very first time, I think people... the idea of a little bit of fear. Not from within the building, but from the state down. We had some dark times seven years ago when that all started going out.*

An instructional leader at Rideau expresses understanding that their frontline professionals expect to maintain discretionary authority, “I’ll piggyback on that, and I’ll just say that the powers that be in our school appear to give the high school teachers great liberty to practice their strengths.”

One Rideau teacher talks about treating instructional leadership initiatives as merely suggestions for them to accept or disregard:

*Although we are central school, we also live in the philosophy in this high school - we do what we want to do. So, we are as an island mentality, like there are small groups of us, I'm sure you can randomly meet. I think there's groups of us that will meet and come up*
with ideas together and bounce ideas, but it's not something that is mandated right now for the district. So, if people want to do something on their own, they can. We're not forced to necessarily curriculum develop together. We do, we like to. I mean I do anyway.

As a result of these feelings, one district central officer at Rideau talks about giving extended time to a teacher to discover that they needed help:

*The next year we went back and said, “Okay how did this go?” One of our other (subject deleted) teachers did not take that approach. She just kind of – “No I’ve taught this for years; I know how to do it.” Came back and our scores were not great on that test, so we said, “Okay we let you do it your way, it’s not working. Now we’re going to sit down.”*

Letting teachers use personal choice to decide which instructional leadership priorities they want to accept apparently can lead to feelings of isolation as described by one teacher at Rideau:

*I mean I feel like we have pretty good (subject deleted) teachers, but what I'm seeing specifically is the kids carried. And when it's so like phonics based as certified (title deleted) teacher, I was never taught how to tell them to decode. I don't know how to help with decoding and phonics, when some kids in my grade need to know that. So, what I'm trying to differentiate instruction. I need help.*

Members from the positive outlier schools in this section describe having discretionary authority within their larger systems. Instructional leaders describe bringing frontline professionals into planning as a K-12 team. This is done, as expressed above, to impress upon each department how their actions fit into the whole system of instructional activity. At the typically performing school, teacher autonomy is acknowledged and accepted by leaders and valued by frontline professionals. Loss of that autonomy is resisted by teachers. Instructional
leaders seeking to help teachers improve must conduct their work first within the established system of autonomy as described above.

**Leading and Managing Change**

Instructional leaders in positive outlier schools in the sample appear to approach changes to practice with intentionally paced timelines while taking time to reflect along the way. In the typically performing school there are not the same conditions to manage change and initiatives can take on a harried pace. Study participants at the positive outlier schools described analyzing improvements and implementing them over a prolonged time period. Also, district leaders describe using clear and persistent messaging of changes to influence frontline professionals instead of mandates.

Finally, one positive outlier school district leader describes testing products before presenting them to staff as a means of only passing along useful items. At the typically performing school both leaders and teachers describe change suggestions, both in practices and for products, as not being measured or restricted. They are left to determine the usefulness of them on their own. Additionally, some teacher leaders describe being unsure of which leadership directives are actually going to persist, which makes them less likely to be followed.

A teacher at Alfred-Almond describes the process of taking on APPR and how they appreciate the process of their administration:

*I think about the change with, like, our APPR and how we’re observed and evaluated. I think our admin is really good about, like, not just reacting really quickly. We kind of step back and we see how it’s rolling out and watch other people do it, and then kind of figure out how we are going to do it. It did kind of get a little bit messy for us once, but we’re not reactive, I don’t think.*
The superintendent of Sherburne- Earlville talks about not using mandates with their curriculum council, instead they talk about persistent messaging to the group:

I don’t know about mandate, but when I meet with our Curriculum Council, and I’ve been really pushing this a lot, really to making sure that we’ve communicated our learning objectives and trying to push the idea of taking the learning objectives and using them as guiding and essential question so that we can, at a certain point during the course of the class period, basically have a vehicle for formative assessment. So, I’ve been saying that a lot.

The superintendent of Alfred-Almond reflects on overseeing repeated messaging but stopping short of mandating action when sharing observations with a mentor teacher in regard to helping their mentee improve:

Rather than meet for lunch and mentor that teacher at that point, and saying you should do this, this and this. I sought out their mentor and said, ‘hey, you know, maybe you could help so and so in this area. Maybe it was just a snapshot, but this is what I saw. So now you are providing that same message, that same level of support, but it’s not coming from the administrative bad guy.

At Alfred-Almond a district leader talks about a group that try out new technology products to determine if they can be useful to the larger staff. They end up not using many of them, but they continue to work to find products that other teachers will find helpful:

So, we pilot almost every single new product. Every single program or idea, we pilot through teachers…and then they pilot for a certain amount of time, we meet every month, we discuss it, and then they recommend or not recommend. So, we have data, we have tried and true with, in the classroom, students and teachers, and then, at that
point, we recommend to the administration. And, we…it’s about a 33% success rate. So, we trash about 75%, and the things that we know work, that we have tried, we present to the administration for approval, and that’s key. That’s key.

At Sherburne-Earlville the superintendent speaks about the importance of clearly communicating about the changes that one hopes to see among staff:

So we haven’t really gotten to the point through our PLCs where they’re going to focus on the unit planning and basically work and backflow from there, but I think that the main thing here is that me communicating that we need to make sure that number one: we clearly communicate our learning goals and making sure that we’re assessing those learning goals, then basically taking that data, that information and making the determination of whether or not they’re re-teaching these to occur or the data for the formative assessment literally gives you permission to move forward.

In the typically performing school, Rideau, teachers who also serve as school leaders talk about not being sure if they have mandates required of them. They also talk about these mandates in a way that appear to indicate that they do not regard messages like these as being truly impactful to their practice:

I: Well, no. Some schools mandate teachers use the same grading books, things like that.

You might be required to do everybody follows the same exact...

DL4: We make sure that kids are aware of their learning targets. That’s been a big one in the past.

I: So, what if you didn’t have that on your board or whatever?

DL4: When we’re observed, if it’s not visible, I don’t know they mention it to me....
DL1: Again, all we have to do is ride it for a year, and they’ll be a new one for next year. Seriously, it’s just the way it works. I’m just being honest. So, exit tickets – that’s, again, the flavor of the day. Next year it will be mint chocolate chip.

Further, according to a Rideau school leader, changes in practice are not paced in ways that help staff to adopt them. According to this school leader, “And at least the ones that we’ve had in computers, we’ve had three different trainings and three different programs in the last four years. And by the time we get trained, it’s obsolete. So those kinds of things are wasted time – literally – and they make us cynical of starting again.” This same approach appears to occur beyond technology shifts as well. According to a school leader, “We are perpetually inundated, just swamped with programs. We have a very active BOCES district, and I mean the programs come at us like machine-gun fire. Gap Analysis, and we sit down all the time, and the latest gimmick someone throws at us.” The over-abundance of trainings and programs without leaders’ direction-setting measures taken appear to create an environment in which staff are not able to build sensemaking for any particular product or strategy.

One Rideau teacher talks about feeling that they are presented with too many options for new practice and that they are left to determine the effectiveness of them on their own:

We don't know what's... and it is a grab-bag, what does work, what doesn't work? This is how I've done things for a long time; it's been very effective, and can I infuse this? Like (name deleted) said, Castle learning, and Moodle. It's actually almost too much stuff where you go, "I don't know which one." And so, as soon as you get something, then it's very frustrating cause if something changes, and you just go, "well I thought we were doing this, but now we're doing this." And people go, "oh, it's whatever."
This is also important to note because perceived instructional mandates are met with resistance at times. According to the Rideau interpretive memo:

*The (school leader) who is in charge of APPR evaluations sends a clear message there are specific expectations for instruction, e.g. EG, central questions on the board. This is direct contrast to what (level deleted) school teachers said about instruction autonomy.*

*Apparent resistance from the (level deleted) school staff who have to adapt their instruction to leaders’ mandates.*

At the positive outlier schools in the sample changes to practice are described as being thought out, intentionally messaged, and productively paced. The typically performing school describes a contrast. The timeline for implementing changes such as APPR are described as not being harried. District leaders at the positive outlier schools both talk about repetitive use of important messages that influence change as opposed to issuing mandates. Further, one district leader talks about analyzing technology products and only passing along suggestions that will enter into current practice more seamlessly. At the typically performing school, Rideau, teacher leaders talk about being unsure which messages by leaders are meant to inform practice over the long term. One teacher also describes being given multiple product suggestions to use without being given guidance on which would work with their established practices, which appear to lead to them feeling frustrated.

**Discussion**

The preceding analysis yields identifiable commonalities, similarities and differences among the positive outliers and the typically performing school in this study. These findings can be appreciated by returning to the literature. This section reviews those findings and makes explicit their connections to relevant theory and research.
**Strengths Based Solution-Focused Discourses**

Instructional leaders in the positive outlier schools appear to employ strengths-based, solution-focused discourses, reinforcing and extending a holistic view of young people that extends beyond their academic roles. Students are encouraged to participate in academically rigorous courses and opportunities despite not demonstrating the “typical” abilities of those who usually engage in them. The goal is to encourage students to develop and achieve high standards and support them as they strive for success.

This belief in student strengths can be viewed as an element of symbolic leadership. As Zott and Nguyen (2007) point out, symbols represent an important part of people’s structures of knowledge, and they help them form a social reality. In the positive outlier schools, it has become a reality for students to be viewed for the strengths they have and others they can develop.

At Rideau this student-centered element of symbolic leadership is not apparent. As a reminder, the superintendent of schools justifies not creating an International Baccalaureate program in part because of the “realistic belief” that the students could not handle the rigor of the program.

**Identifying and Capitalizing on Community Assets**

The leaders at Sherburne-Earlville use community connections to support and enrich their work with students. Supportive relationships between the superintendent and community groups are maintained by working together on common goals and safety preparedness. This connection between the schools and the community appears to have a far-reaching impact beyond support in safety issues. It is a type of leadership that can mobilize people to solve problems. This collective action approach contrasts with the traditional method of having a leader and followers (Heifetz,
Instead, it harkens back to Weick’s (1982) notion of leadership that balances adaptation with adaptability. This allows for a stable organization ready to handle its current demands while also being flexible enough to address demands that are unanticipated (Weick, 1982).

Community connections also offer opportunities for expansive programs. Sherburne-Earlville high school is actively working to bring back an agricultural program and meet a direct need within their community. Larger scale industrial farms are giving way to smaller independent ones. The high school is developing an agricultural program to offer students course work that would prepare them to go out into their communities and start or work on these smaller farms. If the relationship between the community and the schools at this odds-beater were closed and non-reciprocal such communication of need would not occur. This is an example of the adaptive nature of the Sherburne-Earlville high school where people in the community are viewed as partners whose diverse views help to influence the academic program (Heifetz, 2006).

**Assessing Student Interests to Facilitate Engagement, Curriculum Design, and Instruction**

Leaders at positive outlier schools promote the same kind of youth-focused perspective for extracurricular activities, course design, and engagement. Participation in extra-curriculars is encouraged and tracked to ensure that students are involved. Student connection to the school community is a cultural priority. Student involvement is a symbol of a school culture that strives for overall student success. This is in line with Bolman and Deal’s (2003) definition of a culture being an interwoven pattern of elements such as practices and beliefs. There is clearly a priority that students will feel connected to their school community. Tracking student involvement ensures that these connections actually happen and are not left to chance.

Students’ lives are also valued in the design of learning. At Sherburne-Earlville courses were designed to address students’ interests in agriculture and hunting. This effort to utilize
student interest within the technical core of the school appears to enhance student engagement. It also helps bolster their performance and positive outlier status. Further, this ability to make local accommodations to courses based upon student interest points to a less rigid loosely coupled structure (Weick, 1982).

**Collective Efficacy with a Proactive, Adaptive Posture**

Positive outlier school leaders appear to proceed with their work with collective efficacy, i.e., a “can-do attitude” and framed by a proactive, adaptive posture. An example comes from district central officers and school level officials at Sherburne-Earlville who keep communication lines open for their teachers to suggest program switches that better meet student needs. This willingness to remain open to change and not stay locked in a rigid structure shows that the positive outlier school leaders do adhere to Merton’s (1940) notion of bureaucratic leadership working within a pre-existing structure of rules. Instead, their leadership style is symbolic fitting into Weick’s (1982) description for a loosely coupled organization that can successfully adapt to local accommodations. Further, having a “can-do” posture means taking risks to further the positive impact of their academic program for students, and the odds beating schools do that.

Conversely, educators overall in the typical performing school appear to be risk-averse. Concerns over financial stability pervade as the primary motivation for program decision. So do alignment to external authority in the form of prioritizing learning standards that align to Regents tests. This points to more of a reliance to prescriptive authority that a bureaucratic organization (Merton, 1940) would demonstrate.
**District Central Office and School Level Instructional Leaders with Improvement Mindsets**

Instructional leaders from the positive outlier schools look for solutions to problems that arise, and they pursue continuous improvement in established practices. This dual orientation can be called “an improvement mindset” with leaders intent on “getting better at getting better” (Bryk, et al., 2015). Both positive outlier schools’ systems for improvement are strategic and monitored for their alignment and coherence.

At Rideau there is expression of valuing improvement but without a system in place for finding internal methods of improvement. It is expressed in the findings above that state testing data provides one method for instructional leaders at Rideau to find frontline professionals who exhibit strong teaching practice as evidenced in their scores. However, this does not allow for improvement to be discovered until an academic year has passed. This is a hindrance to getting better that Rideau exhibits.

**Frontline Professionals’ Adaptation and Improvement Agency**

Instructional leaders, district central officers and school level officials, in positive outlier schools interact and plan with the belief that their teachers have the expertise to make curriculum recommendations, adjustments, or supplement their own professional learning. They also call on their own frontline professionals to share their expertise with each other. This resulting culture of professional sharing appear to be part of how the positive outlier leaders leverage frontline professional knowledge for everyone’s benefit.

This mobilization of frontline professionals’ strengths is key to symbolic management (Weick, 1982). It also allows the positive outlier schools to thrive amidst challenging situations, which is a hallmark of adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 2009). Additionally, becoming aware of
these teacher abilities also helps instructional leaders stay informed as to how their teachers are conducting themselves in their practices. This helps promote coherence and alignment as well.

At the typically performing school instructional leaders convey a belief that the knowledge for improvement is held by outside experts. This outside-in approach, with an accompanying skepticism about internal capacity, results in training being brought to the staff from outside the district, which means less occurrence of professional knowledge sharing. For example, outside experts are brought into the typical performer to work with the staff on interpreting instructional standards. This method of training where leaders call the shots for teacher training instead of finding out what might be best for teacher from those teachers themselves is in line with Bolman and Deal’s (2003) idea of rational management for a bureaucratic organization.

**Alignment and Coherence Building Discourses and Improvement Mechanisms**

The leaders from positive outlier schools in this study express formal and regular ways in which they communicate with each other. This then begets conversations that both align and build coherence in a tri-level fashion. In other words, in positive outliers “getting on the same page” includes participation from school boards, district central officers, and school level officials. Policies and practices thus are structurally consistent (alignment) and educators throughout the system enjoy clarity regarding district and school priorities alongside their roles and responsibilities. This alignment also increases the chances of accomplishing district goals while reducing distractions from the priorities needed to meet goals (Leithwood & Mccullough, 2017).

The formal processes of collaboration expressed at Sherburne-Earlville and implied at Alfred-Almond has a greater potential for priority alignment and coherence building (Leithwood
& Mccullough, 2017). Positive outlier school leaders communicate regularly and effectively. For example, at Alfred-Almond this is an instructional leader using accountability to build and maintain coherence among their staff members for instructional goals. In Sherburne-Earlville, the formal and broad actions of the “Links Teams” coordinate frontline professionals across grade levels and contend areas to focus on common school plans.

The inclusion of professional input throughout the organization suggests a loosely coupled organization. This structural arrangement potentially affords front-line professionals in the positive outlier schools to feel more satisfaction and gain commitment to their common goals (Ingersoll, 1992). Positive outlier schools in the study have accountability processes overseen by district central officers and school level officials to ensure that coherence around school goals is focused upon throughout the academic year by multiple groupings of staff. As instructional leaders and frontline professionals communicate regularly and effectively, they develop important coherence building relationships.

The collaborative efforts at the typically performing school are limited by inconsistent involvement. When frontline professionals talk about collaboration it is informal and limited to those who might participate in conversations between classes or over lunch.

At the positive outlier schools collaborative conversations are part of formal and accountable systems, such as Sherburne-Earlville’s Links Team. Frontline professionals’ views are actively solicited, and this process contributes to alignment, while enhancing practice coherence.

Although Weick (1976) has implied that loose coupling is the appropriate organization for schools, Shen, et al. (2017) remind that loose coupling in schools may also arise as a result of non-alignment. The typically performing school in this study appears to demonstrate loose
coupling as a result of non-alignment, limited coherence, and the lack of consistent involvement by staff in collaboration supports. This school’s lack of formal collaborative structures signals these needs. According to study participants, collaboration is informal and restricted to a few groups.

Within a bureaucracy, leadership can expect certain performance from staff members based upon the expectations of their roles. In a school, it is expected that teachers instruct appropriately and do so in a way that aligns their practices to meeting organizational expectations.

At Rideau, agreement about teaching standards linked to material tested on Regents exams exemplifies this. Further, frontline professionals there express their value for a “hands-off” approach from administrators in their oversite. Bureaucracies, or tightly coupled organizations then use systems of sanctions and rewards (Bolman & Deal, 2003) to coax compliance to central “rules” of the organization (Weick, 1982).

At Rideau, collaboration might be expected from the instructional leaders, but it is not occurring with broad and formal regularity. This is clearly evidenced by the expressions of collaboration from frontline professionals and instructional leaders that are both limited to small groups of people and also are described as being informal. Teachers are left on their own to collaborate when it is convenient for them. This does not provide their whole staff with more confidence regarding the value of their work (Leithwood & Mccullough). Further, it may also attribute to a loosely coupled structure that actually arises as a result of organizational dysfunction.
**Co-requisite Resources for Alignment and Coherence**

Building alignment around coherent goals is a dynamic process that requires intentional design and active continuous participation by district central officers and school level officials (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Therefore, processes are needed to accountably guide alignment work. Also, time is needed for members of a school to do the work that leads to aligned coherent practice.

Having the intention to work in an aligned fashion does not matter if collaborative time is not provided. At Sherburne-Earlville time is intentionally preserved for collaboration through meeting structures that ensures administrators convene regularly with frontline professionals. This allows collaboration to continue and alignment to occur while reducing distractions from common goals and priorities (Leithwood & McCullough, 2017).

At Alfred-Almond alignment and coherence is bolstered with accountability measures for meetings. One district leader describes having a list of expectations that will be produced at successive meetings. This type of accountability ensures that time spent meeting is focused upon goals enhancing alignment and coherence. It also allows for more local input into the organization without disrupting the organizational goals as a whole (Ingersoll, 1992).

By utilizing these co-requisite resources of time and accountability to build coherence and alignment, the positive outlier schools demonstrate a combination of both loose and tight organizational components. Using routines and accountability to bolster collaborative work is present in both positive outlier schools. Having a system of inspection to ensure compliance and designing feedback to improve compliance are both characteristic of tight coupling (Weick, 1982).
Instead of insinuating a tightly coupled organization at the positive outliers, these characteristics a configuration described by de Lima (2008). Effective complex organizations like schools must be both differentiated and integrated. In other words, there must be a combination of loose and tight elements in an effective school organization (Goldspink, 2007). The findings reported below demonstrate the steps taken to integrate professionals at the positive outlier schools. The results of such actions are increased alignment and coherence.

**Distributed Leadership**

At the positive outlier Sherburne-Earlville, distributed leadership is used to increase alignment around coherent goals. The key to their distributed leadership lies in the collaboration between leaders to meet their goals. The superintendent expresses that leaders at Sherburne-Earlville work together at elementary, middle, and high school levels. This has led to an environment away from one of being in siloes and toward collaborative alignment.

This manner of working together across levels in a school system is characteristic more of a loosely coupled organization than a rational bureaucracy (Merton, 1940). Aurini (2012) adds that loose coupling occurs when an organization adapts for members. Distributed leadership in the positive outlier schools applies this adaption as multiple voices are incorporated into the process of meeting coherent goals. Including various professionals requires compromise. However, the same collaborative process is used at Sherburne-Earlville to align their organization around coherent goals.

The literature suggests that distributed leadership and collaboration with front-line professionals are mutually constitutive (Newmann, et. al., 2001). Each influences the other. This relationship was evident in the positive outlier schools. The typically performing school provides selective contrasts.
At the typically performing school, Rideau, comparatively less collaboration provides less opportunity for distributed leadership and alignment. Selected expressions of collaboration emerge from the interview data, but not across all levels. This makes distributed leadership more difficult to accomplish and certainly limits the benefits from formal collaboration. Clearly state implication for tight and loose coupling

A balance between loose and tight coupling is vital for schools to exhibit improvement (de Lima, 2008). In this light, Rideau’s excessive loose coupling may be problematic.

**Instructional Standards**

Crafting and maintaining coherence around the instructional core by aligning instructional programs on common academic standards is used by all schools in the sample. However, differences among the sample schools are noteworthy. Officials from positive outlier schools share priorities for aligning assessments to standards, choosing priority standards, and also preparing for new academic standards.

At Sherburne- Earlville certain standards are prioritized to work on with the help of frontline professionals. This then helps teachers align their instructional themes and increases coherence. Assessment data is then used to track standards alignment. A formal system is used in which teachers must submit standards aligned assessment data four times per year. This practice aligns with the findings about coherence building from previous research. In limiting standards to concentrate on leaders at Sherburne-Earlville are buffering (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Durand, et al., 2016) their staff from the full load of standards. Simultaneously, they are bridging (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Durand, et al., 2016) between the expectations for standards alignment of their school and New York State.
At the typical performing school in the sample being standards aligned meant using an external authority to organize work. Standards that are aligned to those tested in Regents exams are supposed to be covered at Rideau. The same effort taken at Sherburne-Earlville to prioritize certain standards outside of Regents exams is not taken at this typical performer. Therefore, there is not the same evidence that buffering (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Durand, et al., 2016) occurs.

This is a hindrance to building coherence at Rideau. A top-down compliance-oriented leadership strategy is associated with reduced teacher agency (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018).

Trust

An important conduit for building and maintaining coherence as well as helping frontline professionals make sense of instructional leadership priorities is trust. The instructional leaders in positive outlier schools express feelings of trust in the abilities of their frontline professionals for planning, conducting, and evaluating instructional programs, and they give them discretionary authority for implementing content that addresses external demands. This continuous effort to negotiate a fit between external demands and their schools certainly builds coherence (Honig & Hatch, 2004). It also builds teacher agency and reciprocal trust (Lawson, et al., 2017). Wilcox and Lawson (2018) reminds that teacher agency is built when leaders allow for them to use professional discretion and adaptation. This is exemplified by the superintendents at both positive outlier schools. All express trust in their frontline professionals to work toward district goals in their classrooms without needing to be micromanaged.

In contrast, frontline professionals at the typically performing school express oversight from APPR as a hindrance to the ‘hands off’ trust that they desire and believe they typically receive. In this case trust and agency are eroded by a top down mandate and teachers express their disdain for the shift. Members at Rideau expressed that a feeling of trust will not return
until APPR goes away. This formal system of top-down compliance may make the frontline professionals at Rideau feel as though, in this element, they are ‘implementation puppets’ (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018).

**Discretionary Authority**

For instructional leadership priorities to be effective frontline professionals must understand and support their central goals. However, understanding and support are dependent upon how the meaning of leaders’ directives is made. This is sensemaking and the most effective instructional leaders build cultures that invite individuals to live out shared norms and values (NASSP, 2018). Thus, central tenants that are viewed by staff as being “shared” through common understanding or even collaborative work fair better for productive sensemaking.

Teachers in positive outlier schools have discretionary authority. However, their decision-making power and authority is constrained because they have much less “say” in determinations of the district’s and school’s central goals. For teachers, professional discretion primarily is grounded in classrooms. They have discretion in regard to how they conduct their classroom practices and implement content teachers have more self-choice.

Front-line professionals’ sensemaking in this environment is influenced by instructional leaders’ discernment and prioritization of preferred messages (Coburn, 2001), and it is facilitated by the provision of by adequate time and pacing to innovations so as to allow for teachers to make sense of new practices. Further, clear and consistent communication about what are the “non-negotiables” regarding aligned and coherent central goals help with sensemaking. This is true even as teachers have more discretionary authority regarding how they meet the goals in their personal practices.
In contrast to these positive outlier schools’ structures, norms, and practices, the typically performing school teachers have nearly wholesale license to determine all relevant parameters of classroom practice. Sensemaking among frontline professionals in this atmosphere includes the potential for disregarding the messages of alignment and coherence building offered by instructional leaders. Support and professional development tend to be uncoupled with needs that frontline professionals actually have, and a ‘silo’ structure is the result (Coburn, et al., 2009). Further, initiatives are presented without clear messaging as to which new practices are meant to support coherent aligned central goals. Thus, the discretionary authority these teachers have spreads into determining their own need for stronger practice and selecting solutions from many initiatives without instructional leadership guidance.

In other words, educators in the typically performing school apparently are supposed to figure out how to solve their own problems. Viewed in this way, practice and practice-related problem-solving are structured to be variable, and so is companion sense-making by teachers.

The fact that frontline professionals in Rideau feel that they are not adequately supported when filling the gaps in their instructional knowledge implies a bureaucracy in need of improvement. For example, teacher compliance is expected at Rideau but without feedback systems to check if it occurs (Weick, 1982).

The scenario for sensemaking displayed by positive outlier schools might be called “the sweet spot” in today’s standards-driven, accountability environments. It is one where the proper combination of loose/tight elements are at play (de Lima, 2008). It also fits with theories of distributed leadership. This appears to be the case in schools with comparatively better results such as the positive outliers in this study. Importantly, teachers in the middle retain professionalism, but also are constrained. They exercise discretion but lack total autonomy.
There is allowance for local input without so much discretionary authority so as to derail the whole organization (Ingersoll, 1992).

Discretionary authority in the positive outlier schools is part of a larger process of communication and expectation. Frontline professionals retain the purview of how to meet district instructional goals in their classrooms. District central officers and school level officials work to clearly and consistently communicate about how they expect the district to work together to achieve coherent and aligned goals. They also work to create a “fit” between district expectations and teacher views regarding instructional programming. This influences sensemaking among frontline professionals and opens opportunity for activities that further support shared sensemaking throughout an entire district.

**Leading and Managing Change**

Instructional leaders’ sensemaking is especially critical during times of change. In the positive outlier schools instructional leaders use their leadership as direction-setting. They influence positive change outcomes by prioritizing the “right things” to get done with interrelated programs for staff guided by common frameworks (Newmann, et al., 2001). Then, they manage those elements through the continuous work of crafting coherence via top-down and bottom-up mechanisms (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

For example, changes are paced so as to allow for frontline professionals to effectively adapt to new practice. This also helps to create buy-in for adaptations. Further, instructional leaders make sure that certain messages supporting change initiatives are repeated to staff in important contexts (Coburn, 2005). They also persist with changes that are prioritized and align them with professional development opportunities. This increases continued exposure to these preferred change messages and enhances sensemaking (Coburn, 2001). These characteristics
help manage how sensemaking develops among frontline professionals and pave the way for more successful changes in practice.

In the typically performing school change does not adhere to these same characteristics. Professional development does not align to what frontline professionals believe they need, initiatives are abandoned, and messages about why some initiatives are occurring are lacking. This disrupts sensemaking.

Summary

The analytical categories employed for the data analysis and interpretation yield important differences between the two positive outlier schools and the typically performing comparison school. These differences help to explain how and why the positive outliers achieve better outcomes and also appear to be more effective at building improvement capacity. While the findings in this research project do not describe or explain everything that positive outliers prioritize and are organized to do and achieve, they do enrich descriptions provided by previous research.

Further, the contrasts with the typically performing school add credibility and legitimacy to claims regarding what the positive outliers are organized and led to do; and how these features are associated with comparatively better results. Overall, this study’s findings indicate that what leaders prioritize and do are instrumental in the development of aligned and coherent organizations in which educators collaborate. Evident in the positive outlier schools, these features contribute to improvement capacities and the achievement of equitable outcomes for young people.
Chapter 5

Summary Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

This comparative study focuses on leadership and management in two positive outlier and one typically performing school. District central officers and school level officials, particularly principals, are of central interest. Both kinds of leaders have the potential to influence school and district outcomes, and it is important to understand what leaders in schools with histories of better student outcomes prioritize and do. In particular, highlighting the effectiveness indicators associated with positive outlier school district central officers and school level officials adds to the body of knowledge regarding how and why effective leaders “do what they do” in their organizations.

School organization also is central to this study because leadership, metaphorically viewed, winds its way throughout organizations (Heifetz, 2006). District office and school mechanisms for alignment and strategies for crafting coherence are of special interest because both improve adaptive capacity. School organizations must have both an adaptive capacity as well as effective cohesiveness to be successful. Understanding organizational configurations, such as using loose or tight coupling, in positive outlier schools sheds light on how other schools and districts can organize for success.

This study focuses on a selective sample of questions regarding leadership, organizational design, and their relationships. Do positive outlier school superintendents, principals, directors, committee chairs and other leaders utilize symbolic leadership methods, which are associated with loosely coupled organization? Or, do these leaders employ rational management techniques associated with tightly coupled organizations? Do leaders in positive outlier schools differ from
their counterparts in typically performing schools? In these regards comparative case studies are needed to address these questions.

This research project is timely and significant. The last many years have witnessed continuous educational legislations, such as No Child Left Behind or Every Student Succeeds Act, intending to raise the achievement of all students. Yet, despite these government actions academic achievement and school completion gaps among students persist. This is especially true among critical populations such as economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, or Hispanic/Latino or African American students.

Therefore, it is extremely important to investigate and describe leadership practices associated with schools making progress in providing educational equity as manifested in comparatively better outcomes. Equally of import is the discovery of school organizational models that pave the way for teachers and leaders to employ adaptive approaches to meeting student needs while building and maintaining alignment around coherent school goals.

This study is structured to address some of these timely policy and practice priorities. Founded on a conceptual framework provided by Karl Weick (1982), it is structured to address four research questions:

- What instructional leadership priorities do district central office and school level officials emphasize in their respective positive outlier school systems?
- How do district central office and school level officials align their instructional leadership priorities?
- How do these officials craft and maintain alignment and coherence around the instructional core?
How do frontline professionals make sense of district central office and school level officials’ instructional leadership?

Special interest resides in whether district central officers and school level officials in the positive outlier schools demonstrate symbolic management indicative of loosely coupling organizations; or rational management which is associated with a tightly coupled organization and how these characteristics differ in a typically performing school. Leaders also are also studied to see if their abilities to build alignment around coherent goals while simultaneously promoting adaptive school cultures results from loose coupling or the contrasting organizational model, tight coupling.

Methodology

This study proceeded with a sample of two positive outlier and one typically performing school. The three schools were selected from a larger group of ten included in the 2018 University at Albany NYKids study focused on secondary schools. The “positive outlier” schools are labeled as such if they demonstrated better than expected graduation rates among diverse students when contrasted with comparison schools called “typically performing schools”.

The sample for this study was selected from the schools participating in the larger NYKids study described in chapter three (Wilcox, et al., 2018). The schools of interest are “medium to large rural schools.” Using these schools from the larger group makes this research project more manageable and also addressed a deficit in previous research.

Nearly a quarter of students in the United States go to school in rural locations but are often overlooked by researchers (Schafft, 2016). New York State is no exception to this phenomenon. Rural schools are frequently overlooked by researchers who appear to prefer
researching larger urban areas in the state (Zuckerman, et al., 2018). This dissertation thus helps address this research gap.

The data used for analysis also comes from the larger NYKids study. This study relies on the interview transcripts of district central officers, principals, assistant principals, directors of special education, other school level program directors or coordinators, and regular education and special education teachers produced in the visits of the three schools chosen for its sample and in accordance with the plan set out for this dissertation.

Two cycles of coding were used to analyze the interview transcripts. Initial Coding (Saldana, 2009) is applied first, followed with Pattern Coding (Saldana, 2009). Cross-case analysis (Yin, 2014) is then used after coding to enrich analysis.

Steps were taken to protect the validity of this study. Three qualitative techniques are used in particular. They are thick descriptions in authorship of findings, peer review and debriefing, and expressing the avenues by which bias potentially entered this study while also defining the position of this researcher (Creswell, 2013).

**Limitations**

In addition to case studies, ethnographies and systematic observations are more effective methods for studying loose coupling according to Orton and Weick (1990). Further, longitudinal studies are important in order to discern loose coupling in schools (Weick, 1976). In contrast, the data for this dissertation study derives from two-day site visits.

A limitation created by the boundaries of this study occur in part because of the constrained time frame for data collection. Since ten schools make up the sample for the larger NYKids study teams of researchers only could spend two days in each district conducting interviews and focus groups. This limits the ability to potentially generalize about the views held
by teachers at the school throughout the whole of the academic year that may reveal further
evidence of tight or loose coupling in schools.

The systematic observations and case study design elements of the larger NYKids study
meet Orton and Weick’s (1990) recommendations for ways to “see” loose coupling. However,
the inability to gather information over a longer period of time potentially limits this
dissertation’s ability to observe loose coupling. This is potentially true when considering
Weick’s (1976) recommendation for using longitudinal studies with regards to loose coupling in
schools.

Summary of Findings

Key, defining themes derived from the four research questions structure this study’s
findings. They are summarized below.

Leadership Priorities and Strategies

District leaders and school leaders in the positive outlier schools prioritize and actively
work toward student success. District central officers and school leaders in the positive outlier
schools speak about students in ways that prioritize their strengths. This means providing
students with special opportunities and pushing them into classes and extracurricular activities
where they might not typically have seen themselves.

Further, a school leader in one positive outlier school describes prioritizing planning
academic programs that meet student interests, such as hunting; or they help students gain
preparation for jobs in their local economy by building an agriculture program. The same
orientation was not discovered at the typical performing school.

Leaders at all three schools prioritize student involvement in extracurricular activities.
However, leaders at the positive outlier schools make sure students are connected beyond
academics. For example, leaders encourage student involvement in extra-curricular activities, and then they track it. Then, they reach out to uninvolved students to in order to find ways to connect them to their school community beyond their typical student role.

Positive outlier school district officers and school leaders work to make sure that their organizations are adaptable and focused upon consistent improvement. Leaders in positive outlier schools also express their collective efficacy with “can-do attitudes.” They are proactive about finding weaknesses for the sake of improvement and nurturing an adaptable organization. They are unafraid to take risks in order to advance their organization effectiveness.

At the typically performing school, the superintendent of schools does not express a strengths-based view of students. Instead, they point to student limitations as justification for not pursuing certain things such as an International Baccalaureate program because they appear not to believe that students are able to handle the rigor of it. Therefore, a ‘realistic’ view of student ability is used to limit opportunities.

District central officers and school level officials at the typically performing school are more risk averse. One district leader expresses decision making priorities that are influenced by external factors such as Regents testing material. Further, school leaders at this typically performing school talk about how available funding influence how they make decisions about staffing or programs. They are less willing to take risks.

Leaders in the typically performing school value improvement but they do not have the structures in place to drive improvement from within. Various district and school leaders express that external experts have necessary knowledge for school improvement. Outside trainers are frequently brought in to train the staff at the typically performing school. In contrast, the positive outlier leaders oversee formal systems in which frontline professionals’ strengths are mobilized
and their expertise is shared throughout the organizations. This adds to the improvement agency of the frontline professionals in the positive outlier schools and it is lacking at the typically performing school.

**Priority Alignment**

The district officers and school leaders from positive outlier schools in this study work to align their instructional leadership priorities through regular and formal discourse. Being in the same room to talk about common goals helps positive outlier school leaders accomplish this alignment. Formal processes of collaborative work meant to advance common district goals is present at the positive outlier schools. Formative processes are also present to allow members of this collaborative to check their progress and alignment in a repeated fashion.

Positive outlier district central officers, school level officials, and frontline professionals in the sample bolster priority alignment by making sure opportunities for collaboration occur. Formal meeting structures ensure that school leaders, and district leaders meet regularly with frontline professionals. In other words, these leaders do not skip meetings to perform their typical duties. They also use formative data to assess how well members are working toward collective goals. One positive outlier school leader describes formative checks where frontline professionals have to produce information showing how they are designing assessments that are standards aligned. This helps members work toward common goals while maintaining alignment and building coherence.

Superintendents and school leaders at positive outlier schools work together to collectively achieve district goals. This distributed leadership ensures that alignment around coherent goals will increase. No single leader is responsible for meeting a goal on their own.
Additionally, collaborative work ensures that leaders across district grade levels all work together to achieve coherent goals.

One school leader at the typically performing school speaks about collaborative efforts with limited staff involvement. These efforts involve two district leaders and one school leader who also serves in a district leadership function. Significantly, the superintendent and other school leaders do not join them for these regular sessions. This lack of broad participation by district officers and school level officials affects discourses that could otherwise help align leadership priorities.

Also missing in the typically performing school are the midstream check-ins that allow leaders and frontline professionals to assess if they are working toward district goals in an aligned fashion. Formative checks are not mentioned. Instead, the superintendent speaks about using summative information such as how students are performed on annual standardized tests as a means to identify strong teacher practice, which appear to address district goals.

At the typically performing school less collaboration means fewer opportunities for alignment. There is also less distributed leadership. There are mentions of collaboration among some typically performing school district officers, but nothing appears to be formalized in organizational structures and routines. No one appears to be accountable. Therefore, district central officers and school level officials work to meet district goals in potential isolation without knowing how their efforts connect for the benefit of the larger organization.

**Alignment and Coherence around the Instructional Core**

School leaders in all three schools in the sample utilize instructional standards to bolster alignment around coherent goals. However, some inter-school differences emerge from the analysis.
At the positive outlier school, Sherburne- Earlville, identifiable standards are prioritized for aligning instructional themes among teachers. These priority standards are chosen with input from teachers. Further, assessment data is collected from teachers several times throughout the year to aide in aligning work around these priority standards.

Trust is an important element for maintaining coherence and also helping frontline professionals make sense of leadership priorities. In the positive outlier schools district central officers describe trust in their teachers to plan, conduct, and evaluate their instructional programs. This discretionary authority that teachers in the positive outlier schools enjoy bolsters their agency and also builds reciprocal trust (Lawson, et al., 2017) in the priorities of their school leaders and district officers. Frontline professionals must work within the ‘framework’ created by alignment around coherent goals, but they get to decide how their classroom practice operate and add to district goal attainment. This trust facilitates sensemaking for leadership priorities by teachers and also coherence building around the goals they aim to meet.

The typically performing school provides contrasts. Priority standards are not separated from the larger collection of standards. Instead, all standards that represent information tested by Regents exams are focused upon. Assessment data used to determine how frontline professionals are meeting these standards is summative in nature, relying on standardized testing results.

Frontline professionals at the typically performing school express that they associate trust with their administrators remaining ‘hands off’ in their approach to monitoring staff actions. They express that APPR and its oversite component have diminished trust between frontline professionals, school leaders, and district leaders. Further, they do not foresee it returning until this legislated initiative goes away. This lack of trust diminishes coherence and sensemaking among the staff at the typically performing school.
Sensemaking

Both district central officers and frontline professionals in the positive outlier schools report that making sense of leadership priorities occurs through a combination of externally aligned expectations and discretionary authority. Having externally aligned expectations allow for the frontline professionals in positive outlier schools to know what “non-negotiables” are expected by instructional leaders. School leaders and district officers use communication and expectation to align work around coherent goals. Frontline professionals understand the goals, systems, and expectations that they must work to meet. However, they retain discretionary authority for how they will work within their individual practices to meet district goals through their work with students. Therefore, frontline professionals in positive outlier schools make the goals of their organizations “their own”, while aligning these goals with the larger structure.

District central officers at positive outlier schools influence sensemaking among frontline professionals by leading and managing change. They use their leadership as direction setting, and they influence positive changes by making sure the “right things” got done.

Positive outlier school district central officials craft and maintain coherence via both top-down and bottom up mechanisms (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Changes are paced so that teachers can adapt to new practice rather than taking on too much at once. One superintendent describes persisting with certain priority messages that support change and then make sure they are repeated to staff during times critical for sensemaking, such as in a curriculum council. Finally, professional development in positive outlier schools is conducted to enhance frontline professionals’ abilities to adjust to planned changes.

The frontline professionals at the typically performing school have more discretionary authority without the same presence of externally aligned expectations. In fact, they have nearly
full control of determining all parameters for their individual practices. This means these teachers can highly customize their practices. However, there is not the same external system making sure that each classroom is helping larger goals be met. Additionally, with so much discretionary authority one frontline professional describes feeling like they are on their own to figure out solutions to problems they might encounter. This leads to a feeling of being inadequately supported when they need to fill gaps in their instructional knowledge.

Professional development characteristics associated with improvement-oriented sensemaking appear not to be present at the typically performing school. Professional development is not part of a larger organized effort to help frontline professionals understand and feel equipped for district change initiatives. Instead, they are more isolated trainings unconnected to each other or larger direction setting. As a result, some school leaders do not perceive the professional development they receive as being consistently helpful, which leads to the abandonment of initiatives. This also disrupts sensemaking.

Conclusions

The findings summarized above lend empirical support to seven conclusions. Each is followed by a brief explanation.

Positive outlier district office leaders and school leaders employ leadership and management strategies and emphasize discourses which are explicitly student-centered.

School leaders at the positive outlier schools talk about making sure that students have access to academic challenge in AP courses or academic clubs that they might not otherwise qualify for or see themselves in. These school leaders also talk about making sure that students’ needs for transportation, clothing, and food are supplemented by their schools so that they will not limit their access to academic clubs or after school opportunities. Finally, one positive outlier
school superintendent discusses having formal systems to review and understand student involvement outside of classes in order to make sure that each student has a larger connection to their school community.

*District central officers and school leaders emphasize “agency”, having voice and choice, in two important populations: students and front-line professionals, especially teachers.*

When teachers and students have voice and choice, and collaborative structures and processes are in place, school-wide sensemaking, both individual and collective, is enhanced. For example, students in one positive outlier school have access to taking AP level courses even if they do not immediately qualify, this allows them to choose more rigorous academic work to prepare for future pursuits. A positive outlier school superintendent demonstrates student community voice influence when designing an Agricultural Science program to offer to students in their high school. Agency for teachers in the positive outlier schools is exemplified by choosing instructional standards from the larger list to prioritize, being regularly and formally called upon to share their knowledge to help improve the practice of their colleagues, and by expressing to district central officers and school leaders how they want to engage in improvement and be listened to.

*Positive outlier district office leaders and school leaders hold themselves and others accountable for collaboration and timely communication, building trust and improving alignment and coherence in their loosely-coupled organizations.*

Collaborative meetings are regularly held in positive outliers and include representative members from the leadership and frontline positions. They also have “checkpoints” where evidence must be submitted or reviewed to demonstrate how stakeholders are progressing toward meeting district goals. Selected elements about this process are set by the school boards and
superintendents such as for district goals or the requirement of using instructional standards to
guide instruction; however, feedback about adapting or implementing some of these elements
comes from teachers.

*Positive outlier district office leaders and school leaders strategically blend tight and
loose coupling mechanisms when they grant teachers and other front-line professionals
discretionary authority, i.e., they enjoy choices regarding how they structure and perform their jobs.*

District officers and principals establish non-negotiable priorities with clear boundaries for staff when setting directions for their schools. Frontline professionals maintain discretionary authority, i.e., they enjoy choices over how they instruct. Superintendents at both positive outlier schools express trusting their teachers to make effective decisions regarding classroom instruction and to do what is ‘correct’ for the overall direction of the district.

*Positive outlier district central officers and school leaders emphasize “improvement mindsets” in tandem with adaptive, proactive leadership.*

These district central officers and school leaders look ahead, they do not wait for New York State officials to tell them what to prioritize or how to accomplish state goals. This is reflected in the actions of an positive outlier school frontline professional who was already adjusting their practice to be aligned with the newer Next Generation State Standards (NGSS) from New York State. Also, positive outlier school district central officials, school leaders, and frontline professionals meet regularly and review assessment data that demonstrate how teachers are meeting standards and if changes need to be made in their instruction, they do not wait for summative standardized testing data to have these conversations.
Positive outlier school district central officers and school leaders are skillful resource managers.

They find ways to fund and support the improvement initiatives they recommend and require. At one positive outlier school frontline professionals pilot new programs, ideas, and products under the supervision of a district central officer, which allows them to pass over items that are not worth investing resources in for the larger staff. Positive outlier school district central officers and school leaders hire people for leadership positions who have backgrounds or express professional philosophies that will advance improvement initiatives, resources then go toward leadership compensation as well as oversight and support for innovations.

Positive outlier school district central officers and school leaders rely on data in all matters of direction-setting, priority establishment, and resource reallocations.

This is exemplified in many ways, such as being slower to accept APPR so that they could observe how it was rolling out in other schools and districts to better plan its use. Collaborative groups that bring together superintendents, school leaders, and frontline professionals in positive outlier schools work to clearly communicate about and assess learning goals in order to move forward in an aligned method. District central officers also make data informed decisions about programs and products by having them piloted through K-12 teachers who then provide feedback about usefulness before deciding which will go to the larger group of frontline professionals.

Implications for Future Research

As this study neared completion, opportunities arose for the principal investigator to reflect on how this kind of research might be improved. Key recommendations are summarized below.
Future research would benefit interviews with school board members because members of school boards play important roles in building alignment around coherent goals within school districts. Members from each of the schools in this sample mentioned their school boards. This was especially true when talking about district goal setting.

Future research could include interviews with school board members. It might strengthen analysis to hear how school board members express their roles in working with instructional leaders to create goals. It might also be significant to hear how school board members understand or participate in the collaborative structures used to ensure district goals are met. This might illuminate board members’ roles in building alignment and coherence in schools as well.

Future research also would be potentially strengthened by reviewing transcripts of focus group interviews with School Support Teams (SST’s). Although the larger NYKids study sampled some student support professionals and formal teams, that information was not analyzed as part of this dissertation. Future research should consider analyzing any information collected regarding school SST’s, especially regarding their relationships with school’s instruction programs and systems.

In many schools SST’s function as case managers for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. They make sure that support services provide for the needs of these students, but they also support them in their academic progress making sure their services and supports are coordinated to bring school success.

A focus on relations between teachers’ pedagogy and SST roles and interventions thus is a priority for future research. It promises insight into how people and programs at schools serve diverse students, perhaps enhancing educational equity in opportunity structures and outcomes.
Implications for Leadership Preparation

Leadership programs should emphasize Weick’s (1982) concepts of tight and loose coupling in combination with teachings of Heifetz (2006) on adaptive proactive leadership. Superintendents, other district central officers, and principals must be prepared to utilize these and other leadership and management strategies that strategically blend loose and tight coupling mechanisms. Professionals seeking leadership credentials must learn to set up and manage systems of collaboration that are formal and accountable. They must also learn to oversee communication structures that flow top down and bottom up, allowing prioritized message to be carried strategically down from leadership levels but refined and recommmunicated up from frontline professional levels.

Finally, leadership preparation programs must instill in candidates the importance of trust-building strategies in tandem with solid communications mechanisms, alongside, strategies for building alignment and coherence around organizational goals. This means prioritizing and persistently repeating key messages to frontline professionals, building consensus and gaining their commitment to help advance improvement initiatives. It also means being able to build reciprocal trust (Lawson, et al., 2017). Further, superintendents, other district central officers, and principals must learn how to manage systems of information gathering that allow for instructional programs to remain aligned and checked for their quality. This is also true for changes in practice that must be monitored for successful effect.

Implications for Leadership Practice

Four implications for leadership practice are important. First, superintendents, district central officers, principals, and other school level officials set the stage for improvement when they view students for the strengths that they have. They should also provide avenues for
students to experience academic challenge even if they do not present the typical characteristics of students who might be placed into honors or AP courses. Positive outlier leaders demonstrate that systems to monitor student success and student involvement are in order. These systems provide data which enable student-centered planning in challenging academic programs and extracurricular activities.

Second, these district central officers, principals, and other school level officials in positive outlier schools learn how to build agency among students as well as front-line professionals. They should give both some voice and choice to these groups for creating their own educational or professional paths, albeit structured in accordance with state and district policy. They should also provide opportunities for collaboration in order for students and frontline professionals to contribute their voices to program design and decision making for schools and districts.

This dissertation study also signals need for a special kind of supervision. Leaders must oversee systems of formal collaborative work between leaders and frontline professionals for the purpose of meeting district goals. These systems should allow for input from frontline professionals to influence system design. There should also be evidence production and review within these collaborative systems to inform all members of how they are progressing toward meeting district goals.

Finally, district central officers, principals, and other school level officials must understand how teachers and other frontline professionals make sense of improvement initiatives. This is accomplished by prioritizing certain messages that enhance designated priorities and help to ensure staff members’ derived meanings correspond to leaders’ intended ones. The aforementioned combination of trust and communication are important in all such
sensemaking, and they offer improvement dividends in companion initiatives to enhance alignment and coherence. All contribute to student success and school effectiveness.
### Appendix A

#### Code Book

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Exemplar Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Standards</td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals describe using academic standards to guide or align their academic program or practice. Or they mention alignment to academic standards as a strength of their district/school.</td>
<td>We are getting ready to roll out a new set of standards so making sure that everybody is up to date on the standards and that the curriculum aligns with the standards and where it doesn't align, adapting and modifying curriculum; making sure that everybody is up to date in their certifications and their trainings and coordinating a lot with our BOCES to receive trainings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>District officers, school officials, or frontline professionals express understanding, or methods by which, they are expected to carry out instructional practices, standards of training, or non-instructional resource usage.</td>
<td>Well, a few things. So (name deleted) is our (position deleted). Some of that would be just looking at the use. So, for her, how many teachers are accessing her? So, for example, this weekend, while I was working on teacher evaluations, I will touch base with her to see how many of my teachers are signing up for (subject deleted) in-services? So, that’s one way I’m looking at are they bringing themselves up to speed to do what they need to do in order to integrate it in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Support</td>
<td>District officers or school officials express supporting staff with their professional duties or with resources. Or, frontline professionals express being supported by</td>
<td>We try really hard to approve any professional development conferences they want to go to. We try to encourage and support them. They’re allowed to go – there are those inter-observations I was</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
officials in leadership in these areas.

talking about – we provide coverage, if there’s no sub available then (name deleted) or I will sit in the classroom if you want to leave your classroom to see somebody else doing something because that’s how we support those initiatives. We can’t say, “Go do this, okay, now write sub plans and get your own sub and take your pay.” No, it has to be, it is all built into the school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrative Supportive Belief</th>
<th>The stated belief by district central officers or school officials in the positive ability or the deficit of an ability by a frontline professional to support conduct new professional duties or professional duties that are perceived as being difficult.</th>
<th>This is something we’ve just started this year. (name deleted) – and I told her, when I told her about this idea that they’d been talking about, she was apprehensive. I said “(name deleted), you’re going to be great at this. You’re going to be great at this because you’re one of them. I see it…today. You’re in your (age deleted), you’re still [?]. You don’t like authority figures. You’re always giving me trouble, and you’re going to be awesome.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Frontline professionals are mentioned as having, or they themselves describe having, the freedom to choose how they are going to meet the expectations of academic instruction in the district both by intentional system design for autonomy or as a side effect of less system coordination.</td>
<td>1. I consider her an expert in literacy. She’s well-read and well-researched. She does a lot of that stuff pretty much on her own. But a lot of it comes down to the fact that I don’t have to micromanage because these people are sharp. They’re good and they’re doing what’s correct. So, I’m kind of keeping a hand in it, but I’m not the type of person that is going to try to micromanage and try to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
direct everybody in every aspect of life because, quite frankly, I don’t have to because I have trust in them. They’re doing the right thing, and they’re smart people, and they look at things objectively, and they make sure we’re doing what’s right for the district and for our kids.

2. The next year we went back and said, “Okay how did this go?” One of our other (department deleted) teachers did not take that approach. She just kind of – “No, I’ve taught this for years, I know how to do it.” Came back and our scores were not great on that test, so we said, “Okay we let you do it your way, it’s not working. Now we’re going to sit down.”

<p>| Collaboration | Frontline professionals and leaders at both district central offices and school levels express processes through which they collaborate (or do not collaborate) with district central officers, school level officials, and other frontline professionals to create shared understandings of the purpose and goals for their instructional leadership as well as daily instructional practices. | Yeah, that’s only because (name deleted) does it. So, we’ll have meetings where, at least 2-3 times a year, where she will have 3 or 4 of us in here, who’d be like, “This is something I’m doing in my classroom,” and you get 10 minutes to show, you know, and that gets people to discuss those, you know, new things. |
| Collective Decision Making | Officials or frontline professionals express decision making in the district that includes input from district central officers, school officials, frontline | We, we started talking, we did not have a really well developed RTI program at all. And so, we spent the last two, two years ago meeting monthly as a team. Which |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professionals, or more (school board members, community members, and etc.).</th>
<th>was like (name deleted), and both the principals, and myself and our (district leaders and school leaders) …talking about what that would like and how it would roll out.</th>
<th>Communication Leaders describe communication that is frequent, formal or in formal, and reciprocal between building and district central officers with the purpose of maintaining aligned efforts to district mission, vision, themes, goals, and academic programs.</th>
<th>Myself, (names deleted) who you were just with – our (position deleted). And now our (position deleted), that’s a new position this year. But we meet every Wednesday morning. And generally, those meetings are where those types of things come up. The first person that has a brainstorm brings it here, we start to discuss it, the afterschool program lists something that we had when the budget cuts went really… when funding, we lost a lot of funding.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Support District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals describe the importance of having support from the community for how the school works with its students academically, socially, and emotionally, as well as providing monetary support.</td>
<td>When it’s Election Day, and in May and when there is the school board elections and all things. They do an entire school wide art show. So, every kid K-6th has art displayed in the building. And anybody from seventh and twelfth that has an art class, they are displayed in the building. It is a way to get families here to vote of course but at the same time, making sure everybody feels like they are welcomed in our building and then they are a part of our…</td>
<td>Consistent Leaders District central officials, school officials, and frontline professionals</td>
<td>If you want to make an impact on an organization,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
professionals describe the importance of having leaders who stay in their positions.

### Data Usage

| District central officers, building officials, and frontline professionals talk about using data, or the importance of using data, to make decisions in their practice or inform their understanding of how a program or students are performing. |
| You’re not going to go in and start a lesson plan based upon a reading level of X, Y, and Z, if you don’t have the data to support that the children in your classroom are at a readiness level for X, Y, and Z. OK. You have to create the lessons plans, in order which is the science. You have to utilize data and decision making which is the science. |

### Expectations

| District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals refer to a level of performance they believe students should or can achieve in multiple aspects of the academic program. |
| It's very difficult to enforce rigor. We try for rigor all the time, and to kids who really largely don't understand the bar. If you set it so high, at an inappropriate height, kids who 10 years ago I think wouldn't have flinched at it, are absolutely crippled by that rigor now. We strive for it, but it's very difficult to get kids… |

### External Problem Solving

<p>| District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals refer to needing or using an agency’s help, the addition of a relevant staff member, the use or purchase of a product, or a general admission of not being capable of accomplishing something regarding a district/school need or problem with current resources. |
| Upstairs in the middle-school, they brought in a couple people from BOCES because to get a four on our teacher’s rubric, it has to have student engagement and student-center learning. So they brought in some trainers and they trained a couple people in the building because those people said, “We want to get a four, what can we do?” |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Limitations</td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals express concern regarding the school or district’s financial profile and/or they discuss potential limitations it causes.</td>
<td>It's kind of like, the money is an object, you know. Money is scarce and you have to decide, where can you get the most bang for your buck? So, like I let go off the (title deleted) teacher, because we can't do that now. But we can do after-school and I feel like that's going to have a greater impact on kids. So, that's the direction we went.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals refer to goals that the district has for student success.</td>
<td>Well, alright so our goals for our school is to…we want as many kids as we can to get to a 4- year college, and we want as many kids as we can to get the Regents diploma or a higher Regents. How do I know that? I’m the (position deleted) and I have all of the goals. I have all the school plans. How does we know that as a staff? It’s relayed to us by our principals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals express the importance of all students being educated in common, (with student centered practices and expectations for success), regardless of their social or educational circumstances. And, there is a strong emphasis on not separating students into more isolated tracts based upon perceived need.</td>
<td>Yes. I think for one thing here…it’s the involvement of the kids and that’s, for example, if you look at our website sometimes, and that’s real visuals that help me. I look at, we have a math team, and when I look at the picture of them on…this year…they’re out in front of the tree. I see kiddos who I know very well are coming out of poverty, that their own expectations for themselves or their families were low and they may be kids are in foster homes, they may be kids who I know a lot of background and things, but we …they are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal Problem Solving</strong></td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals refer to solving problems or meeting district/school needs with interventions from people already part of the district staff.</td>
<td>One year, they couldn’t provide anybody, because there was nobody out there that was, you know, filling these positions, so one year we went without any technology support. So, the (position deleted) said, “Let’s look from within our district,” because that’s a person who’s going to know our people, know what we need, be consistent, fight for what they love, and really implement innovative things, that perhaps BOCES couldn’t provide us, because they didn’t have the tools or the know-it-all to work with our people per-say on a daily basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mental Health</strong></td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals express meeting the mental health needs of their students as a priority for the district or school to address, or they give specific examples of how mental health needs are being met.</td>
<td>A kid can’t focus on school because of their mental health needs, and there’s no private practitioners available in (name deleted) County whatsoever. I can send them to mental health, but we’re not confident in their services, and so the practitioners that we’d usually send them to for independent counseling are full and not taking anyone else. And what it has turned into here is that our (position deleted) has a giant caseload of kids that have severe needs. Our (position deleted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mission Alignment</strong></td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals describe the importance of aligning actions or initiatives to the district’s mission. Or, they refer to the district mission influencing how they take action, or the type of action taken in the practice across the entire system.</td>
<td>The district has a strong commitment to having people with a background in special education and some of those key roles in order to further kind of our mission, and to have a role of a secondary principal, I felt like I could actually use my background and some of the knowledge to even further that mission and it’s not just students classified or with IEPs or 504’s, it becomes about meeting the needs of diverse learners. And that was, you know, really kind of both the challenge and a goal for me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Academic Priorities</strong></td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals express the importance of clubs, sports, or technology as a vital element of student success.</td>
<td>We look at absolutely everything. Involvement, number of—percentage—of our kids that are involved in extracurricular activities. Whether that be interscholastic athletics. You know robotics. Clubs, those sort of things. Our attendance rate is vital to us as well. We hover right around 97%, usually as a district. Certainly, our graduation rates. Certainly, you know our test scores and things. Because ultimately as well that is how we’re measuring. We absolutely believe that we can get the kids to this level. But in terms of that success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals express how school programs or services are designed or implemented to offset issues created by students living in poverty.</td>
<td>There’s a backpack program that our PTO kind of – it’s not on a weekly basis, some districts have backpack programs where they fill kids’ backpacks for the weekend on a Friday. We don’t have that here yet, but I think when the Social Worker comes, that might be something that we move it more toward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Adverse Effect</td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals express that living in poverty is difficult for some students in the district or is the reason why school success is limited for students.</td>
<td>Just a few months ago, in February. One of my students was really off topic, and (pronoun deleted) is really focused normally and driven. I was really thrown off. (Pronoun deleted) wasn't doing (pronoun deleted) work, and (pronoun deleted) always did work for me. I was like, hey what is up? (Pronoun deleted) opened up about how (pronoun deleted) didn't have food at home, and (pronoun deleted) was just so worried about, at the end of the day, how (pronoun deleted) was going to eat in the weekend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals refer to training they receive or need, or direct others to participate in trainings, that benefit the students in the district through increased</td>
<td>We’re looking across the board and doing a lot of professional development on poverty and how, you know, students...poverty and kids in crisis, because once again that goes hand in hand. So, we’ve done faculty meetings,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Understanding of their circumstances, enhanced ability to instruct effectively, or for better organization of resources or an instructional program.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Workshops, just book studies, a lot of things related to that for all of us.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal Experts</strong></td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals express examples of sharing expertise across members of staff.</td>
<td>But we have, you know, a turnkey person who’s the go to if you want some great ideas, and she’s willing to do that. She’s not me, she’s not administration, she’s a teacher, and she’s an expert on Promethean Boards. So, we have a lot of those people all around the building that are experts in what they piloted. They’ll do their presentation at a faculty meeting, and they’ll explain why this is great, what they did with it, and they help people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outside Experts</strong></td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals express professional improvement that comes from outside experts, outside expert texts, or outside expert programs.</td>
<td>So, we have a BOCES, as I said, for our professional development. We rely on our BOCES a ton. We have a BOCES staff specialist who specializes in the area of technology who comes in once a month. And we sign them up to work with certain teachers. They can either come down and they can – we provide a room like this or another room for them to sit down and work side by side on something they’re doing. Or that staff specialist will go right into their classroom and help them do it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Risk Taking</strong></td>
<td>District central officers, school officials, or frontline professionals express risk-taking for pilot new products.</td>
<td>So, we pilot almost every single new product. Every</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

146
professionals express a value in taking risks professionally to try and improve instruction. Or, they express examples of risk taking. | single program or idea, we pilot through teachers K-12 and then they pilot for a certain amount of time, we meet every month, we discuss it, and then they recommend or not recommend. So, we have data, we have tried and true with, in the classroom, students and teachers, and then, at that point, we recommend to the administration. And, we…it’s about a 33% success rate. So, we trash about 75%, and the things that we know work, that we have tried, we present to the administration for approval, and that’s key.

| Student Centered | Decisions about “resource allocation, course offerings, schedules, and instructional approaches,” are made with student needs in mind or with reference to information about perceived student need motivating these decisions. | A couple of years ago we added a hunting and wilderness course. This is what they’re interested in, and so why aren’t we teaching – putting that in so the (department deleted) found a literary pieces that focus on hunting and outdoors and those ideas. Now we’re making an English class to try and get buy-in from students taking classes that they want to take. |

| Top Down Decisions | District central officers, building officials, or frontline professionals describe decisions from the school or district central leadership level that must be followed by frontline professionals. | In ELA, for everybody not just ELA, one of the biggest things that teachers know we’re looking for is we want learning targets posted and reviewed at the beginning of the lesson, and some sort of formal or informal assessment on it prior to leaving the lesson. I would say that’s not just one area, |
that’s something that we expect from our teachers across the board.
References


Sergiovanni, T. J. (1981). *Symbolism in leadership (What great leaders know that ordinary ones do not)*.


Wilcox, K. C., & Lawson, H. A. (2018). Teachers’ agency, efficacy, engagement, and emotional resilience during policy innovation implementation. *Journal of Educational Change, 19*(2), 181–204. [https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-017-9313-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-017-9313-0)


