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Superintendent Leadership in Small, Rural Minnesota Public Schools

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SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP IN SMALL, RURAL MINNESOTA SCHOOLS

by

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The purpose of the research was to investigate the leadership skills of rural Minnesota superintendents alongside the academic achievement of the school district. Through the correlates of school leadership espoused by Waters and Marzano, this research analyzed the leadership characteristics of the superintendents in those districts and the level of educational excellence achieved under them.

A multiple case study methodology was used to study nine rural Minnesota school districts and superintendents. Through a written survey, this study considered collaborative goal setting, nonnegotiable goals for academic achievement, board alignment with district goals, monitoring achievement and instruction, and allocating resources to support those academic goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Based on the research of this study, the author has concluded that the superintendents did collaborate with faculty, board and public to set goals for academic achievement and classroom instruction; the superintendent and board monitored progress on their goals, and the school boards supported them through their physical support for those goals

Was there a correlation in this study between superintendent leadership and academic achievement and classroom instruction? The answer to that question might depend on the data used to answer that question. According to the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) testing results, there was no noteworthy increase in

test scores as a result of superintendent leadership. Considering the narrative responses and the efforts to meet the goals through the World's Best Workforce, the superintendents of these school districts are actively involved in the education of the children of their districts through their ongoing efforts to set strategic goals across those districts and then monitor and report the progress to the school boards. There was evidence too, that the strategic goals of the districts included more than just the basic tenets of the World's Best Workforce plan. The superintendents, as well as the staff, administration and school boards of these districts included additional goals that provided the children in their districts the greatest opportunities for a high quality educational experience. Based on this study of these school districts and their superintendents, the leadership of the superintendents did positively impact student achievement and classroom instruction.

Key Terms: instruction, leadership of place, rural, rural school districts, small district, small town, success, student achievement

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Timothy M. Plath

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a study on how Minnesota school superintendents apply the key findings of Waters and Marzano's study on superintendent leadership within their own districts. This study includes the impact of relationships, the local and state economy and school finances, dwindling population and declining enrollment, strategic planning, personnel, community support, curriculum, and technology on the work of the superintendent.

Chapter one provides a background to the study, a statement of the problem, the significance of the study, an overview of the methodology, the limitations of the study, and the definitions of key terms.

Background of the Study

In terms of population decline and state and federal mandated reform efforts, Minnesota's rural schools have felt the negative impact on a greater level than those in urban and suburban areas of the state. In recent history, school enrollments have declined and state resources have decreased (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). According to the Institute for Educational Leadership (2004), these school districts are challenged by the state leadership due to the fact that, "A lack of detailed knowledge about rural education and rural schools makes it easy for policymakers and program developers to assume that what works for urban schools will work equally well in rural areas." That report goes on to note that there needs to be more research on rural schools, their settings or context, and the challenges of rural school leadership (Institute for Education Leadership, 2004, p. 7).

In spite of these challenges, the small, rural school districts of Minnesota continue to provide the students of their districts the best possible education they can deliver, due in part to the strong commitment on the part of the communities in which they reside (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011).

The role of the superintendent is vital to the success of these rural school districts. According to Hyle, Ivory, and McClellan (p. 174, 2010), "the role of the small district superintendent is central to the development, improvement, and maintenance of an effective system of public education in this country."

J. Timothy Waters and Robert J. Marzano studied 2,817 school districts and achievement scores of 3.4 million students to study the influence superintendents had on student achievement and the characteristics of effective superintendents. That comprehensive study resulted in five correlates:

1. "Collaborative goal setting;
2. Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction;
3. Board alignment with and support of district goals;
4. Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction; and
5. Use of resources to support the goals for instruction and achievement" (Waters and Marzano, 2006, p. 3-4).

Because of their comprehensive study, Waters and Marzano (2006, p. 8) determined that "sound leadership at the district level adds value to an education system." These five correlates provide the basis for this study of Minnesota rural school superintendents.

In addition to the five points listed, the Waters and Marzano's study produced a bonus finding. The results of that study implied that the length of time that a superintendent stayed at a school district had a positive effect on the average academic achievement of the students in that district (Waters and Marzano, 2006, p. 14).

Other researchers have utilized these correlates as part of their research on superintendent leadership (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Klatt, 2014; Forner, Bierlein-Palmer & Reeves, 2012; Leon, 2010; Moffett, 2011; Noppe, Yager, Webb, & Sheng, 2013; Stewart, Raskin, & Zielaski, 2012).

As a result of the comprehensive study of leadership by Waters and Marzano, this researcher chose to use that framework as the basis for this study.

The Statement of the Problem

This dissertation will examine rural school districts in Minnesota in light of those five correlates and study the work of the superintendent in those areas, as well as others and how the superintendent's efforts relate to the success of the school district.

The Professional Significance of the Study

The place of rural schools in public education in the United States is significant. Rural school districts make up almost 33% of the total number of the schools districts in the United States. Almost 50% of rural school districts have enrollments below the median enrollment size of 533 students (Johnson, Klein, Lester and Showalter, 2014, p.7). Johnson, et al., (2014, p. 64) note that in Minnesota, rural school districts make up 38% of all districts in Minnesota. Of the rural school districts, 44.3% are small (less than 625 students in K – 12).

Rural education can be frustrating to those who desire that it conforms to what policymakers and the public wish it to be. The reality is that the face of rural schools is rapidly changing. Rural school growth continues to outpace non-rural enrollment growth in the United States, and these schools are becoming more complex with increasing

numbers of students of poverty and of diversity and students with special needs (Johnson, et al., 2014).

There is no shortage of research on leadership and superintendents of school districts. However, the study of rural education and leadership in those rural schools is narrower. Rural education in Minnesota and the leadership of those schools provides an opportunity to look at rural school districts of Minnesota and their leaders in light of the research that Waters and Marzano have accomplished.

Overview of the Study

A multiple case methodology was used in this study. This researcher chose nine rural school districts from southern Minnesota, with enrollments fewer than 1000 students. The districts were selected based on purposive sampling (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2015), the enrollment of the school, and the geographical location of the district. The superintendents, along with Board members, administrators, and faculty from each of the nine districts participated in this research through an online survey.

Delimitations of the study. The districts chosen for this study were all located in southern Minnesota. Only public school districts were chosen and the study did not include private schools. A limited number of individuals from each district were asked to participate in an online survey. Those individuals included the superintendent, principal(s), activities directors, board members, and teaching staff. The surveys were sent out and submitted electronically. A representative group from each district was chosen to be interviewed and represent the district.

Limitations of the study. Ten small rural Minnesota school districts were initially chosen for the study, according to the parameters stated later in this study. Nine districts with enrollments less than 1000 students participated in this study. As a result, the outcomes found in this study are not intended to be generalizable outside of this population and should not be linked to school districts of more than 1000 students or not in rural communities as defined by the US Census Bureau and noted as such in this dissertation. The geographical area chosen for this study may not be representative of small rural school districts in Minnesota. The individuals chosen for this research may not be a true cross section of representatives of small rural school districts in Minnesota. The surveys will be completed electronically. Finally, bias could exist because this researcher has lived in rural Minnesota for more than ten years.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study is organized into five chapters. The first chapter is the introduction to the study. Chapter two is the review of literature related to the research completed by this author. The third chapter includes the method used to collect the data, as well as the analysis technique used. Chapter four shares the results and findings of this study, and chapter five provides the interpretation of the results gained from the research. At the conclusion of this dissertation, one will find the references and appendices.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature on rural school leadership revealed a number of themes. Those themes and their sub points provided the background for the research to be conducted.

Closer Examination of the Findings of Waters and Marzano

In 2005, Robert Marzano, Tim Waters and Brian McNulty published the results of a study on the effect of school leadership by principals in a book entitled "School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results". In that study, they noted that "the actions of a principal have a moderate but significant relationship with average student achievement in the school" (Waters and Marzano, 2009, p. 2). Their research continued as they proceeded to study whether leadership at the district level had a similar relationship with student achievement. Their study sought to answer two questions:

1. "What is the strength of the relationship between district-level administrative actions and average student achievement?
2. What are the specific district leadership behaviors that are associated with student achievement?" (Waters and Marzano, 2009, p. 2).

As a result of the work that Waters and Marzano conducted, they created a graphic (Figure 1) that better explains the relationship of the five correlates that this dissertation addresses. According to Figure 1, the bottom three—collaborative goal setting, board alignment and allocation of resources—are the foundation on which the other two, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, are built.

The non-negotiable goals for achievement are at the top. These goals are the ultimate end product of district reform. All other correlates point to it. Effective classroom instruction, along with non-negotiable goals for instruction, is critical to the

process of reform. The other three provide the basis for the reform. However

necessary they are, they are not able to leverage district reform in terms of academics

in and of themselves (Waters & Marzano, 2009, p. 23-24).

Figure 1. The Relationship of Findings for District Leadership. The bottom three are foundational to the nonnegotiable goals. Adapted from "District Leadership that Works"
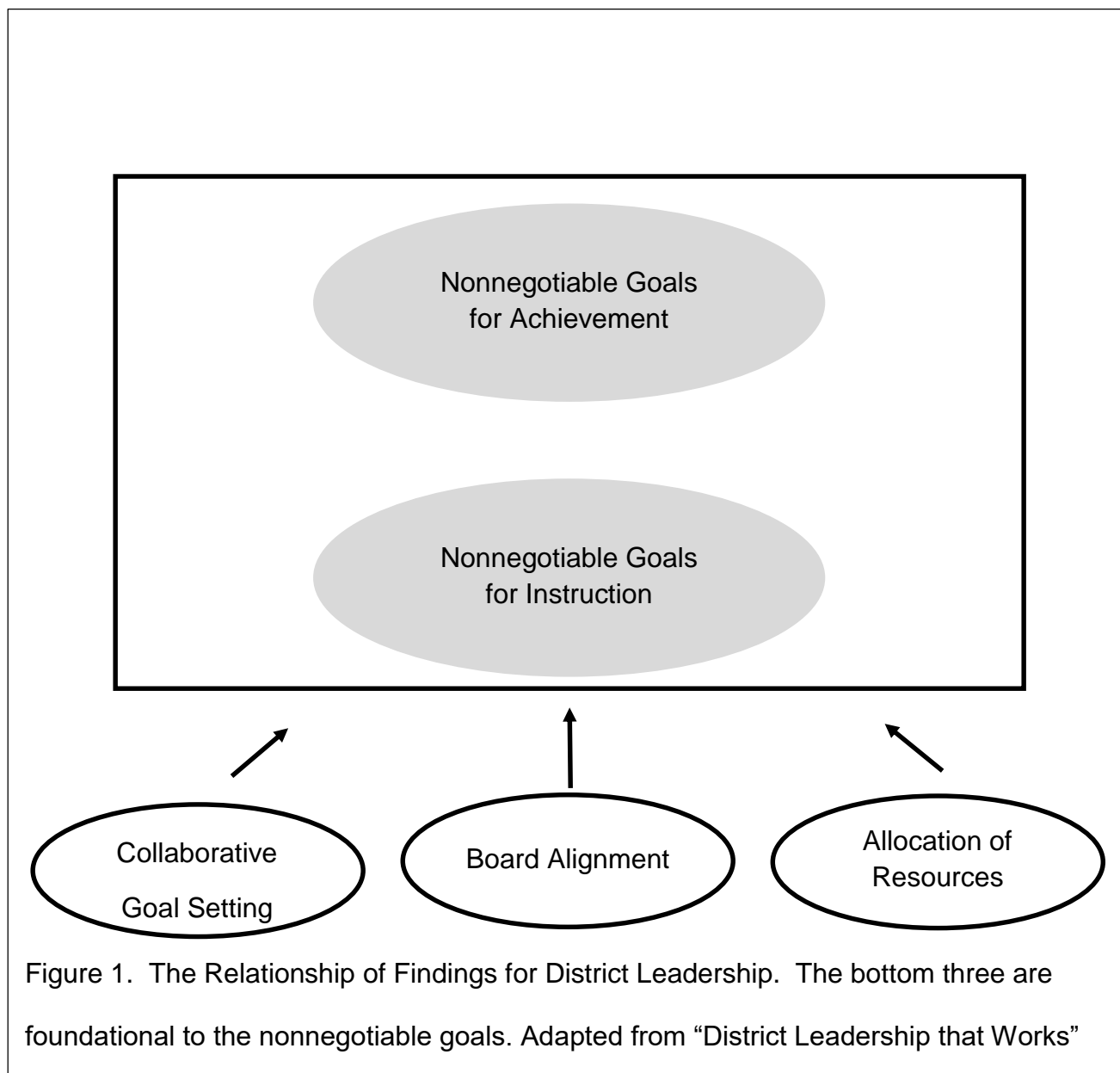
Waters and Marzano (2009) noted the correlation between effective classroom

instruction and the quality of teachers on staff and in the classrooms. They shared that

two effective characteristics of highly effective teachers were experience and certification or licensure. A third characteristic was subject matter knowledge. However, they did posit that the more a teacher knows about the subject matter does not necessarily translate to the quality of the teacher. As a result, they sought to recruit the most highly qualified teachers and retain them.

Waters and Marzano recognized the complexity of the process to develop a district in which the enhancement of pedagogical skills occurs systematically and comprehensively. This process takes time. They shared five phases in order to develop such a system:

- "Systematically explore and examine instructional strategies;
- Design a model or language of instruction;
- Have teachers systematically interact about the model or language of instruction;
- Have teachers observe master teachers (and each other) using the model of instruction;
- Monitor the effectiveness of individual teaching styles" (Waters & Marzano, 2009, p. 56 – 70).

As for the remainder of the figure, Waters and Marzano wrote that collaborative goal-setting is the vehicle used to establish non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction. Board alignment is necessary to sustain long term attention to these goals. Finally, resources must be allocated to fund activities such as professional development, scheduling changes, etc. (Waters & Marzano, 2009, p. 71).

The research of Waters and Marzano is important to ongoing study and provides the basis for this research. There are also other aspects of the superintendent's work and leadership that are worthy of examination.

Relationships

Relationships are important in the home, on the job and among friends. It is no different in schools and communities, especially small and rural school districts and their communities. This section will examine the relationships that exist in and around rural school districts.

Visibility and relationships within the community. In order for the superintendent of a small, rural school district to build relationships, it is vital for that individual to be visible in the community. As defined in Chapter one, small school districts are defined in this research with enrollments of less than 1000 students. Small towns or communities are then defined as the location of those school districts under 1000 students.

Superintendents live a very public life in rural towns (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves, 2012) and community members see them as the face of the educational system (Lane, 2002). They cannot be anonymous. They must be an integral part of the community in which they live (Copeland, 2013). Their lives truly are under a microscope and the community can scrutinize them for everything that they do and say, whether at school or at home (Copeland, 2013; Lamkin, 2006). In that respect, there is little separation between school and life for the superintendent in a small town (Copeland, 2013).

That visibility of the superintendent is often tied to the pride of the school and the community. That aspect of the small, rural school district superintendent's work is different from the urban and suburban school districts across the nation (Copeland, 2013).

Rural schools are the center of small communities and give them a sense of identity (Abshier, Harris, and Hopson, 2011; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, and Lawson, 2014). The school district is the center of the community; its residents may expect the superintendent to be visible throughout the school day. As a result, the visible superintendents are out of their offices in the morning when staff and students arrive (Copeland, 2013). It is also important that the superintendent attends school and community activities (Copeland, 2013). This visibility is just one way that an effective superintendent will have strong ties to the community (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005).

It is not only important for the superintendent to be visible in the community, but also to be a part of the community and to treat the community members with respect (Copeland, 2013). To do that effectively, the superintendent should live in the district and be a neighbor to the other residents of the community (Copeland, 2013). Close relationships among the community and school members is a characteristic of small schools. Those schools are social and event centers and a source of pride for the community (Barley and Beesley, 2007, Lamkin, 2006).

The superintendent of a small, rural school district needs to initiate and develop relationships with the members of the community through continued conversations that are clear and understood (Jenkins, 2007). The focus of those conversations centers on academic achievement by the students. The superintendents of small districts can effectively do that one personal conversation at a time at the gas station, coffee shop, or grocery store (Forner, et al., 2012). The superintendent also creates and maintains regular forums for the community members to share information and receive input from

them (Abshier, et al., 2011). The community can then be involved in the district's strategic planning process, providing positive working relationships with the administration and staff of the district. The members of the community appreciate the opportunity to be involved in the process (Winand and Edlefson, 2008).

When the school leader needs to make tough decisions, the effective superintendent listens to all input so that every voice is heard (Copeland, 2013; Hyle, Ivory, and McClellan, 2010) and considers the values of the community in the process (Jenkins, 2007). While they listened to many perspectives, ultimately the decision belonged to the superintendent (Hyle, et al., 2010).

It is important for the district leader to be transparent. Regular communications with the local media outlets, such as the local newspaper can build relationships with the newspaper staff and, as a result, have a positive impact on the district (Jenkins, 2007).

The small rural school district is an integral part of the community. As families relocate to a new locale, one of the considerations for a home is schooling for their children. These small communities can be desirable places to live (Barley & Beesley, 2007). The parents appreciate the proximity of the school to their homes and do not have to drive long distances (Abshier, et al., 2011). These small school districts have the greatest likelihood of providing a high-quality education that meets the needs of their children (Jimerson, 2006). The small rural school districts also tend to have high retention rates of teachers because they are desirable places to live (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

The attitudes of the community and the practices of the school community are interwoven. Those districts are considered families and the inclusive attitude only serves to build positive working relationships with administration, staff, and members of the community (Wilcox, et al., 2014).

Relationships with the school board. While the relationship of the superintendent with their community and parents is very important, the relationship that a superintendent has with a board is even more important. A positive working relationship between the board and the superintendent can lead to stability within the rural school district (Tekniepe, 2015). It is important for both superintendent and school board to share the vision for the district (Leon, 2008). The superintendents desired academic achievement for all students as their primary goal of the district and used that platform to continually stress that belief with board and community members alike (Forner, et al., 2012; Hilliard and Newsome, 2013). In those studies, teachers, principals and board members noted how academic achievement of all students within those districts was the main goal of the superintendent.

Other vital areas of concern and communication included finances, as well as strategic planning and giving due authority to principals (Abshier, et al., 2011; Forner, et al., 2012; Hilliard and Newsome, 2013).

There are times when relationships between board members and the superintendent can become strained. If the board tends to micromanage the work of the district and of the superintendent, this can lead to tension (Tekniepe, 2015). Board members who come onto the board with their own agenda can have a negative political impact on the work of the superintendent (Tekniepe, 2015). Alternatively, if board

members really do not understand education and the challenges it brings, that can create challenges for the relationship of the board and superintendent (Moody, 2011). The board members often serve the school district on a part-time basis, are not usually professional educators and are not generally knowledgeable in pedagogy and school administration. The knowledge base from which they operated can either be provided by the superintendent, the staff or district employees, or by the district constituency or mass media. If the board members chose only to listen to one of those entities and only one side of the story, it was possible for conflict to develop (Moody, 2011).

Superintendents must be accessible to board members, find ways to communicate with them, and empower the board members to fulfill their responsibilities more effectively. This process takes time and energy on the part of the superintendent (Green, 2012; Zlotkin, 1993).

Both the board of education and the superintendent must recognize that team building and collaboration are necessary for the district to succeed and is an ongoing effort (Moody, 2011). The superintendent must provide the board with the information that they need to make informed decisions and have realistic expectations for the school district. The more frequently the board members and the superintendent interact, the more likely it is that they will develop positive relationships (Bredeson, Lar, and Johannson, 2011).

Relationships between the rural school district's superintendent and the staff, board and members of the community is a vital part of the superintendent's job description. They have a responsibility to effectively communicate with all involved on

all aspects of education, from academic achievement to strategic planning and finances (Abshier, et al., 2011; Bredeson, et al., 2011; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013).

Characteristics of Rural Schools

The picture of a small rural schoolhouse and the accompanying nostalgia appeals to some Americans. They long for the country and the rural, one-roomed schoolhouse. Perhaps the sight of such a building brings back memories for some. That rural American schoolhouse provides that wistful step back in time (Clark, 2014). However, few of those schoolhouses remain. The rural schools of today face new and changing challenges (Sullivan, 2000).

Geography. Across the United States, rural communities make up approximately 97% of the land mass and are home to 60 million people (Abshier, et al., 2011, p. 1). Of Minnesota public school students, one-quarter of them attend rural schools and 38% of the public school districts in Minnesota are classified as rural (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, and Christine, 2014, p. 64). Even though the number of rural school districts in Minnesota would not place in the top ten of the nation, there remains a desire to maintain the commitment to rural students and the schools they attend. As stated earlier, the rural school district is often seen as the center of the community and the hub of the social traditions and events found there (Rey, 2014; Williams and Nierengarten, 2011).

Rural school districts across the nation face a variety of challenges unlike suburban or urban districts. The boundaries of the districts may cover many square miles and the communities themselves may be dependent upon agriculture or the extraction of natural resources from the earth (Abshier, et al., 2011; Budge, 2006).

These districts and communities can often be isolated and have little infrastructure that is essential for encouraging business development. As a result, property values decline and create economic distress in these areas. The living wage jobs of the past are being replaced by lower paying jobs in the service and trade industries. In some communities, the school district is the largest employer in town (Abshier, et al., 2011; Budge, 2006; Wilcox, et al., 2014). Because of these economic challenges, the poverty in these communities can be a significant challenge to the education excellence that schools seek from their students. Superintendents of these school districts must be especially aware of the needs of the community and its students (Rey, 2014; Williams & Nierengarten, 2011).

Enrollment. Declining enrollments in public school districts all across the nation have been a harsh reality. That decline is especially true in rural America due to a depressed farm economy and declining birth rates. As a result, those rural schools seldom resemble the schools of the past (Cook, 2008; Sullivan, 2000; Surface, 2006).

In Minnesota, declining enrollment has disproportionately affected rural school districts. Like their counterparts in the suburban and urban areas of the state, rural school districts have had to address the same expenditure cuts as other districts statewide. Yet, these schools have had to face these cuts with declining enrollments due to lack of employment in the farming and mining industries (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011).

In order to cut costs, school districts in Minnesota have tried a variety of strategies that would not only cut costs, but also potentially improve the academic achievement of the students of those districts. Those strategies include distance

education, the four-day school week, collaboration, consolidation, open enrollment, and reducing facilities' costs, to name a few (Abshier, et al., 2011; Arnold, 2004; Center for Policy and Development, 2009). Rural school districts enacted a reduction in staff as the most often utilized manner to respond to budget shortfalls (Starrett, Casey, and Dunlap, 2014). Some school districts chose to combine duties of staff members and create new positions, thereby saving district funds (Abshier, et al., 2011). Different districts used assertive marketing techniques beyond word of mouth to attract students from outside of the district (Abshier, et al., 2011). The research to date suggests that consolidation of school districts may not be a viable option since it has not resulted in significant cost savings (Center for Policy and Development, 2009).

Finances. Because of declining enrollments, it only makes sense that financial issues would plague those rural school districts. The school districts are having difficulty making budget goals because of tight budgets, declining enrollments and inadequate funding (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, and Slate, 2008; McMurry & Ronningen, 2013; Sullivan, 2000). Increased operational expenses from rising health care costs are a part of each annual budget challenge. Transportation costs due to fuel costs and districts with large geographical areas are significant, as are increased demands for special education services and the unpredictability of expenses that may arise during the course of a school year. As a result, the current funding formula has made an equitable and quality education for rural school students even more of a challenge (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011).

Financial challenges are a major concern for superintendents. Increased academic expectations, rising expenses and a lack of increased funds compound these

financial issues. As a result, students and programs of all kinds were cut (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). While there are significant challenges for small rural school districts, these schools do have their strengths. There is a sense of identity and connection with the communities they serve and they provide education and social advantages to these students (Jimerson, 2006, Sullivan, 2000).

Strategic planning of the budget is vital, as is seeking outside counsel and support to assist with financial procedures. Low reserves in the general operating fund affect fiscal policy and budgeting decisions (Abshier, et al., 2011; Arnold, 2004; Copeland, 2013; Tekniepe, 2015). These financial issues can cause significant stress for the rural school superintendent (Tekniepe, 2015).

Complexities of meeting needs with available resources. Because the rural school district is often the center of the community and its constituency takes great pride in the school, the members of the communities provide moral, volunteer, and financial support and want to be involved in strategic planning for the future. Its teachers and administration are part of the community. Students may be assigned to fulfill community-service requirements or help younger students as part of their course requirements. In exchange, community members help fund extra activities, serve as bus drivers and provide business partnerships that provide students real-world work experience. All of these individuals are invested in the success of the school district because it is the center of activity and they believe in its importance and value. This theme of mutual support of and for the district is vital to its continued health (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Winand & Edlefson, 2008).

Rural school districts continue to grow more complex. There are increasing rates of poverty and diversity and the number of students with special needs continues to grow (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, and Christine, 2014). Yet, these districts are not similar enough to stereotype and compartmentalize all rural school districts. Rural districts continually address geographic isolation in some form, poverty of varying degrees and high concentrations of students at risk with academic difficulties. Superintendents are challenged to develop policies and interventions to assist students and districts (Arnold, 2000; Farmer, Leung, Banks, Schaefer, Andrews, and Murray, 2006).

In spite of the complexity of rural school districts and their diverse needs, teachers in such districts do whatever needs to be done to meet the needs of their students. A shared responsibility to complete the necessary tasks is assumed to be part of the school's culture (Wilcox, et al., 2014). The teachers in high performing rural schools are encouraged to take risks to meet the needs of the students. They trust each other and their administration (Wilcox, et al., 2014).

Technology. Technology is advancing so rapidly that superintendents are under constant pressure and scrutiny to keep up with these rapid changes (Noppe, Yager, Webb, and Sheng, 2013). In the last several decades, technology has become an important part of the education that schools provide to children (Sullivan, 2000). That is no different in rural schools. However, the challenge for rural schools is the geographic isolation. There are areas of the country where communities do not have the high-speed delivery systems needed to allow schools to make full use of technology.

Moreover, schools may not have the budget to maintain the technology that they need or the ability to use that technology when it becomes available (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005). When technology is available, computers and other instruments of technology can be valuable assets in expanding curricular options through distance education and linking students to resources previously unavailable to them (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005; Sullivan, 2000; Wilcox, et al., 2014).

Because they are located too far from a university, technology does offer rural school district administrators opportunities for continuing education and peer support for the staff (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005). It can be challenging for neighboring school districts to form a technology consortium due to the varied internet providers for each community involved.

Telecommunications providers and telephone companies may cover certain members of the consortium, but not all school districts. It can be quite challenging for these providers and companies to work together for the benefit of the cooperating school districts (Sullivan, 2000).

State and federal initiatives. Rural school districts, like their urban and suburban counterparts, have an obligation to fulfill the initiatives set before them by the state and federal governments. Superintendents shared that one of the greatest stressors of their positions were to comply with state, federal and organizational rules and policies (Brimm, 1983; Swent, Gmelch, and Oregon School Study Council, 1977). In small rural school districts, there is no one else to fulfill this responsibility and complete all the reports. In addition, districts expect superintendents to relate local

policy to the state and federal regulations and requirements (American Association of School Administrators, n.d.; Copeland, 2013).

In Minnesota, the Department of Education found it difficult to support rural school districts in light of increased fuel costs and the need to shift spending priorities to other areas where the perceived need seemed to be greater (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). For the last two decades, Minnesota rural schools have worked through numerous mandates and initiatives, such as state testing requirements, increased reporting obligations and threats of sanction (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). It is no wonder that superintendents consider compliance to these mandates and guidelines such a stressor.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the expectations of that program had an impact on rural school districts, too. Minnesota administrators reported that their top education priority was testing and Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) (Center for Policy and Development, 2009). The majority of rural schools eligible for the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) are making adequate annual progress on the NCLB. REAP was established to provide additional funding to assist rural school districts in their unique challenges (Farmer, et al., 2006). While the majority of the school districts made satisfactory progress, there may have been a correlation between the results and the geographical differences and the populations of students those districts serve (Farmer, et al., 2006). The results of AYP and studies surrounding this program indicate that further study may be necessary to address the diverse situations that are routine components of the culture of rural school districts. Geographic isolation,

poverty, and high concentrations of at-risk students are all part of the challenges that these schools face (Farmer, et al., 2006; Williams & Nierengarten, 2011).

In December of 2015, President Obama signed into effect the *Every Child Succeeds Act* (ESSA). ESSA was the replacement for NCLB. ESSA still requires annual testing and reporting on subgroups of students, just as NCLB did. However, while NCLB established AYP and the 100% proficiency requirement, ESSA eliminated this requirement (ASCD, n.d.; Brenner 2016).

Under ESSA, rural school districts can use REAP to "hire additional teachers and aides, purchase new technology, extend course offerings for students, and focus on closing achievement gaps" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2016, p. 1). According to Brenner (2016), rural education is earning a growing focus in federal education legislation.

Special education. Special education in our nation's schools is an important part of the education provided to the families that the schools serve. In rural schools, the number of special education students is growing (Johnson, et al., 2014). Superintendents play a significant role in the support of special education programs. The superintendent's attitude is key to the success of inclusion in district classrooms. If the superintendent shows compassion to the students involved, the staff is likely to follow suit. Then, the superintendent can support the work of the principal, special education directors and teachers in their important efforts of providing a quality education to each child (Hooper, Pankake, and Schroth, 1999).

Student achievement. Standardized test scores indicate that rural schools are successful in teaching the basics (Arnold, 2004). Jimerson (p. 7, 2006) shared the top ten research-based reasons why small schools work:

1. "There is greater participation in extra-curricular activities, and that is linked to academic success.
2. Small schools are safer.
3. Kids feel they belong.
4. Small class size allows more individualized instruction.
5. Good teaching methods are easier to implement.
6. Teachers feel better about their work.
7. Mixed ability classes avoid condemning some students to low expectations.
8. Multiage classes promote personalized learning and encourage positive social interactions.
9. Smaller districts mean less bureaucracy.
10. More grades in one school alleviate many problems of transitions to new schools."

Due to the size of the school district, it is much easier for staff and administration to locate and monitor students who are in danger of not graduating (Wilcox, et al., 2014). Larger schools could actually adapt some of the elements of small school districts in order to be more effective. Such a shift may help policy makers retain and support small rural school districts (Jimerson, 2006).

Schools and school districts are under more pressure now than ever to perform. The media and rural business organizations regularly publish district and school performance reports and compare test scores, graduation rates and cost per pupil with other school districts (Lamkin, 2006; Noppe, et al., 2013; O'Rourke and Ylimaki, 2014). As a result, continuing improvement of academic achievement is the chief goal of a school superintendent (Moffett, 2011). Being an instructional leader, the superintendent must own and be able to share an educational vision for the entire school district that includes meeting students' learning needs and improvement of instruction and regularly

share that vision with faculty, students, board, and community (Moffett, 2011; Petersen, 2002).

The vision must include goals that are lofty and clear, include the diverse set of learners found within the district, include board support and with that support, be non-negotiable (Garrison, 2013; Petersen, 2002; Springboard Schools, 2006; Trevino, et al., 2008). Once those goals are set, then the superintendent must monitor those goals closely and allocate resources to insure that those goals are met (ECRA Group, 2010; Garrison, 2013; Jones, 2012).

Research shows a correlation between district leadership and student achievement, as well as the length of time that a superintendent remains at that district. Effective schools have strong instructional leadership and high expectations for student achievement that leads to a quality education (Leon, 2008; Rey, 2014; Waters and Marzano, 2006; Waters, Marzano, McNulty, 2004). These high performing schools of all locales and sizes focus on meeting the needs of all students and increasing the academic success of every student (Springboard Schools, 2006).

For the small, rural school district superintendent, the pressure to excel is magnified because they are asked to do more with less assistance (Abshier, et al., 2011; Lamkin, 2006). The superintendent must also work with the constituency of the community to remind them of the importance of the district's academic performance, rather than just the fact that the school district is the community's social hub (Rey, 2014).

Student achievement is more than just test results from a singular standardized test. If the school and its community want to increase test scores, they all must work

together to increase academic achievement (Moffett, 2011). The public must understand the unique challenges that a school district superintendent faces each day (Trevino, et al., 2008). Our world's future is closely linked to the success of its schools, educators, and superintendents. It is vital that all work together to that end (Petersen, 2002).

Leadership Attributes

Knowledge to make decisions. It matters little where the superintendent leads a school district, whether it is in an urban setting, a district in the suburbs or a much more remote school district found in a geographical location in our nation. The reality is that a superintendent of a public school district is a leader. This section will address attributes found in educational leaders who serve as superintendents of school districts.

The school superintendent needs to have command of several types of knowledge. The leader first needs declarative knowledge. One gains declarative knowledge by the study of textbooks and other items in writing. Procedural knowledge focuses on skills and performance and informal knowledge is common sense. All three types of knowledge are necessary and utilized by today's superintendent and school leader (Hyle, et al., 2010). Tacit knowledge can also fit into this skill category and is based on experience that the individual gains and from which the individual learns (Lane, 2007)

The skill set does not stop after basic knowledge. The effective superintendent brings an array of skills to the table. They include instructional leader, fiscal guru, and diplomatic human resources officer (Moffett, 2011), but the true scope of the superintendent's job description will be related to the size of the school district. In a

small rural district, the superintendent may be the sole administrator, at not only the school, but also the only chief executive in town. The areas of challenge that a district superintendent faces includes school law, finance, personnel, government mandates, instructional leadership, district or board policies, and technology (Lamkin, 2006, Petersen, 2002). The superintendent's job description is far-ranging and extensive. Knowledge in all of these areas is important for success as a leader.

At first glance, one might consider the duties already shared as more than enough responsibility. Yet, it does not stop there. The superintendent is asked to be a manager, planner, listener, and communicator whose days are filled with unscheduled meetings, petty annoyances, interpersonal relationship issues, intrapersonal personnel conflicts, and frequent interruptions (Brimm, 1983; Budge, 2006; Swent, et al., 1977).

District leadership has a relationship to student performance. They consistently monitor district goals and are held accountable by state and federal mandates (Leon, 2008; Mansfield, 2005; Petersen, 2002; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Given all the managerial aspects already shared, little time was left in the superintendent's schedule to actually lead, much less live a life that is separate from the job (Copeland, 2013; Lamkin, 2006).

Decision making. Superintendents are expected to make decisions that are for the good of the district. They reported that they often had to go against popular decision when making their decisions. However, they also reported the necessity to secure as much input as possible from the community, teachers, parents, students, board, and other administrators (Hyle, et al., 2010; Jenkins, 2007; Swent, et al., 1977). Superintendents also need to consider the ethics of the situation, the ethical position of

the community and their own ethical position. They had to balance what is available and right for achieving the school's vision and mission, while knowing that the decisions will affect others. They reported they made decisions that chose the academic well-being of the students over adult driven financial interests (Forner, et al., 2012; Hyle, et al., 2010; Jenkins, 2007; Surface, 2006).

The superintendents of small rural schools have to be more transparent in leadership than a superintendent of a larger suburban or urban district. The difference was the proximity of the constituency and the relationships with the people of the community (Bird and Wang, 2011; Jenkins, 2007). Those superintendents who were successful leaders took the time to work with and trust others in the school district. They interacted frequently with the staff, as well as the people of the community and were sensitive to the local context and culture (Bredeson, et al., 2011).

High expectations for superintendents. There may be little separation between job and life for a small rural school superintendent. The social and professional life of a superintendent is very visible and they can be the target of much criticism. The job-related stress has had a significant impact on the health of superintendents (Brimm, 1983; Copeland, 2013; Lamkin, 2006; Mansfield, 2005).

This individual needs to be a "jack of all trades." Rural schools typically don't have assistant superintendents or many other administrative support staff. The superintendent may be the business manager and know how to perform and respond in many different situations (Hyle, et al., 2010; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005; Lamkin, 2006; Moffett, 2011). As a leader, the small school superintendent must be

responsible, visionary, flexible, and visible (Copeland, 2013; Hyle, et al., 2010; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005; Lamkin, 2006).

Interpersonal and collaborative. The public school district is a complex organization. The successful superintendent works and lives in the community (Copeland, 2013). Numerous studies contended that it was important for the superintendent to develop relationships with board members, faculty and staff, parents and stakeholders (Abshier, et al., 2011; Bredeson, et al., 2011; Copeland, 2013; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005; Winand & Edlefson, 2008). In a small school district, those relationships were especially important as superintendents worked to earn trust and build relationships within these communities. The studies also noted how important it was for the superintendents to be sensitive to local culture (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Bredeson, et al., 2011).

The technical, conceptual, and relational skills of superintendents have increased remarkably in the last ten years (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005). Hence, there is an increased focus on collaboration and relationship building on the part of superintendents. It is important for the superintendent to include the faculty, board, parents, and community members in financial decisions, the budgeting process, special education and goal setting (Abshier, et al., 2011; Hooper, et al., 1999; Waters and Marzano, 2006; Waters and Marzano, 2007).

As they worked together on these tasks, it was important that the school board and superintendent realize that this collaboration is an ongoing process (Moody, 2011). The effective superintendent developed relationships with families in order to improve academic achievement (Wilcox, et al., 2014) and enacted an open-door policy to

encourage shared leadership (Wilcox, et al., 2014; Zlotkin, 1993). How the superintendent involved the constituency in developing and implementing the vision and mission of the district was an indication of how effective the individual was at leading the district (Zlotkin, 1993).

Vision. A key trait that effective superintendents possessed and modeled was leadership with a vision for their school districts (Leon, 2008; Petersen, 2002). They understood the significant correlation between their vision for the district and the academic achievement of the students. They developed this vision collaboratively with the input of all of the stakeholders of the district (Petersen, 2002; Waters & Marzano, 2006). The vision itself was centered on meeting the needs of the students of the district and it provided the job description for each superintendent (Bredeson, et al., 2011; Moffett, 2011).

Leadership of place. This aspect of leadership was tied into a variety of the aspects of small rural school district administration. In some communities, the school district was the largest employer in town and was the center of the community, so it was not unusual for the town to consider the superintendent their leader (Abshier, et al., 2011; Copeland, 2013; Hooper, et al., 1999; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005). It was important for the superintendent to have strong ties to the community, be visible, and respect and abide by the informal and formal power structures that existed (Copeland, 2013; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005). They also had to be sensitive to and willing to adjust their expectations, goals and leadership roles based on the context of the setting in which they lived and worked. That context included the

district size, the demographics of the community, its culture, history, politics, and geography (Bredeson, et al., 2011; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005).

The education provided to the students of the district was often woven into the community attitudes. In some cases, communities felt that the education should be practical so students can be productive within the community (Wilcox, et al., 2014). Certain districts suffered from apathy because their constituency questioned the value of the education that was provided to their children and saw no way to improve their lot (Budge, 2006). It was the responsibility of the superintendent to help the parents understand the social and economic issues of the community and that the education of the children was a means to change and improve those issues (Rey, 2014). In these tightly knit communities, parents, teachers and administration often worked together to help improve the work ethic of the students and provide them with a quality education, rather than just considering the school as the community center (Rey, 2014; Wilcox, et al., 2014). The effective superintendents understood how the health and well-being of rural school districts and their constituencies were closely tied together and continually worked with their constituencies to promote and deliver academic achievement (Budge, 2006; Rey, 2014).

Leadership Training and Professional Development

It matters little where the superintendent leads a school district, whether it is in an urban setting, a district in the suburbs or a much more remote school district found in a geographical location in our nation. The reality is that a superintendent of a public school district is a leader. Superintendents shared different experiences and attitudes towards the training that they received. They noted that their most effective training

came from a formal source, such as schooling or training programs, or from an informal

source such as an on-the-job experience (Green, 2012). They also noted that the

deficiencies in their training included school law, finance, government mandates, and

board policies (Lamkin, 2006).

Once on the job, superintendents noted the importance of continuing

professional development so that they could continually update their knowledge base,

respond to reform efforts, and have the tools to continue to raise student achievement

and meet district goals (Green, 2012; Lamkin, 2006; Springboard Schools, 2006;

Stewart, et al., 2012). Because of the rural locales of these districts, technology often

offered school leaders the opportunities for expanded learning and peer support

(Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005).

Importance of Leadership

Bredeson, et al. (2011) noted three characteristics of superintendent leadership.

The superintendent's prime focus was on the children of the school district and their

academic achievement. The superintendent also had a clear focus on the vision of the

district as well as upholding the mission of the district that was dedicated to the children.

Finally, establishing a culture of trust and meaningful relationships across the district

was the third dominant characteristic.

The role of the rural school superintendent required one to be well-equipped with

a wide variety of leadership skills and behaviors (Canales, et al., 2008). The

superintendent had to be a good financial manager and a visionary who could

effectively communicate with stakeholders (Abshier, et al., 2011; Center for Policy and

Development, 2009). School boards expected the superintendent to be the expert in

education and do the work required of the position (Zlotkin, 1993). The superintendents

had to transform their roles in the context of the district, participate in shared decision-

making, and have the leadership skills necessary for reform within the district

(Spanneut, Tobin, & Ayers, 2011; Zlotkin, 1993).

      Quality education in a school district equated with strong academic achievement

and aspirations of high education. Superintendents had a positive impact in supporting,

empowering and developing measurable academic excellence within their school

districts (Leon, 2008; Rey 2014).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine how rural Minnesota school superintendents apply the key findings of Waters and Marzano's study on superintendent leadership in their own districts as they relate to these key correlates: collaborative goal setting; non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction; board alignment with and support of district goals; monitoring goals for achievement and instruction; and use of resources to support the goals for instruction and achievement. An additional finding of Waters and Marzano concluded that there is a relationship between the length of time the superintendent remained with the district and the academic achievement of the students of that district (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

This chapter includes descriptions and explanations of the methods used in the research: research design, participants, procedures, instrumentation, assumptions, limitations and delimitations.

Research Design

The method of research chosen for this study was a multiple case study qualitative approach. Qualitative research is used when researchers prefer words rather than numbers to provide a detailed description of a particular issue (Patten, 2014). This researcher chose qualitative research rather than quantitative because he desired a more complete answer to the research question than just numbers.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) noted some comparisons between qualitative and quantitative that this writer found to be applicable to this study. In quantitative research, data is reduced to numerical scores, whereas qualitative research has a preference for narrative descriptions. Quantitative research prefers random samples,

while qualitative research favors more purposive sampling. Quantitative research also has a preference for reporting a statistical summary of results, while this researcher was looking for a narrative summary of the results of the research. Qualitative research can provide detailed descriptions and analyses of various practices, processes or events that will help to contribute to the body of knowledge on a particular topic.

In order for a researcher to conduct qualitative research design, one must construct and reconstruct the design during the course of the study. In effect, qualitative research then is a "do-it-yourself" model of research than the "off-the- shelf" process of quantitative research (Maxwell, 2013).

In qualitative research, the researcher first identifies the phenomenon to be studied and identifies the participant. Then, the hypotheses are generated. Data is collected and analyzed and the researcher concludes the study with the interpretations and conclusions to summarize the research conducted (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2015).

Case study research design is an in-depth analysis of a single entity, is appropriate for "how" and "why" questions and is concerned with exploring, describing and explaining a phenomenon. In a case study, the subjects of the research are considered the case. Research is done on an individual, classroom, school or program. A case study is used to answer "how" questions in research (Fraenkel et al., 2015; Joyner, Rouse & Glatthorn, 2013; Patten, 2014; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Yin, 1994).

The procedures for conducting a case study included determining if the case study approach was viable; identifying the case or cases; extensive data collection; and

reporting on the meaning of the case (Creswell, 2013). The mark of a good case study is that it presents an in-depth understanding of the case and gives quality insight into that specific issue or theme (Creswell, 2013; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

The multiple case study method was chosen for this research to allow multiple school districts to share their information on the topic. Compared to a case study, the multiple case study design is studying more than one case, theme or issue. While multiple case study design research requires more extensive resources and time, the results of such research are considered more compelling (Fraenkel et al., 2015).

The descriptive explanatory approach was used to state, clarify and expound on the relationships between district leadership and the correlates that Waters and Marzano shared. The descriptive explanatory approach allowed the researcher to show the relationships between events and meanings as perceived by the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). It was the goal of this researcher to show the relationships between the leadership strategies of the school district superintendents and the academic achievement of the students within those districts studied.

A multiple case study, as this study was, addressed the relationships within the participating school districts, teacher instruction and academic achievement. In this multiple case study, the focus was on nine rural school districts in Minnesota. The goal was that from this research, valid generalizations would able to be made regarding district leadership and academic achievement in rural school districts of Minnesota under 1000 students.

Yin (1994) stressed the importance of a protocol for every case study project. That included an overview of the project, the field procedures used, the case study

questions used and the guide for the report. As the research was conducted for this project, those guidelines were incorporated into the writing.

Participants/Sample

In order to secure the participants for this study, this researcher used purposive sampling. In purposive sampling, researchers select candidates whom they think will best represent the knowledge needed and be good sources of information (Fraenkel et al., 2015; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten, 2014).   These participants are typically key informants in terms of social dynamics, leadership positions and job responsibilities. Researchers select these individuals because these people will be the most likely to provide the needed information that is relevant to the study, as well as representatives of the cross section of the population needed for the research (Maxwell, 2013; Patten, 2014).

The population for this study included all Minnesota public school districts. The purposive sample used for the study only included those respondents from rural school districts under 1000 students whose district boundaries were located south of US Highway 212 that runs from Granite Falls in west-central Minnesota east to the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. There are approximately 56 school districts that are located in that geographical area according to a 2012-13 survey (Children's Demographics & K-12 Education Infrastructure, n.d.).

The United States Census Bureau determines and identifies the categories into two types of urban areas: a) urbanized areas of 50,000 or more people and urban clusters of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people; and b) "rural" encompasses all

population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000.)

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines rural school districts in the same manner as the Census Bureau. NCES defines a small district as a district that has fewer than 25 students per grade in kindergarten through eighth grade and fewer than 100 students per grade for grades 9 and above (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

Procedures

A list of the school districts in Minnesota was secured from the Minnesota Department of Education. That list was then pared down to those districts with enrollment at or under 1000 students. That list was vetted based on the guidelines of the US Census Bureau for rural towns and further reduced to those districts south of a line from Granite Falls to the Twin Cities along US Highway 212. Each district was provided a copy of this study in exchange for their participation.

Ten school districts were asked to participate. This researcher chose to study ten districts as the result of review of completed dissertations and conversations with former Minnesota superintendents. Based on his findings, this researcher posited that the study of ten districts would provide a quality representation of small rural Minnesota school districts for a qualitative study. Those districts were chosen from the group that fits the criteria listed above. Initially, superintendents were contacted by phone and email to ascertain their initial and informal commitment to the study. A letter of introduction, along with an overview of the proposed study, was sent to each superintendent requesting the district's participation. Each superintendent was asked to

provide written permission from the district for the research that took place. In addition, each participant was asked to fill out and return a participant consent form.

The specific individuals from each school district chosen for the study included the superintendent, principal(s), activities director, two school board members, and two teachers chosen by the superintendent as willing participants. There were personnel who represented the school districts in more than one of these positions. For instance, in two of the districts, the superintendent was also the elementary school principal. This researcher felt that this cross section of district personnel provided the necessary information relevant to this research.

This qualitative research incorporated an online survey (Appendix B). Advantages of online surveys include reduced cost and time, quick response and the ability to survey a large number of people (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Response rates of online surveys can be a challenge, as this researcher learned. The follow up with the superintendent and the participants included phone calls and emails in order to provide greater rates of return. The survey included open ended questions that allowed and encouraged participants to express their own experiences and judgments as they provided individualized and personalized responses (Fraenkel et al., 2015, Patton, 2014).

Once all the data was collected through the surveys, it was analyzed. Qualitative data analysis is a process that analyzes, synthesizes and reduces the information obtained into a coherent description of what has been discovered (Fraenkel et al., 2015; Open University, n.d.). This process of data analysis continuously compares the data gathered. One approach to analyze data is to examine the findings within a pre-

determined framework. Such an approach allows the researcher to focus on the responses and abandon the rest. The second approach is to adopt a perspective that allows the researcher to proceed from an exploratory perspective by considering and coding all data. The majority of research is conducted with some aspects of both approaches (Open University, n.d.). This researcher utilized aspects of both approaches in his data analysis.

The steps of qualitative data analysis include the transcription of interviews (surveys); reading the transcripts to identify categories, clarifying the responses and testing the categories; using the final categories to code responses; and tallying the coded responses (Joyner et al., 2013).

The qualitative data analysis was done with an inductive approach. Inductive analysis allows the research findings to emerge from the themes found in the raw data that was collected (Thomas, 2006). The researcher had several options for the actual analysis. One option was to use a program to analyze the data. The other option was to categorize and analyze all the data manually. Since the amount of data collected was not overwhelming, this researcher chose to invest in the manual approach.

Instrumentation

The author of this study chose to write the questions for the survey. Those questions and the subsequent revisions were based on the research that Marzano and Waters conducted on superintendent leadership. These questions were revised as a result of being field tested by a trio of individuals known to the author and who all held terminal degrees in education or educational leadership. The questions were:

1. How does the superintendent collaborate with each of the following to set goals for the district?

      a. Faculty (including administration)
      b. Board
      c. Public
2. List two or three district goals for student achievement.
3. List two or three distinct district goals which guide teachers' classroom instruction.
4. What evidence shows the School Board supports the district goals?
5. Give an example of how the superintendent monitors district progress in meeting student achievement goals.
6. Give an example of how the superintendent monitors district progress in meeting classroom instruction goals.
7. List examples of how the district uses its resources to support student achievement goals.
8. List examples of how the district uses its resources to support its classroom instruction goals.

The surveys were produced using Survey Monkey. Email addresses of all participants were secured through the superintendent of each district. The subjects were asked to complete the surveys within ten days. When the deadline had passed, reminders were emailed to the participants, as well as the superintendent. This researcher also called the superintendents and personally encouraged participation. The responses were recorded and preserved for reference at a later date.

The responses from Survey Monkey were organized by question and then by categories of respondents (Faculty Member, Superintendent, Activity Director, School Board Member, and Principal). The researcher looked for common responses, themes and key words for each response. He also cross-checked comments made with the answers of other respondents, as well as data on MCA testing from the Minnesota Department of Education website, as well as the World's Best Workforce reports found on each district's website. The responses were then organized based on their similarities and the text was written. Summary tables were also included to help provide a concise and succinct means of reviewing the data.

In order to improve validity, the author used triangulation to search for converging findings from different sources (Yin, 1994).   As the information in qualitative research is gathered and analyzed, the results show that the most significant issue was addressed and all other relevant evidence was included (Yin, 1994). Data triangulation involves the use of multiple sources for obtaining corroborating data on the topic. Researchers provide validity to their research when they find evidence to support a particular theme or code (Joyner et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2013; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The benefits of triangulating data include increasing confidence in data collected, revealing unique findings, and providing a cleaner understanding of the issue (Fraenkel et al., 2015; Thurmund, 2006). During the process of triangulation, the researcher checked on multiple sources and time periods to look for similar patterns in the research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

In this study, this researcher used standardized testing results, cross checking of responses from participants and the World's Best Workforce from each participating district to triangulate the data received in the surveys. The testing results were found on the Minnesota Department of Education website. The access to the data was through the School Report Card found at http://rc.education.state.mn.us/. The last five years of data will be analyzed as part of the triangulation process. In addition, the researcher secured the data from each district's website on the World's Best Workforce plan. The World's Best Workforce was launched in 2013 and includes these components: All children are ready for school; all third-graders can read at grade level; all racial and economic achievement gaps between students are closed; all students are ready for career and college; and all students graduate from high school (Minnesota Department

of Education, 2013). These two sets of results, along with the perspectives of the range of individuals surveyed for this research, provided the necessary triangulation of data for this study.

Assumptions

The confidentiality of the participants in this study will remain anonymous. It was a reasonable expectation to expect that the respondents were honest in their answers given. Any electronic information gathered was stored in a password secured location. Hard copies of any data were stored in a locked file in the office of the researcher.

Limitations

Only nine of the rural Minnesota school districts with enrollments less than 1000 students participated in this study. As a result, the results that were found in this study should not be linked to school districts of more than 1000 students or not in rural communities as defined by the US Census Bureau and noted as such in this dissertation. The geographical area chosen for this study may not be representative of small rural school districts in Minnesota. The individuals chosen for this research may not be a true cross section of representatives of small rural school districts in Minnesota. In addition, the individuals chosen for this study may not have provided accurate answers for fear of reprisal. The surveys were completed electronically. Finally, bias could exist because this researcher has lived in rural Minnesota for more than ten years.

Delimitations

The districts chosen for this study were all located in southern Minnesota. Only public school districts were chosen and the study does not include private schools. A

limited number of individuals from each district were asked to participate in an online survey. Those individuals included the superintendent, principal(s), activities directors, board members, and teaching staff. The surveys were sent out and submitted electronically. A representative group from each district was chosen to be interviewed.

CHAPTER FOUR: REPORTING THE FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how rural Minnesota school superintendents apply the key findings of Waters and Marzano's study on superintendent leadership in their own districts as they relate to these key correlates: collaborative goal setting; non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction; board alignment with and support of district goals; monitoring goals for achievement and instruction; and use of resources to support the goals for instruction and achievement. An additional finding of Marzano and Waters was also included – that there was a relationship between the length of time the superintendent remained with the district and the academic achievement of the students of that district (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

This chapter includes the study population chosen for this dissertation, as well as the data results that have been discovered. Those data results included the responses to the survey questions. Each question is listed in the order in which it was included in the survey. The responses are organized based on their similarities and shared in paragraph form. Included in each section is a table which summarizes the responses into a concise and succinct presentation.

Instrumentation and Implementation

The author of this study chose to write the questions for the survey. Those questions and the subsequent revisions were based on the research that Waters and Marzano conducted on superintendent leadership (2006). A trio of individuals known to the author and who all held terminal degrees in education or educational leadership

assisted this researcher in the revision process of the questions. The questions used in

the survey were:

1. How does the superintendent collaborate with each of the following to set goals for
   the district?
       a. Faculty (including administration)
       b. Board
       c. Public
2. List two or three district goals for student achievement.
3. List two or three distinct district goals which guide teachers' classroom instruction.
4. What evidence shows the School Board supports the district goals?
5. Give an example of how the superintendent monitors district progress in meeting
   student achievement goals.
6. Give an example of how the superintendent monitors district progress in meeting
   classroom instruction goals.
7. List examples of how the district uses its resources to support student achievement
   goals.
8. List examples of how the district uses its resources to support its classroom
   instruction goals.

The surveys were produced using Survey Monkey. Email addresses of all

participants were secured through the superintendent of each district. The subjects

were asked to complete the surveys within ten days. When the deadline had passed,

reminders were emailed to the participants, as well as the superintendent. This

researcher also called the superintendents and personally encouraged participation.

Once the surveys were completed, the responses were recorded and preserved for

reference at a later date.

The responses from Survey Monkey were organized by question and then by

categories of respondents (Faculty Member, Superintendent, Activity Director, School

Board Member, and Principal). The researcher looked for common responses, themes

and key words for each response. He also cross-checked comments made with the

answers of other respondents, as well as data on Minnesota Comprehensive

Assessment (MCA) testing from the Minnesota Department of Education website, and

the World's Best Workforce reports found on each district's website. The responses were then organized based on their similarities and the text was written. Summary tables are also included herein to help provide a concise and succinct means of reviewing the data.

Study Population

The population for this study included a sample of rural Minnesota public school districts. This purposive sample was comprised of those respondents from rural school districts with student-populations under 1000 and whose district boundaries were located south of US Highway 212 running from Granite Falls in west-central Minnesota east to the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. There are approximately 56 school districts that are located in that geographical area according to a 2012-13 survey (Children's Demographics & K-12 Education Infrastructure, n.d.).

In purposive sampling, researchers select candidates whom they think will represent the knowledge needed and be good sources of information (Fraenkel et al., 2015; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten, 2014).   These participants are typically key informants in terms of social dynamics, leadership positions and job responsibilities. Researchers select these individuals because these people will be the most likely to provide the needed information that is relevant to the study, as well as representatives of the cross- section of the population needed for the research (Maxwell, 2013; Patten, 2014). The districts and individuals chosen for this research fit these characteristics.

The United States Census Bureau determines and identifies the categories into two types of urban areas: a) urbanized areas of 50,000 or more people and urban clusters of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people; and b) "rural" areas

encompassing all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

The population of the towns in which each participating school district was found was researched. The populations ranged from just under 400 residents to just over 3000 residents. Four of the districts in the study had more than 1,000 residents, while the remaining five all had less than 1,000 residents. The average population for the towns of the school districts studied was 1,475 (Minnesota Cities by Population, n.d.).

The author looked for a similar way to categorize the size of public school districts. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines rural school districts in the same manner as the Census Bureau. NCES defines a small district as one that has fewer than 25 students per grade in kindergarten through eighth grade and fewer than 100 students per grade for grades 9 and above (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). It was this measure that the author used to determine the size of a small school district as one that is 1000 students or less and then to use that information in this study.

Ten small, rural school districts were selected based on purposive sampling and asked to participate. Those superintendents initially provided consent to their district's involvement in this study. Once the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted and the proposal was approved by the dissertation committee, the superintendents were contacted with the formal consent approval and all ten provided their written approvals, as requested. Once consent was received from the superintendents, individual participation consent forms were emailed to the superintendents to provide to their district participants. Superintendents were asked to

fill out their own forms. Then, they were requested to ask their own principals, activities directors, two faculty members and two School Board members to participate.

One superintendent sent in an email and declined participation for that superintendent's district because the timing wasn't right for that district. Three other school districts were contacted as possible replacements, but never responded. As a result, this researcher continued the study with nine school districts. For the purpose of this study, the nine districts represent the purposive sample of small, rural public-school Minnesota school districts for the research conducted.

This study did not secure demographical information on the respondents due to protecting the confidentiality of the participants. The nine superintendents who lead the school districts in the study have all been leaders of their respective districts for more than three years. Table 1 shows the length of time the superintendents have served in their current districts.

Table 1

Length of service by the superintendents at the school districts that are part of this study

Number of years of service	Number of superintendents
3 – 5	5
6 – 10	3
More than 11	1

Once the consent forms were returned via email, then the surveys were sent to the participants. This researcher initially estimated that there would be 63 possible participants in those nine school districts. The individuals invited to participate in the

study included the superintendent, principals, activities director, two faculty members and two board members. If there had been an elementary and high school principal for each district, the total would have been 63 participants. In reality, there were only 61 possible respondents because several of the superintendents also serve as principals.

Of those 61 possible respondents, 31 returned the consent forms and a total of 28 people actually completed the surveys. The individuals who completed the survey included eight superintendents, six principals, three activities directors, five faculty members and six School Board members for an overall return rate of 46%. The number of respondents involved in the study was an acceptable return rate and allowed the author to draw conclusions about the data provided.

Survey Responses

The following section details the responses received from the respondents of the survey. Each question is listed, followed by summary statements and individual responses. In the responses and as shown in Table 2, AD stands for Activities Director, FM stands for faculty member, P stands for Principal, SB stands for School Board, and S for superintendent. The numbers assigned to each individual were based on the order in which the surveys were returned. There is no correlation between the respondent numbers and the district to which they belong. This researcher was not able to ascertain district membership from the responses given.

In order to further summarize the responses of the survey participants, a table was created from the responses in order to provide an analysis of the reactions given. In that table, the frequency of the responses is shown by the numbers listed in the

column. It should be noted that the larger the number of responses, the more

significant it is. However, all responses given are important to this study.

Table 2

The list of abbreviations for the respondents to this research survey

Title	Initials
Faculty Member	FM
Superintendent	S
Activities Director	AD
School Board Member	SB
Principal	P

Question 1: How does the superintendent collaborate with each of the following to set goals for the district: faculty (including administration), board, and public? The responses of the participating individuals were collated into a simple table to summarize their answers. Table 3 provides an overview of the ways in which the superintendent typically collaborated with the members of the district. The frequency of the responses shown is a cumulative total of all five categories of respondents: superintendents, principals, activities directors, faculty members and school board members.

Table 3

Ways in which superintendent collaborates with faculty, board and public to set goals for the district

Responses	Frequency
Meetings	25
Goal setting or strategic planning	16
In person/personal contact	9
Leadership team	12
Surveys	8

In the responses relative to the goal setting with the faculty and administration, the respondents often cited that this activity took place during staff meetings, in-service or workshop days with the faculty. Three superintendents (S2, S4, S6) wrote that their districts completed the district goal setting process in the fall of the academic year. One district used the Minnesota School Board Association (MSBA) to facilitate their goal setting in August of 2016 (S2), while one school board member (SB2) noted that the district used the local service cooperative for help in the goal setting process. P6 shared a slightly different approach to the goal setting process:

> We met as a committee which was much made up of board, teachers and administrators. A facilitator was hired to guide us through the three-year plan. Our parents and committee members were surveyed and we also met five times last year to look at district data and discuss goals and direction (P6).

As for inclusion of the public in the goal setting process, all five categories of respondents (S8, AD2, FM2, P5, SB5) conveyed a desire on the part of the district to involve parents and other stakeholders in the district to provide input on district level goals.

Different individuals commented on the follow-up of the goal setting process. S7 noted that the district "reviews student achievement goals with the district advisory committee and the school board." While this superintendent shared that regular feedback to the public is provided, "it is difficult to get them engaged." S5 noted too, that the public is invited, but there is limited participation. S7 shared that most public engagement comes from "community members on committee and school board."

Multiple respondents (FM4, S1, S4, AD2, SB3, SB6) noted that the superintendents used "the radio, newsletters, newspaper, weekly communication, verbal communication, and quarterly meetings with committees which included community stakeholders" to share the district goals. One school board member (SB2) shared that "the superintendent is very visible in the community" and that fact "helps to get feedback."

Several superintendents and a faculty member (S5, S7, FM4) did comment about the relationship between the goal setting process and the district involvement in the World's Best Workforce plan of the district. That relationship will be addressed later in this chapter.

Question 2: List two or three district goals for student achievement. In the responses shared by the study participants, many of them either mentioned the World's Best Workforce (WBWF) or noted characteristics of this bill. According to the Minnesota Department of Education website (2013), this bill became reality for Minnesota public school districts in 2013 "to ensure every school district in the state is making strides to increase student performance." The website further explains that each school district is expected to develop a plan that addresses five goals:

1. All children are ready for school.

2. All third-graders can read at grade level.

3. All racial and economic achievement gaps between students are closed.

4. All students are ready for career and college.

5. All students graduate from high school.

The state's expectation was that "each district will create their own plan to align curriculum and instruction so that students are college and career ready" (MDE, 2013). The way in which the state would measure progress was by:

1. "Closing the (achievement) gap by student group;

2. MCA scores;

3. High school graduation rates; and

4. College and career readiness."

The responses to the survey reflected the districts' compliance with this bill, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Responses aligned to World's Best Workforce components (MDE, 2013)

Component	Responses
All children are ready for school	4
All third grades can read at grade level	5
Closing the achievement gap by student group	4
Improve MCA scores	20
Increase high school graduation rates	5
Career and college readiness	6

All five of the faculty members, seven of the eight superintendents, all three activities directors, five of the six school board members, and all six principals noted the importance of improving test scores. The districts all had different expectations for this area. The target goals for meeting or exceeding the standards in math, reading and science ranged from 50% - 90%. Other respondents simply noted that a goal was to "raise test scores" (FM1, FM2, FM3, FM4, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, AD3, SB2, SB3, SB4, SB6, P1, P2, P3, P4).

It was not just test scores that were included in the districts' goals. Other goals noted included references to the World's Best Workforce bill. FM2 noted a district goal of "95+% graduation rate", while the district of S6 had a goal of 100% graduation rate. S1, S4, S5 noted district goals relative to the reading proficiency level of the third-grade students.

Other district goals noted in the WBWF bill included kindergarten readiness (S7, P3, P5), closing the achievement gap by student groups (S3, S4, SB5) and career and college readiness (S7, SB2, P5, FM2).

The respondents shared other district goals that didn't appear to be associated with the World's Best Workforce Plan. FM5 phrased a district goal in this way: "a safe, caring and welcoming learning environment." S2 noted that the district would "follow through with the fourth year of PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports) and decrease office referrals by 10%." One of the superintendents (S8) contributed this goal: "Increase the academic achievement of all students through effective instruction, a challenging and engaging curriculum and aligned assessments." A school board member wrote a district goal was to "raise student achievement and enhance critical

thinking skills; deliver a rigorous and relevant curriculum while using research based interventions to meet the needs of all learners." Several respondents commented about including improvement of technology as a goal (FM1, SB4).

In summary, the World's Best Workforce bill did have a significant impact on the district goals the participants listed as shown in Table 4.

Question 3: List two or three distinct district goals which guide teachers' classroom instruction. This question on district goals which guided teachers' classroom instruction elicited a wider array of responses than did the previous question. While districts still included some emphasis on the World's Best Workforce, there was certainly more variety in what was shared, as noted in Table 5. Some responses were merely reactions to Question 2 and then repeated as answers to Question 3.

Table 5

District goals that guide teachers' classroom instruction

Responses	Number
All third graders will read at grade level	3
Closing the achievement gap by student group	3
Improve MCA scores	5
Increase and improve use of technology	13
Upgrade curriculum	7
Respectful and engaging school environment	3

Working with and improving technology was a response shared by more than one district member. Some of the answers included 1:1 initiatives with iPads and Chromebooks, the use of educational online applications and finding ways for both

faculty and students to maximize technology use and become proficient with it to enhance the teaching and learning within the classrooms (FM1, FM3, S1, S7, S8, AD2, SB4, P1, P4).

Three respondents included the root word "rigor" in their answers to this question. FM2 stated that the district desired to "produce quality rigorous intervention support to top-tier students to help them reach their fullest potential." The district of S5 wanted to "integrate rigor and 21st century skills into classrooms." SB1 reported one goal to "deliver a rigorous and relevant curriculum while using research-based interventions to meet the needs of all learners."

A number of the district goals shared by the survey participants were curriculum-based. They included a desire to update the curriculum and thereby increase the academic achievement of all students with a challenging and engaging curriculum. Other goals incorporated Marzano strategies, the Frayer model for teaching academic vocabulary and maintaining up-to-date curriculum maps that include state standards (FM5, S1, S3, S5, S6, S8, AD1, AD2, AD 3, SB3, SB6).

The reference to the World's Best Workforce Plan was evident in the district goals that guide classroom instruction (S3, S4, SB5, P2, P5, P6). They included preparedness for careers and college; increasing MCA math, reading and science scores; having third grade students reading at their grade level; all students graduating from high school and closing achievement gaps. Other district goals which guide teachers' classroom instruction included a focus on Professional Learning Communities (PLC) (FM5, AD3, S3).

Finally, there were some district goals related to classroom instruction that didn't fit any of the already-listed categories, but were worthy of mention. They included staff collaboration, a safe and welcome and engaging and respectful learning environment, accommodations for all student needs, as well as a reduction of referrals (FM5, S7, SB6, P2, P3, P6).

Question 4: What evidence shows the School Board supports the district goals? Table 6 summarizes the responses from all five categories of participants (superintendents, principals, activities directors, faculty members and board members) given for this question and shows the variety of some of the ways in which the School Boards showed their support for the districts' goals.

Table 6

Ways in which the School Board shows its support of the district's goals

School Board Support	Number of responses
Financial	5
Time	2
Staff development	4
Strategic planning and goal setting	10
Technology	4
Ongoing accountability through reports and updates to School Board	10

The financial support of the School Board was one of the benchmarks conveyed by respondents (FM1, S1, S3, AD2, P4). They shared that the school board purchased

iPads, supported staff development, established benchmarks for curriculum support, and had a willingness to allocate resources to technology.

Another way in which the survey participants recognized the support of the School Board for the district goals came in the resource of time. SB5 noted, "The Board supports the district goals by approving a calendar that allows for PLC's, staff development opportunities, late starts and early dismissals." FM3 stated that the "school board approved a late start each month so staff can discuss and reflect with others how they are doing with the school-performance plan."

Staff development was another area in which the respondents wrote that the Board supported the district goals. Two superintendents noted (S2, S7): "Commitment to staff development before, during and after school year" and "expanded additional programming and resources for PreK, technology and teacher professional development." Others noted that support from the school board for district goals came in the form of the strategic planning that was carried out and adopted (FM2, S3, S8, AD1, SB1, SB3, P1, P5).

The emphasis on technology was evident in the responses shared, too. The respondents stated that the Board authorized the purchase of iPads, Chromebooks and other electronic devices (FM1, SB4, AD2).

P3 shared appreciation for the support of the board for district goals by writing, "We have a reflective culture that demands excellence and holds all members of the institution accountable to the gains that are sought."

Question 5: Give an example of how the superintendent monitors district progress in meeting student achievement goals. The theme of communication between the superintendent and the various individuals and constituencies throughout the districts included in the study was evident in the responses to this question. Table 7 shows the responses as shared from the different perspectives. In this table, the responses from the superintendents were separated from the answers given by the Faculty Members, Principals, Activities Directors and School Board members.

Table 7

How the superintendent monitors district progress in meeting student achievement goals

Responses	Superintendent	Others
Monthly administrative team meetings	3	8
PLC/Staff meetings	3	7
Leadership of improvement process	2	1
Assessment results	3	12
Supervision of instruction	1	1

As noted in Table 7, the superintendents cited administrative team meetings, PLC and staff meetings and discussing assessment results as the means to monitor district progress. S1 and S2 cited monthly data checks and administrative meetings that focused on goal progress and maintenance of the district data dashboard as regular agenda items. S3 and S4 noted how they lead a continuous improvement process and are held accountable by the strategic plan of the district. They work with their principals to implement the interventions necessary to accomplish their student achievement

goals. S5, S6, S7, and S8 wrote about meeting with reading and math teachers, discussing MCA scores with the staff during the year, PLC time devoted to planning for individual interventions, administrative observations on the part of the principals, as well as STAR assessments.

The perspective of the faculty members, activities directors, principals and school board members was similar to the superintendents. They too, cited monthly administrative team, PLC and staff meetings and the ongoing assessment of test scores as ways in which they monitor progress of the student achievement goals within their districts (FM1, FM3, FM4. AD1, AD2, AD3, SB1, SB3, SB4, SB5, SB6).

The principals were closely involved in the process of monitoring district progress towards meeting the achievement goals. Their responses shared that the administrative team meets monthly, the superintendent evaluates performance vs. progress expected in the strategic plan and those results are reported to the board (P1, P2, P4, P5 P6).

P3 provided an insightful editorial that was reflective of the superintendent's work in this area. This individual wrote: "He/She is organized, transparent and honest in communicating data and statistics requiring student achievement. He/She celebrates successes and makes no excuses for areas needing improvement. We aim to constantly improve in the work that we do and use past data to guide our efforts."

Question 6: Give an example of how the superintendent monitors district progress in meeting classroom instruction goals. This researcher expected that the answers to questions five and six would be similar in some respects. However, the respondents also shared different approaches that their districts took to monitor

progress in meeting classroom instruction goals. As shown in Table 8, the responses of

the superintendent are separated from the other responses (principals, activities

directors, faculty members and board members) to provide perspective on the

similarities and differences of responses.

Table 8

How the superintendent monitors progress in meeting classroom instruction goals

Responses	Superintendents	Others
Monthly meetings with administrators	2	8
Leadership initiative	1	2
PLC/Staff meetings	4	6
Observation, surveys, conversations	2	8
Staff development	1	0
Study data from testing	0	4

The ways in which the superintendents monitored the classroom instruction goals

across the district included classroom walkthroughs, district leadership team meetings,

building level meetings and PLC meetings. All were described as being held on a

monthly basis (FM2, SM2, S1, S8).

Several superintendents expanded on the content of those meetings when they

shared their agenda items. They included instructional goals, training in instruction

based on Danielson and Marzano, the gradual release model of instruction, as well as administrative observations and parent, staff and student surveys (S3, S4, S6, S7).

Two principals and one school board member used the word "regular" to describe the frequency of the superintendent's involvement: "He had regular conversations with building administrators about the success and growth of all teaching and support staff" (P3). P5 shared that "He/she regularly visits with teachers and administration to find out what's happening in the classrooms and what needs to be done to continue moving forward." The school board member noted that there were "regular PLC meetings and meetings with teachers" (SB3).

In some cases, the superintendent followed up in person with the teachers, while other superintendents worked through their principals (FM1, AD1, SB6, P2).

Some principals and activities directors noted ways in which the superintendent stayed involved in monitoring progress in meeting classroom instruction goals. They included classroom walkthroughs, reading through the formal teacher evaluation data, being present at weekly faculty meetings, local PLC meetings administration team meetings, assessments of MCAs and student, staff and parent surveys (P1, P4, P6). One activities director noted the "consistent presence of the administration in a non-invasive manner in the classroom" (AD3).

Several faculty members also commented about the involvement of their superintendents in the monitoring process. The superintendents utilized monitoring of PBIS data in SWISS, and lead initiatives in staff development to see that they're being supported. They also used end-of-year meetings to reflect on goals, occasionally attending staff meetings and being aware of what the staff is doing with student

engagement, as well as visiting classrooms randomly, observing faculty members and surveys (FM 2, FM3, FM4, FM 5).

Several of the school board members also affirmatively commented on their superintendents' level of activity in this area. SB1, SB2, SB3 and SB5 all wrote that the superintendent used formative and summative assessment data, teacher observation and evaluation data and ongoing communications with administration and staff throughout the district in order to monitor progress.

Question 7: List examples of how the district uses its resources to support student achievement goals. As the responses for this question were considered, this researcher divided the answers into four categories: personnel, time, programs and financial. Within those four categories was an array of examples that the districts used their resources to support their student achievement goals. Table 9 provides a summary of the examples that the respondents provided as the resources used to support student achievement goals.

Table 9

District support of student achievement goals

Examples of Support	Responses
Personnel	12
Time	8
Programs	15
Financial	4
Technology	12
Staff Development	10

Personnel. Several of the respondents noted the hiring of additional personnel as ways in which the district supported the classroom instructional goals. Those individuals hired included a school based mental health person, a Greater Minnesota social worker, a technology integration specialist and a Native American liaison (FM1, AD2).

The participants also noted that the districts desired smaller class sizes. S1, S4, S7, P1, P5 and P6 all wrote that they wanted to ensure small and manageable class sizes so that teachers could provide more individual attention to those students who need it.

The contributors to this study also noted the importance of quality staff as being an important way in which the district supported their classroom instructional goals. FM2 noted how the district allowed staff members to teach in their areas of strength and interest on the elementary level. SB3 stated how the district wanted "great teachers who are experts in their fields." SB5 also noted, that in their district, "all staff who are hired are properly licensed through the state of Minnesota or have received required variances from the MDE."

Time. In school systems, time can be a precious commodity for educators. The respondents to the survey also noted the importance of time as a valuable way in which the district shows support for instructional goals.

They appreciated the dedicated in-service time to review student data, engage in curriculum review, modification and development, and to participate in staff professional development. Time was also allotted for extended learning time outside of the normal schedule, including after school tutoring for the students (FM4, S3, S4, SB1, S5, SB4,

SB5). SB5 also reported that the school calendar was designed to include regular staff development days throughout the school year, late starts and early dismissals for curriculum improvement and student achievement purposes.

Programs. A large number of individuals participating in this study wrote that the district showed its support for student achievement goals through the implementation of special programs. Of those programs, the use of technology was noted as an indicator of that support. S1, AD1, AD2, SB2, P3, and P6 all wrote of the impact of technology integration in their districts to support 21st century learning. P1, SB3, SB6, FM5 and S7 shared that their districts incorporated iPads into their learning environments, for early intervention and to level the playing field to ensure all students have access to the same resources.

Other programs were initiated and implemented as part of the districts' support of district student achievement goals. Ways in which the district supported these goals included a strong support of PBIS to develop a quality- learning environment, a district wide initiative to implement the Frayer model to increase vocabulary, the use of Schoology as a main portal, and the implementation of Study Island, IXL, and Minnesota Reading Corps to bring struggling readers to grade level (FM2, FM3, FM5, S4).

The participants also noted that staff development was used as a means to show the district's support of student achievement. Staff development provided opportunities for the teaching staff to take part in workshops and regional curriculum development initiatives. Topics included peer coaching, standards-based grading, an analysis of curricular alignment to match state standards, the utilization of effective feedback to

improve learning and using a collaborative culture to improve both teacher effectiveness

and student achievement (FM4, S2, S6, AD1, SB4, SB5, P3).

SB4 conveyed that the district used test scores to identify areas the district needs

to work on (STAR and MCA) and that staff are provided training opportunities to learn

different ways to deliver instruction to support or enhance student achievement. P5

shared:

> Our elementary staff worked together to create a four tier system of support that
> better enables us to target specific needs of both struggling and accelerated
> learners. Classroom teachers and interventionists work closely to plan
> interventions so we can capitalize on the expertise within our building. Early skill
> development was targeted as a priority. Staff are highly encouraged to participate
> in training and professional development devoted to improving student
> achievement (P5).

Both SB3 and P2 were succinct in their descriptions of the support that they received

from the district. SB3 wrote, "Our administration is committed to student achievement,"

while P2 shared that the district provided them with the supplies and curriculum the staff

needed to provide a high-quality education for the students they serve.

Financial. Financial support was the final category of support from the districts.

They included .5% of the annual budget for curriculum updates, purchased databases

to support old and new initiatives and used staff development funds to pay for

workshops, in-service costs and presenter fees. Other means of support involved the

purchase of instructional materials that align with the identified achievement goals,

support the curriculum review process and makes available resources for purchase of

new curriculum on cycle.

The districts provided financial support and funding for interventions;

membership in a collaborative, academic intervention programs; concurrent enrollment

course opportunities; and high school programming options (S1, FM2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7). AD3 expressed appreciation for the administrative financial support of the district and noted that they are "very willing to go out on a limb for student success."

Question 8: List examples of how the district uses its resources to support its classroom instruction goals. Like the responses to the previous question, the answers to this question have been divided into subcategories. Those categories include professional development, financial, technology, personnel, and programs and resources. Table 10 provides a summary of the responses the participants shared as ways in which the district uses its resources to support classroom instruction goals.

Table 10

Ways in which the district uses its resources to support classroom instruction goals

Response	Number
Professional development	12
Financial	4
Technology	7
Personnel	8
Programs and resources	16

Perhaps the similarity of the responses in this question compared to the previous question can best be summed up by one of the answers that was shared by a school board member: "Student achievement and classroom instruction are inextricably linked."

Professional Development. A number of participants in this study cited the importance of professional development for its staff. FM4, S1, S2, S5, S6, AD3, SB1

and P6 all noted the importance of staff development to enable teachers to grow their

skills, maintaining the funding for this effort and encouraging attendance at workshops.

Other participants noted means of support from the district included training for

new and experienced teachers in specific techniques they are using, technology

training, training opportunities to gain and access resources and tools to work on district

classroom instruction goals. Other examples include staff development on PLC's,

standards-based grading and developing a collaborative culture to improve both teacher

effectiveness and student achievement (FM2, SB4, P3).

Perhaps the most descriptive comments on the importance of staff development

in their districts came from a superintendent and a principal. S7 wrote that our district

"provides world class staff development. I am not sure that there are many school

districts that have exposed their teaching staff to the professional speakers that we

have." P5 stated:

> Time is built into our calendar and daily schedules to collaborate with grade level
> and subject-matter teams. This time is used for data analysis, research on best
> practices and collaborative planning. Staff are highly encouraged to participate in
> training and professional development devoted to specific instructional areas
> (P5).

Financial. Two respondents shared that the district supported classroom goals in

a financial manner. AD3 and P4 wrote that the district supported classroom instruction

through increased spending, such as in the areas of software and licenses.

Technology. Six of the respondents included technology as an important aspect

of district support for classroom instruction. Several individuals shared that their

districts incorporated a 1:1 initiative (SB2, P3). One principal wrote that the district (P1)

implemented use of iPads, while an activities director noted that the district was using

Chromebooks (AD1). Two others shared a broader perspective on the implementation

of technology as a way of supporting classroom instruction. They want to utilize

technology teaching and learning tools to prepare the students for the 21st century

(FM5, P3).

     Personnel. Like the responses to the previous question, a number of the

individuals who shared their thoughts considered the impact of personnel on the

education provided to the students as a major factor in district support.

     Several of the people noted that their districts hired added help in the positions of

Reading Corps teacher, Intervention Specialist, Dean of Students, Tech Interventionalist

and Curriculum and Testing leader. Teachers were also provided extra compensation to

teach during after-school programming (FM1, S8, AD1, SB4, P4).

     Another manner in which the districts supported classroom instruction was the

attention paid to student: teacher ratios. S4, S6 and P1 all maintained that their districts

paid close attention to small class sizes and keeping staff at the levels to support those

smaller class sizes. The rationale shared was that the smaller student-teacher ratios

enable teachers to provide more individual attention to students who need it.

     The districts also supported classroom instruction by providing time for the staff

to meet to address student learning at each grade level and provide time to create and

organize units into digital platforms (FM2, AD2). S5, SB4, FM3, AD2, SB 5 and SB6

conveyed the importance of PLC meeting times in order to do the following:

- analyze benchmarks and progress monitoring data;
- modify instruction based on assessment results;
- work on areas that the district has identified to help work on classroom instruction delivery;
- discuss classroom goals; use of statistical data to show growth in yearlong goals; and

- increase the value of formative assessments.

As part of the support process by the district, the principal devoted time to classroom observation and the principal and superintendent would meet at the end of the year to reflect on the progress made towards the classroom instruction goals (FM3, S3).

Programs and Resources. The districts showed their support of classroom instruction through additional programs and resources the schools needed in order to provide a quality education for the students they serve. Those programs and resources, while varied, were all implemented as ways of improving the education for the students in their care. Title 1 provided extended learning time and allowed for more individualized help as well as small-group intervention (FM2, S4).

Other programs included the curriculum review process and resources for purchase of new curriculum on cycle; the Formative Common Assessments between grade level partners to discuss and diagnose student learning needs; interventions for students who need help; MCA boot camp for kids who need help before MCA tests; joining a collaborative for grade-level and subject-area meetings; and after-school support and summer school for struggling students. Several school board members also noted that the teachers expand their flipped lessons and work on making blended days more useful and efficient, as well as collaborating between different subjects to help improve their classroom instruction (FM5, SB3, S2, S4, SB5, SB6).

The final way in which districts show their support for the classroom instruction of its teachers is in providing resources for instruction. S6, P2, P5, and P6 simply wrote that the district provides up-to-date curriculum, materials and supplies in order to effectively deliver instruction. S7 emphasized just how important resources were for

success in the classroom by writing, "We provide teacher resources (curriculum, software, manipulatives) to provide an engaging learning environment. Time is our most valuable resource. District dedicates time for teachers to collaborate about pedagogy and student achievement" (S7).

Triangulation of Results

To ensure that the data collected through the surveys is accurate, this researcher chose to use data triangulation. The sources of this triangulation included MCA testing results, World's Best Workforce data and the different viewpoints shared in the responses to the survey questions.

MCA testing results. The author chose to check the data gathered through the survey process by studying the MCA testing data supplied by the Minnesota Department of Education website. The MCA overall scores in the subject areas of math, reading and science for the last five years (2012 – 2016) were studied. The data that were studied included the number and percent of those who were considered "proficient" and the total number tested. The data from each of the nine participating school districts were totaled into Tables 11 - 13 entitled "MCA Testing Results of School Districts." Table 11 includes the math scores, table 12 the reading scores and table 13 shows the science scores. Tables 14 - 16 show the results for the entire state of Minnesota. Table 14 shows the state math score averages, table 15 shows the state reading scores and table 16 shows the state science scores. The author presents this data with the acknowledgement that these results are just one assessment that will provide a glimpse of the academic achievement of the students in the study school districts.

According to the results posted on the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) website and shown in tables 11 - 16, the percent of proficient students from the study school districts in each subject area of math, reading and science was lower than the state average for each of the five years. During those five years, the math scores decreased three times and increased once. The reading scores increased for two years, maintained the score one year and decreased one year. The science scores increased three years and decreased one year. In both the state of Minnesota results and the average of the nine school districts in the study, the math and reading scores from the first year to the second dropped significantly. In science, the state experienced the same results while the nine school districts had significantly increased scores.

The results found on the MDE website show that improvement was needed on the part of the school districts. They recognized that fact by the comments made in the survey responses.

Table 11

MCA Testing Results for Nine School Districts - Math

	Math		
Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2012	58.3%	1,711	2,934
2013	52.2%	1,510	2,894
2014	55.1%	1,560	2,831
2015	52.8%	1,474	2,794
2016	52.5%	1,479	2,817

Table 12

MCA Testing Results for Nine School Districts – Reading

	Reading		
Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2012	68.3%	1,990	2,914
2013	51.8%	1,490	2,879
2014	52.7%	1,514	2,875
2015	53.8%	1,505	2,797
2016	53.8%	1,539	2,861

Table 13

MCA Testing Results for Nine School Districts - Science

	Science		
Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2012	42.6%	489	1,148
2013	49.7%	598	1,204
2014	42.9%	533	1,243
2015	47.0%	541	1,152
2016	47.9%	581	1,214

Table 14

MCA Testing results for state of Minnesota - Math

	Math		
Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2012	61.3%	263,827	430,619
2013	50.2%	261,002	433,393
2014	60.5%	263,981	436,244
2015	60.2%	264,251	438,856
2016	59.5%	262,922	441,663

Table 15

MCA Testing results for state of Minnesota – Reading

	Reading		
Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2012	75.3%	323,699	429,669
2013	57.6%	250,398	434,532
2014	58.8%	257,262	437,233
2015	59.5%	262,346	440,615
2016	59.9%	266,820	445,724

Table 16

MCA Testing results for state of Minnesota – Science

	Science		
Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2012	50.8%	91,112	179,333
2013	52.4%	93,225	178,045
2014	53.4%	96,480	180,542
2015	53.4%	98,496	184,605
2016	55.0%	100,817	183,271

World's Best Workforce. The World's Best Workforce (WBWF) played a significant role in the responses for questions two and three, as noted earlier in this chapter. All of the categories of respondents: superintendents, principals, activities directors, faculty members and school board members—referenced aspects of the bill. Those characteristics included: all children are ready for school; all third-graders can read at grade level; all racial and economic achievement gaps between students are closed; all students are ready for career and college; and, all students graduate from high school (Minnesota Department of Education, 2013).

Each school district posted their state-mandated report summary for WBWF on their websites. These reports included the districts' responses to the expectations according to three reactions: Goal Met, Goal Not Met, or Goal in Progress. The

accompanying information found in these reports was also reported in the responses for questions two and three.

Along with the test scores and WBWF information, the researcher cross-checked the responses from the various individuals who participated in the study and found them to be in alignment. Based on the information found in the test scores, the World's Best Workforce reports and the data gathered in the surveys, the researcher believes the information collected to be accurate.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the instrumentation and implementation of the survey itself, provided the results of the surveys that were presented to the superintendents, principals, activities directors, faculty members and school board members and cross-checked the accuracy of the responses through triangulation. The results provided a glimpse of the districts' efforts towards student achievement and classroom instruction and the relationship of the superintendent's leadership to those efforts.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how rural Minnesota school superintendents apply the key findings of Waters and Marzano study on superintendent leadership in their own districts as they relate to these key correlates: collaborative goal setting; non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction; board alignment with and support of district goals; monitoring goals for achievement and instruction; and use of resources to support the goals for instruction and achievement. An additional finding of Marzano and Waters was also included – that there was a relationship between the length of time the superintendent remained with the district and the academic achievement of the students of that district (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

The Statement of the Problem

This dissertation examined rural school districts in Minnesota in light of those five correlates and studied the work of the superintendent in those areas. The purpose was to determine how the superintendent's efforts relate to the academic achievement of the students within the school district.

Review of the Methodology

This researcher conducted a study of nine small, rural school districts in southern Minnesota. Each of the districts had an enrollment of less than 1000 students. The participants in the study included the superintendent, principals, activities director, two faculty members and two board members from each district. Each completed a survey of open-ended questions on Survey Monkey. The eight survey questions were field tested by three individuals with doctoral degrees in education or educational leadership.

Once the responses were submitted, the author collated, organized and categorized the responses into a format that allowed him to draw conclusions from the responses given.

Summary of the Results

The premise behind this study was based on the research that Water and Marzano reported on in a working paper entitled "School Leadership that Works" and their book "District Leadership that Works." In their study, their primary research question was: "What is the strength of relationship between district-level administrative actions and average student achievement?". Their secondary research question was "What are the specific district leadership behaviors that are associated with student achievement" (Waters & Marzano, 2009, p.4-5)?   From the secondary question came the five questions that are the premise for this study. As the individual questions and findings of this study are reviewed, they were done in light of those five correlates. Each of the summaries listed below includes the perspective that Waters and Marzano shared on each topic, as well as the summary based on this research.

Collaborative goal setting. Waters and Marzano noted that effective district leaders include the stakeholders of the district in the process of establishing non-negotiable goals for their districts. They also want their principals very involved in the goal setting process since they will be the leaders charged with implementing those very goals in their buildings (Waters and Marzano, 2009).

Based on the results of the survey, the superintendents in this study did involve the stakeholders of their districts in the goal setting process. Three of the most common responses attest to the superintendents' involvement. Those responses were that they collaborate with the faculty, board and public through meetings, goal setting or

strategic planning sessions and meetings of the leadership team (FM1, FM2, FM4, FM5, S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, AD1, AD2, AD3, SB1, SB2, SB3, SB4, SB5, SB6, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6). Twenty-six respondents indicated that the superintendent involved faculty, administrative team members, school board, parents and the public in this effort. They also noted that the members of the district were involved in goal setting and/or the strategic planning process (FM1, FM2, FM4, FM5, S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, AD1, AD2, AD3, SB1, SB2, SB3, SB4, SB5, SB6, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6). Several superintendents did note that, while the public was invited to participate, there was little response. The feedback that did come from the public came from individuals on the district advisory committee or some other group or committee connected with the board or district. The forum in which those meetings took place varied. They included August inservices, board or strategic planning retreats, goal setting meetings of the board to which the faculty, administration, parents and public are invited, district advisory committee meetings, surveys, and the World's Best Workforce Committee. Two of the districts invoked the services of outside organizations, the local service cooperative and the Minnesota School Board Association (MSBA), as the means to help them set goals for the coming years.

One school board member shared thoughts on the collaborative efforts of the superintendent of that district. "Attends staff meetings, shares data and input from all members. Sends out informative emails, gives a monthly report to the board at their meeting. Posts a letter in the district newsletter that is available to the public, invites and listens to input and ideas from the parents and other stakeholders in the district" (SB5).

Waters and Marzano stated the importance of the principal being involved in goal setting for the school district. Five superintendents and five principals all wrote that their leadership team was involved in the goal setting/strategic planning process. More will be written on the involvement of the principals later in this chapter.

Based on the responses received, it is the conclusion of this researcher that the superintendents in this study do effectively collaborate with the members of the districts to set goals for the district.

Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction. It was the finding of Waters and Marzano that those superintendents who were effective made sure that the collaborative goal setting process resulted in nonnegotiable goals in student achievement and classroom instruction. Within that basic tenet, they did not intend that district leaders would dictate one instructional model, but rather "adopt a broad but common framework for classroom instructional design" that would guarantee "the consistent use of research based instructional strategies in each school" (Waters and Marzano, 2009, p. 7).

The survey responses for this correlate of Waters and Marzano fit with questions two and three of the survey. The participants were first asked to list two or three goals for student achievement and then respond in the same manner for classroom instruction.

The impact of the World's Best Workforce (WBWF) bill in the state of Minnesota played a significant role in the responses for these two questions, as well as others, of the participants in this study. This bill was passed in 2013 and includes these five components: All children are ready for school; all third-graders can read at grade level;

all racial and economic achievement gaps between students are closed; all students are ready for career and college; and all students graduate from high school (Minnesota Department of Education, 2013).

The MDE website also notes that one of the ways in which school districts can measure progress is through improving test scores. That guideline was reflective of the response most often shared for question two when the individuals responded by noting the importance of improving MCA scores. The remaining responses all fit under the tenets of the WBWF and included:

- all children are ready for school;
- all third grade students can read at grade level;
- closing the achievement gap by student group;
- increase high school graduation rates; and
- career and college readiness (MDE, 2013).

The responses of the participants for question three still included tenets of the WBWF plan, but also contained emphases on increasing and improving the use of technology in the classroom by both teachers and students and improving and upgrading the curriculum. One superintendent wrote about the goals of the district by commenting that the district wanted to "increase the academic achievement of all students through effective instruction, a challenging and engaging curriculum and aligned assessments. We want to achieve the goals of the WBWF for all students in the school district" (S8). A school board member also that the district wanted to "raise student achievement and enhance critical thinking skills; deliver a rigorous and relevant curriculum, while using research based interventions to meet the needs of all learners" (SB1).

Through their answers, all of the categories of respondents showed a commitment to improving the quality of education that they provide to the students of their district. Whether that was through a 1:1 technology initiative or increasing the rigor of the curriculum in the classrooms, the commitment to ongoing school improvement was evident.

Board alignment with and support of district goals. Effective school districts have school boards who align themselves with and in support of those nonnegotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction. The school boards are responsible for these goals remaining the top priorities within the district (Waters and Marzano, 2009).

Question four of the survey addressed this correlate on Board support of district goals from the research of Waters and Marzano. The top two response categories of the individuals surveyed for this question included strategic planning and goal setting and ongoing accountability through reports and updates to the School Board. The comments on the strategic planning and goal setting of the board conveyed the fact that the board assimilated the goals set by the district and those goals became their own. Those goals were part of the district strategic plans. According to the survey participants, the goals became a part of the board's annual work agenda, as they insisted on regular updates and reports on the district's progress towards meeting those goals. "The Board supports the district goals by approving a calendar that allows for PLC's, staff development opportunities, late starts and early dismissals" (SB5). One principal wrote "We have a reflective culture that demands excellence and holds all members of the institution accountable to the gains that are sought" (P3).

The financial support of the board towards the district's goals didn't receive as many votes as the goal setting and updates, but in the responses of some of the individuals, it certainly was impactful. The other responses to this question included the focus on technology, showing support for staff development and the resource of time to complete those tasks.

Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction. Waters and Marzano stated that effective superintendents constantly monitor district progress towards academic achievement and then also expect that their schools will regularly monitor their progress towards improving academic achievement and classroom instruction within their district (Waters and Marzano, 2009).

Questions five and six fit under this tenet of Waters and Marzano's study since they asked the participants to give an example of how the superintendent monitors district progress in meeting student achievement goals (five) and classroom instruction goals (six). To study these responses, the superintendents' answers were separated from those other members of their districts. For question five, the superintendents focused on three areas: monthly administrative team meetings, PLC or staff meetings and assessment results.

Waters and Marzano (2009) wrote about the importance of the building principals being involved in the collaborative process of setting goals. The responses of this survey question indicates that the school districts being studied held to that belief. Besides the three superintendents who shared that they monitored district progress through administrative team meetings, eight respondents from the other four categories (principal, school board member, faculty member and activities director) also stated that

their superintendents monitored progress through those monthly meetings with their district administrators. The principals themselves commented about regular conversations with the superintendent, surveys, and meetings and informal conversations with staff members as ways to monitor that progress. A number of the respondents who were not superintendents noted that the superintendent monitored district progress in meeting student achievement goals through staff and PLC meetings (FM1, FM2, FM3, FM4, AD1, AD2, AD3, SB1, SB2, SB3, SB4, SB5, P3, P4).

The majority of the faculty members, principals, activities directors and school board members commented that the superintendent used assessment results to monitor progress in student achievement goals. They referenced a number of different standardized assessments that included MCA, NWEA, and STAR, as well as ACT and formative assessment. They noted how the superintendent led the efforts of the district to study these assessments and then set improvement goals for the future (FM4, FM5, SB2, SB4, SB5, SB6, P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P60).

A school board member noted the work of the superintendent in this area. "Prior to the start of the new year, administration and staff review various data sources to determine the student achievement goals for the school year" (SB5). A principal described the superintendent in these words:

> "He is organized, transparent and honest in communicating data and statistics requiring student achievement. He celebrates successes and makes no excuses for areas needing improvement. We aim to constantly improve in the work that we do and use past data to guide our efforts" (P3).

The responses to question six were similar to the responses to question five. Question six focused on the ways in which the superintendent monitors progress in meeting classroom instruction goals. Four of the eight superintendents noted that they

accomplish this task through meeting with the staff or PLC meetings (S2, S4, S6, S8).

Six of the other respondents concurred with that thought (FM4, AD2, SB1, SB3, P4,

P5). There were two responses that ten of the faculty members, activities directors,

principals and school board members each noted. They included the monthly

administrative team meetings as a way to monitor that progress. The other way in

which their superintendents monitored progress was through observation, surveys and

conversations. The superintendent surveyed parents, staff and students to monitor

progress (FM1, FM2, FM5, SB1, SB4, P1, P2, P3, P4, P5. Superintendents conducted

classroom walkthroughs, held conversations with teachers about their practice, talked

with principals about the work that their teachers were doing in the classroom and

participated in staff and PLC meetings. Based on the survey feedback to questions five

and six, these superintendents were committed to and involved with monitoring district

progress in meeting student achievement and classroom instruction goals.

Use of resources to support the goals for instruction and achievement.

Time, money, personnel and materials were the four resources that Waters and

Marzano shared as necessary for support of the district goals. They did not offer a

minimum level of sustenance that is necessary to show the district's support, but they

did describe the support level as "meaningful" (Waters and Marzano, 2009, p. 8).

This tenet of Waters and Marzano was also divided up into two questions for the

survey. Like several of the previous questions, the respondents were given the chance

to share examples of how the district uses its resources to support student achievement

goals and classroom instruction goals.

These questions elicited significant responses from the participants both in terms of content and number. Seven individuals shared that the district supported student achievement goals by providing additional personnel to support those goals (FM1, S7, S8, AD1, AD2, SB4, P1). These additional personnel helped reduce class size, thereby allowing teachers to provide more individualized instruction to the students who were in need of it. Other contributors to the survey also noted the importance of procuring and keeping quality staff members in order to provide a top notch education to the students of their districts (FM2, SB3, SB5, P3).

The district showed support of student achievement goals by funding programs. They included technology initiatives, PBIS and other programs designed to improve the learning environment in their schools. Supporting and implementing technology, as well as sustaining professional staff development were observations made by the participants who recognized the importance of both.

One athletic director commented about the support of the district.

"Administrative support financially. They are very willing to go out on a limb for student success" (AD3). One superintendent noted the support by the district in writing, "We provide teacher resources (curriculum, software, manipulatives) to provide an engaging learning environment. Time is our most valuable resource. District dedicates time for teachers to collaborate about pedagogy and student achievement" (S7).

One response made by eight of the participants struck a chord with this researcher. They commented that their districts provided support for academic achievement by providing the staff with time. That fact didn't go unnoticed as they reflected on the importance of having time to collaborate on curriculum or for staff development (FM4, S2, S3, S4, S5, SB1, SB4, SB5).

While it was interesting to note that only eight of the 28 respondents listed financial support as a way in which the district provides sustenance to the academic achievement of its students, it may be logical to contend that programs, additional personnel, technology and staff development all cost money and so the financial support was understood (FM2, S1, S3, S4, S5, S7, AD3, P6).

The responses to question eight were similar to the responses in question seven. They also included professional development, programs and resources, personnel and technology.

It's important for districts, school board members and superintendents to show their support of classroom instruction through the professional development of their teachers. They also continue that support by providing them with quality teachers and professionals, as well as funding technology initiatives for both staff and students so that they can provide a 21st century educational experience for the students. That technology can also play a role in the programs and resources that districts fund for the schools, administration and staff.

The volume of responses to these questions indicated to this researcher that the respondents understood the importance of district support for academic achievement and classroom instruction and showed that support in a variety of ways.

Suggestions for Further Research

As this researcher worked through this study, several suggestions for further research came to mind. First, the study engaged nine small school districts in southern Minnesota. A study that includes all small, rural school districts would broaden the

perspective of the correlates of Waters and Marzano and perhaps lead to new and different conclusions.

How would the results from this study differ from a study that includes school districts larger than 1000 students? Would some of the personal touch, evident in the small districts, be lost?

The impact of the World's Best Workforce (WBWF) was significant in the responses of the participants. It would be interesting to study the correlates of Waters and Marzano in districts that weren't under guidelines like these. How much difference or similarity would there be in district goals if the leadership of each district were allowed to set their own goals and monitor the progress towards those goals in forms of annual reports?

Summary and Conclusion

This research studied a small number of Minnesota public school districts. Through this study, the author has concluded that the superintendents did collaborate with faculty, board and public to set goals for academic achievement and classroom instruction; the superintendent and board monitored progress on their goals, and the school boards supported them through their physical support for those goals. These findings are significant for school administration training programs.

Was there a correlation in this study between superintendent leadership and academic achievement and classroom instruction? The answer to that question might depend on the data used to answer that question. According to the MCA testing results, there was no noteworthy increase in test scores as a result of superintendent leadership. Considering the narrative responses and the efforts to meet the goals

through the World's Best Workforce, the superintendents of these school districts are

actively involved in the education of the children of their districts through their ongoing

efforts to set strategic goals across those districts and then monitor and report the

progress to the school boards. There was evidence too, that the strategic goals of the

districts included more than just the basic tenets of the World's Best Workforce plan.

The superintendents, as well as the staff, administration and school boards of these

districts included additional goals that provided the children in their districts the greatest

opportunities for a high quality educational experience. Based on the results found

within this study, this author concludes that superintendent leadership did have a

positive impact on student achievement and classroom instruction in the nine small

public school districts in Minnesota that were part of this study. For the sake of the

children, it will be vital for these districts and others to continue their efforts to insure

that future students receive such an education as well.

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Appendix A

HSRC File

TO: platht@csp.edu
CC: Humans Subjects Review Committee File

The IRB Human Subjects Committee reviewed the referenced study for renewal under the expedited procedures according to federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101 (Research Category 7): RESEARCH ON INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP CHARACTERISTICS OR BEHAVIOR (INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, RESEARCH ON PERCEPTION, COGNITION, MOTIVATION, IDENTITY, LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION, CULTURAL BELIEFS OR PRACTICES, AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR) OR RESEARCH EMPLOYING SURVEY, INTERVIEW, ORAL HISTORY, FOCUS GROUP, PROGRAM EVALUATION, HUMAN FACTORS EVALUATION, OR QUALITY ASSURANCE METHODOLOGIES.

Study Number: 2017_24
Principal Investigator: Timothy Plath
Title: Superintendent Leadership in Small Rural Minnesota School Districts

Classification: ___ Exempt _X_ Expedited   ___ Full Review

Approved _X_

Approved with modifications: ____ [See attached]

Declined ____   [See attached]

Upon receipt of this letter, you may begin your research. Please remember that any changes in your protocol need to be approved through the IRB Committee. If you have questions, please call the IRB Chair at (651) 641-8723.

_____
Signature, Chair Human Subjects Review Committee

__April 17, 2017__
Date

Appendix B

Research Consent Letter

May 4, 2017

Dear ---------,

As a doctoral student in the Education Department at Concordia University in St. Paul, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is *Superintendent Leadership in Small, Rural Minnesota School Districts* and the purpose of my research is show a correlation between the leadership of superintendents and the academic achievement of the students they serve.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at Cedar Mountain School District. My plan is to interview superintendents, principals, activities directors, board members and teachers to help complete this research. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

In order to maintain the privacy of the participants, the consent forms and all data from the participants' surveys will be stored electronically in a password protected environment. Any hard copies of information will be stored under lock and key at all times.

If you have questions or concerns about this research, they may be directed to the following individuals:

Dr. Jerry Robicheau (Dissertation Adviser)　　Institutional Review Board
Concordia University　　　　　　　　　　　　　Concordia University
1282 Concordia Ave.　　　　　　　　　　　　　1282 Concordia Ave.
St. Paul, MN 55104　　　　　　　　　　　　　St. Paul, MN 55104
651-603-6193　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　651-641-8723

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on approved letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Timothy M. Plath
Principal – Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School

Appendix C

Consent Form for Research Participation

Concordia University - St. Paul, Minnesota

Consent Form for Research Participation

Study Title: Superintendent Leadership in Small Rural Minnesota School Districts

Principal Investigator: Timothy M. Plath

Student Researcher: Timothy M. Plath

I am a doctoral student at Concordia University (St. Paul), in the School of Education. I am planning to conduct a research study, which I invite you to take part in. This form has important information about the reason for doing this study, what I will ask you to do if you decide to be in this study, and the way I would like to use information about you if you choose to be in the study.

Why are you doing this study?

You are being asked to participate in a research study about the relationship between superintendent leadership in small rural Minnesota school districts (under 1000 students) and classroom instruction and student achievement.

The purpose of this study will be to examine how rural Minnesota school superintendents view and apply the key findings of Marzano and Waters' study on superintendent leadership in their own districts as they relate to these key correlates: collaborative goal setting; non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction; board alignment with and support of district goals; monitoring goals for achievement and instruction; and use of resources to support the goals for instruction and achievement.

What will I do if I choose to be in this study?

You will be asked to provide your email address to the researcher so that you can be sent a link to a Survey Monkey survey. The survey is eight questions long and does ask you to type in answers about your school district. Once you've completed the survey, that will be the extent of your involvement.

Your time commitment: You can expect that the survey will take up to 45 minutes to complete.

Study location: You may take this survey at home or at school on a computer of your choice.

I may quote your remarks in presentations or articles resulting from this work. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity, as well as your district's identity, unless you specifically request that you be identified by your true name.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

Your participation in this study does not involve any physical or emotional risk to you beyond that of everyday life. If you are uncomfortable with a question I ask about, you are free to not answer or to skip to the next question.

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality of the information we collect from you could be breached – we will take steps to minimize this risk, as discussed in more detail below in this form.

What are the possible benefits for me or others?

You are not likely to have any direct, personal benefit from being in this research study. This study is designed to learn more about the relationship between superintendent leadership and teacher instruction and student achievement in rural Minnesota school districts. It is a goal of this study that its results may be used to help rural school districts in the future.

How will you protect the information you collect about me, and how will that information be shared?

Results of this study may be used in publications and presentations. Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used.

To minimize the risks to confidentiality, I will keep any and all hard copies of data in a locked file. Any computer data will be stored in password protected files.

I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you before I share it.

Financial Information

Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating in this study.

What are my rights as a research participant?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. If at any time and for any reason, you would prefer not to participate in this study, please feel free not to. If at any time you would like to stop participating, please tell me. You may withdraw from this study at any time, and you will not be penalized in any way for deciding to stop participation.

If you decide to withdraw from this study, any information collected from you will not be used if you decide to withdraw before finishing the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns about this research study?

If you have questions about this research, you may contact the me at:

Tim Plath
Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School
45638 561st Ave.
New Ulm, MN 56073
platht@csp.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the following office at Concordia University:

Dr. Steven Ross - IRB
Concordia University
1282 Concordia Ave.
St. Paul, MN 55104
Telephone: 651-603-6193

Consent

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form.

Consent for use of contact information to be contacted about participation in other studies
Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

_____ (initial) I agree to allow the researchers to use my contact information collected during this study to contact me about participating in future research studies.

_____ (initial) I do not agree to allow the researchers to use my contact information collected during this study to contact me about participating in future research studies.

_____

Participant's Name (printed)

_____

Participant's Signature   (By typing in your name, you are giving consent to your participation in this research.)

_____

Date

Please click "Save as" and then add your last name to the document title. Email it back to:

tplath@mvlhs.org

Once I receive your consent, I will send you the survey.

Appendix D

Research Survey

My name is Tim Plath and I am principal at Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School in New Ulm. I am in the Educational Leadership doctoral program at Concordia University in St. Paul and am working on my dissertation. Your willingness to complete this survey and provide me with important data is greatly appreciated!

The purpose of this study is to answer this question:

How do rural Minnesota school superintendents apply the key findings of

Waters and Marzano's study on superintendent leadership?

Those key findings include:

1. Collaborative goal setting;
2. Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction;
3. Board alignment with and support of district goals;
4. Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction; and
5. Use of resources to support the goals for instruction and achievement"
   (Waters and
   a. Marzano, 2006).

Classroom instruction is defined as classroom activities and presentation of content that are structured, sequenced and lead by teachers (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).

Student achievement is "The status of subject-matter knowledge, understanding, and skills at one point in time" (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, n.d., p. 9)

School District: _____

Position

Board Member   Superintendent   Principal   Activities Director   Teacher

<u>Questions</u>

1. How does the superintendent collaborate with each of the following to set goals for the district?

    a. Faculty (including administration)

    b. Board

    c. Public

2. List two or three district goals for student achievement.

3. List two or three distinct district goals which guide teachers' classroom instruction.

4. What evidence shows the School Board supports the district goals?

5. Give an example of how the superintendent monitors district progress in meeting student achievement goals.

6. Give an example of how the superintendent monitors district progress in meeting classroom instruction goals.

7. List examples of how the district uses its resources to support student achievement goals.

8. List examples of how the district uses its resources to support its classroom instruction goals.