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Editor
AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice
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I have been editor of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* since 2015, when I served as a co-editor to Chris Tienken before assuming the chief editor role a year later. The JSP's mission has been to provide school leaders, primarily superintendents and other central office administrators, along with higher-ed scholars studying K-12 education, the research-supported content to help guide their stewardship of districts.

Our contributors have been scholars and practitioners from the ranks of top research institutions, graduate programs preparing teachers and leaders, and K-12 public school systems from across the nation, representing rural, suburban, and urban communities. *JSP* issues have included diverse voices and controversial topics, often around themes that reflect current challenges facing superintendents and their teams. *JSP*'s editorial team has sought studies and commentaries to help our readers better understand the commonality of such challenges, along with the barriers and the opportunities.

School districts are complex, dynamic, and contested environments. Those inhabiting them represent a microcosm of the larger society with its cultural and political influences and tensions. Leading schools require a diverse set of skills and attributes, including but not limited to courage, compassion, patience, adaptability, intellect, and curiosity.

It is presumed that *JSP*'s readers are curious about what works, why, and why promising initiatives sometimes fail. It is also presumed that both researchers and readers exit the exchange of ideas and the examination of problems, not only with solutions, but with more questions that lead to more research. This is the nature of inquiry.

Basic and applied research have served all of America's institutions: education, healthcare, science, technology, economics, and much more. Research that balances the theoretical with the practical has helped us to build the strongest economy in the world, lead in all categories of technological innovation, and serve as an international model in the sciences. The United States has consistently led the world in such economic indicators as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the global competitiveness index, the production of scientific papers, the number of utility patents for innovation, and Nobel prize winners.

Behind these indicators is a strong public school system that feeds into a world-renowned higher education system. It is a myth that America's public schools are failing. In fact, they have succeeded despite facing the headwinds of social and economic inequities

that have contributed to an income gap between the wealthiest and the middle- and lower-income groups. The United States has one of the largest income gaps of all industrialized countries, yet for many, public schools have been a refuge from such inequities, serving as a springboard to life-transforming opportunities.

Today, America has begun a new and uncharted path that appears to be moving away from a reliance on scholarship. The new administration in Washington has begun defunding major research institutions: academic, scientific, health-related, and higher education. The medical, energy, environmental, scientific, and education research sectors are among many being dismantled for reasons, other than "efficiency," that have yet to be explained.

Leaders of institutions that rely on a combination of scholarship and practice understand that to do the best work for our students, there needs to be continual assessment towards improving that which we need to do better. These are productive approaches to applying our research. Such leaders also recognize their responsibility to advocate for those we represent - our students and their futures. This advocacy relies on intellect and knowledge gained through practice and scholarship. That is the easy part. True advocacy depends on threat awareness and courage.

For superintendents reading this column, it is hoped that you have established relationships with your local, state, and federal leaders—congressional representatives and senators. These representatives must be held accountable to answer questions about the radical defunding of major learning institutions. These institutions are in place to advance and not weaken our nation nor make us less healthy, less secure, less prosperous, and more dangerously uneducated.

This is not a red or blue state problem. It is an American problem. No matter the state or region within it, all will be affected by living in a society that no longer respects the importance of science and research. There will be serious downstream consequences.

As curious, informed, and responsible scholar-practitioners, we should be demanding answers to basic questions about the dismantling of America's research agenda: *What are we doing? Why? How do we know or think it will work*? The answers should be founded on evidence, not speculation or hearsay about inefficiencies or corruption.

Superintendents have a powerful voice in their communities and beyond. Regional groups of leaders bring an even stronger voice. They should be asking their congressional representatives how *they* understand the current defunding efforts and how *they* envision an America without robust and scientifically driven research. Superintendents in their advocacy roles must reject broad, evasive, or diversionary responses. Educational leaders are experienced in guiding students and faculties through discussion via questioning that probes for clarity and depth of response. It is a moment to apply these skills on behalf of our students and our nation's future.

Many entered the work of school leadership understanding that the mission is to serve students and society. This happens by providing the best education possible through advocacy for resources and management of what has been provided. But the work is more than this. Advocacy takes many forms. We are at a moment when our school leaders' role as the scholar-practitioner is insufficient. Our collective voice may be one of the last guardrails to challenge and question our legislators about what has made America an international leader in the science of knowing and what is happening to reverse generations of

advancements. Now may be a final opportunity.

What makes the *JSP* so unique is that aside from some technical support from AASA, the journal is developed by volunteer editors and reviewers, many of whom are current or retired superintendents, central office leaders, building leaders, professors, and researchers. This is a labor of dedication to the field and our students. The reward comes from the satisfaction of serving those leading schools and their students.

As I leave this role, I want to offer a special thank you to Barbara Dean, who has been an assistant editor for almost twenty years and pulls the issues together after the editing and reviewing. She has brought insights, wisdom, and technical expertise to every issue.

Final Issue's Theme:
Leadership, Culture, and Continuous Improvement

We try to find themes from a synthesis of articles that are submitted each year. The Spring 2025 issue's theme of *Leadership, Culture and Continuous Improvement* was developed back in the summer of 2024. Its focus may have been prescient as the articles in the issue underscore the importance of grounding educational practices in research to ensure they are effective and sustainable. Specifically, the articles address such topics and themes as the synergy between community involvement, effective leadership practices, strategic decision-making, and change management.

By engaging the community and fostering culturally responsive leadership, schools can create supportive environments that enhance educational outcomes. Additionally, informed decision-making and structured change management approaches are essential for sustaining improvements and adapting to various influences and power dynamics within the school system.

Researchers Axelbank and Howick write, "It has become a bedrock principle in school administration that community engagement is desirable and even essential in improving our schools. In the current era of conflict over school policies and the resulting contentious School Board meetings, community engagement has become both more critical and more difficult to accomplish effectively." Parker, Brown, and Frazer contend, "Decision making at the school district level is subject to both external and internal influences and that the school district as an institution remains the main arena where decisions are made about a variety of features - from local educational politics and governance to enrollment and leadership. Effectively run school districts can be sites of powerful instructional change."

Cardona, Miller, Corrales, and Peters present research that suggests, "Superintendents need to be aware that principals who carry on culturally responsive leadership practices will create high teacher effectiveness, and sustainable school success. When principals develop their ability to guide a campus through a common goal, they can create high expectations monitored around goal attainment for the benefit of students and teachers. It is imperative that superintendents understand the magnitude of the relationship between school principal cultural proficiency and transformational leadership for the success of their school communities."

Finally, Flumerfelt and Ellis warn that "While the need to improve school outcomes is widely recognized and practiced for a variety of reasons (i.e, equity, the moral imperative of education, etc.), the journey into the creation and sustaining of change is something that schools and all organizations struggle with.

And because change management itself requires a space within leadership and organizational sciences, this indicates that change is hard to implement and maintain. It requires a framework and discipline to engage well." The issue's scholar-practitioners make their cases with evidence. Healthy systems function best when using it. Advocacy is an opportunity for today's school leaders to influence for necessary change but also use their voices to preserve that which benefits our students and society.

It is also what great leaders do best. Advocate!

School Principal Cultural Proficiency and Transformational Leadership

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between school principal cultural proficiency and transformational leadership. A purposeful sample of 166 school principals, employed in school districts in the southeastern region of Texas, completed the *Educator Cultural Proficiency Insight Tool* and the *Successful School Leadership Survey*. Using a culturally responsive leadership framework, findings suggested that a positive relationship existed between cultural proficiency and transformational leadership. Principals with high expectations for students, ownership and responsibility for student learning outcomes, and recognized presence of racism were more likely to exhibit transformational leadership behaviors creating implications for school districts around hiring and capacity building towards working with diverse stakeholders.

Key Words

culturally responsive leadership, cultural proficiency, transformational leadership

Introduction

The principal is described by Sturgis et al. (2017) as a catalyst, influencing to prepare students for a global society with transformational leadership (Burns, 1978) and a safe and responsive school where cultural practices are acknowledged (Bond, 2017; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Although there is no intellectual difference in kids before they begin formal schooling, research shows that students of different cultural backgrounds underachieve compared to their classmates, further creating an "achievement gap" (Cummins, 2015; Ford et al., 2008; Holihan, 2022; Jackson & Howard, 2014).

Culturally diverse students find it challenging to connect when their cultural practices are misunderstood, as a significant number of these students drop out before graduating (Gray-Nicolas & Miranda, 2020; Riele, 2006). A student's socioeconomic status and demographics will not be the only deciding factors in their achievement especially if immersed in effective instruction (Arneback & Jamte, 2022; Spring, 2008). Within the scope of culturally responsive leadership (CRL), studies reveal the importance of developing and analyzing culture and leadership as a dimension of learning and academic achievement (Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Smith-Maddox, 1998). As a result, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between school principal cultural proficiency and transformational leadership.

Review of Literature
Cultural proficiency

Incorporating cultural proficiency as the capacity for cultural responsiveness, educators must reflect and consider cultural awareness and diversity (CAD) (Buck, 2016; Cobanoglu, 2021; Gay, 2015; Welton et al., 2015). Similarly, Siwatu (2011) examined preservice

teachers' cultural proficiency and found that they were confident in their ability to teach. However, they scored lower in culturally responsive practices, where there was discomfort in aligning their teaching to understanding of culture and exposure to student disparities.

Attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning (ABESL) refers to educators wanting students to learn beyond their potential, understanding their students and how they express knowledge, and what student interests can make learning fun (Miller, 2011). Attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning are part of culturally responsive caring, which Gay (2010) described as the most effective in supporting students to learn within a diverse environment. Other factors of ABESL include motivating students to grow (Davis & McIntosh Allen, 2020), creating fun, yet rigorous learning opportunities (Montgomery & Rubin, 2022), and maintaining a positive view towards diverse students (Abdulrahim & Orosco, 2020). Cultural responsiveness is the state of mind that educators possess when addressing cultural interest and ABESL.

Educators who connect with diverse students at a level that shares attitudes, expectations, and behaviors engage in ownership and responsibility (Gay, 2010). These educators often treat students with respect, as if they were their own children to make them successful (Gray et al., 2022; Steketee et al., 2021). Culturally responsive educators showcase high responsibility for the success and failure of their students (Davis & McIntosh Allen, 2020) while keeping students accountable (Neri et al., 2019).

Diverse students who engage with inclusive educators increase their achievement, and vice-versa opposing views increase social

deficiencies in those students (Whitford & Emerson, 2019). Therefore, authentic "recognition of racism" by educators is essential because addressing bias within a school district correlates to growth in marginalized learners (Duncan, 2019; Verow, 2022). An educator who recognizes racism prevents racial bias (Russell et al., 2019), cultural racism (Nardi et al., 2020), and preventing institutional racism (Elias & Paradies, 2021).

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership started with Burns (1978), who set concepts of effective leadership behaviors that are transformational in nature. Burns (1978) deduced that leaders and their followers influence each other to achieve success and raise motivation. A transformational leader reshapes culture by increasing inspiration and setting direction towards a shared goal (Allen et al., 2015; Ibarra, 2008; Kitur et al., 2020; Raolina et al., 2021; Sturgis et al., 2017; Suraya & Yunus, 2012).

School leaders who define a common goal, create an instructional climate that builds teacher capacity producing resilient environments increasing job performance and leading to improvement. (Chen & Yang, 2022; Danbaba & Panshak, 2021; Mullen et al., 2021; Raolina et al., 2021; Sebastian et al., 2016).

Principals that build capacity share tasks and responsibilities while motivating colleagues to work effectively and efficiently to achieve goals. This leadership behavior is crucial within campus culture as flexible teachers can beat all obstacles (Mullen et al., 2021). The principal's ability to be competitive and support teachers comes from setting policy that is cognizant of diverse thinking in developing effective schools especially connected the ability to redesign the

organization with the amount of trust the teachers had on campus with their principal (Coban et al., 2020; Khusni & Mahmudah, 2020). Research elucidates a successful redesign involving good relationships with stakeholders, being ethical and building towards instruction while choosing to work in conditions that are collaborative (Liu, 2021; Schrik & Akinyi-Wasonga, 2019).

Cultural proficiency and transformational leadership

When defining CRL studies reveal the importance of developing and analyzing leadership as a dimension of cultural responsiveness for the success of students (Cardona, 2023; Gorski, 2016; Lewis Chiu et al., 2017).

Leaders who connect with minoritized youth, show pride in their community, and meet their cultural needs become involved in resolving inequities simply by acknowledging cultural diversity (Hanson et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). Miller (2020) suggests leaders must recognize students' diversity as an asset rather than a burden and analyze the intersectionality of their race and daily self-awareness.

Communities of students have been targeted through injustices and can be supported through the creation of school level culturally responsive spaces (Lomotey, 2019). found Principal leadership behaviors such as (a) reflection and adjustment by correcting her own biases, (b) using data-driven decision-making to support the campus vision, (c) cultivating diversity within her campus by being an obstacle to oppression systems, and (d) always prioritizing the needs of her diverse parents and students helped build a culturally responsive environment at school (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Madhlangobe & Gordon.

2012. Principals who acknowledge students' cultural needs are likely to have a greater influence on their campus when they lead.

Theoretical Framework

Culturally responsive leadership incorporates leadership philosophies, methods, and policies that create inclusive learning environments for students and families from marginalized backgrounds (Khalifa et al., 2016). It was initially framed from a lens of cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 1994).

Culturally responsive leadership requires that school principals understand and emphasize high expectations for student achievement (Johnson et al., 2011; Young, 2010), infusing into the curriculum the history, principles, and cultural understanding of the students' lived experiences (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Howard, 2001), cultivating the social and political mindfulness (Hernandez et al., 2013; Jackson, 2011), and creating culturally aware leaders (Gorski, 2016; Lewis Chiu et al., 2017).

Cultural responsiveness and school leadership have merged into CRL as a framework where leaders prioritize high standards for student academic achievement, demonstrate ethics, support instructional strategies, and collaborate with all stakeholders (Bottiani et al., 2018; Burns, 1978; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2011; Khalifa, 2020; Khalifa et al., 2019). In addition, CRL emphasizes improving educational outcomes and experiences for all students, especially those historically marginalized in the educational system (Howard et al., 2019; Johnson & Fuller, 2014).

Method
Participants
The participants were 166 K-12 school principals in a service region in Southeastern Texas. Most of the respondents were female (69.3%), while the remaining were male (30.7%). Of those, 35.5% were White, 34.9% Hispanic, and 27.7% Black. The majority of principals reported less than 10 years of experience as a principal (83.1%), followed by 10-19 years (13.9%), 20-29 years (1.2%), and 30-39 years (1.8%). The mean administrative experience was 6.3 years.

Instrumentation
Educator cultural proficiency insight tool. The *Educator Cultural Proficiency Insight Tool* (ECPIT) was developed to precisely measure the cultural proficiency of educators based on factors and characteristics (Miller, 2023). The ECPIT consists of 31-items used to measure four different factors of cultural proficiency: (a) Cultural Awareness and Diversity ($\alpha = .878$), (b) Attitudes, Beliefs, and Expectations of Student Learning ($\alpha = .784$), (c) Ownership and Responsibility ($\alpha = .715$), and (d) Recognition of Racism ($\alpha = .918$). Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with the item practices using a 4-point Likert scale (1=*Strongly disagree*; 6=*Strongly Agree)*. Higher scores indicate higher cultural proficiency.

Successful school leadership survey. The *Successful School Leadership Survey* (SSLS) was developed to examine transformational leadership behaviors (Leithwood et al., 2023). The items selected measured four dimensions of transformational leadership (a) setting the direction, (b) developing people, (c) redesigning the organization, and (d) improving the instructional program. Participants were asked the extent to which they, as school leaders, engage in the practices with the anchors reduced to a 4-point Likert scale (1=*Completely Disagree;* 4=*Completely Agree*). Higher scores indicate a higher frequency of transformational behaviors of leaders. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients ranged between .91-.94.

Data Collection Procedures & Analysis
After IRB approval, the researcher obtained a database of school principals in Southeastern Texas, and emailed a link containing the two electronic surveys and cover letter. The survey responses were collected over a six-week time frame. Upon completion of data collection, data were uploaded to IBM SPSS. Research questions were addressed using regression analysis. To measure cultural proficiency, all four independent variables were entered as a block. A significance value of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance and adjusted-R^2 was used to calculate effect size.

Findings
Principal's ability to set directions
Findings indicated that a relationship existed between cultural proficiency and a principal's ability to set directions, $F(4,165) = 3.214$, $p = .014$, adjusted-$R^2 = .051$. Approximately 5.0% of the variance in a principal's ability to set directions can be attributed to their level of cultural proficiency. Only one of the four cultural proficiency subscales, *Attitudes, Beliefs, and Expectations of Student Learning*, was found to have a statistically significant positive relationship with a principal's ability to set directions ($p < .05$).

In other words, as a principal's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning increase, so does their ability to set directions.

Principal's ability to develop people
Findings indicated that a relationship existed between cultural proficiency and a principal's ability to develop people, $F(4,165) = 4.563$, $p = .002$, adjusted-$R^2 = .080$. Only one of the four cultural proficiency subscales, *Attitudes, Beliefs, and Expectations of Student Learning*, was found to have a statistically significant

positive relationship with a principal's ability to develop people ($p < .05$).

In other words, as a principal's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning increase, so does their ability to develop people. Eight percent of the variance in a principal's ability to develop people can be attributed to their level of cultural proficiency.

Principal's ability to redesign the organization
Findings indicated that a relationship existed between cultural proficiency and a principal's ability to redesign the organization, $F(4,165) = 4.793$, $p = .001$, adjusted-$R^2 = .084$. Only two of the four cultural proficiency subscales were found to have a statistically significant positive relationship with a principal's ability to redesign the organization, *Attitudes, Beliefs, and Expectations of Student Learning* ($p < .05$) and *Recognition of Racism* ($p < .05$).

In other words, as a principal's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning and recognition of racism increase, so does their ability to redesign the organization. Approximately 9.0% of the variance in a principal's ability to redesign the organization can be attributed to their attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning and recognition of racism.

Principal's ability to improve the instructional program
Findings indicated that a relationship existed between cultural proficiency and a principal's ability to improve the instructional program, $F(4,165) = 12.774$, $p < .001$, adjusted-$R^2 = .222$. Only two of the four cultural proficiency subscales were found to have a statistically significant positive relationship with a principal's ability to improve the instructional

program, *Attitudes, Beliefs, and Expectations of Student Learning* ($p < .001$) and *Ownership and Responsibility* ($p < .05$).

In other words, as a principal's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning and ownership and responsibility for student learning outcomes increase, so does their ability to improve the instructional program. Approximately 22.0% of the variance in a principal's ability to improve the instructional program can be attributed to their attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning, and ownership and responsibility for student learning outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that a relationship existed between cultural proficiency, principal's ABESL, and a principal's ability to set directions. These results are similar to research that discusses the importance of principals having a clear shared vision for schools (Gurr et al., 2006; Mombourquette, 2017).

The link in making schools successful is for leaders to be student focused, collaborative, and shared values. Principals that utilize data for student-centered decisions create the driving force of having high expectations for students. The results are also consistent with the findings by Brown et al. (2022) where a relationship exists between cultural proficiency, principal's ABESL, and a principal's ability to develop people. Leaders who are empathetic listeners and view cultural diversity as a strength in instruction created opportunities for professional development. Supporting diversity in this way further expounding on building teacher capacity.

Study results also highlighted a relationship between cultural proficiency,

ABESL and recognition of racism, and a principal's ability to redesign the organization similarly to research that found principals who believed all students could learn were more likely to engage in organizational redesign efforts (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020). As part of any redesign effort, Verow (2022) elucidates the need to engage educators in conversations about racism, examine implicit biases, and celebration of school diversity. The principals who recognize the presence of racism in their school are more likely to address it.

Finally, a relationship exists between cultural proficiency, ABESL and ownership and responsibility, and a principal's ability to improve the instructional program. Similar studies demonstrated that educators who took ownership and responsibility for the instructional program, rather than delegating responsibility to others, were more effective at improving student learning outcomes (Marks & Printy, 2003; Schrik & Akinyi-Wasonga, 2019; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

The relationship between principals' cultural proficiency and transformational leadership supports an existing gap that has previously been qualitatively demonstrated but not quantified (Brazill & Ruff, 2022; Demery, 2022; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Magno & Schiff, 2010; Wilson, 2022).

However, a relationship was not found to exist between cultural awareness and diversity and transformational leadership, which is in direct conflict with Khalifa et al. (2016), who claims it is a foundation of the culturally responsive leadership framework. One possible reason would be that school principals often think of their success as a whole, digging deep into individual cultural awareness and diversity, and not as a campus wide initiative.

Implications

As a result of this study's findings, implications for superintendents and school principals emerged.

It is important for school superintendents to understand that a school principal's cultural proficiency can be used to influence the principal's ability to carry on effective transformational leadership because this understanding can inform the selection and development of effective leaders in the education system.

This understanding can support superintendents in the hiring process of principals with a mindset of high beliefs and ownership for student learning. A principal's culturally responsive leadership allows them to create school culture that thrives in student ownership, supportive improvement and high innovative expectation within the campuses.

Superintendents need to be aware that principals who carry on culturally responsive leadership practices will create high teacher effectiveness, and sustainable school success. When principals develop their ability to guide a campus through a common goal, they can create high expectations monitored around goal attainment in benefit of students, and teachers.

It is imperative that superintendents understand the magnitude of the relationship between school principal cultural proficiency and transformational leadership for the success of their school communities.

As school principals grow to understand and value diversity, they contribute to the growth and success of their school community. In part, by creating equitable environments where marginalized groups of staff and students can be successful.

When principals have a high cultural proficiency, they are more likely to engage diverse stakeholders, grow positive relationships and interactions with stakeholders for the betterment of the school culture focused on diversity and success.

Principals who are self-efficacious in cultural responsiveness prioritize the development of school-wide supportive curriculum linked to personalized student interest, and their lived experience.

They practice inclusive acknowledgment and respect for all student learners. They develop teacher capacity and engage teachers in professional development to address instructional strategies with improved teacher job satisfaction and retention rates.

The understanding of the relationship between a principal's cultural proficiency and transformational leadership is crucial for their own success and influence in meeting the vision and mission of their school.

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Community Engagement Using Future Search: A Systematic Evaluation of The Wisconsin Experience

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Abstract

In the current era of conflict over school policies and contentious School Board meetings, community engagement has become both more critical and more difficult to accomplish effectively. By interviewing nineteen district superintendents in Wisconsin, this study systematically assesses how effective the Future Search process is at community engagement. The results strongly support the use of Future Search to positively and meaningfully engage school district communities. Nearly all subjects reported that the investment of time and money was well worth it; that there were many positive outcomes; that Future Search provided valuable input to strategic planning; that it was superior to other attempts at community engagement; and all said they would recommend Future Search to their peers.

Key Words

community engagement, future search, strategic planning, stakeholder involvement, collaboration, polarization, building trust, school board relations

It has become a bedrock principle in school administration that community engagement is desirable and even essential in improving our schools. In the current era of conflict over school policies and the resulting contentious school board meetings (see, for example, Robertson, 2021 and Carr & Waldron, 2023), community engagement has become both more critical and more difficult to accomplish effectively. The question about how to engage the community may be an obstacle to superintendents and school districts taking the steps necessary to harness the power of such efforts. While community engagement may enjoy wide acclaim as an essential tool for school districts theoretically, superintendents may be ambivalent about undertaking it in practice. When asked how they feel when they think of community engagement, 65 leaders of State School Administrator Associations created the word cloud shown in Figure 1. (Howick, Axelbank, & Bales, 2023).

Figure 1

While "essential" and other positive words got the most mentions, other responses convey more ambivalence: obligated, divisive[ness], consuming, vulnerable, agitation, challenging, torn, volatile. It is clear from such reactions that these district leaders have mixed feelings about what might be involved with engaging their community. In addition, one can speculate that this doubt may be driven in part by lack of knowledge or experience as to how best to conduct community engagement.

Some authors have attempted to fill this knowledge gap. Hands (2023) and Chadwick (2004) detail steps and methods that can be taken to effectively engage the community. Hands (2023) examines both macro and micro levels of interpersonal and systemic relationships in the districts she studied to build

a comprehensive model with recommendations. Chadwick's "Practical Guide for Educators" (2004) surveys various techniques for engaging a community and develops a generic four-stage process: frame the issue, identify constituent groups, understand constituent perspectives, and develop strategies to encourage constituent action. She describes possible ways to implement these stages, providing a sort of menu of options. One of the options she outlines is Future Search, the method we investigate in this study.

There have been a number of studies of specific applications of Future Search in schools and other settings (see, for example, Bailey & Dupre, 1992; Warzynski, 2004; Whittaker & Hutchcraft, 2002; Polanyi, 2002; Oels, 2002; Dewey & Carter, 2003). Our search of the literature identified two attempts at systematically examining Future Search by investigating a large number of Future Search conferences. Olsen (2011) studied the impact on the development of leaders who had used Future Search by comparing 54 leaders who had used Future Search in their organizations to 82 leaders who had not. She found that "Leaders who have implemented a Future Search conference in their organization do display more transformational leadership behaviors than leaders who have not implemented Future Search methodology" (p. 85). While examining leadership correlates with Future Search is indeed important, it leaves open the question of the impact on the organization itself.

A comprehensive study of school systems that used the Future Search process is reported in Schweitz, Martens, and Aronson (2005). They provide detailed information on twelve school districts that used Future Search for community engagement and future planning. The districts studied run the gamut from small to large, rural to urban, with a variety of levels of diversity. Each example includes the goals, process, and results of the Future Search.

We embarked on this study to systematically assess how effective Future Search is in fulfilling the goals of the superintendents who decide to engage in the process. We took advantage of an unusual situation in Wisconsin wherein a large number of school districts have utilized Future Search and therefore provides a ready sample.

We decided to use the district superintendents as the study's subjects since superintendents are the main decision-makers in a school district, and investigating these leaders' experiences would help other superintendents decide whether Future Search was right for their district. We will first describe Future Search principles and process, outline our methodology, report our results, and then provide some discussion and recommendations.

Future Search

Future Search (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010) is a method of planning that aims to discover the common ground that exists in multiple stakeholders and then harnessing this to spur these stakeholders to take action to address needs they identify in their setting. Future Search is based on four principles (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010; p. 5):

1. Get the whole system in the room
2. View the whole system before planning
3. Focus on common ground and the future, not on conflicts and the past
4. Self-management and responsibility for action

Get the whole system in the room
When thinking about which stakeholders to

include, Weisbord and Janoff (2010) coin an acronym: who A.R.E. I.N.? (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010; p. 48):

A   people with **A**uthority on the issue
R   people with **R**esources of money, time, energy
E   people with **E**xpertise on the issue
I   people with **I**nformation on the issue
N   people with **N**eed around the issue

The involvement of all stakeholders begins with the formation of a steering committee that plans the Future Search. This committee is made up of 10 -15 people and includes representatives of diverse stakeholders constituting a microcosm of the community. The superintendents interviewed for this research typically included these groups as stakeholders in their Future Search: students, parents, staff, teachers, School Board, local government leaders (e.g., mayor, council), residents with no children in the school, clergy, small business owners, large business leaders, childcare providers, and representatives from the local college or university.

Like Future Search, most methods of community engagement reach outside the typical boundary of the school system to include community members who still have a stake in the schools. However, interaction *between* the stakeholder groups is a unique feature of Future Search, not present in other models.

View the whole system before planning
Typically, stakeholder groups are very knowledgeable about their part of the system, their "silos." But when people only know their own part of the system, they are blind to causal relationships that are essential to the systemic ecology. The Indian parable of the six blind men and the elephant is a playful way to understand this problem (Figure 2) (illustration by Hans Møller, used with permission)
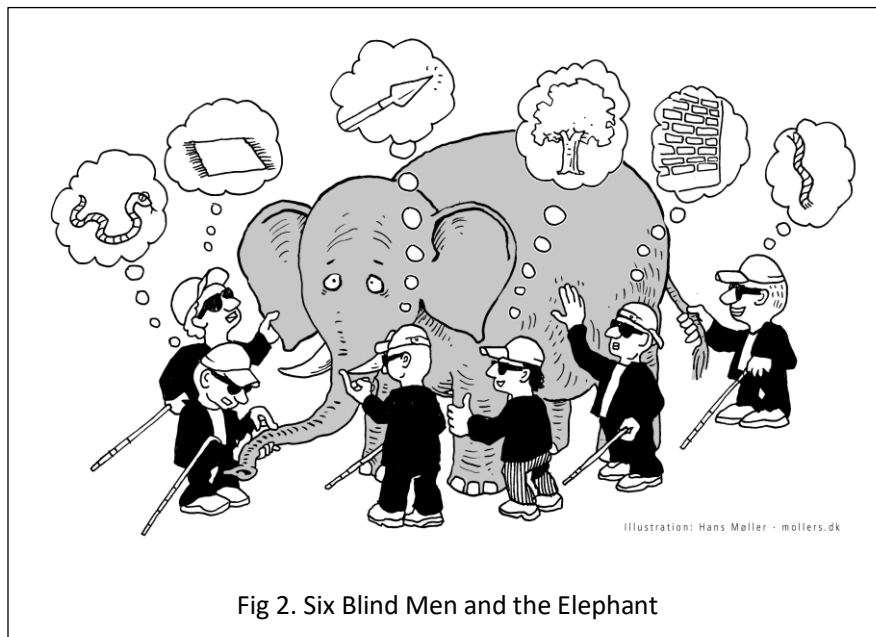

Fig 2. Six Blind Men and the Elephant

While each can describe a part of the animal, they don't understand the whole elephant or understand the interconnectedness of the parts of their system *until they start talking with one another*.

A frequent comment by the superintendents interviewed was that when stakeholders got together and talked with one another, their minds were opened to other perspectives and this greatly reduced polarization in the district. In turn, this lowered the level of extremism and created opportunities to agree on common priorities.

Focus on common ground and the future, not on conflicts and the past

Future Search entails using past conflicts as *data*, not to be ignored, but also not to be worked on. By keeping the focus on the future that everyone desires, creativity is unleashed, positions are softened, and people find they have more in common than they realized.

There were many pre-existing conflicts in the districts represented by our interview subjects. An example of such a schism involved long-time residents who were resistant to change and newcomers to the community who were eager to see progress and change. During the Future Search Conferences, these two camps found that they both had common interest in the quality education of the students.

And when they learned about challenges to maintaining or improving that quality, they were eager to come together and agreed on effective steps such as improving facilities. By focusing on this common desire, their conflicts faded into the background.

Self-management and responsibility for action

Most of the participant discussions in Future Search occur in groups of eight to twelve people. Each group is asked to select a facilitator, recorder and reporter, and these roles contributed to keeping each group moving and focused. Participants were asked to share these roles throughout the process and, in doing so, participants were responsible for completing each task in a timely manner. This process enabled the district leaders to fully participate in the discussions and empowered the participants to lead their discussions, reinforcing the principle "do not do for others what they can do for themselves."

If the four principles are followed carefully, the Future Search process results in a "common ground agenda" of usually 8-12 items to which everyone agrees (a unanimity model, not consensus or majority).

The participants also prioritized these, giving the superintendent and School Board clear direction for what the community wants them to do. Because the stakeholders create the common ground agenda and the priorities, the community has buy-in and strong commitment to implementing it.

Therefore, there is no need to "sell" these plans to stakeholder groups. The superintendents we interviewed commented that it became much easier to pass school funding referenda following the FS because they had a hand in creating the plan and were fully committed to seeing their plan implemented. In addition, when residents questioned why the district was taking some action, the superintendent could always answer, "we are doing this because the community told us they want it." And this was a reliable way to minimize resistance and obstacles.

The format used most often in the twenty school districts represented in this study takes about 12 hours, typically in two consecutive evening sessions of four hours, followed by the next Saturday morning for the final four hours. The highly interactive and

experiential conference is broken into four parts: review of the past, survey of current trends, envisioning a desired future, and discovering common ground. In the process of engaging in these activities, participants most often met in small groups made up of representatives of each stakeholder group.

Research Design and Methods

We contacted all twenty superintendents in Wisconsin who had used Future Search in their districts in the past eight years, asking them if they were willing to be interviewed for this project. The response rate was 100% and all the respondents indicated a willingness to be interviewed. An information sheet was emailed to the subjects, and they were asked to sign a form consenting to be interviewed and to having their interview recorded and transcribed. Four interviewers were able to schedule nineteen interviews, yielding data on twenty Future Searches (one superintendent had done two Future Searches, one each in two different districts). The interviews took 40-80 minutes and were recorded and transcribed using an online transcription service. See Appendix A for the list of questions that were asked in the interviews.

Results

Basic characteristics of the districts and superintendents

Table 1 shows the basic and demographic characteristics of the districts represented in this study, as reported by the interviewed superintendents (Table 2). Twelve of the twenty districts were self-identified as rural in character, five as suburban, two described as a combination of suburban and rural, and one classified as suburban and urban. To gauge the socioeconomic character of the districts, we asked what percentage of students qualified for reduced or free lunches. The range was 15% - 57%.

Table 1

Characteristics of the School Districts

District	No. of pupils	No. of buildings	Population- Community	Type of Community Served	% F&R Lunch	Racial/Ethnic Make-up	Political Make-up
1	450	2	1,500	Rural	57	95% White 5% Minority	Conservative
2	780	3	6,000	Rural	23	88% White 12% non-white	More Blue
3	840	2	2,500	Rural	30	96% White	80% Red 20% Blue
4	850	2	12,000	Suburban	<10	mostly White half Jewish	Liberal

5	915	4	4,500	Rural	50	22% Latino <5% Black	slightly more Blue
6	1,031	4	10,000	Rural	40	93% White 2% Black 5% others	Left-leaning
7	1100 [c]	2	8000 [d]	Rural	53	99% white Amish/Menonite	Conservative
8	1150	2	4,500	Rural	35	95% White	Red
9	1,260	3	5,000	Rural	35	88% White next biggest group is Hispanic, and then Black	historically conservative, but new residents coming from Madison, so now purple
10	1500 [e]	4	4,500	Very Rural	50	70% white 25% Hispanic 5% other	Conservative
11	1,900	3	4,500	Rural	10	very white, growing latino	Red
12	2,200	4	13,000	Suburban/ Urban	30	70% white 10% African-American 20% other	Liberal, Democratic
13	2,300	4	25,000	Rural	15-20	mostly White	Red flavor
14	3,000	7	9,500	Suburban	50	98% white 1.5% Hispanic 0.5% Black	Red, Conservative
15	3,176	5	17,000	Suburban	37	80% White 7% Black 5% Hispanic 4% Asian 4% Indian 1% Pacific Islander 1% unclassified	60% Conservative 40% Progressive
16	4,000	6	30,000	Suburban	17	80% White 20% POC	Blue (by 2020

						Election results)
17	4,000	6	22,500	Suburban/ Rural	21	85% White 6% Latino 5% two or more races	Conservative
18	4,500	6	40,000	Suburban	20	90% white 10% Black 5% Asian 5% Hispanic	Politically Conservative but socially progressive
19	5,200	9	30,000	Rural	37	94% White then 2 or more races then Hispanic	Purple
20	9,064	11	74,849	Rural and Suburban	35	Mostly white	Marquette - Blue Surrounding - Red

Note. All information provided here is based on the information each superintendent provided in their interview.

[a] Red is assumed to mean conservative/right, blue is assumed to mean liberal/left, purple is assumed to mean roughly evenly split between red and blue.

[b] 1 village, 3 townships. [c] 20% are transient each year. [d] Including prisoners, estimated 5000 not including prisoners.

[e] Very transient population, e.g., 100 students would leave in October and 100 new ones would arrive in April.

[f] Includes 3 tiny villages.

[g] This is the only Future Search that was in Michigan. The superintendent was responsible for an unusual area covering 9000 square miles and includes 13 public Local Education Agencies (LEA), one large district accounting for 3000 students, 1 public school academy, 1 private school, 16 towns/villages, 24 Townships, including one district with only 36 students.

Table 2

District	No. of Years as Superintendent	No. of Years in This District	District	No. of Years as Superintendent	No. of Years in This District
1	12	12	11	15	8
2	6	6	12	13	6
3	3	3	13	5	3
4	4	4	14	6	6
5	18	6	15	6	6
6	4	4	16	?	6
7	6	6	17	1	1
8	10	6	18	5	1
9	7	7	19	9	5
10	17	17	20	Four so far	3

Table 3

Year and Attendance at Future Search

District Year the Future Search was held No. attendees

1	2017	150	11	2015	125
2	2018	92	12	2017	120
3	2021	70-80	13	2017	over 100
4	2021	105-125	14	2016	90
5	2021	over 80	15	2023	100
6	2022	80	16	2018	100
7	2019	90-100	17	2023	225
8	2019	115	18	2023	145 evenings, 125 Saturday
9	2016	120	19	2017	104
10	2016	100	20	2021	75

Note. All data shown is based on information each superintendent provided in their interview.

All these districts would be considered small to medium size, with a little over half (eleven) of them serving cities and towns with under 10,000 residents, and the largest has a population of nearly 75,000. All but three of the districts encompass multiple towns, with one of them serving a very large geographic area made up of 54 different governing entities (towns, villages, townships). These districts all serve overwhelmingly white populations—nearly all of them were at least 80% white, with only two having about 70% white residents.

Decision to conduct a future search
Fifteen of the superintendents learned about Future Search through programs of the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA). Nine of them specifically cited the WASDA training for new superintendents, and four more said that they learned about Future Search at WASDA conferences. Some had previous experience with Future Search or the Future Search facilitator (second author D.H.). The idea to use a Future Search process in their districts originated with sixteen of the superintendents, while three district School Boards initiated the idea, and one inherited the idea from a predecessor who had started the process.

The rationale for future search

All the superintendents were interested in engaging the community served by their districts, to align their efforts with the values and desires of the residents, and this was the primary reason for using FS. In particular, they expressed a desire to hear from a wide array of voices in their communities. This comment is representative of this goal:

> *We need to get the right people here at the table and really go through what does the community expect from us ... And so [we were] really trying to gain clarity there and get everybody at the table in a respectful and controlled way.*

Some of the districts were facing decisions on constructing new buildings or were anticipating the need to put a referendum in front of their community for funding. A number of the superintendents reported that previous referenda had failed, and they saw the FS as a way to help the community support the referendum and to help make decisions about how the funding would be used. For example:

> *We were actually going through a significant land purchase. A lot of the conversation was about, what's going to be built on the land? Should it be a high school? Should it be a middle school... And I felt like we were really missing the boat, that we shouldn't be talking about what goes on the land. We should first be talking about, who are we, as a district, who do we want to be.*

A number of the superintendents had conducted or considered doing surveys and a few used focus groups or more informal ways to get input from the community. But the interviewees cited the limitations of such efforts, chiefly that they could not ensure that they were getting a representative sample of their community. Three said there had not been any previous efforts at community engagement.

Thoughts on return on investment

Funding for the Future Searches came from either general funds or professional development funds. Quite a few of the interviewees commented that they were at first concerned about the cost of hiring a consultant to facilitate the Future Search process. When asked about their thoughts on the return on this investment, they were unanimous in expressing that it was a good way to utilize funds. A number also mentioned the investment of time required, for example:

> *[It was an] investment ... in time. That became a pretty heavy focus of a number of my staff members, including myself, that had committed to planning and working on logistics. We invested a considerable amount of manpower beyond that... but I think it is a worthy investment when you consider ... that you had community members who were now informed and educated.*

Outcomes of the future search

All the superintendents we interviewed went into the Future Search with clear ideas about the outcomes they were hoping for. These are representative of the desires of the group:

> *... build relationship with community, identify what students need in order to be successful, [create] opportunities that will meet the needs and aspirations of the community and district, etc.*

The big thing was, one, to bring the community together… Secondly, to see where the board and the admin team's thoughts aligned with the community. And the third big outcome was to develop a strategic plan.

The interview subjects were asked to what degree Future Search accomplished their desired outcomes, and 100% of the responses were characterized by immediate and succinct expressions of satisfaction, for example: "Awesome." "Nailed that." "It was a work of art." "Exceeded my expectations across the board." Most of the respondents described ways that they were able to turn the priorities into achievable and measurable steps.

Unexpected outcomes

One of the common experiences of Future Search is that ideas emerge that could not be anticipated. This is due to getting people together who don't normally talk with one another, causing synergy—the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The superintendents we interviewed cited a number of surprising results.

I didn't know that the facilities issue was going to get the priority it did—it was the #1 priority. I also didn't expect the passion in the conversations—it was very real.

More emphasis on mental health - then they had some really good ideas on how we could even do it more. And even the kids had really great ideas.

I was surprised at how strong Social Emotional Learning came out from our community. Not just getting services in school, mental health providers within the school. They wanted something more. People wanted us to do more community partnerships, to use the brain power of the people in our community.

A number of superintendents described how important it was that students were included as participants. They felt that the community really listened to the voices of the students. And they expressed surprise at some of the students' suggestions and feedback:

Especially the high school kids: "yes, I got a great education there. But sometimes it's just really boring. You've got to do more to engage us."

The students wanted less technology. They wanted more paper and pencil.

We solicited any negative or disappointing outcomes and twelve of the superintendents responded that there were no negative results. One superintendent expressed disappointment that more Hispanic families did not participate. A surprising result that one interviewee mentioned was that academics was not prioritized higher by his district's community.

Long-term Impact of the future search on the districts

All of our interview subjects reported profound positive impacts on their districts that they attributed directly to the Future Search process. These included improved alignment between district and community, and the district representing the values of the community, represented by these sample comments:

We actually came together - very much in alignment in regards to what we really want to have outcome for kids and what we want our District to look like, now and five years from now.

We had common values after the Future Search, and there was clarity in those values.

A number of the superintendents reported that, even though Future Search is not intended to be a conflict resolution process, it nonetheless led to healing fractures or divisions in their community.

You always have your naysayers. And we purposely tried to invite the worst naysayers, the people that are always complaining about what we did or how we did it. I think it did heal some of those.

We had our own community members who disagree with one another, who [were] still sitting at the same table and having a conversation expressing their opinion, but doing it in a respectful way.

One of the most striking impacts reported by our subjects was the way that Future Search facilitated the community being supportive of the school district. This was most vividly demonstrated by the ability to pass referenda, even when past efforts had failed. This is particularly noteworthy because passing a referendum is not a stated purpose of Future Search.

The final outcome was a referendum ... And then we passed the referendum during the pandemic. In sixty years, they had not passed anything that would progress the buildings or the district for kids and they're learning.

The previous administration said we will never ever go for an increase to the Special Education millage [a type of property tax]. *And that was a value that came out of our Future Search. On May 2, we passed a $100 million millage over the next 20 years, money that will all go to the Special Education costs in our 13 local districts.*

Two hallmarks of Future Search, "getting the whole system in the room" and helping stakeholders to come to a shared understanding of their system leads to elements of the community learning about each other. This was seen as a very valuable impact of Future Search for our interviewees.

I think baked within the process was that kind of learning about each other. ... And as you have people in-person around the table talking to each other, I think that certainly builds empathy.

You have a lot of diversity within that room. - age, culturally, ethnically, professionally. A lot of different types of folks in a room. And it does allow for kind of hearing, exchange of thought and perspectives that maybe align or don't align with yours. So, I think that's certainly a good outcome there, that it introduces people to others in your community.

Given the inevitable turnover of district and school leadership personnel, and Board members, sustainability of goals and continuity across changing leadership would be very important for the stability of a district's schools. Future Search aids in this continuity, providing a stable set of goals and priorities, set by the community and independent of whomever is on the Board or in the superintendent's chair.

A product of getting diverse stakeholders together is that people talk with those whom they would not otherwise interact. Such new contact often leads to innovative and unexpected results. The experience of these superintendents confirms this impact of the Future Search process, particularly as

evidenced by new partnerships and programs. Some examples were a new learning center in auto-mechanics and diesel engines, expanded relations with the Chamber of Commerce leading to youth apprenticeships, a partnership with an Audubon Nature Center, and business partners for a technology education center.

Future Search helped in developing a strategic plan

Nearly all the superintendents that we interviewed saw the Future Search as integral to their efforts to develop a strategic plan for their districts. Most often the priorities that emerged from the Future Search became the basis for the specific action steps incorporated in the subsequent strategic plan. Superintendents found this enormously helpful to them, especially knowing that the community would now be supporting the actions needed, including funding and volunteers.

The impact of the future search on the superintendents and their job

All the superintendents interviewed for this study noted the impact of doing the Future Search on them personally and professionally. Most said that it made their job easier in some ways, but also harder in other ways. The Future Search made the path to implementing new programs and policies smoother because the community identified those priorities and therefore supported actions to bring them to fruition. But because of the transparency and accountability inherent in the Future Search process, many of the superintendents felt pressure to bring results. Despite this pressure, which may have made their job more rigorous, they welcomed the stimulation and energy it imparted to them.

In addition, some commented about the time and work required both before and after the FS as another aspect that may have made their job more challenging.

One subject noted the profound impact that the FS had on his feeling about his job: "I remember driving home after that last afternoon and talking to my wife. And I said, this is why I wanted to become a superintendent."

Bottom line: Would the superintendents do another future search and would they recommend it to colleagues? The superintendents we interviewed were unanimous in saying that they would recommend the Future Search process to their peers. The comments were characterized by enthusiastic endorsement, such as, "On a scale of one to ten, I'd give it a ten." The experience garnered from doing the Future Search led all these superintendents to say that they would do it again. Most said that after about five years the priorities need to be refreshed, and so that would be an appropriate time frame to consider conducting another one.

They also learned important lessons from their experience that would ensure success.

Find the right people for your design team. Get the influential people in your community involved.

Don't be afraid of the dissenting voices. It's important that you have the dissenting voices around the table.

Make sure you're setting aside enough time to get the work done. I think that it was a lot more of a marathon for prep than what I was expecting.

You got to trust the process. And whatever your community comes up with, that's the right answer.

Despite their enthusiastic recommendations, the superintendents offered some caveats. There has to be willingness on the part of the district administration team and School Board to act on the priorities that emerged from the Future Search. There also has to be a commitment to invest the time required—there is no shortcut possible in that regard. And if the superintendent is hesitant about being fully engaged with the process it would not work well.

Discussion and Recommendations

The experiences of these superintendents from Wisconsin school districts strongly suggest that Future Search is a powerful process for engaging the community to set the direction of the district, consistent with the values of the people living there.

In so doing, the districts could then rely on their community's support, something that was not always available in the past. This facilitated the creation of actionable strategic plans and eased the passage of referendums. New partnerships and programs were created that had not been considered or possible before. While these results are clear in this sample, some limitations of this study need to be noted: 1) a limited sample, 2) the absence of a control group, 3) and the anecdotal, as contrasted with measurable, nature of the data. These limitations point to promising directions for future research.

Looking at the school districts in this sample raises the question of whether the results could be generalizable to settings with different characteristics. Would Future Search be as effective in an urban school district serving a larger and more diverse community? Schweitz, Martens, and Aronson's (2005) comprehensive study of twelve cases of Future Search in school districts includes examples in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, and Minneapolis.

The range of district size in their survey, from 3,870 students to approximately 300,000 students, covers situations far larger than the districts in our sample. In fact, there are only five districts in our sample larger than the smallest one in their study. The results described by Schweitz, Martens, and Aronson are similar to what our subjects described.

Therefore, we believe that our results are likely to be generalizable to larger, and urban, school districts. Any time a study lacks a control group, caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions of causality. A comparison to a control group would be extremely valuable, and we recommend such a project for future research.

An examination of changes in student test scores, graduation rate, faculty turnover, parent satisfaction, or other measures of school performance would help assess the impact of Future Search. A future study using such measures, and comparing districts that use Future Search with those that don't would be a powerful way to assess the efficacy of Future Search.

Given that our data provides convincing evidence for its effectiveness, given that Future Search has been used for over forty years, and given that there has already been a book written about its application to school districts (Schweitz, Martens, and Aronson's, 2005), why has its application not been more widespread?

In Wisconsin the New Superintendents Academy program has been instrumental in sparking interest in Future Search. But such

exposure has not been apparent in other states. In addition, we asked our subjects whether they had any exposure to techniques of community engagement during their academic training.

Only one of the nineteen superintendents we interviewed reported having any significant training in community engagement. One described guest speakers who emphasized its importance. Others said that they sought extra training in strategic planning.

The overwhelming sense from these interviews was that the training they received did not adequately prepare them to engage their communities, a critically important component of the superintendent's role. A final recommendation that emerges from our study is for graduate programs in Educational Leadership to include specific training in effective techniques of community engagement such as Future Search.

Conclusions

The results of our systematic study of Future Search as a tool of community engagement for school districts, as reported by the superintendents in those districts, are unambiguously positive. The superintendents report that conducting the Future Search led to overwhelmingly positive results, beyond their expectations.

They report significant increase in community support for the schools, which often resulted in the passing of funding referenda. The districts were able to create new partnerships with other community organizations.

Divisions in the districts' communities were healed. The Future Search led to clear priorities that became the basis for strategic plans that had the full support of the community, easing implementation of these priorities. Developing these community-determined long-term priorities eased the transition to new leadership.

In sum, the superintendents we interviewed felt that the Future Search achieved the goals they had for the process, and unanimously recommended Future Search, and would do it again.

Author Biographies

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

I. *Basic Info*

A. What is the size of your district?

    1. # pupils

    2. # of towns or municipalities that your district serves

    3. # buildings

    4. Population of community you serve

B. How would you describe the character of your district?

    1. Urban/Suburban/Rural?

    2. Social economic status? What percent qualify for free/reduced rate lunches?

    3. Racial/Ethnic Demographics?

    4. Political breakdown?

    5. Are there any significant or defining fractures/divisions in the community?

    6. What are the conflictual issues in your community?

C. How long have you been a superintendent? How long in this district?

D. When did you do a FS? How many FS's have you done?

II. Decision to do Future Search

A. How were you introduced to FS, where did you hear about it?

B. Whose idea was it to do a Future Search– you, the School Board, both?

C. How would you describe the state of community-school district engagement before you did a Future Search?

D. What was the rationale for doing FS, what was your thought process about why do it?

E. If this was your idea, how did you navigate getting the School Board on board?

F. What were your anxieties, concerns, worries, hesitations going into it?

G. How did you think about the necessary investment of money and time? What was your thoughts about the return on investment?

H. Where did the funding come from to do this – what line in the budget? Other funding source?

I. What other visioning or community engagement processes did you consider (e.g., survey, focus groups)? What other visioning processes have you done?

III. The Future Search

A. What was the schedule? (how many days, which days and what hours)

B. Who were the stakeholders – what were the stakeholder groups that were invited?

C. How many people attended?

IV. Future Search Outcomes

A. What were the desired outcomes that you had for the FS?

B. How well did Future Search produce the outcomes you desired and expected?

C. Were there any unexpected outcomes, positive or negative?

D. What was the impact/outcome/effectiveness of the FS along these variables?

    1. Alignment between district and community

    2. District reflecting the values of the community

    3. Healing fractures/divisions in the community

    4. Getting the community behind the school

    5. Engaging the community

    6. Bringing the community together, elements of the community learning about each other

    7. Sustainability/continuity across changing leadership

    8. Innovative/unexpected results

    9. Helpful input to creating a strategic plan

E. What did you learn about the values of the community?

V. Long Term Outcomes

A. What happened next after the FS?

B. To what degree are you still engaged in the process started at the FS?

C. To what degree are community fractures healed?

D. How would you assess the impact of the FS on you?

E. In what ways did the Future Search make the job of superintendent easier or more difficult?

F.   Do you plan to do another FS? Do them regularly?

G.   What advice would you give a superintendent wanting to do some community

     engagement?

H.   What kind of training did you get in community engagement?

I.   How strongly would you recommend Future Search?

J.   What advice would you give to a superintendent considering Future Search?

Closing the Gaps with Leadership and Vision: A Case Study of Continuous Improvement

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Abstract

The challenges of school improvement are great for those serving as instructional leaders. The quality of the leadership strategies and methods used to foster academic achievement and accrue sustainable change do impact final outcomes. This article provides a case study of a district striving to achieve new benchmarks of academic performance and exceeding those goals through a specific method known as Lean which utilized Respect for People and Continuous Improvement. The strategies for school improvement included the use of a district Playbook with shared processes and standards. The Playbook's targeted outcomes lead to outstanding achievement results. This study provides a front line look at how to close the achievement gaps.

Key Words

school improvement, district playbook, lean, continuous improvement, respect

The importance of continuous improvement is well-established for the educational sector (Schmucker, 2001; Fullan, 2001; Sparks, 2018; Flumerfelt & Soma, 2012; Flumerfelt, 2012; Balzer, 2010). However, the need for continuous improvement can lead some administrators to misinterpret this strategy into the practice of "reinventing or realigning the wheel" and thinking that simplistic replication is the only pathway to creating change. In reality, a proven way to impact change is to create a learning organization (Senge, 1990; Argyris & Schon, 1996), which includes respect for people first, supported by demonstrations of the use of continuous improvement second. These priorities are significant in school improvement and are sometimes unknown or forgotten.

Through the dual lenses of Respect for People and Continuous Improvement, stakeholders can feel safe and valued and that change that produces better results matters. Therefore, they are more willing to collaboratively re-evaluate practices and actively participate in and own the improvement needed to close the gap.

While the need to improve school outcomes is widely recognized and practiced for a variety of reasons (i.e, equity, the moral imperative of education, etc.), the journey into the creation and sustaining of change is something that schools and all organizations struggle with. And because change management itself requires a space within leadership and organizational sciences, this indicates that change is hard to implement and maintain. It requires a framework and discipline to engage well. This challenge is a contributing factor to the traditional outcomes of educational change as having a low success rate for longevity and success (Horsley & Kaizer, 1999). Self-sustaining power structures, workflows and a heavy compliance environment for schools mitigate against the

ingredients for innovation and change. Saranson (1919-2010) long ago stated that this situation, "… almost automatically rules out options for change" (1990, p. 35). However, schools are now taking the challenge to grapple with the gaps between the hopes of school reform and the ability to engage in improvement (Dykema, 2002).

Before presenting a case study of how the achievement gap was closed in one school system, background on the two driving principles of Respect for People and Continuous Improvement are described next.

Respect for People

Respect for People is defined as a mindset and practice founded on the humanity of valuing others through meaningful inclusion, active listening and developing potential. This results in a disposition from instructional leaders in a school system that process/system owners and end users of a product or service determine value, not the decision makers or managers of the system. This is because these stakeholders, teachers, staff, parents, students, community, etc., can quickly identify where a process or service is not working or is working and help to solve these problems. The mindset of Respect for People, therefore, relies on collaborative coaching cultures and job/position security, whereby it is safe for valued stakeholders to call out a problem–and also be called upon to help to solve it. And, further, it means that identifying and solving problems requires data-driven analysis and decision making, not just inspiration or emotion, where the 'squeaky wheel gets the grease.' The practice of Respect for People translates into defined routines of safe protocols for stakeholder input, feedback and ownership of improvements. Respect for People is what the DNA of the school is about, readily found in the culture of the school. Examples include participative leadership and accountability expectations, regular internal communication and problem solving through

huddles, after action and problem review data digs. Any of these protocols are surrounded with feedback loops and accountability for reporting back; building trust; reporting with authenticity of data and results, and using observations where the work takes place as one source of truth, etc.

Respect for People has long been advocated for instructional effectiveness for instructional improvement to solve curricular barriers, instructional technology gaps and teaching quality issues, for example. Cologne (2022) provides insights into the value add of inclusion for special education students with severe disabilities and families. She found that the realistic versus the intended outcomes of inclusion are sometimes lacking. However, they were improved by removing the exclusion that these students and their families often feel from the school community. The countermeasure to exclusion is broadly found in Respect for People. In another example, Delgado, Wardlow, McKnight and O'Malley (2015) advocated for integrated collaborations for K-12 classroom technology decisions. Respect for People also has applications for teaching quality, such as highlighted by a study of Texas science teachers (Robina, Mundy, Kupczynski & Challoo, 2018) where it was found that it was more impactful to student achievement to provide training and support for teacher efficacy. And, further, that increasing teacher efficacy is more effective than reducing class size in terms of impacting student achievement.

The examples of the power of Respect for People in closing the achievement gap are numerous. And even if these examples did not exist, our human spirits certainly guide us into the way of working and living whereby it is internalized that people matter. Scholars and practitioners alike have long advocated for the development of social capital in an

organization as a competitive advantage for performance outcomes (Porter, 1990).

Continuous Improvement

Continuous Improvement is a mindset and practice defined as a fierce commitment to positive change based on cycles known as the Plan-Do-Check-Adjust (PDCA) cycle. The PDCA cycle was first outlined by Shewhart (1918-1967) as a statistical control method (1939). It proved helpful in organizational experimentation, to find optimal solutions through problem solving, testing and revising work.

It begins with identifying a problem through data analysis (Plan), figuring out solutions to pilot against targets (Do), examining the results of that testing cycle (Check), and making changes to either sustain the pilot or to revise it (Adjust). Deming (1900-1993), Shewhart's protege, then popularized PDCA through his groundbreaking work in Total Quality Management (TQM) and his book, Out of the Crisis (1982). TQM became a driving force for world-class standards in manufacturing based on 14 points of focus. TQM then opened the way for Toyota to become the leader in the Lean Performance Management system. Lean Continuous Improvement has since been used and engrained in all sectors, including banking, supply chain, healthcare, government, law, construction and education.

The application of Continuous Improvement is becoming widely accepted in education, such as with the Michigan Department of Education's Michigan Integrated Continuous Improvement Process (MICIP) designed to systemize meeting the holistic needs of students, followed by instructional planning, and followed by the process of funding (MDoE Website, 2024). MICIP is described as a mindset (Need, Plan,

Fund) using PDCA approaches, such as assessing, planning, implementing.

Two decades ago in 1996, in 2001, and again in 2006, Schmoker (1996) identified Continuous Improvement as best practice for change navigation in schools (Schmoker, 1996; Schmoker, 2001; Schmoker 2006). He understood it as a sustainable method of adding value to instruction.

Continuous Improvement is advocated for as the key to help schools bridge the divide between desired goals and current reality. Since it occurs when a shared commitment to change is established through Plan work, beginning Continuous Improvement is not difficult for schools to establish per se. However, the full PDCA cycle is often incomplete, impacting the full benefit and sustainability of Continuous Improvement. Fullan (2001) described Continuous Improvement as hard because "The big problems of the day are complex, rife with paradoxes and dilemmas" (p. 2). Further, Elmore (2003) delineated Continuous Improvement as a journey of cultural alignment of "norms and values" that impact instructional practice. When instructional practice norms and values are driven by measures of efficiency, such as with the cold cognitive model of high stakes testing, the journey is hard to engage. Ferrero (2005).

So, school improvement has been sought after universally for a long time (White, 1997), it requires an organizational change process like continuous improvement to achieve. Elmore (2003) provided that where time is given and trust is built around shared norms and values, embedded in continuous improvement, instruction will improve (Berry, 2011). For example, Schmoker (2006) highlighted the success of teachers implementing new instructional practice under the norms of "authentic literacy" (p. 51) and he further highlighted that continuous

improvement is not an event, but a collaborative and transparent process of meeting regularly, piloting ideas, refining them, and finally publishing them while training people to implement them. This is like the practices of Professional Learning Communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Smylie (2010) also identifies how highly regarded continuous improvement is as principled practice.

Further, Resnick (2010) urged schools to use good resource management, including social capital management, all levels (from district policy to classroom practice) for instructional reform to occur. She clarified that this has not been done widely in schools and the pesky gap between the shared commitment to school improvement and the ability to implement exists. Unfortunately, Resnick (2010) further stated, "attempts to design education organizations and test those designs empirically in a continuous cycle of improvement are still rare" (p. 195). Since continuous improvement is highly contextualized in terms of tactics, for an overall framework, school leaders can rely on Elmore's (2006) views as:

> One does not 'control' school improvement processes so much as one guides them and provides direction for them, since most of the knowledge required for improvement must inevitably reside in the people who deliver instruction not in the people who manage them. (p. 58).

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) also found that certain principle-based leadership behaviors are helpful to second order, deep, change. Again, this is not presented as a prescriptive approach to continuous improvement. Blankstein (2010) endorsed this conceptualization by describing

continuous improvement as careful, thoughtful and organic work fostered by collective reflection, collaborative work and leadership development. In short, continuous improvement is a method, not a routine, for closing the gap.

The Playbook

The interrelationship between Respect for People and Continuous Improvement does provide enablers to bring forth a Playbook of strategies for instructional success. This is because it is possible to establish a learning culture around these two principles, Respect for People and Continuous Improvement, when these tenets are used in an aligned system (Emiliani, 2010). This powerful combination, resulting in organizational learning, has been proven in other sectors, such as with Toyota's early lessons in organizational learning (Rother & Shook, 1999). And further, Weick's (1993) conclusions on high-reliability organizations and their sensemaking aptitudes, Argyis and Schon's (1978) double loop learning model that tests assumptions of system functionality, and Spender and Grant's (1999) work on developing organizational learning as an innovation strategy, provide great foundations for the Playbook.

Discovering the benefits and risks of using Respect for People in tandem with the rewards and struggles of a commitment to Continuous Improvement is a way to gain systemic benefits on many fronts, including developing "organizational intelligence" (Flumerfelt, et. al, 2017) something commonly known as "working smarter, not harder." In fact, this system of practice is the foundation for Lean world-class management (Womack, Jones & Roos, 1990; Womack, Jones, 2003: Balle, Jones, Chaize, & Fiume, 2017). Both Respect for People and Continuous Improvement are needed as a system. And if either element is missing or misaligned, then it is difficult to gain or fully leverage

organizational learning, and in turn, better leadership strategy deployment and better outcomes. That is why a Playbook based on these two principles is very impactful.

Case Study

Below is an account of an administrator from a growing district outside of the Dallas/Fort Worth, TX, area which serves just under 17,000 students. This administrator (Administrator A) learned to use the world-class tenets of Lean, based on Respect for People and Continuous Improvement. In the process, she enjoyed the benefits of organizational learning and the execution of exciting instructional leadership tenets and practices which got outstanding results. Presented next is her story of using Respect for People and Continuous Improvement, also known as the Lean Performance Management System, to close the gap.

Learning to Use Respect for People and Continuous Improvement

In her new role as a central office chief curriculum and instructional officer, Administrator A was able to take on the tasks of the entire curriculum and instruction system. Since she was transitioning from the high school principalship, she wasn't sure that she knew enough about curriculum and instruction, let alone if she could supervise this type of work for a large district. Her mentor, the Superintendent, however, provided her with the tools and professional learning that she needed to be successful in her role. As a 'Lean' thinker, her Superintendent taught her that Continuous Improvement would not be possible if leaders of the organization first did not build a culture of trust, Respect for People.

She knew her job was to implement his vision for curriculum and instruction and to create systems that allowed the organization to continue to evolve and improve. And while she was faced with this daunting challenge, even

though she knew little about systems in curriculum and instruction, she did trust her Superintendent and knew that he was experienced in using Lean for school improvement. The entire central office instructional team and the district instructional team were in pursuit of best instructional practices through the Lean Performance System and had been trained and coached accordingly.

In an interview with the superintendent, he stated that Respect for People and Continuous Improvement were foundational for the achievement attainments of the district in several ways. First, regarding Respect for People, the district developed all curricular work through the empowerment of the faculty by growing the knowledge of the faculty through collaborative work of developing, testing and deploying curriculum. This curriculum had to be aligned with state curriculum standards, but it was not purchased, a practice done by many districts. The curriculum was written and vetted by teachers in the district for better customization and learning pathways for their students. Teachers were paid for these efforts. The district used an inverted or flipped power model where central office leaders were listening to teachers, visiting classrooms and on campus working with schools to deliver quality instruction. Second, regarding Continuous Improvement, constant data reviews took place, and changes were made to get better results. Problem solving and adjusting became so commonplace that change was simply viewed as a part of the culture of instructional improvement.

Since everything was so new to her, both her job and her use of Lean, she selected to scope the district and then design a district Playbook as a framework for her work. Working with the Superintendent, this Curriculum and Instruction Playbook created a routine of work that was pursued daily.

These are the five key elements of the Playbook, based on enacting Respect for People and Continuous Improvement:

1. Write our own, district-created curriculum.
   This element was selected to ensure that students and their families were respected based on their learning needs and that specified curriculum, aligned with state standards, could be delivered. It also enabled teachers to be the process owners of curriculum creation and delivery, representing a very powerful form of respect through empowerment. As process owners, the teachers could also pinpoint more effectively where curricular improvements were needed and implement them through continuous improvement. The support, guidance and oversight of instructional coaches and central office personnel kept this process on track over two years as curriculum was developed, tested and delivered.

2. Develop and provide our own two tiers of assessments to conduct quality checks in our system as curriculum-based and unit assessments.
   This element was selected to ensure results from the curriculum development and delivery as the Check and Adjust steps of the PDCA cycle. When performance gaps were identified, the process was to keep the cadence of continuous improvement in place and address gaps through the teacher teams and PLCs. Blaming people for problems was not the countermeasure, but, rather, collaborative problem solving to dig into where realignment of curriculum and teaching was needed. This again demonstrated Respect for People by having the process owners drive process improvement.

3. Identify essential standards for each course in each grade level.
   This element was selected to create clarity for grade-level planning, teaching, assessment and interventions. With clear, simplified standards, the faculty and instructional staff had clear benchmarks to work toward. When standards were not met, then continuous improvement ensued and was engaged by faculty and building teams to identify where improvements could be made.

4. Create focus and clarity for the members of our organization.
   This element was selected to make sure that people understood roles and expectations. Through clear role and process depictions, ongoing communication loops, reinforcing success and addressing gaps, people could understand where urgency is needed to ensure priorities were clear. This is an effective way to establish Respect for People by helping to optimize efforts and time through clarity and focus. Also, as Continuous Improvement work ensues, these efforts of focus and clarity create pathways to get to problem solving that matters.

5. Instructional coaches and campus leaders implement quality checks at the campus level an information is relayed to central administration for support and guidance.
   This element was selected to make sure that overall curricular and instructional processes and results were working well and serving students. The basis for data-driven decision making requires taking data sets and analyses and making sense out of them, so that data utility progresses from data to information to knowledge to organizational intelligence. This ontology is ongoing and iterative work that underscores Continuous Improvement. It demonstrates Respect for People by ensuring that logic and rationale driven objective decision making.

The importance of this Playbook was instrumental in obtaining the improvements needed. Each of these elements are combined and examined in more detail next. This is followed by a presentation of results from the Playbook method.

Playbook 1: Write Our Own, District-Written Curriculum

For years, the district used an online container for curriculum. While the curriculum container was well thought out and a useful guide for teachers and curriculum leaders, it was known that the best professional learning that could be offered to teachers in the district was to involve them in the curriculum writing process. So, there was a task of creating a system to manage the curriculum writing process in order to create tight control about what that process looked like. Using Continuous Improvement and Respect for People, Lean process mapping was useful collaboratively at this point to identify the most value-added tasks and remove wasteful steps.

DuFour (2009) wrote about systems by stating, "a systems approach to school improvement represents the antithesis of a culture based on individual isolation and independence. The focus is on creating powerful systems that promote the continuous improvement of the entire organization" (paragraph 5). To have a quality process of curriculum writing, a systems approach of a field of teams of teachers for every grade level.
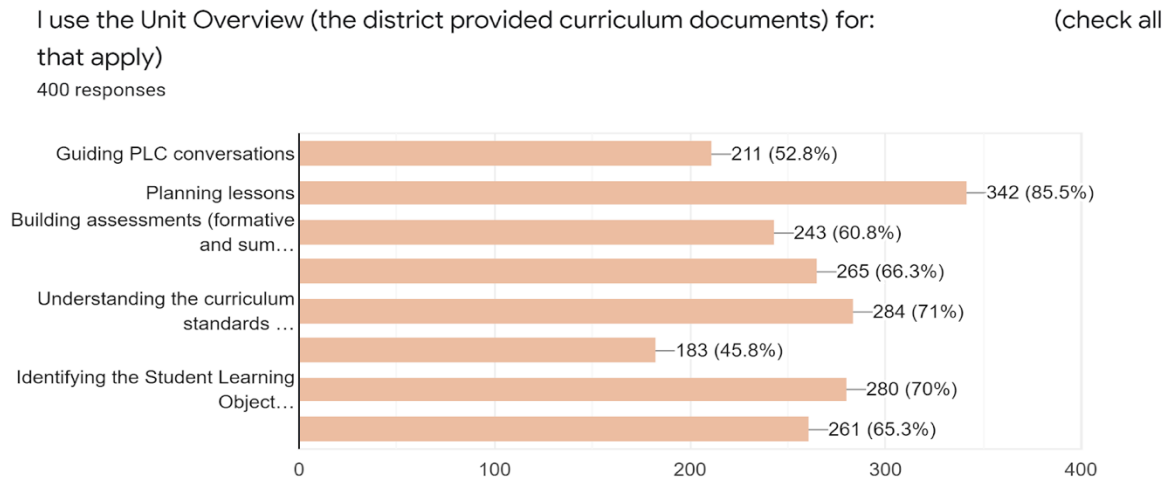
and every course in the four core content areas were formed: English language arts and reading, math, science, and social studies. Each team was small, with five or six teachers on each team with connections to building PLCs assured. For these teams to be successful, the tenet of Respect for People and the use of Lean Continuous Improvement was critical. Simply talking about ideas together was not enough, they had to work together driven by the Playbook founded on Respect for People and Continuous Improvement. Teacher teams were supported to continue in their work, vertical and horizontal communication lines were maintained. Also, to ensure the process steps were occurring to engage learning, they followed the process maps. And they kept testing the work in the proven continuous improvement cycle. They also created a common and straightforward curriculum overview template to be used for each content area using continuous improvement tools. Key descriptors based on metrics that mattered were used and arranged visually into the template. The team members were then tasked with analyzing current curriculum needs based on assessment data.

The vision for the streamlined curriculum overview document was for any teacher or leader in the district to be able to pick up the curriculum unit overview for any course in any grade level and be familiar with the contents and support/resources that were available for each course. This is one way they demonstrated Respect for People. The vision for the assessment process was that data-driven, logical, and rational thought would be used to identify both systemic dysfunctions along with root causes. Each teacher team was able to develop, test, gain feedback, reflect and revise each component of the curriculum overview template. This is how they engaged in Continuous Improvement.

In this part of The Playbook, they stuck to our system of tenets. Respect for People was extremely important in this process. This was enacted as: 1) our own teachers wrote the district curriculum, influenced by assessment data from our students and 2) the curriculum unit overview documents were streamlined for every grade level and content for ease of use. Continuous Improvement was equally important to the as well. This was in play as teachers: 1) developed and piloted work products and 2) sought feedback from teams of teachers on their campus, grade level curriculum and assessment teams and committees and 3) used the feedback to drive changes in each of the curriculum overview templates. Figures 1 and 2 below depict the feedback they obtained to ensure Continuous Improvement.

Figure 1

Survey Data from 400 Teachers Asking How They Use the Unit Overview Document

I use the Unit Overview (the district provided curriculum documents) for: (check all that apply)

400 responses

Category	Value
Guiding PLC conversations	211 (52.8%)
Planning lessons	342 (85.5%)
Building assessments (formative and sum…	243 (60.8%)
	265 (66.3%)
Understanding the curriculum standards …	284 (71%)
	183 (45.8%)
Identifying the Student Learning Object…	280 (70%)
	261 (65.3%)

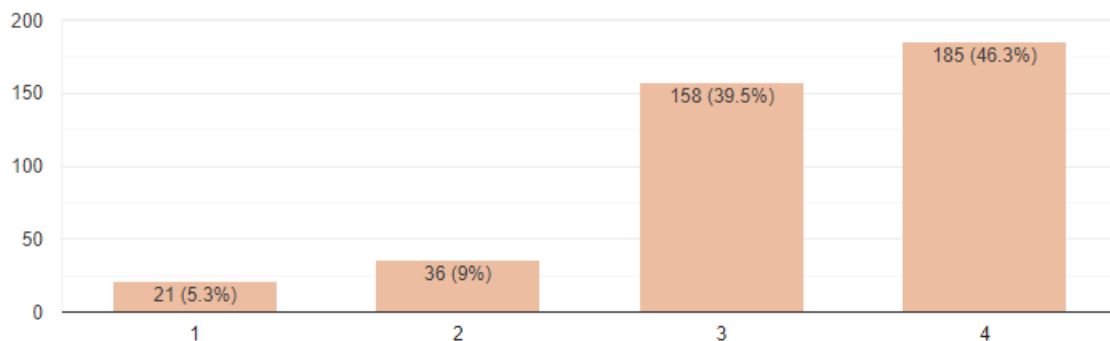How useful teachers find the unit overview documents with 1 being not useful and 4 being very useful.

Figure 2

How Useful Teachers Find Unit Overview Documents with 1 Being Not Useful and 4 Being Very Useful

I find the Unit Overviews (the district provided curriculum documents) to be:

400 responses

| Rating	Value
1	21 (5.3%)
2	36 (9%)
3	158 (39.5%)
4	185 (46.3%)

Over the course of the last three years, they created a district-written curriculum created by over 350 staff members. The impact that 350 staff members had on their campuses and their individual content-specific teams resulted in positive results in student achievement.

Through the tenants of Respect for People and Continuous Improvement, they increased the number of academic distinction designations, included in the state accountability system in Year Three, from an average of 9 to 25 distinctions. Figure 3 depicts the improvement trend.

Figure 3

Four-year Trend of Academic Distinction Designations
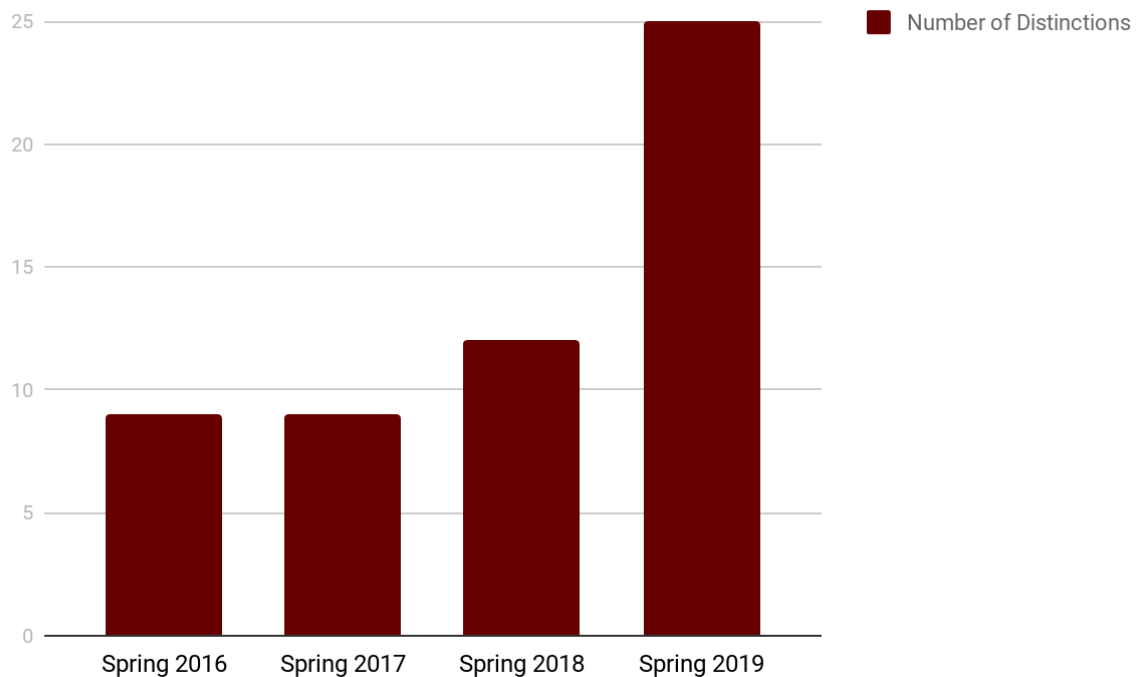
Playbook 2: Write Assessments to Conduct Quality Checks, Develop Curriculum-Based Assessments and Unit Assessments

The next element in the Playbook that the curriculum team tackled was writing assessments. While they wrote unit assessments, they also were tasked with creating curriculum-based assessments (CBAs), two per year for each grade level or course that had a state assessment tied to it. Downey, English, Poston, and Steffy (2009) refer to assessments in the following manner, "It is recommended that districts develop summative assessment measures that parallel not only the state's accountability assessment but also the district curriculum objectives" (p. 53). They used a common template for this phase of work as well in order to build out the system. The formula for these assessments was simple: 1) write a 12-21 question assessment, 2) only assess the most frequently assessed standards on the state

assessment that our students historically have done poorly on, and 3) ensure that assessment composition of items is 30% high rigor and 70% easy-medium rigor. This formula was specific and targeted. When conducting Continuous Improvement, the need for succinct descriptions designed to solve the problem at hand is needed. Their formula provided this guidance.

Each curriculum coordinator was tasked with creating one curriculum-based assessment to be given in the fall semester and one to be given in the spring semester. Over-testing students was never the goal; therefore, the Superintendent's vision was only to administer this type of quality check twice a year. While this concept was foreign to the members of the organization, with careful thought, support, and planning, the CBA process in the district became very successful. Respect for People was essential in this aspect of the Playbook. They had some teachers who in the past were not accustomed to comparing their data with other teachers around the district, and they had to be coached so that they could learn the value of collaboration. And relying on Continuous Improvement, these teachers anxiously awaited their assessment results to see how well their students performed in order to begin improvement planning. Figure 4 depicts how teachers used the CBA process.

Figure 4

How Teachers Reported Using Data from Curriculum-based Assessments

I use Campus Common Assessments (CCAs-unit assessments) and Curriculum Based Assessments (CBAs) for:

400 responses
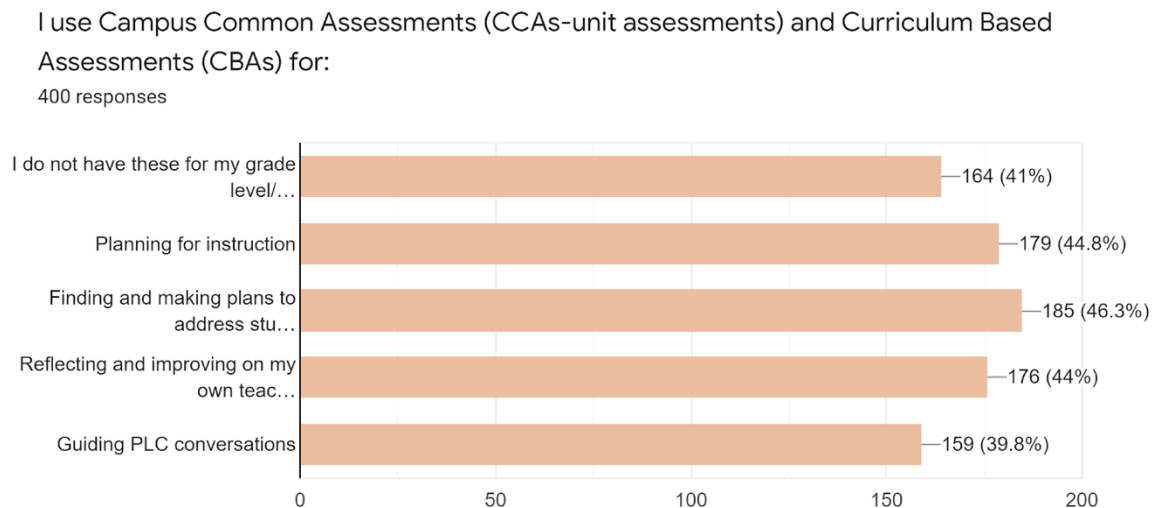
Playbook 3: Identify Essential Standards for Each Course in Each Grade Level

While creating unit overviews for the purpose of being the primary planning resource and guide for teachers has significantly impacted the system, our curriculum and instruction team still longed to provide greater clarity to teachers about what to teach and to what depth and specificity. They wanted to allow teachers to have greater focus and clarity when looking at their standards. Dufour (2009), wrote about how the systems approach to school improvement involves a process which he calls essential learnings. A process is put into place to ensure teams clarify the essential learnings for each course, grade level, and unit of instruction; establish consistent pacing, create frequent common assessments to monitor student learning, and agree on the criteria they will use to judge the quality of student work. One of the ways to approach this desire was to identify essential standards for every course in every grade level. Through a two-day process, they brought in teachers from Kindergarten through 12th grade to accomplish this task. Figure 5 depicts a sample curriculum overview document.

Figure 5

Sample Curriculum Overview Document

Academic Vocabulary	Differentiated Instruction & Planning Supports
Unit Vocabulary **place value**-the value of a digit as determined by where it is in a number such as ones, tens, hundreds, one thousand, ten thousand, hundred thousand, etc **thousands period**-three-digit grouping of whole numbers where the grouping consists of a thousand place, ten thousand place, & a hundred thousand place **ten thousand place**-the position of the fifth whole number from the right, the second digit in the thousands period **represent**-express indirectly by an image, form, or model; show visually **mathematical relationship**- **Related Vocabulary** **compose**-to combine parts or smaller values to make a number **decompose**-to break a number into parts or smaller values **compatible numbers**-numbers that are slightly adjusted to create groups of numbers that are easy to compute mentally **numerical expression**- a mathematical phrase, with no equal sign, that can contain number(s), unknown(s), &/or operator(s) **properties of operations**-laws or properties that apply to arithmetic operations	Unit 1 Resource Alignment Document RISD Additional District Provided Resources to Supplement Unit TEKS Clarification (TEA provided) Vertical Alignment Document (TEA provided) **Differentiation:** ● 3rd Grade Supplemental Aids ○ Students need to be taught how to fill in and when to use the supplemental aids. **Differentiation Scales: (linked)** 3.2A 3.2D 3.4A 3.5A LINK to Student Friendly ELPS **Technology Integration: (linked)** Online Games: ● Investigations Games

Red=Readiness TEKS, Blue= Supporting TEKS, Green=Financial Literacy TEKS, Black=Processing TEKS, Maroon=TEKS NOT Assessed

Rockwall ISD Unit Overview	3 Math Unit 1: Place Value to 100,000 & Addition/Subtraction within 1000
credit-buying or obtaining goods or services now with an agreement to pay in the future **human capital/labor**-abilities, skills, & education that helps to make a worker more valuable **interest paid**-money paid for borrowing money or making purchases on credit **relationship -** how two things or numbers are connected; the connection of what is taken in (input) and what is produced (output) **savings plan**-a plan to set money aside for future use **scarcity**-when human wants for goods & services are greater than the quantity of goods & services that can be produced using all available resources	● Interactive Skills ● http://illuminations.nctm.org/ Activities and Instruction: ● www.k-5mathteachingresources.com ● www.thinkingblocks.com ● www.mathwire.com/index.html Financial Literacy: ● Texas Council of Economic Education Lessons ● Free Personal Financial Literacy Book ● Financial Literacy Interactive Lessons ● Practical Money Skills

Those teachers, along with a facilitator and curriculum coordinators, were able to work together to identify the skills that build upon one another from grade level to grade level. Once teams of teachers identified those key skills by grade level, each team was tasked with identifying a select few standards to call the essential standards that would be identified in our curriculum documents. The intent of identifying these standards was for teachers to better identify priority standards that needed to be taught with greater depth and specificity than other standards included in our curriculum documents. The use of Respect for People included creating clarity and focus for members of your organization. With the number of standards that teachers are required to teach each year, identifying essential standards by grade level, by course, was one way that they could provide more focus for their teachers on what to teach and with what degree of specificity. And that method was the enabler for Continuous Improvement work. Figure 6 depicts a sample of Math Essential Standards.

Figure 6

Sample of Essential Standards

RISD Math Essential Standards							
Pre-Kindergarten	Kindergarten	1st Grade	2nd Grade	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade	6th Grade
V.A.1 Child knows that objects, or parts of an object, can be counted.	K.2A Count forward & backward to at least 20 with & without objects	1.2C Use objects, pictures, & expanded & standard forms to represent numbers up to 120	2.2A Use concrete & pictorial models to compose & decompose numbers up to 1,200 in more than one way as a sum of so many thousands, hundreds, tens, & ones	3.2A Compose & decompose numbers up to 100,000 as a sum of so many ten thousands, so many thousands, so many hundreds, so many tens, & so many ones using objects, pictorial models, & numbers, including expanded notation as appropriate	4.2B Represent the value of the digit in whole numbers through 1,000,000,000 & decimals to the hundredths using expanded notation & numerals	5.2B Compare & order two decimals to thousandths & represent comparisons using the symbols >, <, or =	6.4G Generate equivalent forms of fractions, decimals, & percents using real-world problems, including problems that involve money
V.A.2 Child uses words to rote count from 1-30.	K.2B Read, write, & represent whole numbers from 0 to at least 20 with & without objects or pictures	1.2F Order whole numbers up to 120 using place value & open number lines	2.2B Use standard, word, & expanded forms to represent numbers up to 1,200	3.2D Compare & order whole numbers up to 100,000 & represent comparisons using the symbols >, <, or =	4.2F Compare & order decimals using concrete & visual models to the hundredths	5.4F Simplify numerical expressions that do not involve exponents, including up to two levels of grouping	6.7A Generate equivalent numerical expressions using order of operations, including whole number exponents, & prime factorization
V.A.3 Child counts 1-10 items with one count per item	K.2C Count a set of objects up to at least 20 & demonstrate that the last number said tells the number of objects in the set regardless of their arrangement or order	1.2G Represent the comparison of two numbers to 100 using the symbols >, <, or =	2.2D Use place value to compare & order whole numbers up to 1,200 using comparative language, numbers, & symbols (<, >, or =)	3.3F Represent equivalent fractions with denominators of 2, 3, 4, 6, & 8 using a variety of objects & pictorial models, including number lines	4.2G Relate decimals to fractions that name tenths & hundredths	5.3A Estimate to determine solutions to mathematical & real-world problems involving addition, subtraction, multiplication, or division	6.3D Add, subtract, multiply, & divide integers fluently
V.A.5 Child counts up to 10 items and demonstrates that the last count indicates how many items were counted.	K.2D Recognize instantly the quantity of a small group of objects in organized & random arrangements	1.5B Skip count by twos, fives, & tens to determine the total number of objects up to 120 in a set	2.2F Name the whole number that corresponds to a specific point on a number line	3.3H Compare two fractions having the same numerator or denominator in problems by reasoning about their sizes & justifying the conclusion using symbols, words, objects, & pictorial models	4.3D Compare two fractions with different numerators & different denominators & represent the comparison using the symbols >, =, or <	5.3E Solve for products of decimals to the hundredths, including situations involving money, using strategies based on place-value understandings, properties of operations, & the relationship to the multiplication of whole numbers	6.3E Multiply & divide positive rational numbers fluently
V.A.8 Child verbally	K.2E Generate a set using concrete & pictorial models	1.3B Use objects & pictorial models to solve word problems involving joining,	2.3C Use concrete models to count fractional parts		4.3E Represent & solve addition & subtraction of	5.3G Solve for quotients of decimals to the hundredths,	6.4B Apply qualitative & quantitative reasoning to

Playbook 4: Create Focus and Clarity for the Members of Our Organization; Coach Leaders on Quality Checks

Creating focus and clarity for members of the organization is a primary role of the Curriculum and Instruction (C&I) Department.

The campus leaders wanted focus. They wanted to know where to allocate the resources of effort, time and funds, especially when campus needs pull them in so many directions on a weekly, daily, and hourly basis which leads to the discussion of control in the curriculum process. Frase et al. (2000) wrote about Standard One (control) of the curriculum management audit by writing the following, "If an organization is not in control, the likelihood of it being able to accomplish its mission is diluted." (pg. 85).

They further wrote, "organizations that meet Standard One of the audit are more likely to be able to make a difference in student learning." (p. 85). The need to identify focus areas (control) for campus leaders was evident. Each month the C&I department provided professional learning for campus leaders at a regularly scheduled monthly meeting. The intent for this meeting was purposeful and strategic.

If the one chance to impact all members of our leadership team was once a month, our team had to be specific about answering the question: "What do we want campus leaders to know, learn, and implement in order to keep the system moving forward in a positive direction?" For this reason, our curriculum and instruction team carefully crafted brief lessons each month. Just like a teacher in the classroom, they built a skeleton of a professional learning lesson for leaders, then tweaked, reviewed, and tweaked them again, until the final objective and takeaways for that lesson were so clear, that they could ensure all stakeholders would walk away having common learning and understanding.

These lessons were first prefaced with the Call to Action that the District Strategic Planning Committee created to empower learners to embody independence, value relationships, and achieve excellence as thriving members of a dynamic, global community. That Call to Action was then followed by reading our Vision for Curriculum and Instruction as the promise to provide a guaranteed and viable curriculum, with support, to provide relevant quality instruction for all. This strategy was built on Respect for People because the goal was to enable specific instructional leadership, not just expect it, as the Call to Action stated. It also required Continuous Improvement as the means to perfect the lessons to maximize the use of meeting time and learning.

To provide clarity to campus leaders, one of the key elements of the monthly meetings with all stakeholders had been to open every meeting or professional learning opportunity with these two statements. It was just as important to remind campus leaders, every month, of our Call to Action and our vision for Curriculum and Instruction as it was to provide clarity to the teachers on what to teach and to what depth and specificity.

Therefore, for the last three years every meeting with campus leaders was opened with all stakeholders reading these two statements. This technique is a way to engender engagement as a demonstration of Respect for People, and to remind our instructional administrators what Continuous Improvement requires--an ongoing and iterative journey of change. The tendency to become distracted and forget what the core values are, our goals, and the vision as a district was so common, they could

not imagine a better way to start every meeting. Not only were they consistent in the openings of the meeting time with campus leaders, who now can recite both from memory, but they were also consistent in the content that was provided to district leaders.

For Principals, Assistant Principals, and Instructional Coaches, they ensured that all three stakeholder groups had the opportunity to participate in the same professional learning around curriculum and instruction each month. It was found that the key to moving an entire system forward in a positive direction, where members of the organization shared a common understanding of mission, vision, and goals, that they had no choice but to ensure they were providing the same professional learning opportunities, monthly, to each stakeholder group. Over the course of three years they have realized that this has been one of the key plays in the Playbook. Not only was it key to coaching the Campus Principals, but it was key to coaching Assistant Principals and Campus Leaders (via our Instructional Coaches), by allowing all groups to participate in the same type of professional learning monthly.

Playbook 5: Instructional Coaches and Campus Leaders Implement Quality Checks at the Campus Level and Information is Relayed to Central Administration for Support and Guidance.

As an extended effort to focus campus leadership on the right work, the Superintendent facilitated quality checks once a year. Each campus leadership team is invited to sit down with the Superintendent and can analyze campus assessment data. During these quality checks, the Superintendent asked questions to seek understanding about the systems that each campus leader has on his or her campus about student achievement. He conducted 21 quality checks annually, toward the end of the first semester. The message that this sent through his participation in these quality checks is clear: the priority is taking care of students. Through these quality checks campus leaders saw Respect for People in action of the Superintendent challenging and encouraging campus leadership teams to be reflective in their pursuit of Continuous Improvement so that students were well prepared to be thriving members of a dynamic, global community.

Summary

In summary, the use of the world-class performance management system, known as Lean, founded on the tenets of Respect for People and Continuous Improvement gave this district the mindset and tools to operationalize a customized Playbook for solving instructional problems.

The Playbook, reinforced, measured and enacted, included critical strategies:
1) Write their own district-created curriculum.
2) Write their own two tiers of assessments to conduct quality checks in our system through curriculum-based assessments and unit assessments.
3) Identify essential standards for each course in each grade level.
4) Create focus and clarity for the members of the organization.
5) Coach campus and district leaders and implement quality checks at the campus level by central administration.

These efforts have provided excellent achievement results, improved the instructional culture and empowered them to a clear vision for the future.

It is hoped that this story of tackling the substantial, complicated and complex systems of curriculum, assessment and instruction provides insights into the feasibility of driving instructional improvement and achievement increases. The narrative here shared specific strategies that were derived from clear problem identification and problem solving. Many different strategies were used to gather both qualitative and quantitative data on the current state of various instructional systems, system-based needs assessments were conducted, and instructional staff were heavily involved in analyzing the situation to understand it deeply.

From this informed, data-based perspective using Lean mindsets and tools, this principled Playbook was derived. This Playbook for the District contained strategies tailored to meet the needs of this school system. The Playbook was deployed with a cohesive leadership team, operating under clear mission, vision, values and goals and using the Lean toolkit.

To simplify this narrative into replicating this exact Playbook into another district setting is not recommended, unless the context is extremely similar to the one described here and only if the problems needing solution are identical. Each school system is different, so the needs of each system should be brought forth using Respect for People and Continuous Improvement.

However, in any case, the power of Lean thinking and the usefulness of the Lean tools will benefit any school in any context.

Author Biographies

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Re-envisioning School: Lessons on School Reform from Montessori District Schools

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Abstract

Montessori programs in public school districts are successful and popular, but rare. This study investigates how district leaders make decisions about alternative models for school reform, using Montessori as a focus. This study addresses the following questions: 1) What are the needs in the school district that Montessori could potentially address? 2) What questions would school district leaders need answered about a new curriculum, like Montessori, to consider its implementation? Interviews and focus groups were conducted with 11 leaders from eight school districts. Using the lens of institutional theory, we suggest that the constraints district leaders face when considering alternative models are primarily normative and cultural-cognitive, but that regulative solutions can play a key role in addressing them.

Key Words

Montessori, innovation, curriculum, institutional theory, leadership, decision-making, school reform, school choice

Education scholars have learned that Montessori programs provide many benefits to students, but these programs can be difficult to access. By increasing access to Montessori programs, school districts could benefit from an improvement in students' academic performance. Students in Montessori programs have often performed well on measures of literacy (Rodriguez, Irby, Brown, Lara-Alecio, & Galloway, 2005; Mallett & Schroeder, 2015; Culclasure, Fleming, Riga, & Sprogis, 2018), math (Donabella & Rule, 2008; Brown & Lewis, 2017), and school readiness (Ansari & Winsler, 2014; Lillard & Heise, 2016). Montessori has also improved the academic success of students from low-income, Black and Brown communities (Ansari & Winsler, 2014; Brown & Lewis, 2017). Parents have voiced favorable attitudes toward Montessori programs and were satisfied with the impact it has had on their children (Hiles, 2018). But within the school choice and school reform landscape, Montessori is often excluded from the conversation, despite the research that highlights what Montessori can potentially do for families, students, and schools (Lillard, 2019). If programs like Montessori are demonstrably effective and popular, why aren't there more of them? This study seeks to understand how school district leaders make decisions about alternative models for school improvement and reform, using Montessori as a focus.

Review of Literature
District-level decision making
Decision making at the school district level is subject to both external and internal influences. According to Gamson and Hodge (2016), the school district as an institution remains the main arena where decisions are made about a variety of features - from local educational politics and governance to enrollment and leadership. Effectively run school districts can be sites of powerful instructional change (MacIver & Farley, 2003). In some cases, district-level decision making can be sharply influenced by the power relationship between district leaders and school principals (Xi, Shen, & Sun, 2020). Overall, traditional school districts can be important sites of reform, capable of leading the implementation of reforms before a state adopts them (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). This study is important because it seeks to unpack these dynamics in the context of decision-making for introducing curricula that could potentially aid in school reform.

Montessori school choice & parents
Montessori advocates recognize education as a social justice issue (Lillard, 2021). In the early 1900's, Dr. Maria Montessori's work with poor children in Rome proved that children can learn when they are exposed to nurturing environments that support their development. Today, school choice has been focused on parent empowerment, where parents have the right to choose a school for their child if they find their assigned school does not meet their child's needs (Berends, 2021a, 2021b). While parents want access to schools for their children that will improve their academic performance and well-being, those schools may not be in their local community. For many families, the challenge of school choice centers around lack of access to a better learning environment due to location or transportation.

The Montessori curriculum, often found in private schools, is also delivered in over 500 public schools across the US from preschool through high school, attracting diverse families (Hiles, 2018; Debs, 2019). Lillard (2019) articulates three extrinsic reasons for Montessori's longevity in the US: generally positive student outcomes, teacher satisfaction, and parent endorsement.

Theoretical framework

Institutional theory is a framework that helps us conceptualize the decision-making process that institutions' leaders face. Education leaders face the push-and-pull of satisfying multiple stakeholders with conflicting values on the path to appeasing both their local school community and the broader institutional community (Casto & Sipple, 2011; Scott, 2001). Scott (2014) asserts that institutions' organizational structures are based on up to three different "pillars" of constraint: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive (see Table 1). Regulatory processes revolve around the action of establishing rules, examining others' conformity to them, and dictating rewards or punishments to influence future behavior. The regulative pillar holds the central ingredients of force, sanctions or rewards, and expedient responses which in turn undergird the concept of authority. The normative pillar defines goals and designates appropriate ways to pursue them. It represents the coupling of values and norms. Values represent the comparison of existing structures or behaviors with the preferred or desirable construction of standards. Norms define legitimate means to pursue valued results and specify how things should be done (Scott, 2014). Next, the cultural-cognitive aspect of institutions "stresses the central role played by the socially mediated construction of a common framework of meanings" (p.69). We leverage this conceptual framework to understand district leaders' perceptions of Montessori and their thoughts, questions, and concerns about implementing a model like Montessori.

Table 1

Three Pillars of Institutions (adapted from Scott, 2014, p.60)

	Regulative	Normative	Cultural-Cognitive
Basis of legitimacy	Legally sanctioned	Morally governed	Comprehensible Recognizable Culturally supported
Logic	Instrumentality	Appropriateness	Orthodoxy
Indicators	Rules	Certification	Common beliefs
	Laws Sanctions	Accreditation	Shared logics of action
			Isomorphism

Methods

We conducted an interview study (Roulston, 2010) to strengthen our understanding of school district leaders' perceptions of the Montessori curriculum. Our specific research questions were:

1.) *What are the needs in the school district that Montessori could potentially address?*
2.) *What questions would school district leaders need answered about a new curriculum, like Montessori, in order to consider its implementation (i.e. child outcomes data, logistics, financing, school readiness data, etc.)?*

The study included 11 leaders from 8 school districts that do and do not have public Montessori programs (see Table 2). The participants took part in virtual/remote focus groups and interviews representing districts from each of five geographic regions (see Table 3).

Table 2

Focus Group (FG) Data Collection

		Mid-Atlantic	West	Southeast	Midwest	Northeast
Districts without Montessori	Before lit. review	FG #1				FG#7
	After lit. review	FG #2				
Districts with Montessori		FG #3	FG #4	FG #5	FG#6	

Table 3

Interview Data Sources

Region	District	Participants	Status of Montessori
Mid-Atlantic	Cherry-Blossom Public Schools	Ms. Flowers	Existing Montessori
	Rosebush Public Schools	Dr. Barry	Existing Montessori
	Bayside County	Dr. Wilson	No Montessori
Southeast	Sunflower County Public Schools	Ms. Nelson	Existing Montessori
	Marigold County Public Schools	Dr. Gordon	Existing Montessori
Midwest	Emerald City Public Schools	Dr. Payton	New Montessori program
West	Harrington Public Schools	Ms. Osborne; Ms. Dexter; Mr. Ross; Ms. Gonzalez	Existing Montessori
Northeast	Seaside Public Schools	Dr. Hopkins	Considered Montessori, decided not to proceed

Data collection

Focus group interview protocols can be found in Appendix A. For participants from districts with public Montessori, the one focus group interview per region included consideration of the needs Montessori fulfills in the district as well as the process, implementation, and supports that are involved with operating a district Montessori program.

For the districts without public Montessori, we designed a 2-part interview process. After the first interview, the participant received a literature review sharing the history, objectives, and effectiveness of Montessori programs. The second interview captured changes to the participant's thinking after the participant read about Montessori outcomes. In practice, we only implemented this two-part focus group process with one of our two non-Montessori districts, because the participant from the second district was already deeply familiar with Montessori education.

Participant recruitment strategies included convenience sampling where the researchers leveraged professional networks for targeted selection. Targeted school district leaders included Directors of Innovation, Early Learning/Childhood Education, Curriculum and Instruction, and Head Start, and similar roles.

Data analysis

Focus groups and interviews lasted 45 minutes to one hour. Using Atlas.ti, codes from the transcribed interviews were grouped and refined to address the research questions. Codes were then categorized into subthemes representing the participants' dispositions towards Montessori, public schools, and implications for implementing a new curriculum with community stakeholders. From the subthemes, we synthesized the saturated codes to form overarching themes which we address in the Results section.

Results

School districts' needs that Montessori could potentially address

In sharing their perceptions of and experiences with Montessori, district leaders spoke about specific problems Montessori could address, as well as benefits or potential benefits such a program could bring to their districts.

The need for post-pandemic support

Several leaders discussed the potential of Montessori to mitigate the negative effects of the COVID pandemic. As they work to support students' learning despite pandemic learning loss, some districts are recentering the need to support the whole child, including social-emotional learning in the school setting.

Because Montessori education moves at each child's pace and offers opportunities to be active in a constructive way, it was seen as having the potential to support improved behavior and academic skills after the isolation and academic losses of the COVID-19 school shutdowns. Other participants spoke about Montessori as a way to help children develop executive functions, which they perceive as greatly needed after multiple years of distance learning.

The need to strengthen academics

Whether or not they currently had Montessori in their districts, leaders saw Montessori as one answer

to the need for stronger academics and a better educational experience for children. One leader emphasized the power of Montessori to strengthen the learning environment in early childhood. She discussed the gaps and challenges in her district's early learning program that she felt the introduction of Montessori could address:

> "We found that there were misunderstandings in teachers' knowledge about mathematical thinking and how to systematically introduce math concepts to young children … And within the literacy piece, there was also this lack of understanding about phonological and phonemic awareness."

She saw Montessori as a solution that would address these gaps in the district's early learning program and better prepare children for academic work.

Many district leaders saw Montessori helping students develop the skills and capacities they wanted them to have at the end of their schooling experience. Ms. Flowers said, "I do see a difference in the way that the students in the Montessori classrooms are able to attend to a task, their independent thinking." The outcomes she attributed to Montessori aligned with her district's profile of the kinds of graduates they wanted to produce.

The need to retain families in the public school system
Many participants attested to the popularity of Montessori in their districts. In some cases, there are not enough Montessori spots to meet the demand from parents. Ms. Flowers explained:

> "The problem is it's so popular that we can't meet the demand. That's the big concern. But to the community, the seats are just like gold. It's like the golden ticket."

In some districts, the Montessori program is helping to retain students in the public school system who might otherwise attend private schools. "It gives the parents an option if they're looking for something different than a traditional classroom."

These three needs: for post-pandemic recovery, for enhanced academic achievement, and for supporting family retention, were the most significant needs district leaders identified that they saw Montessori as helping to meet.

Questions school leaders would need answered to consider Montessori implementation
Participants all understood Montessori's adoption within a school district as a multi-layered initiative that involved multiple stakeholder groups. When considering a new program or curriculum, school leaders reported questions and concerns across three broad categories: their own understanding of the program, the sociopolitical context for the decision, and the nuts and bolts of what it would take to implement the program

Leader understanding
Many of the leaders we spoke with had some prior knowledge of Montessori from their personal lives; many were Montessori parents or had colleagues or family members whose children attended Montessori schools. Though these experiences generally made them "believers" in the potential of the Montessori method, they recognized that they needed to supplement these personal experiences with

professional development. Dr. Payton described how he had some knowledge of Montessori as a parent to two young children in a Montessori school, but that he "really expanded [his] knowledge once moving to Hickory City around Montessori" because he "had to supervise and evaluate the principals and continue to recruit for those schools." This anecdote highlights the different level of understanding that is needed to engage with Montessori as an educator versus as a parent.

Local context
District leaders also spoke in detail about how a new Montessori program would need to be planned and implemented within their specific geographic, political, and district contexts. Leaders have to consider what's going on in their district and their community; how will this program fit with existing initiatives and priorities? How will the community respond? Leaders spoke about Montessori as potentially dovetailing with existing district initiatives around school choice, early childhood, and equity. Indeed, Dr. Payton described his district's new Montessori program specifically as a tactic to combat historical inequities:

> "So in our equity policy, it really clearly spells out that we will dismantle and disrupt systems, processes, and procedures that we have set up that continuously create advantages for some and disadvantaging others with the ultimate goal of ensuring that student outcomes can no longer be predicated on race, socioeconomic status, or any other marginalized identities…Most public school systems that have public Montessori, it's traditionally a signature school or magnet school. The way ours is set up, it's a neighborhood school… It's our school with our highest number of free and reduced lunch families in that area."

This leader views his district's nascent Montessori program as a tool to increase access to quality early learning experiences for an underserved community. However, in Ridgeview, Dr. Wilson indicated that questions of access were part of the reason why the district decided *not* to launch a Montessori program. His district is geographically divided into three zones, with no transportation provided across zones.

A Montessori program in any one zone would not have been accessible to students in the other two zones unless they could provide their own transportation—a situation which would create disparities in access. Thus, district leaders can view the idea of a Montessori program entirely differently, based on their local contexts.

Funding
Part of the local context includes funding possibilities and constraints, which district leaders described as a significant factor in their decision-making.

Virtually all of our participants described creative approaches to funding existing or prospective Montessori programs. Leaders cited the substantial cost of purchasing a classroom's worth of Montessori materials, as well as the ongoing cost of staffing Montessori classrooms with two adults. Funding for teacher training was also a concern.

Funding needs for implementing or expanding Montessori may be similar, but solutions vary from district to district. Participants described a wide variety of potential funding sources for Montessori programs: Head Start funds, Race to the Top money, capital funds, grants magnet school

funding, state funds, and local funds. Our conversations with district leaders indicate that while funding district Montessori programs can be done, it isn't easy, and the path to success varies across districts.

Stakeholder perspectives
District leaders named a variety of stakeholder groups they would consult about a prospective Montessori program, consisting largely of educators at various levels of the district hierarchy. Dr. Wilson described the need to enlist support from leaders in various district departments: "You have to make sure that you have the CFO on board as well as, you have to have… Curriculum and Instruction."

Teachers came up as a particularly important stakeholder group. In attempting to bring Montessori to Seaside, Dr. Hopkins devoted extensive time and energy to winning over the teachers in her district's existing early childhood programs: "We included our center-based programs in part of that process. I had to get the buy-in from the public school teachers first."

None of the leaders we spoke with described families as playing a significant role in decision-making around curriculum. However, participants consistently described a need for parents to develop understanding of Montessori for the program to succeed.

Dr. Payton of Emerald City Public Schools knew that parents' approval would hinge on their understanding of Montessori and its potential benefits. His district has implemented "Parent Nights" where parents can learn what goes on in a Montessori classroom. When asked about the parent and community response, Dr. Payton described initial suspicion giving way to enthusiasm:

"Initially there was a small amount of feedback, thinking that we were trying to bring a charter school to Emerald City. And so continuously communicating that [the Montessori program is part of our] public school system…It's not a magnet or signature school, it's for the Springfield families. And I will say the overwhelming majority of families and community members have been super excited about the Montessori program over at Springfield."

The Montessori parent nights served to inform and clarify aspects of the Montessori program and were well-utilized by the parents. It was important for parents and families to understand what their children would be experiencing in the incoming Montessori classrooms. When stakeholders come to understand Montessori, as in Emerald City, they can play a powerful role in determining a program's success.

Adoption and implementation
Unsurprisingly, when considering the implementation of a new Montessori program, district leaders had many questions and concerns about the "how." Some of these were concrete and mechanical, such as those around teacher preparation, facilities, and funding. Others were more abstract, including questions about how to make sure programs were equitable, accessible, and comprehensible for families.

Facilities

Unlike Montessori charter schools, which are typically organized around Montessori ways and structures from the beginning, school districts are not starting from scratch.

Our participants spoke thoughtfully about what existing structures and programs in their district would need to be modified in order to make space—literally and figuratively—for a Montessori program. Ms. Flowers and others reported that raising capital for new facilities would be a big and long-term project for their districts. Similarly, Dr. Wilson pointed out that carving out space from existing school buildings would disrupt long-standing feeder patterns and potentially cause upset in those communities.

These questions about facilities, of course, are tangled up in the questions about budgets and funding described above. In the absence of capital funds for new facilities, district leaders who wish to implement Montessori are faced with the prospect of disrupting an existing school to make it happen–which can sometimes create an opportunity for Montessori. Dr. Payton related that part of the impetus for Emerald City's new Montessori program was to bolster enrollment at a school that was in danger of closing due to budgetary constraints:

> "It really came twofold in terms of us looking at Montessori. One was dealing with our budget cuts as a result of COVID. We had a loss of enrollment. There were proposals to close schools. Our board took school closure off the table. And if we're not talking about closing schools, we have to be talking about growing. So that was one part of the conversation."

These examples suggest that while in some places, facilities are a problem for Montessori programs, in others, Montessori provides a solution to a facilities problem.

Staffing, training, and professional development

District leaders recognized that it was not enough to have a building; that building would need teachers who were prepared to implement the Montessori method. Leaders had questions about how to provide initial Montessori training for teachers, as well as ongoing instructional support and professional development. Other participants spoke to the challenges of recruiting teachers in the first place in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several district leaders referenced the need to support specialized professional development for Montessori teachers and staff. Even when district leaders recognize and respect Montessori teachers' need for professional development that is relevant to their pedagogy, they sometimes have questions about how to deliver that alongside district-wide professional development initiatives targeted at traditional schools:

> "We have a districtwide PD plan, and we have districtwide professional development seminars and professional development days, and all of those things that are not grounded in Montessori practice. So, it's always really, really challenging to figure out how do we support this small number of teachers when their programming looks very different."

To address this, Cherry-Blossom School District started a Montessori Institute, which supports Montessori educators during the district's new teacher orientation.

Harrington Public Schools responded to the same challenge by reorganizing the supervisory structure within the district. They have recently gathered all the district's Montessori schools under the direction of one assistant superintendent with Montessori knowledge, rather than having them supported by different assistant superintendents on the basis of geography as they were before.

Access and family engagement
Leaders had thoughtful questions about how to market and communicate Montessori in their communities, and expressed a desire to be intentional about making their Montessori programs accessible to those who could benefit the most. The theme of equity arose in every one of our conversations, and leaders voiced questions about how to ensure that access to Montessori programs was equitable. They were cognizant of historical patterns of inequity in the distribution of resources, frequently along racial lines. Their questions around this issue were very nuts-and-bolts, pertaining to logistical concerns like transportation and lotteries.

Discussion

We embarked upon this research to better understand the decision-making process behind specialized programs and curricula like Montessori. Using the lens of institutional theory, we suggest that the constraints district leaders face when considering alternative models are primarily normative and cultural-cognitive, but that regulative solutions can play a key role in addressing them. Scott (2014) describes cultural-cognitive constraints as "the common frames and patterns of belief that comprise an organization's culture … the organizing logics that structure organizational fields … the shared assumptions and ideologies that define" systems (p. 68). A district's openness to alternative models often hinges on whether leaders have the tools and information they need to challenge shared assumptions and ideologies about schooling (a cultural-cognitive constraint).

Another important outcome from this work is that teachers are a key constituency. The district leaders we interviewed voiced significant concerns about how teachers would react to a Montessori program in their district. Anyone hoping to build momentum for a special program would do well to get teachers on board, and to be proactive in planning for teacher training and recruitment. Teachers are influenced by both normative and cultural-cognitive constraints.

Their understandings of their role within the system can function as a cultural-cognitive constraint, and the traditionally focused norms and protocols within the district function as a normative constraint. Interestingly, regulative solutions (such as creating structures for Montessori-specific professional development) can push back against normative constraints within a district and make space for cultural-cognitive growth.

We did identify one regulative constraint: school funding. Unsurprisingly, the cost of a Montessori program was a key factor for many of our participants, driven in no small part by the cost of teacher training. The start-up costs for a new public Montessori program can be steep, and our participants expressed a need to be creative both in finding this funding and in messaging the investment. This communication requires overcoming some cultural-cognitive constraints stemming from beliefs about how resources should be deployed.

Conclusion

For many years, public Montessori advocates called for more research to demonstrate the outcomes the public Montessori programs can produce for students. Now that we have a critical mass of studies demonstrating how Montessori programs can benefit children and families, we suggest that a lack of research is no longer the most important barrier to the expansion of Montessori in school districts in the United States.

Indeed, Montessori is just one example of educational innovation that is supported by research, but still not widely implemented. This study highlights the normative and cultural-cognitive constraints that, too often, prevent educators from translating research to practice.

Our data suggest that both the catalysts and barriers for the growth of the public Montessori movement in district settings are hyperlocal, and local advocates will be best situated to understand these factors.

Although district leaders are the decision makers in their districts, a variety of stakeholder groups, including teachers and families, must be engaged to successfully re-envision school.

These findings can inform the larger conversation about innovative educational models as well as providing guidance to advocates working for the adoption of Montessori.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Interview Protocols

Montessori District Leaders

1. Please define your role and responsibilities in the school district and share how many years you have been serving in this role.

2. How would you describe the structure and landscape of your district's approach to education? How does Montessori fit in?

3. What led to the creation of your Montessori program? What challenges or concerns did you face during the initial implementation of your Montessori program?

4. In your view, what assets does Montessori bring to your district?

5. What holds you back from expanding your Montessori program?

6. Has the district ever conducted an evaluation of the Montessori program? If so, what were the results?

Non-Montessori District Leaders Interview #1

1. Please define your role and responsibilities in the school district and share how many years you have been serving in this role.

2. How would you describe the structure and landscape of early childhood education (ECE) in this district?

3. In your view, what is the purpose of education?

4. What factors are considered when deciding what programs or curricula to offer in your district? What programs are offered now? What role do families play in these decisions?

5. What are your top priorities for the 21-22 school year and beyond?

6. Tell us what you know about Montessori. Where does your current knowledge come from? What do you think about it?

7. Has your district ever explored or implemented Montessori in the past?

Non-Montessori District Leaders Interview #2

1. Tell us your perceptions about Montessori. Did the literature review change your views at all? How?

2. What, if any, benefits do you think Montessori would bring to your district? What might a Montessori program look like in your district?

3. What challenges or hurdles do you foresee if your district decided to pursue Montessori?

4. How do you expect parents and families would respond to a Montessori program in the district?

5. What questions or concerns do you have about Montessori that are still unanswered or unaddressed?

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4. Teacher Quality (e.g. hiring, assessment, evaluation, development, and compensation of teachers)
5. School Administrator Quality (e.g. hiring, preparation, assessment, evaluation, development, and compensation of principals and other school administrators)
6. Data and Information Systems (for both summative and formative evaluative purposes)
7. Charter Schools and Other Alternatives to Public Schools
8. Turning Around Low-Performing Schools and Districts
9. Large Scale Assessment Policy and Programs
10. Curriculum and Instruction
11. School Reform Policies
12. Financial Issues

Submissions

Length of manuscripts should be as follows: Research and evidence-based practice articles between **2,800** and **4,800** words; commentaries between **1,600** and **3,800** words; book and media reviews between **400** and **800** words. Articles, commentaries, book and media reviews, citations and references are to follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, **latest edition**. Permission to use previously copyrighted materials is the responsibility of the author, not the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*.

Cover page checklist:
1. title of the article:
   identify if the submission is original research, evidence-based practice, commentary, or book review
2. contributor name(s)
3. terminal degree
4. academic rank
5. department
6. college or university
7. city, state
8. telephone and fax numbers
9. e-mail address
10. 120-word abstract that conforms to APA style
11. six to eight key words that reflect the essence of the submission
12. 40-word biographical sketch

Please do not submit page numbers in headers or footers. Rather than use footnotes, it is preferred authors embed footnote content in the body of the article. Also note, **APA guidelines are changed so that one space is required after the period at the end of a sentence**. Articles are to be submitted to the editor by e-mail as an electronic attachment in Microsoft Word, Times New Roman, 12 Font.

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The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* maintains of record of acceptance rates for each of the quarterly issues published annually. The percentage of acceptance rates since 2010 is as follows:

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2013: 15%	2017: 20%	2021: 17%
2014: 20%	2018: 19%	2022: 17%
2015: 22%	2019: 19%	2023: 17%
		2024: 16%

Book Review Guidelines

Book review guidelines should adhere to the author guidelines as found above. The format of the book review is to include the following:

- Full title of book
- Author
- Publisher, city, state, year, # of pages, price
- Name and affiliation of reviewer
- Contact information for reviewer: address, city, state, zip code, e-mail address, telephone and fax
- Reviewer biography
- Date of submission

Publication Timeline

Issue	Deadline to Submit Articles	Notification to Authors of Editorial Review Board Decisions	To AASA for Formatting and Editing	Issue Available on AASA website
Spring	October 1	January 1	February 15	April 1
Summer	February 1	April 1	May 15	July1
Fall	May 1	July 1	August 15	October 1
Winter	August 1	October 1	November 15	February 1

Additional Information

Contributors will be notified of editorial board decisions within eight weeks of receipt of papers at the editorial office. Articles to be returned must be accompanied by a postage-paid, self-addressed envelope.

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