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An Autoethnography of a First-Time School District Superintendent: Experiences in Governance, Fiscal Stress, and Community Relations

by

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San Jose State University
San Francisco State University

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ABSTRACT

An Autoethnography of a First-Time School District Superintendent: Experiences in Governance, Fiscal Stress, and Community Relations

by

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Joint Doctorate in Education Leadership

University of California, Berkeley

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There are just over 1,000 sitting superintendents and like number of local educational agencies (LEA’s) in California, serving 6.2 million students. Superintendents’ ability to share knowledge and learn from each other is limited; this is especially true the further one’s work is removed from concentrated urban populations. This study addresses the following question: As a first-time district superintendent, what roadblocks stand in the way of effectively leading the district? To consider the question, this inquiry interprets a representative sample of my experiences as a first-time superintendent over the past five years during a period characterized by constant fiscal stress, organizational uncertainty, and shifting demographic populations. The theoretical basis from which this inquiry draws includes three streams of qualitative research (a) autoethnography, (b) organizational sensemaking, sensegiving, and decision-making, and (c) Critical Race Theory. Using the emerging field of autoethnography to interpret selected experiences in a design study that makes sense of them, I hope to help other superintendents, and those interested in decision-making for schools and districts, to set a better course by measured, sense-making reflections of their own experiences. Similar to conventional ethnography, auto-ethnographic methods require the researcher to systemically gather and sort data, to express such data in a manner that follows the conventions of the field, and to present and interpret findings in a manner acceptable by the field’s official journals and research publications.

To apply a clearer lens to the question, I apply the theoretical perspectives of Critical Race Theory (CRT), its Latin derivative Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCRIT), and organizational sensemaking, sensegiving, and decision-making to inform my observations. I apply selected experiences to the
narrative theme identified as board and administrative leadership relationships.

The findings and conclusions drawn from this research are designed to offer additional understandings to first-time superintendents who serve in relatively small districts with rapidly changing demographics, specifically where growing populations of Latino students, with socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic challenges, require new service models and interventions. Even given the limitations and shortfalls of this methodology, there is sufficient acceptance of autoethnography as a qualitative device from which valuable conclusions and findings can be drawn. This research has the potential to raise other questions around effective leadership and governance for future researchers to consider. Perhaps the most important product of this study will be to support an end to the isolation superintendents feel, particularly those first-time superintendents who serve outside urban areas, far from the highway of shared, face-to-face experiences communicated by urban superintendents.
Introduction to the Study

There are just over 1,000 sitting superintendents serving a like number of local educational agencies (LEA’s) in California, serving 6.2 million students (California Department of Education, 2009). Shared knowledge and experience is in relatively short supply from those who serve in the profession every day. Time for learning from each other is limited, and that is especially true the further one goes from concentrated urban populations.

The purpose of this inquiry is to interpret a representative sample of my experiences as a first-time superintendent over the past five years during a period that has been characterized by constant fiscal stress, organizational uncertainty, and shifting demographic populations. I serve as superintendent in a high school district that serves approximately 3,200 students. Reflecting its proximate location near the San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose Metropolitan Area, and its status as a suburban/rural bedroom community with a relatively large migrant population, a small but powerful agribusiness population, and a shifting business population, the economically, racially, and linguistically diverse district has a history of electing politically conservative individuals to its school board. As a newcomer to this relatively closed-to-outsiders community, but as one who was raised nearby, I have been afforded some degree of acceptance as one who, though not “one of them,” has developed some understanding of the community’s values and priorities. Prior to my selection as superintendent, I served in a variety of settings in school systems, both public and private. After teaching in both public and private settings for the first seven years of my career, I became an administrator in private schools, serving in line administration as vice principal and in staff support positions as admissions director and finance manager. Then, I reentered the public schools as administrator at the district level. For the seven years prior to my appointment as superintendent, I served as the chief human resources officer for urban districts in the San Francisco Bay Area. Upon assuming the post of superintendent within the evolving district environment described above, I became aware rather quickly about the issues confronting the district, its changing demographic landscape, developing governance issues, and looming financial distress. What became readily apparent is that there were impediments to positive, necessary change, and bottlenecks to effective district reform, that stood in the way of academic progress.

Purpose and Scope of the Study

With the above as prologue, my objective in this thesis is to communicate my own personal experiences in a form I hope will help others to make sense of my observations and interpretations. To do so requires identifying empirical mechanisms, or lenses, to view a representative sample
of experiences or events, interpreting and assigning organizational significance to these experiences, and, most importantly, communicating what the implications of these experiences mean to educators, particularly other superintendents, as they negotiate their own ways through their own organizations.

**Introduction to Research Design**

An appropriate methodology for this inquiry is afforded by the relatively new and emerging field of “Autoethnography.” Similar to conventional ethnography, auto-ethnographic methods require the researcher to systematically gather and sort data, to express such data in a manner that follows the conventions of the field, and to present and interpret findings in a manner acceptable by the field’s official journals and research publications.

Ethnographers acknowledge that their studies are in no way cumulative in the same way that conventional scientific studies are, but the field has historically sought to create observational methods that allow the observer to be objective and exclude any personal bias of the observer. In contrast to conventional scientific studies, autoethnography welcomes the knowledgeable observer to express his or her experiences, observations, and interpretations. Further, and in contradistinction to participant-observer ethnography, in which the participant-observer is expected to keep his or her distance from the experiences or events under review, the participant-observer in an autoethnography is central to the act of sensemaking, interpretation, and final analysis. Autoethnography is ethnographic work in which the researcher is (a) a member in the research group or setting, (b) visible as a member in the researcher’s published texts, and (c) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.

To this specific study, autoethnography offers a unique means of providing my contribution to the profession by connecting this researcher with the superintendent’s position, from within and outside of the position, and in making its connection to student success, even given some reservations about filtering observations and cautions about personal bias I will mention below.

**Research Question and Methodology Framework**

In this study, I address the following question: As a first-time district superintendent, what roadblocks stand in the way of effectively leading the district?

To help make sense of this research, in looking from within these stories and from outside them, I will apply the theoretical perspectives of
Critical Race Theory (CRT), its Latin derivative, Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCRIT), and the theory of organizational sensemaking, sensegiving and decision-making to inform my observations. I will explore three narrative themes in relating my stories around the theme of board and administrative leadership relationships. The stories relating to this theme will be explored after I provide a description of the cultural settings at work within the district.

The findings and conclusions drawn from this research are designed to offer additional understandings to first-time superintendents who serve in relatively small districts with rapidly changing demographics, specifically where growing populations of Latino students, with socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic challenges, require new service models and interventions (Coburn, 2003).

As a basis for using this method of research, I call upon an empirical mechanism and perspective provided by March, Sproull, and Tamuz (1991). They argue that organizations learn from experiences. They explain why it is necessary to develop mechanisms for organizations to learn from experience in circumstances, when history offers only scarce samples of experience. An auto corporation cannot afford to wait until hundreds of people die in unsafe cars, before it decides to revamp its assembly procedures (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). A governmental agency like NASA (National Aeronautic and Space Administration) cannot wait until it has collected data on even a few space shuttle disasters, before it reviews and corrects its shuttles’ structural deficiencies (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). In the same way, a state department of education cannot afford to watch while district after district falls into state oversight or even bankruptcy, before creating analytical procedures for identifying districts at risk of bankruptcy and creating protocols for exiting financial distress (Behn, 2003). Leaders in organizations who treat a space shuttle disaster, a death caused by a faulty car, or a district’s financial ruin as an individual data point, thereby waiting until a statistically valid sample of data points presents itself, are inviting organizational failure. Rather, organizations must view such “data points” as organizationally important events, and apply their best sensemaking capabilities to these events, to preserve and enhance the integrity of their organizations. Such introspection involves looking at events from multiple perspectives and utilizing multiple interpretations to properly situate them within a larger explanatory framework.

Summary of Chapters

To address my research question, this research methods paper is organized into five sections. I begin with an introduction of the educational, organizational, fiscal, and political climate of the high school district in which I currently serve, now in my fifth year as a first-time superintendent, and
describe my place in that environment. In section two, I review key literature informing my decision to conduct my research using autoethnography as the qualitative design method of choice, aided by the additional constructs of CRT/LatCrit, and organizational sensemaking, sensegiving, and decision-making. In section three, I describe the design study itself, including the thematic arena into which data events are deposited, specifically the theme entitled Board and Administrative Leadership Relations. In section four, I describe how conclusions and findings drawn from my study of the experiences and events have currency in the field, and how understanding the superintendent within an environmental context, as seen through my own experiences, can support other superintendents, especially those from smaller, relatively remotely located districts, where feelings of isolation are common. I describe how findings and conclusions are to be organized according to my research questions. Finally, in section five, I describe potential implications for future research and limitations built into autoethnography methodology.

Chapter 1

Educational, Organizational, Fiscal, and Political Climate of the District

Introduction

How can a superintendent chart the course of reform for a school district? Students, parents, and even teachers generally do not know who the superintendent is or what he or she does, except for some vague notion of being the big boss. The position is certainly not as visible or understood as the principal. Yet, when governing boards go in search of a new superintendent, they invariably talk about getting someone who can move the district forward. They either like the direction of the district and want to find someone who will continue along the same direction—but to deeper levels and greater heights—or they do not like the direction in which the district is moving and want someone who will change course and set the district in a new direction. In either case, boards are looking for someone who will either connect with the current culture or create new culture. What about the superintendent creates such connections or makes for such changes? For superintendents themselves, this is an intriguing question and one that is appropriately considered within the context of the pressures that bear on the position and the person.

Expectations of Superintendents

Apart from, and in addition to, the superintendent matching the governing board’s expectations for building culture, promoting student
success, achieving harmony among constituencies, and managing fiscal resources prudently, first-time superintendents face the added vulnerability of being so new in the position that the first years of their tenure are also spent building a measurable track record of success that supports security in the position for the officeholder and the confidence of the community. Concerning this tenuous relationship among the governing board, the community at large, and the superintendent, Brown, Swenson, and Hertz (2007) state that school leaders are expected to perform leadership functions in the context of institutional hierarchies that allow blame for failure to be placed squarely at the doorstep of the superintendent’s office. They argue that the “...role of the superintendent is at once complex, difficult, and fraught with potential for failure” (p. 5). Brown et al. (2007) conducted a survey among superintendents to test Glasser’s Choice Theory.

According to Glasser (as cited in Brown et al., 2007), all human beings have five basic needs that influence their choices and behaviors: Survival, Power, Freedom, Belonging, and Fun. Glasser argued that these five basic needs are so powerful in influencing behavior choices that all individuals choose behaviors that best meet their basic needs. Glasser’s Contextual Needs Assessment (CNA) (as cited in Brown et al., 2007) was implemented among a test group of volunteering American Association of School Administrators (AASA) superintendents that had been identified as recognized leaders in their field in order to obtain feedback concerning their capacity for each of the five basic needs, as well as input into where those needs are typically met (Brown & Swenson, 2005). AASA, through its own sponsored study of the primary responsibilities of the superintendent, concluded that such primary responsibilities include instructional leadership, fiscal management, community relations, and operations management. Member administrators, as identified by the AASA, measured qualities of these leaders in a rather subjective way, as leaders were chosen essentially through the acclamation of their peers in the field, and were chosen by region for national recognition.

The Brown and Swenson (2005) study was undertaken to give context to behaviors by linking leadership recognition with the basic needs of those leaders. According to Glasser (as cited in Brown et al., 2007), basic needs are primary drivers of human behavior; therefore, the study of those individual needs is critical to understanding behavior choices. If behavior choices made by “recognized” superintendents characterize their effectiveness as school leaders, the researchers argued, it serves researchers well to study the foundation of those choices in an attempt to understand leadership effectiveness. By focusing on a group of school superintendents recognized as exemplary leaders by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and comparing them against a randomly selected group of other superintendents, Brown and Swenson (2005) were able to connect a theory of human behavior with the self-
reported behaviors of recognized leaders. While the recognized and randomly selected superintendent groups demonstrated similar profiles, recognized superintendents demonstrated stronger need profiles in the areas of survival, power, belonging, and freedom. Brown et al. (2007) concluded that the differences might indicate more sensitivity and self-reflection on the part of recognized superintendents. These superintendents may be more aware of their behavior choices and the impact those choices have on others, or in other words, more aware of themselves and their connection to their surroundings. They may be leaders who see all behavior as somehow related to their responsibility to lead by example. If they see themselves as necessary agents of capacity building among the districts other leaders, they may well operate in the background, thereby allowing the other leaders to grow in their own leadership. One can rather easily envision the above intricate interrelationships at work as I begin to unfold my own place as a first-time superintendent within the contextual circumstances that follow.

**Personal Perspective and Background**

However, to better understand the study I am about to undertake, it is necessary to spend an appropriate portion of this introduction to helping the reader understand my personal perspective as researcher within the context of this study. If one can understand the personal journey I have taken, including significant personal experiences and events along the way, then one can better understand the theoretical perspectives on which this study is based and my application of those perspectives to events.

To begin at the end of my journey, I, a White male, live in a close-knit, first generation, Mexican-American family, including six siblings, with five hermanas (sisters) and one hermano (brother), assorted sobrinas (nieces) and sobrinos (nephews), and all with a deep-rooted Roman Catholic faith. Every Sunday, I sing in the choir in both English and Spanish at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, a community poor in economic status, but wealthy beyond measure in love, social justice, family, and faith. By family, faith, and choice, we as a family have been involved in formal community organizing activities involving grass-roots based issues such as children’s health care, schools of choice for economically disadvantaged families, safe neighborhood initiatives, and equitable treatment by law enforcement. My wife’s family learned social justice at an early age when her parents conducted meetings in their home for and with Cesar Chavez and his United Farm Worker members of the 1960’s. Not only did my wife spend time in the fields as a baby, while her parents harvested crops, but she helped make the burritos, family assembly-line style, that were shared among marchers who sought a fair wage and better working conditions. How a White male from a middle class upbringing was accepted into this family with such great capacity to love is beyond my ability to comprehend.
My work for social justice issues intersected with my work in education in 1997, when—while working as a district office administrator for a large, urban district in which the overwhelming majority of its students were considered poor, as measured by the Federal School Lunch Program—I began working with and for the National Coalition for Equity in Education (NCEE), a National Science Foundation grant-funded program emanating from the University of California, Santa Barbara. NCEE’s work was and is focused on developing understanding around issues of equity in the world, and applying those understandings within education to create structures that support student success, personal growth, and healing from oppression. NCEE’s work, based on twelve “Perspectives on Equity” developed under its founder, Dr. Julian Weissglass, helped NCEE participants develop and enhance their understandings around the “isms” of the world, how oppression can emanate from both internal and external forces, and how to heal from oppression that inhibits us all.

In parallel with that work, I acted as board president for a non-profit organization whose mission it was to create small, autonomous schools of choice for students living in poor, underserved parts of the San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose Bay Area.

In stark contrast to my own White, middle-class family background, and my more recent educational work environment over the past 15 years, I had spent the 20 years prior working in non-public education in very affluent parts of the greater San Francisco Bay Area. The pronounced contrasts in access, student mobility, and resources for education were, at the very least, glaring. One way to experience this difference is to simply stand at the top of the University Avenue overpass overlooking U.S. Highway 101 that separates Palo Alto from East Palo Alto.

Looking westward, one can see multi-million dollar homes and the opulence that is Palo Alto, including Stanford University, with all its wealth. There are very wealthy public schools with seemingly unlimited support from equally wealthy education foundations, and there are elite private schools that are to those seeking single-sex or coeducational environments. In short, educational choices are abundant and easily accessible to those who can afford them.

Looking eastward, one can see poverty as far as the eye can see, with public schools that get limited support from well meaning philanthropists, few health care services, scarce business opportunities, and minimal infrastructure. Parents are left wondering how to provide rich educational experiences for their children. The difference between the great wealth that is Palo Alto and the equally great poverty that is East Palo Alto is easily evident.

In a way, my own life journey was one of being raised White and middle class as a child—right in the middle of the overpass, neither wealthy nor poor—then moving through work to the wealthy, “Palo Alto” side of the
freeway, and finally moving, again through work, to the “East Palo Alto” side of the freeway.

One other experience in my background needs to be told to help explain the lens through which I will undertake this study. Again, I relate the experience through storytelling. The story revolves around my great-grandmother, who lived in Chicago.

As a very young child, I remember picking up my great-grandmother at the airport as she descended down the roll-up stairway that used to accompany the arrival of the four-prop engine planes that delivered passengers to San Francisco International Airport. While she stayed with my grandparents, she would make chicken and dumplings, and the most tasty cinnamon-pecan sticky buns ever. She had another interesting trait. She wrote in a distinctive (to me) cursive style. Years later at my aunt’s house, long after my great-grandmother’s visit, I found a letter addressed to my aunt with that same distinctive style, with a Chicago return address, and the name Rosenbloom as the return addressee. I was a young teen at the time and asked my aunt if this was my great-grandmother’s name. She denied that it was. Still many years later, when my cousin and his wife were given blood tests in preparation for the impending birth of their first child, my cousin stated that he tested positive for Tay-Sachs disease—a disease resulting from a genetic mutation most common among the Jewish population. When my cousin asked his mother, and my aunt, she finally admitted that we were, in fact, of Jewish descent. As seen through the eyes of my NCEE work, this personal experience was an example of internalized oppression that my own family, beginning with my grandfather, after whom I am named, experienced to avoid being identified as Jewish at a time between World War I and World War II when such identification could be dangerous. My grandfather apparently felt that way, so much so that he made my father and his sister (my aunt) promise not to reveal the family secret. I remember thinking—and I still feel this way—that I was denied a part of my own heritage due to this act and the family secret that ensued. As one who was raised Roman Catholic, I have never known exactly how to incorporate this new knowledge into my life.

Although this story pales in comparison to NCEE stories I heard from people of color who shared their own personal experiences, this little indignity gave me the smallest taste of what it feels like to have culture denied. That this was self-inflicted makes it all the sadder. All of these experiences accompanied me into my first-time superintendent position and all were very present in my consciousness as I entered my new office.

Professional Perspective and Background

My professional background is best viewed by bifurcating the “folk theory,” as described by my advisor, I brought into the position of
superintendent as distinct from the contributions borne from my participation in UC Berkeley’s doctoral program that bore directly on my administrative position as assistant superintendent for human resources.

*Professional Experiences in Education that Create “Folk Theory”*

Prior to assuming the position of superintendent, I had risen through the ranks of education in the same way that many superintendents do, having begun as a classroom teacher in pre-No Child Left Behind (NCLB) days in language arts, United States history, and mathematics at the middle school and early high school grades. Among California teachers, I can still boastfully display my Lifetime teaching credential in social studies. After teaching for five years, I began climbing through administrative ranks, using my Lifetime administrative services credential to light the way. I began serving as a vice principal of a kindergarten through eighth grade elementary school. Thereafter, I served as both a director of admissions and a business manager in private schools. I thought I had reached a mountaintop when I became a principal for a kindergarten through eighth grade elementary school. That was not to be the case. Divorce in my personal life and redirection of my career path led me to becoming a director for facilities and planning in a large, urban elementary district. Finally, my last job before becoming superintendent, a job I served in three different urban districts, was assistant superintendent for human resources.

Each one of these jobs brought lessons learned about leadership and decision-making that would come in handy later. As a teacher, I experienced first hand the supreme benefit of collaboration time. After all, I was a teacher who was asked to teach outside my area of competence, a common occurrence in the 1970’s. Without the support of a language arts teacher who had graduated from Stanford and whose expertise was language arts, I would have missed covering significant portions of necessary curriculum, and what I did teach would have missed the mark. A corollary to this lesson was that I had to experience the embarrassment of others’ knowledge that I was a teacher who was not competent at his craft, and I had to learn how to set my own ego aside for my students’ benefit. I distinctly remember how forgiving and encouraging my Stanford partner was at my ignorance. To this day, I count her as a friend, though it has been years since we have taught together. I did bring something to the party, however. I was pretty adept at dealing with students with whom other teachers may have had some difficulty. Our collaboration time together was not completely one-sided. In my current job as superintendent, I have been able to draw upon those experiences and accompanying feelings to promote the notion of shared best practice and overcoming the fear of feeling less than fully competent. In particular, I have been able to make sense for teachers in our new teacher academy, by making them understand that it is
not important to have all the competencies in place before entering the classroom for the first time. What is important is that willingness to be vulnerable and to be open to learning in areas in which one’s own shortcomings are painfully apparent.

As a vice principal, I learned at ground level about the need for consistency of policy and practice. My middle school students, their parents, and their teachers needed to know what the school rules were, what the consequences were for violating those rules, and that those consequences were going to be applied in a predictable fashion. At that time, dealing with angry parents and their angry students gave me tools to apply today in my position as superintendent. I can remember an experience that occurred almost exactly 30 years ago. A student I will call Jason decided to place some form of super glue (Yes, there was super glue at that time!) in some of the exterior door locks of our school. There was no doubt as to his guilt in this matter. He was suspended, a common and predictable consequence for such behavior at the time. As I was coaching our football team after school, Jason’s father came at me with lungs blaring. He must have called me every insult he could muster at the time. It was my first big experience with an angry parent who knows his child is guilty and who nonetheless defends the child, thinking that is the best way to prove his love for his child. It was one of my first experiences at treating almost incoherent rage with a calm, discreet response. The lesson has served me well over the years in working with new administrators to help them understand how blind parents can become when trying to support their children. I later learned that this was one of the few times this parent supported his son, however he approached his means of support. It was not until 15 years later that Jason confirmed that my approach was the correct one for him at the time, as his own life at that time had been completely off balance. Making sense of that experience for young administrators today who deal in student discipline not only helps them learn to work through difficult parents to get at consistent, predictable discipline, but it provides me with credibility, as they know they are talking to someone who has walked in their shoes.

As a business manager, I learned to understand budget formation, implementation, and monitoring functions, including the audit process. Knowing that process from both accounting and budgeting perspectives has given me credibility with governing boards.

As a principal, I have learned what leading a team to reach its best academic purpose on behalf of students can involve. There have been many instances of differing views on what it takes to make student success accessible. I have communicated with parents, teachers, students, and the community about working toward such success. I have learned the importance of listening with an open mind and heart to passionate views from diametrically opposed perspectives. I have learned the importance of positive relationships with all constituents to work toward student success.
As a director for facilities and planning, I became aware of the importance of physical environment to student learning. In the process of modernizing schools in an urban district in San Jose, California, I became aware of the importance of lighting temperature, learning centers, safe and secure campuses, information infrastructure, play facilities, and the other accoutrements of physical plant to better serve student achievement. When I was hired as director, I distinctly recall hearing from my supervisor and evaluator, the chief financial officer for the district, that my competence in construction and maintenance was not important; she was seeking someone who could link the physical structure and infrastructure of a school to student learning. In other words, my experience as a principal for six years was far more important than any experience I possessed about facilities planning.

Another experience I had as director of facilities and planning was to be more important than any I had around school construction and modernization. I spent a good amount of time on the superintendent’s cabinet. For the first time, I saw the upper level management team in the process of making decisions. It was in this cabinet that I first came into contact with decisions about education being made based on matters unrelated to student success. For example, I watched the cabinet consider what time to start and end school based on the bus schedules and the union contract constraints, rather than on what we knew about student achievement and engagement at the time. I realized for the first time exactly how constrained management had become, based upon its own decisions in prior negotiations. It was clear to me that management had given into classified employees concerning matters of employee start time, break time, and scheduling rules. Management had given away language on these matters that it would never get back, as a practical matter. It was very unclear as to why such decisions by prior management teams had been made. I realized for the first time how important it is for management to hold on to language and thereby retain as much management discretion as possible. It was important not because management needed to be able to abuse employees, a common claim among union officials then, but because management discretion was necessary to create and maintain programs that benefitted students. These lessons became very useful as I assumed the last position I would hold before assuming my current position as superintendent. For the next seven years, I would be serving three different districts as the assistant superintendent for human resources.

Most of my time served as assistant superintendent was spent working for one superintendent. Fortunately, I served under the right superintendent for me; this was a superintendent who saw his role as developing leaders in education. As a Japanese-American, he was culturally sensitive to the concept of sensai, or teacher, in the fullest sense of that word. He was a true mentor. In return for loyalty and service to his leadership on my part,
he would grow me as an assistant superintendent. His stated goal to me was that he would prepare me to become a superintendent. In creating student achievement for his students—an outcome he was able to achieve in two successive terms in two districts in which I served him—he was also able to prepare his administrators for higher positions in district administration. In my case this meant preparing me to become a superintendent. There were several lessons embedded into his mentorship.

I learned that it was important for the superintendent to be able to have a buffer between key areas of the superintendent’s decisions and those who might be on the other side of those decisions. For example, when we were considering budget reductions to the operating budget, the superintendent would be sure that, although he had everything to do with the decisions to be recommended to the board—after all, he was on the hook for them if they backfired or otherwise failed—he would be sure to make the chief financial officer the front person for such recommendations. He did not do this to hide from the decision, although he was sometimes accused of hiding behind his seconds. On the contrary, his buffer zone allowed others to approach him with concerns, recommendations, and disagreements in a way that placed him in the position of mediator, potentially bringing opposing views around a given decision together. Once in a while he might change his recommendation or decision.

Similarly, he was never the front person in negotiations. That was my job, as assistant superintendent. Although I never went into negotiations with my own agenda on the major items under negotiations, I was seen as the author of negotiations issues, as far as the unions were concerned. I then became the object of their arguments. This was necessary for the superintendent. In his role of mediator, he could enforce decisions he had already made relative to negotiations, or he could consider an alternative course that I would then take on his behalf. I learned the importance of a buffer, that space in the middle of decisions, just prior to their implementation, that allowed for potential modifications, amendments, or course changes to decisions. I employ this concept today, and I argue to my current board that the buffer zone is an important component of the decision-making process.

Another lesson learned was the concept of the governance team, one that included the board and the superintendent. From my assistant superintendent position, I was invited to watch and participate, as my superintendent would have phone conversations, informal meetings, and lunches with board members. He maintained close relationships with board members on both personal and professional levels. He recognized the importance of relationships in decision-making. Those relationships followed the superintendent into the closed session meetings of the board, in which personnel matters and matters of potential litigation were discussed. As invitee/participant to closed session agendas, I was called upon to present
personnel matters to the board in ways that informed the board of decisions to be recommended for their consideration. If appropriately presented, the evidence would lead the board to the logical conclusion that would become the board’s decision. The trusting relationships built outside the boardroom created the credibility inside the boardroom that was necessary to arrive at the best decisions for the district and its students. Whether I was reporting to the five-member board that was in place in the first district or the seven-member board that existed in the second of the two districts in which we worked together, the process was the same. I came to know the governance team relationship this way. I also came to know the amazing good fortune I had to work for someone who was so committed to education that he was willing to coach and share leadership in this manner.

These lessons, created by years of experience in service to school districts became the “folk theory” that Dr. Gifford, my advisor, recommended that I include in this paper. In truth, these lessons were the lessons from which my sensemaking activity, described later in the paper, is based.

The University of California, Berkeley/California State University Joint Doctoral Program Amid Changing Times

During the time I served as assistant superintendent, I participated in University of California, Berkeley and California State University’s Joint Doctoral Program in educational leadership for equity. The program impacted my ability to make sense of my experiences, while providing a place where I could share my experiences in classes filled with administrative professionals and the best academic leadership any university can offer.

Probably most significant during this period was the seminal piece of legislation commonly known across America as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). One of the most significant elements of NCLB was the requirement under law that decisions must henceforth be evidence-based. That simple truth created a new industry of software designed to measure and sort data. Many districts, including my own, came to know and use software to make sense out of a variety of data. All school districts know that the reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which is commonly known as NCLB, passed into law in 2001, established law on accountability, school choice, teacher quality, evidence-based learning models, and parents’ rights to know. States have implemented NCLB in different ways, but California has had some interesting and rather unique implementation issues. The area in which I experienced some of these implementation glitches came in the areas of the definition of highly qualified teachers (HQT). Section 1119, Qualifications for Teachers and Paraprofessionals, of the ESEA states that “each local educational agency
receiving assistance under this part shall ensure that all teachers hired after such day, and teaching in a program supported with funds under this part, are highly qualified.” Implementation of this law, though left up to the states, was also ultimately regulated by the federal government, under the United States Department of Education. When the law was first implemented, California was experiencing a severe teacher shortage, due in part to the passage of a class-size reduction program in grades kindergarten through three, and also in grade nine for English and Math. The intersection of these two events created a need for California to define pathways to achieving a credential that also satisfied NCLB requirements. The result was the Intern credential. Interns were deemed highly qualified if they were enrolled in a program leading to credentials in the areas in which teachers were working. In addition, to initially implement the law, districts were charged with assessing their current teachers as highly qualified. State-approved tests were applied to teacher experience and qualifications to assess the status of teacher qualifications. In some cases, interesting anomalies occurred, in which people like me, with Lifetime credentials, but who may have been teaching outside their credential area for many years, were found to be not highly qualified. They had to prove highly qualified status through a point system. In some cases they could not do it. In such cases, they had choices to make: retire, go into a program leading to a credential, and/or consider a change in teaching assignment. In short, the law did not fit all circumstances, and the connection to student success of these regulations was not apparent.

NCLB connections to student achievement through implementation of evidence-based decisions about instruction seemed apparent and could be measured through California’s state accountability system, a growth model that viewed growth in absolute terms and in comparative terms. In absolute terms students’ test scores were expressed as a school-wide API (Academic Performance Index) score. Schools were given growth targets by the state and measured successful or unsuccessful against those targets. Overall populations were measured, and significant subgroup populations of students were also measured against state-mandated targets. Schools were also measured against demographically similar schools.

On the federal level, schools were given targets for proficiency that were absolute targets, with the goal that all students in the country would achieve proficiency or above in English and Math by the year 2013-2014. Schools failing to meet identified targets would be sanctioned, and parents would be given greater choice options for their children.

I found the accountability to be helpful, as far as it went. However, accountability did not reach into the classroom in any significant way. The principal could be fired, under state regulations, and superintendents were always fair game, if schools were unsuccessful. Teacher unions continued to protect ineffective teachers from being terminated, and state laws on firing
teachers made the process so expensive and time-consuming that it was easier to manage ineffective teachers through assignment than through termination. In my current district, a teacher termination based on poor performance cost just under $70,000, and that figure was only due to the teacher opting to resign rather than go to hearing. Included in the process were a series of poor performance evaluations, creation of charges leading to a recommendation for termination, an opportunity to “cure” the ineffectiveness that lasted the better part of a semester, and then a final recommendation to terminate service. All documents had to be drawn by attorneys to avoid any procedural errors. Procedural errors would have cost the district a loss in the case to terminate for poor performance. Such loss would have been expensive and to no avail. What in California’s application of accountability procedures got at this issue? If one believes that the single largest contributor to student success is a competent teacher, then how did NCLB address the issue when a teacher who had been deemed highly qualified under California’s application of NCLB was unsuccessful in leading students to success?

At Berkeley, we discussed decision-making under these new and changing conditions. Having the help of Berkeley and California State University academics to review and consider the intent and the application of the law, and having directed readings on NCLB sent my way supported my better understanding of the law. That stated, the application of NCLB was never quite the same as the academic discussions we had in class.

Personally and professionally, I brought meaning into my new job from the “folk theory” understandings developed from my old jobs and the academic readiness afforded me by the excellent joint doctoral program.

Educational Climate

Superintendent and Board Relationships

In order to set up a framework for understanding the developing superintendent and board relationships that occurred, it is important to remember that this is a relatively small district, serving approximately 3,200 students. There are approximately 275 employees, divided almost evenly between licensed, or certificated, employees and classified employees. The district is set in a rural/suburban environment, with a total county population of approximately 60,000 residents. The primary city in the county houses almost half the population of the county, and most of the county’s wealth is located outside the city limits.

Upon surviving the interview process in my current district, and being appointed a superintendent for the first time, I was acutely aware of the former superintendent’s perceived failures. Upon my selection as superintendent, board members came, in no particular order, through my
office door in a rather steady stream. They wanted to inform me that, not only had the previous superintendent failed to move the district forward to the community’s satisfaction, they (the board members) wanted me to know, directly from them, specifically why the former superintendent had failed.

One board member came through my door stating that he felt the superintendent, who was a friend, was very competent, but could not share leadership. This board member stated that the former superintendent would come to work at dawn’s early light and stay late into the evening daily, but this former superintendent could not delegate any decisions, and this, noted the board member, was her downfall. The board member also expressed that the former superintendent may not have had the best leadership team and may have been compensating by making all the decisions about curriculum, finance, and human resources herself, after copious amounts of research, because she did not—or could not—trust her leadership team.

I remember thinking that this board member may have been on point, concerning the former superintendent’s need to control all decisions directly. I distinctly remember walking into the superintendent’s office—my new office—and discovered minutes on negotiation sessions from both major bargain units in the district. In addition, there were facilities files, personnel information, board minutes, policies, agenda information, and contracts with outside agencies. All these artifacts represented just a sampling of the items in the superintendent’s office that I ran across during my first days on the job. I remember thinking at the time that this person must have been Superwoman. How could she possibly be the holder of all this district information on her own? How could she gather all input, not consult with her administrative team, and then make most decisions autocratically (Rogers & Blenko, 2006)? Although I was a first-time superintendent, I was acutely aware of the functions of the Business Office, the Human Resources Office, and the Educational Services Offices. I remember bringing administrators into my office, asking them if they had copies of documents, and then doling those documents out to the respective administrators for action and follow-up, as appropriate.

Board members continued to come to the office to offer their opinions about why the previous superintendent was no longer there. They emphasized that the two superintendents prior to this last one served tenures of 10 and over 20 years, respectively. All these communications were a clear and specific message to me—and were meant to be so—that (a) the district needed to heal from an autocratic ruler, (b) there were traditions that needed to be respected and, in some cases, resurrected, and (c) I needed to size up my administrative staff quickly. Based on my observations of the superintendent’s office, my education about leadership, and my own beliefs about growing leadership, these messages resonated with me.
I took office on September 1, 2006. In November of the same year, two months after my appointment, two new board members were elected, dramatically changing the tenor of the board. One had been a former top level administrator in the district who apparently had been encouraged to retire by this former superintendent, and the other had been a former teacher in the district who could not stand the direction of the district any longer—and who believed the best way to fix the problem was to retire and run for the board. When linked to another top administrator who had decided to retire early (rather than work under an autocratic superintendent), campaign for, and win, a seat on the board, these three former employees formed a new majority on the board. This new majority took laser-like aim on correcting the miscues of the former superintendent and, by extension, the former board. What would their attitude be toward a new, first-time superintendent who had been chosen by the former board, from which board, only one of the three within the new majority had been a member when I was hired? Glasser’s survival behavior (as cited in Brown et al., 2007) was number one on my list of concerns, immediately after the election.

This new board, unlike the old, believed in the systems that had worked well in the past; indeed, they were among those who had been implementing those systems. This new board majority had all retired before they otherwise might have, in part owing to the leadership that was in place during their final years as employees—again, two having been former top administrators and the other having been a recognized teacher-leader. At the first board meeting they attended as a new majority, these new board members presented me with a list of over 20 items they wanted accomplished immediately. The items dealt with day-to-day operations, such as supervision, evaluation, maintenance, and curriculum and instruction. However, while they were trying to fix things they saw broken by the former superintendent—and there were many things on their list with which I agreed—there were a growing series of new realities that needed to be addressed. These realities came from federal, state, and local requirements that did not exist in the same way when they were employees of the district in their leadership positions. What follows immediately is a brief summary of the new realities the district faced concerning (a) enrollment and demographic trends, (b) human resources with respect to district and site leadership, and (c) district finances that were occurring while I was becoming accustomed to being a first-time superintendent.

**Enrollment and Demographic Trends**

Enrollment and demographic trends projected a district that would peak at an enrollment of about 3,300 students and then would gradually decline by about 100 students over a five to seven year period, until
approximately 2015, when enrollment would begin to increase again, due in large measure to new development. Between 2002 and 2009, the county and city’s infrastructure—in particular, its sewage and waste water systems—were not equipped to support growth, either through residential or commercial means. Local governments grappled with the issue while they succumbed to the pressures of local politics in failing to produce a finance scheme to deal with the issue. Arguably, local agrarian, no-growth leaders would rather not identify a solution to the growing problem. But when businesses started to close, as Silicon Valley drew commuters away from this suburban/rural community that bordered the Valley, and lack of development left shops empty during business hours, voters finally realized that passage of a bond—anathema to this community—was necessary to save the county and its primary city. A bond was finally passed, and major increases in sewer rates became the vehicle for paying off the bond. In 2008, district enrollment peaked and began its slow decline.

An unintended consequence of this no-growth policy was a reduction of the community’s middle class, and an increasing population of students living in poverty, as measured by students qualifying for the Federal School Lunch Program. When I arrived in September 2006 the Free and Reduced Lunch rate was 28% and in the fall of 2010, the rate was 42%. Wealthy families remain and continue to be able to withstand the exigencies of the economic crisis existing in California and the nation. They continue to have power to vote with their feet, as they decide whether or not to enroll their children in the district. In the meantime, our Latino population has grown, both numerically and as a percentage of enrollment. Latinos now comprise over 60% of students enrolled in the district. There is just a small proportion of other populations of color in the district, with Filipino, Black, Asians, and American Indian populations totaling a mere 5% of enrollment, and Whites, at 35%, comprising the rest of the district’s enrollment. Although this represents a demographic shift in both enrollment diversity and poverty, there has not been a corresponding increase in faculty members of color. Certificated staff members of color continue to comprise about 15% of total staff.

Organizational Climate

*Human Resources: District and Site Leadership*

The top three district administrators—the chief human resources officer, chief fiscal officer, and chief academic officer—who are direct-reporters to the superintendent—have all been appointed to their positions within the past three years. Though extremely competent and skilled professionals, all are brand new to their functions, having come recently from the teaching ranks, and are very new to their positions of leadership.
All were promoted from within, after conducting a thorough search process. Although this will be discussed later, the result of hiring administrators who are new to their positions can be explained in terms of costs and benefits to the district. Costs include more training and professional development, the realization that there will be errors borne from lack of experience, and a tremendous amount of personal coaching/mentoring from the superintendent (which translates into a long-term benefit, after this short-term cost). Benefits include new administrators’ increased credibility among staff going into the position, growing belief among staff that excellence can rise to the top, and first-hand knowledge of the competencies of the newly appointed officeholders.

Site leadership, though somewhat more experienced, is still relatively new. The district’s large, comprehensive high school promoted an experienced assistant principal to the position of principal in fall 2007. She, in turn, hired three new assistant principals, after the former team all left the district. This new team has worked hard, under the new principal’s dynamic leadership to create a new identity that respects the older traditions of the school. Combining the old with the new, the new principal, who was raised in the community and graduated from this same high school, is building strong connections to the community and students. Still, her leadership team is also new, and the same cost-benefit analysis concerning her site team applies in the same way as they applied to district leadership.

Fiscal Climate

District Finances

District finances, similar to district financial conditions all over the state, have created systemic strains on all aspects of the operation, from increased class sizes coupled with lower pay for teachers, to pay cuts to top administrators, reduced numbers of classified support staff, and decreasing fund reserves. The financial strain is palpable, made more understandable to staff by the county unemployment rate, which is one of the highest in the nation, at over 20%.

With the above explanation serving as a description of the circumstances at hand and acting as a backdrop of the existing setting, what prevents or inhibits a new, first-time superintendent from changing a district’s cultural settings, especially when such change is designed to address pronounced shifts in the linguistic, socio-cultural, and political landscape, and ever worsening persistent fiscal stress? As a first-time superintendent of this district, what roadblocks have stood in the way of effectively leading the district? What bottlenecks to systemic, social reform does a first-time superintendent face in a district context of pronounced shifts in the linguistic, socio-cultural, and political landscape, and ever
worsening persistent fiscal stress? Upon reflecting on the literature and devising an appropriate methodology design, I hope to be able to provide valuable insights for other first-time superintendents in similar circumstances to consider.

Chapter 2
A Review of the Literature

Hentschke, Nayfack, and Wohlstetter (2009) studied the leadership styles and behaviors of superintendents in smaller, urban districts as they compared with superintendent leadership styles and behaviors in larger, urban districts. The authors conducted interviews with superintendents and their leadership teams in four urban districts to consider how district size might influence superintendent personal behaviors, leadership strategies, and reform initiatives. The authors found that the personal leadership behaviors and associated operating strategies and tactics seemed remarkably distinct from what superintendents do in very large urban school districts.

This information became more important when considering how many students are served in smaller districts, as compared to the number served in large, urban districts. According to National Center for Educational Statistics (as cited in Hentschke et al., 2009) data for the 2004-2005 academic year, only 153 large urban districts—districts defined as serving more than 35,000 students—exist in the United States. In California alone, only 21 districts statewide enroll 35,000 students or more. More common are smaller urban districts—those districts serving between 5,000 and 35,000 predominantly minority, low-income students, of which there are 1,759 nationwide. Hentschke et al. (2009) point to Togneri and Anderson’s (2003) study of five high-poverty districts, ranging in size from 3,000 students to more than 45,000 students across five states. This study found that successful smaller districts concentrated on aligning curriculum with state standards and developing school leadership.

The Hentschke et al. (2009) study identified Marsh and Robyn’s (2006) working paper on school and district responses to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The paper provided superintendent-specific reform strategies. They reported high percentages of superintendents (a) who used state assessment data to develop district improvement plans, (b) who focused on professional development, and (c) who made changes to district curricula and instructional materials. The research of Hentschke et al. (2009) ultimately focused on these three research questions:

1. What types of reforms are smaller urban districts adopting to drive student achievement efforts?
2. How do superintendents in these urban districts behave (e.g., leadership styles)?
3. To what extent does district size influence superintendent leadership and reform decisions?

Their findings fit two distinct categories of superintendent leadership (a) those which addressed the strategies, processes, and content of school district reform, and (b) those which emphasized personal leadership behavior. Specific themes emerged from the study. The first (Theme 1) was that NCLB influenced and gave rise to reform efforts that were in direct response to the legislation. One example of a reform effort was directed at English Learners to support their progress to fluency and to passage of the California High School Exit Exam. The second (Theme 2) was that districts created broad-based, board-approved strategic plans to address reform efforts. These plans tended to be reviewed and revised annually or biannually, and they served as a reform catalyst for superintendents. The third (Theme 3) involved specific strategies to involve partners in reform from a variety of constituents, from the county education office, to interested parents, to staff collaboration. Such outreach even extended to non-profit organizations to enlist financial or other kinds of support. Fourth (Theme 4) were later efforts to create strategic cohesiveness through activities like developing benchmark exams and (Theme 5) creating specific target populations for districts to address as a means for dealing with reform. Still other themes emerged, such as data-driven decision-making (Theme 6), professional development to support data-driven decision making (Theme 7), and instructional programs of choice (Theme 8), such as magnet programs. Although the authors found these themes remarkably close to the same types of themes that emerged in larger districts, the smaller district superintendents were more “hands-on” with the data, the reform efforts, and the people they managed. Their relationships were more direct and, not surprisingly, more personal, due to the superintendents’ proximity to the actions being undertaken within their districts.

It is no coincidence that my own experience in leadership as a first-time superintendent in a smaller district, such as those included in the Hentschke et al. (2009) study, mirrors the study’s findings about reform efforts. However, it would be folly to believe that the course has been easy, or that my efforts as a first-time superintendent have met with no resistance. It would also be untrue that all my reform efforts have made things better, when some have required reshaping over time due to unintended consequences (Sandholtz, Ogawa, & Scribner, 2004). I must also add, based on my own experience, that it is impossible to separate the job duties of a first-time superintendent from the personal values and beliefs of the person in the job. The personal connection to the job should not be surprising. Starting with the job posting for superintendent, communities recognize a close connection between the superintendent as an individual,
from personal beliefs and philosophy to character traits, to the superintendent’s potential for effectiveness in the job.

The posted qualifications of the district position listed below for my school district include personal, professional, and educational qualifications, and they illustrate the message, expressed almost as a plea to find the perfect match, including these sought-after traits:

**Personal Profile**

The District seeks a Superintendent who:

1. Has a proven track record of increasing achievement for all students.
2. Is honest, trustworthy and an individual of the highest integrity.
3. Is able to create a strong leadership team and provide inspirational leadership for the staff, the community, and the governing board.
4. Has an appreciation for high school students and is an effective communicator with secondary educators.
5. Brings a strong belief in personal accountability, and a record of effective planning and task completion.
6. Can instill confidence in school leaders and serve as a mentor.
7. Appreciates the strengths of diversity, and a culturally sensitive community.

**Professional Profile**

The District seeks a superintendent who:

1. Has experience with school building programs and facilities issues.
2. Brings a demonstrated history of collaborative leadership that builds staff morale.
3. Has successfully led curriculum and instruction, has experience in the program improvement process, and will set high standards for student academic performance.
4. Has experience working with diverse populations and addressing a gap in student achievement.
5. Communicates effectively with a diverse community.
6. Has experience in Pre-K to College, or at a minimum, with comprehensive programs K-12.
7. Focuses on articulation with partnership school districts and continues to build relationships with community groups.
8. Builds a strong leadership team with the Board through the establishment of clear outcomes and expectations.
9. Possesses an understanding of budget and manages the district’s resources.
10. Understands the curriculum and instructional needs of secondary students.
11. Has high standards for personal accountability and holds others accountable for consistently high standards.
12. Supports strong ongoing staff development programs designed to increase achievement for all students.
13. Communicates effectively with all members of the Board.

Education/Experience
1. Eligible for Administrative Services certification in California.
2. Strong curriculum, instruction, and staff development background.
4. Masters degree from an accredited institution; Doctorate desirable.
5. Prior successful experience as a superintendent is highly desirable.

Interestingly enough, this job posting is, more or less, typical of and similar to job postings for superintendents anywhere in California or the nation. Such postings illustrate that communities believe that the person of the superintendent—those characteristics that make him or her the emotional, spiritual, and cognitive person he or she is—are as important as the competencies he or she may bring to the position. In filling superintendent positions, it is very commonplace to hear headhunters tell candidates that the community is looking for a match. Therefore, even though the characteristics listed above are similar to superintendent postings anywhere, candidates are differentiated and selected by their communities after communities conclude that the superintendent candidate is either a match for the community in question, or not. Ultimately, the one chosen to be superintendent is more or less successful, at least in the early stages, on the basis of how well he or she mirrors the community’s values and fits the community’s cultural models and settings (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001), as defined by the posting’s profile and as perceived by the community—especially by the community’s governing board. However, one constituency’s strength is another’s weakness, when it comes to evaluating the superintendent’s match to the community. In short, the superintendent is called to fill conflicting roles.

In considering the roles or functions of the superintendent and how they can conflict, Cuban (1976) identifies roles that include superintendent as teacher-scholar, administrative chief, and negotiator. His study concluded that the superintendents were expected to assume each of the three roles at varying times, with different publics. As these three leadership roles, instructional, managerial, and political, play themselves out in the job, the conflicts can be palpable. As instructional leaders, superintendents are responsible for improving student achievement. As managers, superintendents must ensure their districts operate efficiently and effectively, with a minimum of friction, yet taking risks to make necessary
changes. As political leaders, superintendents have to negotiate with multiple stakeholders to win public approval for programs and resources. Increasingly, superintendents responding to local complexities that are in constant flux are also placed in the position of responding to state, federal, and local community demands to improve student achievement with greater emphasis on the need to lead systemic reform. Such demands for success are frequently accompanied by shrinking financial resources, underscoring the nature and magnitude of the conflict.

The Cuban (1976) study, and another study by Kowalski (1995), concerning urban superintendents have identified an ongoing need for superintendents to invest time in their own educational and political leadership. Other studies (Petersen & Short, 2002) have identified another, increasingly important role, that of the superintendent as communicator. Kowalski (2001) captures, describes, and further defines these primary superintendent roles, responsibilities, and actions as:

- Scholar, providing leadership for teaching and learning, including critical actions such as setting instructional goals, establishing curriculum, providing professional development and evaluating personnel.
- Manager, responsible for managing human and material resources, making critical decisions about financial and human resource allocations.
- Political Leader, responsible for creating coalitions and resolving conflicts, and acting to involve community, successfully negotiate with unions, and interact with local, state, and federal policymakers.
- Social Scientist, responsible for leadership in social and cultural issues, and acting critically to respond to needed cultural change as communities diversify.
- Communicator, responsible for effective internal and external communications and information management, and acting critically to create communication systems that are open and allow feedback.

More recently, literature on the subject suggests that superintendents should be more directly involved in curriculum and instruction (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

Concerning autoethnography, Sarah Wall (2008) refers to Sparkes as she defines autoethnography as “… highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (as cited in Wall, p. 39). The purpose of autoethnography, according to Wall is to support greater sociological understanding through this form of self-research by relating personal stories. In describing the process of autoethnography, Wall (2008) describes legitimate concerns about representation, presentation, and
performance that anyone undertaking this qualitative approach will experience, if one is to be true to the process.

Wall (2008) notes that there was a crisis of representation during the 1980’s as ethnographers began to employ more interpretive, experimental, critical, and personal forms of writing. She states that Clough argued that the writing of experimental ethnographies “does not necessarily resolve the issues of representation” (as cited in Wall, 2008, p. 41). Autobiographical writing relies on a “writing imagination that is based on movement, complexity, knowing and not knowing, and being and not being exposed” (p. 41). Wall (2006) states that she, as autoethnographer, was always struggling with the subjectivity of her thoughts, as she considered what others might think of them—and her. She states, “No subject can be a fully self-identified, fully aware, or fully intentional author because unconscious desire makes fully intentional subjectivity impossible” (p. 41). With that understanding in mind, relating a series of facts around a personal story reduces it to its basic elements, and strips one of embellishment or interpretation.

Wall (2006) states the following:
I see autoethnography as a research method that is part of, but delineated from, the broader realm of autobiography. By conceptualizing it this way, we can use self in a methodologically rigorous way, but personal stories can coexist with autoethnographic research...Ultimately, using self as subject is a way of acknowledging the self that was always there anyway and of exploring personal connections to our culture. (p. 11)

Johnston and Strong (2008) write that autoethnographers focus both outward, on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience, and inward, to a vulnerable self that may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As autoethnographers move backward and forward, inward and outward, the intricate and often subtle distinctions between personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition.

Vickers (2007) writes, “Like Weick (1995:59), I regard one’s personal identity as being shifting and multiple, especially when related to acts of sensemaking. I also recognize that in organisational life, people often produce part of the environment that they face” (p. 224). Vickers refers to autoethnography as the dynamic, functional identity of the author as that person resides within the cultural settings of the time and place. In autoethnography, Vickers refers to the ability to observe the past and future, and the ability to look inward and outward with respect to the experiences faced by the autoethnographer. Finally, Vickers relates experiences as one who has experienced them emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually, and then Vickers attempts to look at those same experiences as a dispassionate outsider. These views, from within and without, allow Vickers to make sense
out of the experiences, she underwent, as one being bullied in the workplace (Vickers, 2007).

Review of Research Theories

*Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Race Theory*

In the case of a superintendent relating personal stories with the support of relevant data, and built upon the environmental context of the district and the personal reality of the superintendent within that environment, having the support of a theoretical perspective—a lens through which to view the data and related experiences—can lend additional meaning and clarity to this highly personal exercise. In my case, applying Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its Latin derivative, Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), can support powerful understanding of the stories that will be told.

Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) apply CRT and LatCrit, through a qualitative study, to two events (a) the walk-outs of 1968 in East Los Angeles—protesting the inferior education and facilities under which students lived and worked—and (b) the 1993 student occupation of the UCLA Faculty Center to protest the Chancellor’s decision not to support expansion of the Chicano Studies Program there to departmental status. The authors offer five perspectives that form the basis and pedagogy of CRT and LatCrit (a) race and racism intersect with other forms of subordination, such as gender and class discrimination to create a variety of oppression, (b) CRT and LatCrit challenge traditional claims of educational objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity, (c) CRT and LatCrit share a commitment to social justice through resistance that leads to social transformation, (d) a CRT and LatCrit framework recognizes the experiential knowledge of students of color as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, and (e) CRT and LatCrit insist on analyzing race and racism in education by placing them in a historical and contemporary context.

Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) observed different types of resistance within this framework, classifying them and naming them as self-defeating resistance, reactionary behavior, conformist resistance, and transformational resistance, as they applied within the context of the 1968 walk-outs in East Los Angeles and the 1993 student occupation of the UCLA Faculty Center. In observing transformational resistance, the type of resistance that transforms society from the perspective of women involved, to the walk-outs of 1968, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal found that it was typical for the young women involved in the walk-outs to have a social consciousness born from modeling by their parents at home—who themselves were active in transformative activities and became mentors for their children. For these families, the researchers found that social justice was a cultural norm. The study then looked deeper into transformational resistance, observing it from internal versus external perspectives. Internal
transformational resistance is exemplified by the student who appears to conform to the norms of the school, but in fact is preparing to be successful enough in school and work to come back and give back to the community by improving it—which is, in fact, what occurred in a number of cases. External transformational resistance is overt as it creates change. The work of these authors builds upon the work of several others, including Valenzuela (1999), Valdes (1996), and Villenas and Deyhle (1999).

Relational Knowing

Relational Knowing, another theoretical perspective, can provide additional meaning to the type of resistance that transforms by considering interrelationships involved in a given set of experiences and how those interrelationships create effective change. Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), in conducting interviews as part of their case study, identified intense interrelationships among subjects in their study. In one such case, an interviewee involved in the sit-in at UCLA in 1993 spoke tearfully about how she struggled with the type of resistance she was exercising during this sit-in, as that compared with the exercise of resistance demonstrated by her close friend, who had been arrested as one of the students who refused to move from the Faculty Center. Viewing the interview of this student (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) from a Relational Knowing theoretical perspective lends a new way of looking at this interview.

Concerning the theoretical perspective identified as Relational Knowing, Gallego, Hollingsworth, and Whitenack (2001), argue that Relational Knowing is an integration of (a) knowledge of curriculum and instruction—which, at the secondary level, includes subject content knowledge, (b) knowledge of self and other, and (c) knowledge of critical actions to effect positive reform. The researchers argue that these come together within the consciousness of teachers and leaders. Gallego et al. (2001) conducted two sets of ethnographic studies in different geographic locations, one study in a mid-western middle school, and the other study in a west coast elementary school. Through their ethnographic research, they found that critical relationships were key to achieving sustainable, effective, school reform.

Ozer, Wolf, and Kong (2008) concluded through qualitative evidence that students connect to teachers. They found that such student connectedness with teachers is tied to students’ perception that teachers were committed to student learning and teachers’ actions were perceived as caring. The sense of belonging to school was not clearly understood because more defined or nuanced measures for school belonging may be necessary to better understand the concept.
Sensemaking and Sensegiving

A third theoretical perspective worthy of consideration is that known as Sensemaking and Sensegiving. In studying strategic change in a university setting and the role of the chief executive officer in initiating and implementing change, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) called upon this grounded theory to support analysis and understanding of the events studied through ethnography, of the choices that were made by a new chancellor to chart a new strategic direction for a large university.

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) explain the need for conducting research on organizational change this way:

> Because the development or revision of organizational interpretive schemes is typically a subtle and evolving process, traditional survey methods and even in-depth interviews cannot adequately reveal the nature and sequence of changes taking place. Instead, research approaches designed to investigate such processes must be non-intrusive, longitudinal, and capable of tracing the unfolding changes. Such research needs to be 'interpretive' in nature, which implies an alternative paradigm applied to the study of strategic change. (p. 435)

The researchers, in applying ethnography as the longitudinal research process of choice, given their need to understand change processes as they unfolded over time, needed a basis for developing understandings, which could then be transferred in ways that made the resultant understandings useful to others. Doing so involved an active admission that developing understandings using this type of research involves unavoidable subjectivity that must be embraced, acknowledged, and admitted to readers.

In this ethnographic look into the change process initiated by a new university chancellor, beginning shortly after his arrival, researchers Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) gathered, as evidence of their developed and subjective understandings, inter-office memoranda, meeting minutes, and other internal records of the change process. These artifacts were necessary to triangulate their primary evidence, diaries and in-depth interviews, to support their conclusions about the change process in a university setting. This study was particularly applicable to my own research, as some of the characteristics of governance and change in a university setting, particularly the professors’ resistance to change, are similar to the characteristics of teachers’ resistance to change and governance in high school districts.

As the researchers gathered their data through ethnography and assigned value to the data, thereby developing conclusions from their research, another level of understandings emerged around the manner in which they assigned value to their data. What emerged was the theory of sensemaking and sensegiving that they realized had become part of their assignment of value to data.
Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) identified sensemaking and sensegiving as the two theoretical dimensions necessary to create meaning out of their ethnographic research. They described sensemaking as, having “to do with meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties as they attempted to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature...” (p.442) of the information they were processing. Sensegiving, in contradistinction, was described as having to do with “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (p. 442). They concluded that these two, interrelated processes were “iterative, sequential, and to some extent reciprocal” (p. 442).

Rouleau (2005), writing many years after the seminal Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) article, refines the definitions of sensemaking and sensegiving. Rouleau (2005), in applying sensemaking and sensegiving to a study of the way middle managers respond to organizational change, defines sensemaking as “the way managers understand, interpret, and create sense for themselves based on the information surrounding the strategic change” (p. 1415). Rouleau defined sensegiving as “attempts to influence the outcome, to communicate ... thoughts about the change to others, and to gain ... support” (p. 1415). Rouleau believes these two, sensemaking and sensegiving are “two sides of the same coin” (p. 1415), one not able to exist in meaningful form without the other. They are not district domains, but instead intersect with each other. Rouleau describes that top managers, starting with the 1990’s decade, have taken greater interest in interpreting narratives to create understandings developed through sensemaking and put to use through sensegiving.

Rouleau (2005) applied the theoretical perspective of sensemaking and sensegiving to a study of how middle management interprets, or conceptualizes, change and then how middle management then applies organizational change to their work environment. In the study, Rouleau was analyzing how middle management in a fashion company within the Canadian design industry made sense of top management decisions, interpreted the meaning of decisions, and then applied decisions to produce and sell new fashion designs. Rouleau gathered and logged decisions made by top management. He then logged how top management decisions were interpreted and translated into actions by middle management as they were implemented in practice. In conducting his ethnography, Rouleau spent four days per week in the Canadian clothing company she was studying. She conducted interviews, observed as a participant, and reviewed company documents around change activities. In coding her conversations with employees, she realized that there were cultural differences emanating from translation of language from English to French.

Rouleau (2005) argued that sensemaking involves (a) translating, or telling stories they wanted to hear about events, (b) overcoding, placing
socio-cultural codes on elements of the conversations, (c) disciplining, subjective and emotional effects of events, and (d) justifying, or providing a set of reasons to adopt a change. Together, these things make sense out of data and events (p. 1431). The implications of Rouleau’s work are her contributions in detangling situations into usable pieces of information that inform practice.

Jeong and Brower (2008) also use the theoretical perspective known as sensemaking and sensegiving as they study in ethnographic fashion a Korean fire inspector as he recounts his experiences in conducting his building inspections. Jeong and Brower (2008) separate the act of sensemaking into three contexts. They describe these contexts in the following passage that separate fire inspector Kim’s experiences in the following passage:

First, the individual as sensemaker brackets (notices) some puzzling and troubling portion of the flow of experience in the encountered situation as a metaphoric text or document for closer attention. Second, the individual forms (interprets) a plausible idea of the portion that is set apart so that he or she restores (reestablishes) the interrupted practical engagement with the situation that he or she faces (Moran, 2000; Weick, 1995). Third, the sensemaker implants the idea through behavioral manifestation (action), and in doing so creates things in the situation, which often provoke further bracketing (noticing) and formation (interpretation). (p. 233)

In understanding the dynamic of the first stage of the three stages of sensemaking, researchers Jeong and Brower (2008) relate the story of Mr. Kim, the fire inspector who investigated a five-story building and found that it did not install a fire escape device required by law under Korean fire code. As he was creating his report that cited the infraction, another fire inspector, Mr. Lee, observed that Mr. Kim had not noticed the fact that the building was not a five-story building at all, but rather a two-story building that had three other levels below ground. Mr. Kim had entered the building from one side of its location on a steeply sloped hill, while Mr. Lee viewed the building from another angle. The story pointed out that noticing, as the first element of sensemaking, is limited by one’s power to observe.

Mr. Kim’s observations led him to his own interpretation of the facts, which then led him to a particular course of action. Thus, the stages of sensemaking are interdependent, with actions occurring that are based on interpretations, and interpreting information being only as good as the observations on which such interpretation is based.

In drawing these conclusions, Jeong and Brower (2008) identify a key limitation of sensemaking. What is noticed becomes the data for sensemaking. What is not noticed at the time becomes the potential subject of future sensemaking. They point out that whether noticing is automatic or
an active-thinking process, it becomes the data used to interpret the observed data. There is also attention given to the notion that observers tend to fail to notice stimuli that are problematic in some way to the observer.

In applying contexts to the process of sensemaking, Jeong and Brower (2008) hold that the actor in a sensemaking scenario first takes into account external observations and internalizes them for the purpose of processing what is observed externally. The next step taken by the sensemaker is to then externalize what had been internalized into some new external circumstance borne from the processed, internalized surroundings. This, the researchers argue, creates a new set of circumstances out of the old. Jeong and Brower (2008) sum up this process in this passage “…sensemaking as enactment can be said to be an interdependent authoring process in which individual actors continuously invite new situations (settings) that often require further sensemaking” (p. 235).

Summary

When considering the many and conflicting roles of the superintendent, personal stories can be made more valuable and given greater meaning by applying theoretical perspectives such as Critical Race Theory (CRT)/Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), Relational Knowing (Gallego et al., 2001), or Sensemaking and Sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau, 2005; Jeong & Brower, 2008). Unfortunately applying too many theoretical perspectives to one study can add confusion, rather than clarity to information. The explanation of the design study to be undertaken herein will explain the theories to be applied to the study in ways that will add the desired clarity. Certainly, the study of the superintendent position requires careful analysis and application of appropriate theory.

By any researcher’s reckoning, the superintendent position is multifaceted and demanding, and a pivotal leadership role in public education. As a currently sitting superintendent, I have found that filling these roles to the satisfaction of the community’s vision for their students has meant being available 24-7. This has translated into physical and emotional commitments to community members and staff, critical connections and relationships within and outside the organization and the larger community, and a connection with a district identity that cannot be adequately explained, except through the telling and retelling of personal experiences.

As mentioned above, the working definition of autoethnography provided by Sara Wall (2008), highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding, helps lay the foundation for autoethnography as
an appropriate means for gathering data to help me—and other first-time superintendents in small school districts—get to the bottom of what it takes to be an effective leader for reform among the myriad pressures described above. The review of literature above considers autoethnography, its benefits and limitations, theoretical perspectives, and potential to serve as a specific design study methodology.

Upon reflecting on this body of literature, I propose to conduct my research through autoethnography. It is a design study that will address the specific question I believe provide valuable understandings around the unique position of a first-time superintendent in a relatively smaller school district complicated by dramatic shifts in the linguistic, socio-cultural, and political landscape, and persistent fiscal stress. There are many such districts situated in current, similar stresses throughout California and the nation.

I do not make this decision lightly. Duncan (2004), in considering autoethnography’s fitness as a research method states, “Autoethnographic research has not yet enjoyed the popularity and respect of its ethnographic predecessors. With its use of self as a source of data, it has been criticized for being self-indulgent, introspective, and individualized” (p. 2). Clearly, the method has detractors among researchers who consider using one’s self as a primary source as no more than a cheap, self-indulgent trick that produces no more than one’s own feelings and experiences and lacks anything approaching empirical balance. Nonetheless, I can best get at the answer to my question as a first-time superintendent in a small, rural/suburban school district by using this methodology to study deeply, and on a highly personal level, the experiences and interactions I have encountered since entering the job.

It must be clearly understood that first-time superintendents are uniquely isolated individuals, especially when confronted with the geographic isolation that accompanies placement in a smaller, rural/suburban district. In such districts, even other internal administrative support that exists on at least two levels in larger districts, at the director and coordinator levels, is absent in smaller districts. Instead, one is left to lead very much alone in one’s leadership, insofar as daily exchanges among central office administrators are concerned. I found myself in the position of being constantly sought out for answers to financial, human resource, curricular, and governance questions without much in-house expertise available to provide answers. This is not to complain; it was simply the reality. Use of autoethnography as a research method may be the only, and if not the only, perhaps the best, way to unpack these personal experiences in a way that provides service to the profession.
Chapter 3

Study Design and Research Methodology

Autoethnography Research Design

Autoethnographies are, put in simplest terms, case studies that follow the tradition of ethnographic research (Duncan, 2004). Anthropologists first used this method in the early 1900’s, when they were exploring the lives of “primitive” people, attempting to portray their existence from a “native” point of view. In the 1920’s, researchers would live among the subjects of their studies, becoming immersed in the culture on the most basic experiential level, sometimes for years at a time in very foreign lands, like the coast of New Guinea. As time passed and fashions changed, ethnographic studies moved closer to home. Eventually, they came to reside within the researchers’ own cultural context, tended toward studies of shorter duration, and were more selectively and narrowly focused. Still later, studies were conducted among the working cultures of local institutions; schools and hospitals, subcultures of the urban fringe, and specific aspects of a situation could be investigated as study subjects, such as gender differences, power relationships, or group structures. In such cases, the ethnographer, who was an “outsider” seeking to understand the lived experiences of others by participating in the research situation, would become an “insider,” as the situation allowed (Wall, 2006).

Fast-foreword to the twenty-first century, wherein ethnographic approaches are being acculturated into a postmodern academic world. There exists today a desire to discover and make room for the worldview of others, a postmodern sensitivity, in which there is no one right form of knowledge; rather, multiple viewpoints exist that are acknowledged and valued. In this environment, narrative ethnographic approaches are now evolving to acknowledge and facilitate a more personal point of view by emphasizing reflexivity and personal voice (Mykhalovskiy, 1996). This environment recognizes the researcher as representative of a multilayered worldview, itself worthy of expression. Autoethnography is part of—and a result of—this methodological trend that Denzin and Lincoln have identified as the fifth moment in the history of qualitative research (as cited in Duncan, 2004), in which participatory research and experimental writing are featured.

Duncan (2004) posits that the essential difference between ethnography and autoethnography is that in an autoethnography, the researcher is not trying to become an insider in the research setting. Duncan (2004) states:

He or she, in fact, is the insider. The context is his or her own. Through autoethnography, those marginalized individuals who
might typically have been the exotic subject of more traditional ethnographies have the chance to tell their own stories. (p. 3)

In this new context, autoethnographers assume that reality is neither fixed nor entirely external, but is created by, and moves with, the changing perceptions and beliefs of the viewer. This subjective view, though criticized from a positivistic standpoint, has, over time, come to be seen as an acceptable form of research (Duncan, 2004). During the latter half of the twentieth century, authors such as Polyani (as cited in Duncan, 2004), a chemist, wrote of the impossibility of removing the passion and commitment of the observer. He emphasized that the observer’s passions and commitments were essential to experiencing and investigating the world. Peshkin (as cited in Duncan, 2004) cautioned that there is potential to exploit positively the subjectivity of the researcher. In contradistinction, Eisner (as cited in Duncan, 2004) argued that the researcher is a connoisseur and “instrument,” whose past experiences made investigation possible. For Eisner, the researcher as autoethnographer should not be viewed as a mechanical device for seeing. Instead, the researcher as autoethnographer should be understood as enlightened by human qualities and virtues such as intentionality, purposefulness, and knowing one’s frame of reference.

Therefore, autoethnography draws on the methods of data collection and analysis that are typical of traditional ethnography, and autoethnographic studies are clearly distinguishable from other storytelling approaches, such as autobiographical and narrative research. To further clarify this last point, although ethnographic and autoethnographic reports are presented in the form of personal narratives, this research methodology is more than just telling stories. Autoethnography provides reports that are scholarly and justifiable interpretations based on multiple sources of evidence. Autoethnographic accounts are not just researcher’s opinions, but they are supported by other data that confirm or triangulate those opinions told through narratives. Methods of collecting data can include participant observation, reflective writing, interviewing, and gathering documents and artifacts. Participant observation is the most characteristic tradition of ethnographic work and, not surprisingly, it is the most important for autoethnographers. Due to the significance of personal experience to autoethnography methodology, participant observation is the primary practice through which personal reflections are developed and all other data collection activities are organized. Because autoethnographers are already fully immersed in their topic of study, they are not subject to gaining permission to become a participant observer in the setting of those being studied. Such is the nature of one who is fully immersed in, and part of, the study.
Autoethnography Qualitative Design Study

The true test of meaningful autoethnography is the ability to effectively engage in what Duncan (2004) refers to as the “act of self reflection” (p. 6), a perspective that fits my design methodology well. Any qualitative design study using autoethnography must be built on a sound narrative structure. The system of building narrative reflections must suit the type of study to be undertaken and the research questions to be addressed. A system of classifying and keeping reflections should be one that suits the nature of the research setting.

What follows then, after a review of the literature, a critical analysis of autoethnography, and consideration for my circumstance as a first-time superintendent, is a well considered decision to conduct my own research using this unique but wholly appropriate to the setting, form of critical reflection. Autoethnography works in my setting in that it will allow me to address some very specific questions that first-time superintendents regularly face, as they weigh their chances to effectively move changing districts toward new successes, amid new realities and new accountabilities. This is the question, worthy of significant consideration, that I propose to address: As a first-time district superintendent, what roadblocks stand in the way of effectively leading the district?

I make this decision knowing that I have encountered bottlenecks to systemic, social reform that I have faced as a first-time superintendent in my district, within the context of pronounced shifts in the linguistic, socio-cultural, and political landscape, and ever worsening persistent fiscal stress that is the story of the district over the past several years. I make this decision with the hope that better understanding these impediments to effective leadership will help me, and others in similar circumstances in small school districts, exercise more effective leadership.

Reviewing the literature around the history of this research tradition, I perceive this autoethnography as an exploration of specific themes within the setting of this small, but evolving, school district and my leadership within these ongoing themes, as I negotiate my way through the changing landscape of the district. Of course, no superintendent operates in isolation. Therefore, I have considered the human interrelationships within three major and specific themes that are central to my leadership as a first-time superintendent.

After laying a foundational base through storytelling, with a description of the district’s setting at the time I arrived in 2006—especially as such setting relates to the demographic, human resource, and fiscal conditions at the time—I will conduct a design study after considering these specific, significant, thematic areas of relational activity. These three silos, or distinct components, of district operation, (a) changing district finances, (b) board and administrative leadership relationships, and (c) community relations in a
community affected by shifting demographic conditions, have been
considered and will be described below, individually. Upon consideration of
these three narrative categories, I will describe why I have chosen the
specific one of the three potential themes to become the focus of my
autoethnographic study. Through this exercise in narrative storytelling
through autoethnography, I hope to be able to unlock the underlying
impediments or roadblocks to reform and to identify and consider what
bottlenecks must be addressed to provide for smoothly functioning district
leadership from the first-time superintendent. The paragraphs that follow
provide a description of the three thematic areas of study that were under
consideration.

Narrative Thematic Areas of Study

Narrative Theme One: Changing District Finances

The first narrative theme is the story of district finances, from the time
I arrived as superintendent in fall 2006 through the current fiscal crisis of
2010. From the board’s admonition to get district finances back in line after
the fiscal year 2005-2006 had ended in an operational deficit, to the current
financial circumstances in which state revenues have been both dramatically
reduced—approximately 20% per district throughout California over the past
two and one-half years—with revenues concurrently deferred, I have
reflected deeply on my decision-making process. More and more, one must
apply the most effective decision-making processes available to balance
students’ needs, district goals and objectives, the accompanying human
resources required for service delivery, and the fiscal implications of
decisions.

Narrative Theme Two: Board and Administrative Leadership Relations

In this reflective narrative, I considered how board-superintendent
relationships affected decisions and whether or not decisions contributed to
or became impediments and/or bottlenecks to reform. I have also
considered how the board’s interactions with the superintendent can
influence, positively or negatively, interactions among district and site
administration. In reflecting further on this narrative, I have also considered
how board-superintendent relations have impacted the entire political
landscape of the district, including relationships with the larger community.
Within this theme, I have reflected on how board-superintendent relations
have impacted negotiations with the district’s collective bargaining unions,
either creating or removing bottlenecks.
Narrative Theme Three: Community Relations in a Community Affected by Shifting Demographic Conditions

Finally, in considering this narrative, I have reflected on the story of a changing district, from the time I arrived as a first-time superintendent in 2006, when the district was essentially a “half-and-half” district demographically, with about one-half the population comprised of White, Non-Hispanic students, and the other one-half of students identified as Latino. As the percentage of students qualifying for the Federal School Lunch Program increased from 28% in fall 2006 to over 40% in fall 2010, and the number of students qualifying as Migrant over the same period increased from just under 400 to just under 800—and due to recent legislation, is on the decline again—I have reflected on how decisions made with my administrative team were designed to change the service delivery system to address the community’s changing needs.

The Chosen Theme: Board and Administrative Leadership Relations

After careful consideration of the three themes described above, I am choosing to focus on board and administrative leadership relations, specifically on a key story of those relationships, the election, just over two years ago, of a Latino male board member, the first male to serve in several years of the district’s history, as I have been able to discern that history. The story of this board member’s election has had ramifications on the overall dynamics of board and administrative team relations. I will recount events occurring prior to his election, the immediate aftermath of his election, and events that have occurred since that time. All this will be related as one narrative. As I will explain below, these stories and this narrative theme will be analyzed from one who is an insider as superintendent, and how this board member election has affected the leadership dynamic of the district. My own leadership as a first-time superintendent will be analyzed in light of the changing demographics within the district, the fiscal distress that increasingly affects the district, and key community relationships that support the ultimate goals of the district, the chief one of which is student achievement.

Data Collection Method

Observation. Primarily, data from employing autoethnography methodology comes from participant observations, specifically my own observations as participant observer, around experiences encountered during the change in the governing board from this historic election and how the change affected board and administrative team relationships. These
narrative observations will be triangulated with artifacts connected to the
telling of personal stories. Philaretou and Allen (2006) argue that:

Autoethnographic research is conducted by interpreting personal
documents, letters, and recollections of important events in a
person’s life through the process of account-making. Such research reflects what the researcher deems worthy of
investigation, which is in turn shaped by his/her academic
background, maturity level, and general state of mind.
Autoethnographies, therefore, should be understood as partial
interpretations or aspects of the autoethnographer’s life and not
solid and static explanations of the totality of one’s character or
experience. (p. 66)

The reflective narrative story around the selected theme must be
supported by—effectively triangulated by—data from a variety of sources.
In this case, I have over four years of data to call upon that can be gathered
and used to analyze and support my narrative storytelling. Data include
board meeting minutes, news articles, internal electronic communication,
letters, budget documents, and notes on negotiations (Orbe, 2007). Each
piece of data will be gathered and sorted into an area of board and
governance relationship, including board superintendent, board and
administrative team, and inter-administrative team relationships, as
appropriate. One could imagine each of these relational areas as individual
silos, to be filled with grains of data that become part of the larger thematic
narrative.

As with any case study, delineating the study boundaries is essential
to defining and reporting the research. That is why it has been an essential
and defining task to limit my research to the chosen thematic area, avoiding
the well-documented (Eisner, 1991) tendency to move far afield in writing
my own narratives.

Qualitative. Eisner (1991) argued that the utility of a qualitative study
is one of the most important ways of judging it and suggested three types of
usefulness that might be considered. First, Eisner held that a study is useful
if it helps readers to develop some understanding of a situation that is
otherwise confusing. The findings of such studies result in a sense of
satisfaction as confusion is lifted and “things fit into place.” Over my years
in education, especially those years in or near the superintendent’s office, I
have heard superintendents say that no one knows what it is like to be in
the seat of the superintendent. If I can help others develop some
understanding of how superintendents lead in the context of complex
interrelationships, this research can be measured as useful.

Second, Eisner (1991) argued that qualitative studies are useful if they
help readers in some way to anticipate future possibilities and scenarios.
Given the changing nature of schools and districts, any help in being able to
predict how situations may develop, given a set of inputs, will justify this study and make the research truly valuable.

Third and finally, Eisner (as cited in Duncan, 2004) suggested that qualitative studies are useful if they act as guides and help to uncover particular aspects of a situation that might otherwise go unnoticed. When it comes to seeing things coming before others do, superintendents need to be in their own class. Anything that my research can do to help that process along will be useful to superintendents, especially first-time superintendents, who remain most vulnerable to changing circumstances.

Validity and Reliability

Construct Validity

According to Yin (as cited in Duncan, 2004), construct validity for qualitative case studies is achieved if the correct operational measures for the concepts being studied have been established. Creating data silos around inter-relational areas of board and administrative team governance dynamics, including (a) board superintendent, (b) superintendent and administrative team, and (c) board and administrative team relationships, and then filling each of those silos with the grains of significant, related data sets will satisfy this standard for qualitative construct validity. As stated above, the types of data being gathered include individual electronic internal communications, news articles, budget documents, and significant meeting minutes and notes from board meetings and bargain unit negotiations. Data will span a four-year period and will only be concerned with the thematic area of study.

The uniqueness of my particular design study in autoethnography carries the inescapable conclusion—and caution—that it is not meant to be a representative example. Connelly and Clandinin (1994) wrote that personal experience methods result in autobiographical writing that presents only one individual’s narrative, but not necessarily the only one. Earlier in this paper, I cautioned that my experiences carry the well considered, but very real burden of being one person’s, my own, perception. However, the task of meeting the criterion of external validity does not lie in finding another design study that mirrors my own experience or point of view. Rather, it lies in the strength of my own design, including its thematic nature and underlying theories, and how the findings and conclusions might be applied to other situations in the field that makes the study valid externally (Yin, 1989).
Reliability

Reliability is established in a case study when someone could devise a similar protocol that would allow someone else to follow the researcher’s procedures (Duncan, 2004). Very simply put in this instance, it is clear that this protocol would allow another to conduct a similar design study. In other words, the study design could be replicated, even though the results would certainly be different because the players and data will be different in a different setting.

Looking inward as a participant observer, I will relate stories from a highly personal perspective that includes values, cognitions, feelings, and underlying philosophies. This data becomes part—the contextual glue—of the personal narrative. This is the perspective of viewing my own decisions and actions, as well as other decisions and actions with which I am associated as the ultimate insider. Then, reviewing the same stories from a dispassionate perspective, as if one were looking at one’s self from the outside, I will attempt to analyze the narrative theme and the stories told as if viewing them from the perspective of an objective, outside observer.

Again, triangulating data to my own participant observations will include governing board meeting minutes, budget documents, negotiations notes and minutes, news articles, electronic communications, and personal calendars. Such triangulation will support authentic analysis of my narrative storytelling. I will rely on these artifacts to support thoughts, feelings, conclusions, and impressions I had at the time the stories were being created. Autoethnography also involves “predictions about relevant future [and past] events and affective reaction” (Philaretou & Allen, 2006, p. 67). Therefore, I will unabashedly react to and predict about stories, where such reaction and prediction is relevant to the process of this research through autoethnography.

Roadblocks In the Way of Effective District Leadership: Narrative of a Superintendent Around the Election of the First Latino Board Member in District History

The Value of Episodes as Reflective Tools in Addressing Strategies

Hendry and Seidl (2003) held that to be productive, empirical research needs to be guided by theory. In their work on considering strategy theory as part of social practice, they look to the concept of the “episode,” which they describe as a sequence of events or communications, flowing from beginning to end, that allow organizations to reflect on day-to-day practice. In reviewing the concepts of strategy, practice, and change, they point to episodes as opportunities to reflect and consider how organizations can change. Episodes provide opportunities to stop and consider practices and
strategies that become almost automatic over time. Although the Hendry and Seidl (2003) paper consider episodes in the context of business organizations, schools are no less susceptible to forming practices and strategies that become automatic over time. They are just as susceptible to hearing the same story or considering the same data over time and applying the practices that others before them applied because in those earlier times, such practices worked. What we sometimes fail to consider is that the circumstances around strategies and practices may change slowly over time, even so slowly that those involved in school leadership may not even recognize that changes are happening, even though they may be looking at data that, if truly viewed authentically, would identify such changes. One reason for such inability to see changing circumstances, and the accompanying seeming paralysis that results in things being done essentially as they have been done is found in the argument that managers in organizations are either in the middle of the context of an organizational strategy, or they are so close to it that they suffer the same result, a sort of failure to see the forest for the trees.

Hendry and Seidl (2003) also argue that part of the reason for creating context around strategy within a theory of practice is to appropriately place attention specifically on its routine. They refer to "systems theory" as a series of communications that require a form of abstract understanding, so that one communication naturally leads to another and another. The linking together of such communications, from the first communication to the last, or concluding one of the series, forms what Hendry and Seidl call episodes. These episodes end one of two ways, either naturally by the concluding communication in a series of communications, or by a time limit. Episodes can be gathered for consideration through some reflective process by managers, to make sense out of the series of communications and to give meaning to episodes. That meaning can become the agent for organizational change, with such change emanating from within the organization, as opposed to change generated from outside of it.

In schools and districts, a study of episodes within the organization can help inform and make sense of the facts. Such reflection is a basis for informing change within the district office. The series of events that will be relayed in the consideration of the established governance structures of my district, as seen through my eyes as a first-time superintendent, will help inform the process of decision-making, not only in my district but also for the benefit of district governance in general.

Board and Superintendent Relationship in Period Following Superintendent’s Appointment

As stated previously, this research addresses this question: As a first-time district superintendent, what roadblocks stand in the way of effectively
leading the district? Using autoethnography, thereby acting as the ultimate insider, I will take some time to relate the setting in which I found myself upon entering my new office as a first-time superintendent in this small high school district of 3,200 students located just outside the San Francisco, San Jose, Oakland greater Bay Area. Through storytelling, I will describe some of the pressures on the office of the superintendent, pressures that are probably not unique to similarly sized district superintendents.

Earlier, I stated that I came to this position with all the “folk theory” I had gathered over 25 years of experience in schools and with over 10 years of experience at the district office working with and around superintendents and governing boards. I had also entered this position of newly appointed superintendent with the academic experience of a doctoral program at what many consider one of the finest institutions of learning in the country, University of California, Berkeley. I was armed and ready to make change and implement what I had learned was important to student success. These were the leverage points I had identified in my interview with the board as necessary to create positive change for the district’s students:

1. Create a safe school environment by creating, implementing, enforcing, and monitoring clear, consistent, predictable rules of conduct, known as “The Code.”
2. Acquire, implement, and monitor use of a powerful, data manipulation device that could disaggregate data in a variety of ways to measure learning.
3. Implement a standards-based, aligned curriculum in all core subject areas.
4. Implement professional development in a variety of areas, including effective practice, improving subject matter competence, assessment, and differentiation strategies.
5. Create an effective means of communicating with parents about their students.
6. Increase opportunities to engage students through meaningful relationships with adults.

These will be discussed later in this paper. It is important that, in addition to having introduced an agenda I wanted to put forth upon entering the district as superintendent, I also had some ideas about how to make change happen.

This is not unlike the situation faced by the college president studied by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991). As described earlier in this paper, the Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) study detailed the change-making strategies and actions of a newly appointed university president who began his tenure by announcing his commitment to move the university into the top ten of United States public universities. The president launched the strategic change process by espousing his vision of change, describing the benefits of change in “hypothetical scenarios,” revamping the university’s administrative
structure in a manner consistent with his scenarios for change, and taking steps to reallocate resources from programs he concluded would not help the university achieve its long-term strategic goals and objectives (pp. 442-443).

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) observed that these actions are consistent with the organizational construct of sensegiving, that iterative, sequential, and reciprocal process described earlier. In the context of the Gioia and Chittepeddi study, leaders committed to promoting substantive changes attempt to promote dramatic departures from the status quo by portraying the future of their respective organizations in a manner intended to encourage key stakeholders to embrace the values and changes needed to help bring the envisioned organizational construct into fruition. Such leadership also recognizes that the process of sensegiving is also dependent upon the success of the other key, related organizational construct, sensemaking. In the context of the university and its new change-minded president, “sensemaking” has to do with meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties as they attempted to develop a framework for understanding the nature of the intended strategic change (p. 442). In looking at what I was hoping to accomplish as a first-time superintendent, my own concern for change was as significant to my organization as Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) college president, the subject of their study.

I was anticipating that my own sensemaking process would compel influential opinion leaders, our teacher-leaders and the mid-level administrators that made up our management team, to decide if their perspectives on the need for substantive systematic strategic change were in alignment with my vision of change. If the answer to the question was no, the individuals in these roles would have to decide if they could change their views without destabilizing their internal moral or intellectual codes of operation. If they decided they could not, they must then decide if it is in their best interests to assume a neutral position of watchful waiting, or to resign from their leadership roles. No matter what position they decided to take, individuals in these roles would have to engage in a fair amount of sensegiving behavior. If they decided to change previously held positions, they would then have to explain such positional changes to their colleagues, especially to those who had relied heavily upon their interpretative skill and professional acumen in the past. If they decided to assume a position of watchful waiting, they must be equally skillful in explaining to those in their immediate circle of influence why they appear to be acting in a manner that seems at odds with their past interpretations of the organization’s strategic priorities and well-being. Finally, if they decided to join the loyal opposition, they would have to be willing to explain why they are at odds with the new superintendent and the board of trustees responsible for selecting a change-minded leader to lead the district.
While all this was transpiring internally in the period immediately following my appointment, the external environment in which school districts operate has changed dramatically since the 1991 Gioia and Chittipeddi study. Such dramatic changes in circumstances, particularly in the economic environment, underscore the importance of understanding the roles sensemaking and sensegiving play in determining the success or failure of the strategic change process. Predictable federal and state funding patterns, minimal private sector competition, such as the charter school movement, and little or no pressure on academic administrators and faculty to pursue research-based agendas are no longer the norm.

The demand that educational organizations—and the leaders of those organizations—accept greater public accountability for the academic performance of their students is operating at the highest stakes level possible, as superintendents and principals can count on being replaced for failure to meet growth targets. The long term consequences of the Great Recession of 2009, the backlash against the public sector unleashed by organized initiatives such as the Tea Party movement, and the frustrations of groups committed to increasing the academic achievement of students from low-income households, and students from racial, ethnic, linguistic minority groups, have also served to raise the public temperature to combustible levels, as leadership struggles with the complex, compound mixture of organizational, economic, political, and social forces. Due in part to these forces, the potentially significant consequential threats to public education and its component organizations are greater than they have been since the onset of the age of mass public education, which rose to prominence immediately following the close of World War II.

These forces combine with the historical resistance of professional educators working in these settings to any type of external influence, irrespective of its origins or motives, especially if this influence in any way appears to mirror the values and measures used to guide the fortunes of the private for-profit sector. This reality poses an enormous threat to the future well-being of publicly-financed, elementary and secondary educational organizations. Even though change-minded boards and educational administrators may have the best interests of public schools and districts in mind when launching the strategic change process, these relatively new forces at work make for an explosive combination of reactionary sentiments in favor of the status quo. Unfortunately, this is the case even in circumstances in which the maintenance of the status results in chipping away at the legitimacy of these educational organizations in the eyes of the citizens being taxed to finance their ongoing operations.

As stated in the Introduction, my arrival to office as a first-time superintendent was greeted by about two months of a honeymoon period, followed by the election of a new governing board, with a new board majority, and a list of 22 items the new board wanted done right away. I
took great care, upon entering the job, to get around to staff members, including an effort to meet every teacher in the district, introduce myself, and hear their comments or concerns. This was definitely my honeymoon period in the job, the period from September through November 2006. Though I came prepared to implement the plan on which I interviewed, the new board had its own plan and had relayed the same to me in no uncertain terms.

By January of 2007, the board demanded and received the status report shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Status Report on Board Demands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>General Description</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Person(s) Resp.</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Maintenance of facilities leads to attrition and low morale</td>
<td>Work orders are unattended; communication weak; systems not in place; annual items unanticipated and unattended</td>
<td>Meet with maintenance supervisor to consider systems (WO, communication, staffing)</td>
<td>Sup’t</td>
<td>2-28-07</td>
<td>Install computers for staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Custodians not properly evaluated/supervised; no substitutes; no accountability</td>
<td>Meet with maintenance/custodial staff (consider perceptions, staffing, communication, duties)</td>
<td>CFO</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communicate to requester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Transportation/Custodial</td>
<td>Custodians not properly evaluated/supervised; no substitutes; no accountability</td>
<td>Meet w/ Staff</td>
<td>See #1 above</td>
<td>3-31-07</td>
<td>Establish sub system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status: Revised schedules to level work assignments; directed HR to build list of sub custodians; increase oversight of evening custodians</td>
<td>Set up Sub System</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Management/Leadership</td>
<td>Teamwork lacking; responsibilities not well defined for public and staff; no supervision by teachers at brunch; department meeting minutes/agendas given to Board and retained</td>
<td>Teambuilding with administrators; develop and/or review action/communication protocols; review with Board and administration; develop goals for 07-08</td>
<td>Sup’t.</td>
<td>February 23-25</td>
<td>Cohesive team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status: Conducted BOT retreat to establish protocols; Directors retreat in February to build team and consider working relationships; scheduled workshop to consider protocols and roles/responsibilities for administrative team on April 27; Plan for Board and administrative team to convene in June to review protocols, roles and responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NCEE</td>
<td>Effective communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>March: McMahon Group on communication protocols</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>June with Board/Administration</td>
<td>Aligned vision &amp; goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Protocols</td>
<td>Processes not transparent</td>
<td>Create visible chart of processes by job position</td>
<td>C&amp;I Director</td>
<td>3-30-07</td>
<td>Transparency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3.1 (continued)

#### Status Report on Board Demands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>General Description</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Person(s) Resp.</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Discipline</td>
<td>Pods cause inconsistency; Failure to follow up on referrals; Counselors uninvolved; Campus supervisors too involved (beyond job description)</td>
<td>Evaluate pod model, Review discipline systems and backups, Identify PD opportunities for teachers/staff</td>
<td>HS Principal, C&amp;I Director, Alt. Programs Director</td>
<td>4-30-07</td>
<td>Clear, high expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Communications well (see Stan’s notes) Consistency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Safety</td>
<td>Administrators do not hear safety issues raised by Campus Supervisors</td>
<td>Hold forum with campus supervisors to hear concerns, Speak to law SRO about safety concerns, Create mitigation opportunities</td>
<td>HS Principal, APs, C&amp;I Director</td>
<td>5-30-07</td>
<td>See #3 above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>See #5 above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Students in Parking Lot</td>
<td>Several opportunities for trouble; supervision difficult</td>
<td>Prohibit parking lot access; purchase class sets and locate new sports lockers (parking lot placed off limits)</td>
<td>CFO, C&amp;I Director, AP #1</td>
<td>8-1-07</td>
<td>Supervised students Safe environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Graffiti</td>
<td>Not painted over soon enough</td>
<td>Consider clerical support for Maintenance (.5 FT) to dispatch, record, and process work orders</td>
<td>CFO, HR Director</td>
<td>8-1-07</td>
<td>Early response Recorded Computers in lieu of clerical support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Unreturned calls by administrators/teachers; classified workers not at stations</td>
<td>Messages not relayed to administrators; calls not returned in timely manner; classified workers away from stations after lunch</td>
<td>Create policy to transmit messages w/in 1 hr. to recipient; Policy to return calls within 24 hrs. of receipt &amp; emergency calls ASAP; Review schedules &amp; breaks to assure classified presence in ea major school office area</td>
<td>HR Director, HS Principal, CFO</td>
<td>8-1-07</td>
<td>Clear communicated policy Effective communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3.1 (continued)

**Status Report on Board Demands**

**Governing Board**

**Issue Points**

**January 2007**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>General Description</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Person(s) Resp.</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10. Red Books</td>
<td>Director of Ed Services working with site administration and DCs to work on restoring curriculum guides (Red Books) according to State standards. First part of project is sue by end of April; principal directed to deal with those resistant to the process.</td>
<td>Standardized aligned delivery of curriculum lacking; accountability for standards compromised; support for teachers diminished</td>
<td>Use ACCLAIM to introduce process to standardize Math delivery system</td>
<td>C&amp;I Director</td>
<td>6-15-08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Course Descriptions</td>
<td>Status: Director of Ed Services directed to assume control of course guide process; ordered course guides to ensure all students receive a guide this spring; directed that all students receive guide in future</td>
<td>Courses not approved; process for approval not followed</td>
<td>Review approval process and timelines with staff; establish quality control over process, with assigned accountability</td>
<td>C&amp;I Director</td>
<td>4-30-07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Review Classes to be Offered</td>
<td>Status: Director of Ed Services to review all courses and approve same to ensure law and Board Policies are followed.</td>
<td>Administrative review of course offerings not occurring</td>
<td>Propose thorough DC/Principal; Review at C&amp;I Office</td>
<td>C&amp;I Director</td>
<td>5-1-07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Class size Irregularities</td>
<td>Status: Director of HR and Fiscal Services directed to review position control, staffing formulas, and budget; teacher assignment to be allocated based on reasonable enrollment; layoffs of excess positions ordered; opportunity to fill under-enrolled classes, including course books for all students ordered throughout spring</td>
<td>Classes both too large and too small</td>
<td>Allocate staffing to specified formula to be determined</td>
<td>C&amp;I Director</td>
<td>2-10-07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3.1 (continued)

*Status Report on Board Demands*

**Governing Board**

**Issue Points**  
**January 2007**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>General Description</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Person(s) Resp.</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **14. Teacher Assignment**  
Status: Recruitment of teachers to place HQT’s in positions with greatest need; site administration working with teachers to make high-needs class assignments a shared responsibility while working on teacher attitudes | Most experienced/competent teachers teach higher level courses | Recruit for best teachers early and streamline hire process  
Assign teachers to fit program needs; within program limitations, allow teachers input on assignment change process | C&I Director  
Alt. Programs. Director  
HS Principal | 6-1-07 | See #13 above  
Recruitment/Retention through PD plan  
RE. support for home purchase |
| **15. Teacher Morale Low:**  
Status: Walk through observations reestablished by administration with District administration developing indicators checklist for observers; Director of HR to consider an end-of-year social gathering of classified and certificated staff; break and lunch supervision reestablished for directors. | Few opportunities to socialize; district/site driven activities missing | Create sunshine committee to review meaningful socialization opportunities  
Meet with DCs  
Meet with Depts. | HS Principal  
AP #3  
HR Director | 8-1-07 | Sense of team  
Positive relationships  
Resolve Science issues  
Staff Development PD |
| **16. 3-Minute Observation by Administration**  
Status: Re-established (see 15 above). | Administrators do not perform observations | Review observation/walk through structure to emphasize visibility | C&I Director  
HS Principal | 8-1-07 | Connection to staff & administrative PD |
| **17. Honor Roll**  
Reviewed handbook, Board Policy, and federal law; created honor roll system with local and state/federal guidelines; published honor roll on website and in communications. | Students not recognized for good work | Review legal restrictions of posting of exemplary students  
Consider options for student recognition; review existing plan | C&I Director  
HS Principal  
AP #3 | 6-30-07 | Effective student recognition system  
Honor Roll Published in Student & Town papers |
Table 3.1 (continued)

Status Report on Board Demands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>General Description</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Person(s) Resp.</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18. Dress Code</td>
<td>Dress suggests gang affiliation; hats allowed in class; inappropriate clothing</td>
<td>Review dress codes/uniform codes of similar schools</td>
<td>HS Principal</td>
<td>5-31-08</td>
<td>Safe, effective learning environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Create representative committee of student, teacher, community, law enforcement, and administrative representatives to consider dress/uniform code and report to Superintendent/Board</td>
<td>Alt. Programs. Director AP #3 AP #1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of purpose visible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Administrative support for sports/activities</td>
<td>Attendance at and support for sports and activities lacking; attendance at recognition programs lacking</td>
<td>Communicate calendar of events/place events on master calendar online using Outlook once exchange server is operational</td>
<td>CFO HS Principal</td>
<td>4-30-07</td>
<td>Perception of visibly involved administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status: Site administration directed to review dress code policy and enforcement of same, including hats and hoods</td>
<td></td>
<td>Check assignments for activities to enhance coverage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Include presence of coverage of events in weekly reports/reports to Board</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Course Expectations</td>
<td>Course expectations not clearly defined/shared/communicated/recorded</td>
<td>Divisions review and articulate courses; administration review to ensure alignment to standards and across departments</td>
<td>C&amp;I Director HS Principal AP #2</td>
<td>6-30-08</td>
<td>See #10 above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status: Being reviewed in curriculum guides (see Red Books, #10 above); principal directed common final exams.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.1 is augmented by a status report made in a March update to the board that apprised them of the status of each of the 22 items they wanted accomplished by me immediately. The status update is located in the first column, directly under the item title. Such was my initial relationship with the new board, including its new board majority, in December 2006.

As described above, it did not begin this way. I had been appointed in August 2006, after emerging as the board’s preferred candidate at the culmination of a three-month process that had been conducted by a respected headhunter of district superintendents throughout California. As noted in the Introduction of this paper, sought after characteristics spoke of dynamic leadership, inspirational leadership, knowledgeable in all aspects of school business, able to build consensus, and competent in curriculum and state content standards. And yet, after hiring me for my ideas on bringing alignment of curriculum to the district, creating professional development around assessment and using data to inform instruction, using fiscal resources in ways that reflect district values, and recruiting and retaining...
competent, effective teachers, the board—bolstered by an election that created a new board majority in November 2006—was dictating exactly what they wanted accomplished in detail. They knew something I learned quickly; if I wanted to remain superintendent of this district, I needed to respond to their dictates, and soon. After all, three members of the new board had been elected after having been long-time employees of the district, two who had been top administrators in the district, and the other who served a full career as a teacher in the district’s large, comprehensive high school. All had a significant following, and this was a relatively small community that did not accept outsiders easily.

I spent great care in those first weeks on the job getting to know my administrative team, both district level administrators and site level administrators. I wanted representation from all on my cabinet, which dealt with all aspects of district governance. I also learned that I had one important vacancy that needed to be filled, that of the chief human resources officer for the district. In the interim, I had to cover many aspects of that job, while conducting business as superintendent. Fortunately, human resources staff members were very competent and seasoned veterans of all aspects of their jobs.

Concurrently, I made the rounds with all community groups, meeting with or attending meetings of the area LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens) president, the local Rotary Chapter, the Veterans Association, the Police and Fire Chiefs, other local and county school district officials, and service agencies and assistance networks throughout the county. In all cases, I attempted to listen to concerns as much as possible. Whenever there is a change in leadership, there is a tendency among some to bash the former leadership. I had been advised by another superintendent to just listen to comments without commenting myself, and that is what I did.

From the community, I heard one immediate and rather loud cry that our students were seen too often, and in too many numbers, around town during school hours. The community, in what seemed like one voice, believed that students were cutting class with relative impunity. In other words, they did not see the district doing anything about it. Because I had witnessed a solution that not only improved attendance, but also improved communication at home, in other districts, I immediately contacted a company that could not only call several numbers for each family at the same time, but could also send email messages at the same time, automatically anytime a student was missing from class. After negotiations, a contract was presented to the board in January 2007. Although the company had data demonstrating that attendance had increased by about 11%, based on their own survey of participating districts, and I had personal experience of the same result in two other districts, the contract was not immediately approved. Our board wanted to be assured that the contract
could be funded from categorical funds. Although only part of the contract would qualify for funding under categorical programs, the board finally approved the contract in February 2007. It is noteworthy that the contract amount was just over $12,000 annually. A one-percentage point increase in attendance, from 93% to 94% was equivalent to $180,000 in increased funding by the state, based on attendance. It would seem that this kind of decision would be a no-brainer. In fact, it was a very difficult decision for the board. When I asked myself why this would be such a difficult decision to make, especially given the data to support its success in getting students to school, the answer seemed to be that the board simply did not trust ideas that came from people it did not trust. I was their new superintendent. However, I was elected by the old board, not this board. They did not yet know if they could trust me. In fact, since the system has been implemented, attendance has increased to a consistent rate around 95%, increasing revenue to the district of about $340,000 annually. In truth, they might not have agreed to the contract at all, but for the fact that the community was tired of seeing high school students downtown too often, when they should be in class. Anecdotally, I would hear stories right after the system was implemented that mothers or fathers would receive the call informing them that their children were not in class, and parents would show up, children in hand at the front door of the high school, within 15 minutes of receiving the phone call.

I cite this early example of my relationship with the new board to indicate how difficult it was to gain their trust. In fact, even concerning this decision, I did not gain their trust for several months, as they wanted to be sure this was the right decision by waiting for comparative attendance data. I identify this element of distrust as a general element that existed—and still exists—at the full-board level. Noting this dynamic is necessary in considering the data and analysis that follows. Prior to Mr. Vargas becoming a member of the board, Mr. and Ms. Vargas had a well developed distrust of the administration and, by extension, the board borne from years of advocacy for students’ rights they argued were being abused with regularity.

**Board Member Vargas Prior to Election**

At the board meeting announcing my selection, I remember meeting a husband and wife team who had been long-term constituents of the high school. A Latino family, they seemed passionate about education and the kind of education their children were receiving at the district’s high school. They wanted me to know that they were involved parents. Board minutes from the next meeting, August 23, 2006, revealed the following public comments from this same husband and wife:

Ms. Vargas stated that she has submitted a complaint to the Superintendent for the school’s violation of federal and state
laws. She explained that the student emergency cards had a signature line for parents to indicate they had received the Annual Notification to Parents of Rights (parent handbook); however, the parent handbooks were not yet sent out to parents. Ms. Vargas stated that if students did not have a signed emergency card they were denied their schedules and that some students forged their parents’ signatures. She further reported that in many cases parents had to take time off work and come to the school to pick up their students’ schedules. Mr. Vargas stated that on the first day of school students receive a printed copy of class expectations from each teacher and that some of the expectations/statements are contradictory to Ed Code and to school policy. He cited an example of one course expectation that says the student can only make up two tests per semester and noted that Ed Code provides that if a student is ill, work/tests can be made up. Mr. Vargas suggested that the Board ask how many complaints are received about staff.

It became clear early that these parents were advocates for students’ rights. I remember feeling that it was admirable that they cared enough about their own children, and the children of other families, to advocate so hard for their rights. At the same time, I wondered why they felt it necessary to file complaints with the state when they seemingly could have simply gone to administration to see whether or not they were aware that they might be violating students’ rights to education and parents’ rights to notifications required by law. Almost two years later, this father would become the first Latino elected to the governing board of the district. That was well into the future. For the present, he was a concerned father, and part of the husband and wife team that my own wife and I had met in the August 3, 2006 meeting of the board. My wife, herself Latina, and an advocate for rights of the underserved, told me when she met these two parents that I better be careful because these two had an agenda, though it was unclear at that time just what their agenda might be. My wife stated, and it made quite an impression on her, that this husband and wife team had lived in the community for the past 15 years, yet they still felt like outsiders.

Going back to the time just prior to my becoming a first-time superintendent in this district, and following the record of advocacy until Mr. Vargas campaigned for and won a seat on the district’s governing board, Mr. and Ms. Vargas submitted an ongoing series of complaints against the district or against individual members of administration. Table 3.2 summarizes the complaints registered by the Vargas family until the election of Mr. Vargas as the first Latino member of the board.
### Table 3.2

**Vargas Complaint History Prior to Mr. Vargas Election to Board**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complaint Date</th>
<th>Complaint Type</th>
<th>Complaint Subject</th>
<th>Complaint Disposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-18-06</td>
<td>Uniform Complaint:</td>
<td>Allegations:</td>
<td>1. Letter to parents outlining enrollment procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Board Policy 1312.3 Discrimination</td>
<td>1. Withholding student class schedules pending parent signature on emergency cards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Based on Race, based on violations of</td>
<td>2. Requiring parent signature acknowledging receipt of parent notifications required</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20 USC 1232g (FERPA statute) and CA Ed.</td>
<td>by law prior to receipt of notifications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Code 49063 (governing annual parent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>notifications).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-5-06</td>
<td>Complaint Against Employees Board</td>
<td>Allegations:</td>
<td>No change in board’s offer of February 2, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policy 1312.1</td>
<td>1. Withholding student class schedules pending parent signature on emergency cards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Requiring parent signature acknowledging receipt of parent notifications required</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>by law prior to receipt of notifications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-11-07</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Student Behavior Contract</td>
<td>Mr./Ms. Vargas expressed concern that students who have been suspended should not have strict behavior contract; First comments to board at meeting of April 18, 2007. Resolution of 2-2-07 applied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-31-07</td>
<td>Uniform Complaint:</td>
<td>Allegations:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Board Policy 1312.3 Discrimination</td>
<td>1. Withholding student class schedules pending parent signature on emergency cards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Based on Race, based on violations of</td>
<td>2. Requiring parent signature acknowledging receipt of parent notifications required</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20 USC 1232g (FERPA statute) and CA Ed.</td>
<td>by law prior to receipt of notifications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Code 49063 (governing annual parent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>notifications).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This is a repeat of the same complaint proffered one year prior. From the prior complaint, although the district argued no harm or violation occurred, the district reviewed enrollment policies. Mr./Ms. Vargas are arguing that the promised changes did not occur in the way they were promised.
Table 3.2

Vargas Complaint History Prior to Mr. Vargas Election to Board (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complaint Date</th>
<th>Complaint Type</th>
<th>Complaint Subject</th>
<th>Complaint Disposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8-19-07</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Concept of zero tolerance; Ms. Vargas argued that the discipline policies are being administered by those with heavy hands.</td>
<td>Discipline policies reviewed annually.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-20-07</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Alleged that non-student son could not wait on the street in front of the school until dismissal, when student-son is dismissed.</td>
<td>Communication to administration assuring free use of streets to all; no confirmation of allegation could be obtained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-25-08</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Alleged that treatment of two students in a fight was disproportionate</td>
<td>Disagreement about facts in evidence; concluded that administration acted appropriately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-9-08; re-filed through ACLU, 10-17-08</td>
<td>Informal (Though Mr. Vargas sought state support for his argument)</td>
<td>Alleged that charging student athletes fees for transportation to athletic events is illegal and disproportionately affects student of low socioeconomic status</td>
<td>District researched issue and determined that charging a non-mandatory fee is allowed if other means for getting to events are provided. On 6-2-09, ACLU provides assurance no suit is to be filed and agrees that non-mandatory fees can be charged, but only with other assurances on alternative means for transportation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-27-08</td>
<td>Complaint Against Employee Board Policy 1312.1</td>
<td>Allege inappropriate treatment of son at athletic event</td>
<td>District provided meeting opportunity to discuss resolution; Vargas family declined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-29-08</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Complaint against new policy on gang-identified apparel</td>
<td>District forwarded law enforcement’s identified apparel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a participant observer, I have felt as if Mr. and Ms. Vargas, prior to Mr. Vargas’ election to the board, have had the effect of creating a logjam in the governance of the district. Repeatedly, issues such as those noted above have been addressed by Mr. and Ms. Vargas through lodging informal or formal complaints against the district administration. They appear to operate from the belief that administration has no intention of treating students, and particularly Latino students, fairly and equitably (see Appendix A). Prior to the superintendent or other administrator’s knowledge of an issue of importance to the Vargas family, a letter to the board, a comment at a board meeting, or an email communication to an administrator or board member would surface an issue.

The parent handbook suggests that parents should first take up an issue at the place where it originates, with a teacher, administrator, or other
staff member, in order to have complaints resolved at the lowest possible level. Board policies concerning complaints reinforce that procedure. Mr. and Ms. Vargas do not follow that process. On the basis of their actions and their comments, they indicate they have no faith in the system of governance in place. They believe it has not served them, or they believe they can get better results by jumping ahead or circumventing the system of governance. They argue that the resolutions of their complaints support their belief in that resolutions do not occur in a manner that is satisfactory to them. They argue instead that the district attempts to implement the “legal” solution, but not the “right” solution. They seem to believe that the “legal” solution does not achieve their goal of equitable treatment.

**Understanding Events From Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Race Theory Perspective**

Reviewing Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), recall that Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) offer five perspectives that form the basis and pedagogy of CRT and LatCrit, as follows:

a) Race and racism intersect with other forms of subordination, such as gender and class discrimination to create a variety of oppression,

b) CRT and LatCrit challenge traditional claims of educational objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity,

c) CRT and LatCrit share a commitment to social justice through resistance that leads to social transformation,

d) CRT and LatCrit framework recognizes the experiential knowledge of students of color as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, and

e) CRT and LatCrit insist on analyzing race and racism in education by placing them in a historical and contemporary context.

If I apply the framework—perhaps in this context it is better referred to as world view—then perhaps I can make some sense out of what the Vargas husband and wife team are trying to do and why they go about their course of complaining in this manner. First, it is critical to understanding their actions and the reasons for them that their world view holds that systems of authority, such as school district governance systems are racist at their core. Whereas they may believe that individuals within the system may not act in racist, oppressive ways—and by no means am I arguing that Mr. and Ms. Vargas believe that individuals within our district’s governance
system, from board to administration, are not racist—when those individuals become part of a larger governance system, by definition, they become parts of a racist system. For people of color, based on many years of hearing individual stories of racism, this is no revelation. It is very important for Whites to understand this point, and life experience informs me on this point, also. But only if a White person in a position of authority understands that individuals such as Mr. and Ms. Vargas assume, going into any situation, that they will be participating in a racist process can any potentially proactive action be taken that improves life for students.

Applying Solorzano and Delgado Bernal’s (2001) work on CRT and LatCrit lends some context and understanding to their actions. One must accept that their way of going about business is far more expensive than those who assume a trustful, fair governance system. Indeed, in the past year, the district has spent over $60,000 on legal fees in reviewing and responding to complaints and allegations raised by Mr. and Ms. Vargas—and this, after his election to the board. Each time an issue came up in Table 3.2, the district was required to prove that discrimination did not occur, and all students were treated the same way. However, without the work of Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), that might have been the end of the story. In the case of our district, knowing that the form of explanation or description in which communications were made had an effect on how messages were received by parents such as Mr. and Ms. Vargas, one can take additional care to review communications to parents through an equity lens. This exercise can help parents to see that district and site administrators are trying to be sensitive to the fact that many parents see both communications and decisions from administrations as more acts of racism. In fact, the good that Mr. and Ms Vargas have done by being vocal and defiant in their advocacy is to ensure that more and more communications are being reviewed through an equity lens. Items of review include the language of communications, sensitivity to specific subgroup audiences, the form of communication (phone, email, written, electronic), and the support for dealing with responses to communications.

In one specific example, the form parents use to determine the type of transportation their children will take to get to athletic events was reviewed on more than one occasion. The purpose of the review process was to ensure that no discriminatory or otherwise illegal practice could be construed from the language used to describe how students opt for their choice from the list of transportation choices on the form.

As reported earlier, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) observed different types of resistance within this framework, classifying them and naming them as self-defeating resistance, reactionary behavior, conformist resistance, and transformational resistance, as they applied within the context of the 1968 walk-outs in East Los Angeles and the 1993 student occupation of the UCLA Faculty Center. In observing transformational
resistance, the type of resistance that transforms society from the perspective of women involved, to the walk-outs of 1968, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal found that it was typical for the young women involved in the walk-outs of 1968 in East Los Angeles to have a social consciousness born from modeling by their parents at home—who themselves were active in transformative activities and became mentors for their children. For these families, the researchers found that social justice was a cultural norm. After looking deeper into transformational resistance, observing it from internal versus external perspectives, they found that internal transformational resistance is exemplified by the student who appears to conform to the norms of the school, but in fact is preparing to be successful enough in school and work to come back and give back to the community by improving it. In their research they found that this actually occurred in a number of cases. In contradistinction, external transformational resistance is overt as it creates change.

Viewed from a LatCrit perspective, Vargas spent the time before becoming a board member, applying resistance toward the then-existing board to transform practice around access to college prep courses, changes to suspension and expulsion policies, and his observations of general disproportionate treatment of Latinos. His insistence on a presentation and audit of data relating to discipline was done to shed light on a problem he believes is being hidden from the public.

As one who is concerned about issues leading to the achievement gap between Black and Brown students as compared with their White and Asian counterparts, I share Vargas’ concern on all these issues. The question I kept reflecting upon, as did my administrative team, is was this form of advocacy on the part of Vargas a help or a hindrance in achieving the very outcomes he was seeking, during this pre-board member period of his own history?

As stated earlier in this paper, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) identified sensemaking and sensegiving as the two theoretical dimensions necessary to create meaning out of their ethnographic research. They described sensemaking as, having “to do with meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties as they attempted to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature...” (p. 442) of the information they were processing. Sensegiving, in contradistinction, was described as having to do with “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (p. 442). They concluded that these two, interrelated processes were “iterative, sequential, and to some extent reciprocal” (p.442).

In considering the events surrounding the event of Vargas’ election to the Board, and in particular, in attempting to make sense of the pre-election period of governance as it relates to Vargas and his influence on board
governance, applying this underlying theory can lend support to my understandings and lend support to findings and conclusions that may be of use to other first-time superintendents as they consider impediments to their own board and superintendent relationships.

With that in mind, what sense can I make out of my own participant observations of watching and experiencing this pre-appointment period of the Board, Vargas’ interactions with it, and any impediments to my own administration of the district’s business as its superintendent, a first-time superintendent?

First, I observe that Vargas’ advocacy, one that was to transform district behavior by calling out the Board through public commentary, had little direct effect, as indicated by his frequent demand for a third-party audit of the district’s discipline data. It should be noted that, although board minutes do not reflect this and I could not locate an independent source to confirm it, my own experience and that of my administrative team was that Vargas did not believe in the truthfulness of the discipline data that district administration was presenting, even though that data identified disproportionate numbers of suspensions and fights by Latino students. Vargas expressed that we were hiding facts about discipline, and that the evidence of this fact was in the varying ways data were reported. The Board did not take up his cause. Instead, the most that the Board would do at the conclusion of any particular public comment by Vargas was to ask administration to look into the matter. Each time that occurred, nothing in evidence ever indicated misrepresentation of data or hiding of data. If Vargas’ idea was to change the way the district was doing business, then he was failing in his attempt. The more extreme his comments, the less the Board appeared ready to respond positively to his complaints.

To administration, tracking down Vargas’ comments for the Board seemed to take time away from some of the very concerns Vargas had for equitable education of Latino students. As indicated earlier in this paper, in my job interview I had expressed a goal of aligning curriculum horizontally and vertically to ensure state standards were being covered in ways that support student learning as students progressed through their courses. This goal is directed at all students, and I believed then—and still do believe—it must be addressed systemically if learning content standards is to occur for all students. Similarly, I argued for a data manipulation system used and understood by all in order to sort, disaggregate, and analyze data in meaningful ways that support instruction.

An analysis of the roadblocks to governance, both governance relationships between the board and superintendent and board and administrative team relationships, in juxtaposition with the single event of Vargas’ election to the board, can be undertaken by applying sensemaking and sensegiving to a comparison of the agenda of the board, the administrative team under my leadership as superintendent, and Vargas’
own agenda. Such analysis must consider whether or not governance decisions that led to increased student achievement were aided or impeded by the board, the administration, and Vargas.

Upon assuming the position of superintendent, working with the administrative team, the following administrative goals were established and approved by the board, known as the district’s goals and objectives, to increase student achievement:

1. Create safe school environment by creating, implementing, enforcing, and monitoring clear, consistent, predictable rules of conduct, known as “The Code.”
2. Acquiring, implementing, and monitoring use of a powerful, data manipulation device that could disaggregate data in a variety of ways to measure learning.
3. Implementation of standards-based, aligned curriculum in all core subject areas.
4. Implement professional development in a variety of areas, including effective practice, improving subject matter competence, assessment, and differentiation strategies.
5. Creating effective means of communicating with parents about their students.
6. Increasing opportunities to engage students through meaningful relationships with adults.

Creating a Safe School Environment

For the administration, the first steps toward creating a safe school environment, as told to me by teachers and administrators alike, involved creating, or perhaps better stated as re-creating clear, enforceable, consistent rules of conduct in class and around campus. Many teachers felt as though the three years prior to my appointment as superintendent had been a period of eroding discipline, including a failure to enforce rules of conduct that were long established at the district’s comprehensive high school. Such failure resulted in student attendance rates declining, student civility to one another in decline, and an increase of fear and distrust on campus, both in and outside of class.

Under my leadership, the code of conduct was resurrected, and a purchase of posters containing the code placed the code in clear view of each student in every classroom and in common areas. Teachers were sent a presentation created by administration so that the message would be delivered to students in the same way in every class. Those charged with implementing the system of discipline were trained on the law, the district’s policies on discipline and the range of consequences to be administered for infractions of the code. Administrators themselves were assigned outside supervision duties during student break time, not only to enforce the code,
but also to become real points of contact for students outside of class. Relationships were born during those times, and they were given opportunities to grow and develop, as students became more connected with leadership during these non-class times. In the midst of enforcing a consistent, predictable discipline policy, positive adult-student relationships were given freedom to grow and develop.

Vargas’ own agenda for student discipline, as gleaned from his comments at board meetings over a period of over two years prior to his election to the board, and as summarized in Appendix A, included emphasis on student rights and equitable discipline. These ideas were reflected most often in his comments to the board. He was convinced that discipline disproportionately impacted Latino students. Rather than spend time on the discipline policy, Vargas wanted time spent on professional development of administrators. He became convinced that two administrators were targeting Latino students for discipline, and he stated that belief to me on more than one occasion. Administration, including me as superintendent, spent many hours responding to Vargas’ allegations of discrimination. Table 3.2 outlines Vargas’ formal complaints against the district, many of which alleged discrimination against district employees. Complaints were specifically directed at the district’s discipline policies, or were directed at other district policies that alleged some form of disparate treatment for students of color, Latino students in particular. One complaint, which grew into a complaint registered with the federal Office of Civil Rights (OCR), which required approximately 100 hours of administrative time, and ultimately resulted in an expenditure of over $64,000 resulted in findings that the district was conducting its business within the letter and spirit of the law. Was that entire process necessary? Did it result in improved conditions for students in ways that support student achievement? Administrators were responding with a resounding “no” to those questions. Moreover, they felt as though a tremendous amount of money and time had been spent responding to false allegations of impropriety on the part of the district by Vargas.

Conversely, Vargas felt that his complaints were being whitewashed through the law. Since he did not trust the legal system to treat students and families of color fairly, yet it was the only system available to him to fight the injustices he perceived, he also felt let down by the process. He felt the system is fixed against students and families of color, and he could bring statistics to bear about graduation rates and student discipline rates that supported his contentions. He stated on more than one occasion that the district hid behind the law. He argued that administrators would rather do what is legal than what is right.

How could I as superintendent convince him that both he and I wanted the same things for students of color in terms of creating a safe, positive environment for learning to occur? My response to that question was taken
on several fronts. First, I made myself visible in the Latino community, and in authentic ways. I spent my own money annually to support scholarships for Latino students. I attended meetings of Latino sponsored groups, such as LULAC (League of United Latin American Students). On my own time, I advocated for Latino causes, such as passage of the Dream Act and immigration reform. I served on local boards, such as the county’s Workforce Investment Board, and the local community services agency board. In short, I tried to prove to Vargas and those with similar sentiments that, even if they believed the system is crooked, there are individuals within it—and not just Latino individuals—who cared about equitable treatment of students. I believed then, and still believe, that building some credibility by becoming a positive actor in the community for the underserved is essential to positive governance. If I could not convince Vargas and others that I not only understood something about their struggles then they would not allow me to act as their leader. Leadership involves a personal investment of time on the part of the leader, especially when that leader is a first-time superintendent. One must build one’s own credibility as a leader. This was the only conclusion I could draw from the immense amount of time spent in putting out fires in places where fires, in fact, did not exist. Perhaps better stated, the wrongs that Vargas saw were not the wrongs that needed to be corrected. There were other things that could be accomplished that would better support a safe environment for students. An example of one such support system was the implementation of a formal mentor system that was implemented for students at risk from broken families, economic strife or dysfunction, and/or violence. The program brought counselors who were very familiar with the environmental settings in which these at-risk youth were living. Dividing the at-risk students into cohorts of males and females, these cohort groups meet with their leaders weekly. In addition to meaningful presentations, these counselors also listen to their students discuss the highly personal issues that create their unsafe living conditions, and that spill over onto their school conditions. In this environment, relationships are built that become ongoing relationships. One year’s participants become student leaders in succeeding years, thereby building their sense of self-worth. Positive engagement activities like these, initiated by administration, show excellent results. They support the climate that Vargas is trying to create.

Have we made progress with Vargas, now that he is a board member, on convincing him that caring people work within the system of governance? I would have to say that we have not made significant headway in this area. But I continue to believe that our chipping away at his armor through actions that improve lives of underserved students is the only way to convince him otherwise. My work with the National Coalition for Equity in Education tells me that feelings of oppression, discrimination, and racism are learned over time, and it will be necessary for much time to pass, filled with
positive experiences of engagement for youth before those negative earlier experiences can be mitigated.

Assessment that Informs Instruction

When I arrived as superintendent, I learned that there was a tool at the district that could disaggregate data that had been purchased eighteen months prior to my taking office. Administrators had been trained on use of the device, as well as a few key teachers, but the tool had essentially fallen by the wayside. In establishing a goal, supported by objectives, to implement a data-driven system, I encouraged administration to adopt a new device that I know would be supported by the manufacturer (the one in place there at the time was unsupported), would be driven home through ongoing professional training, and would be evaluated regularly for its effects on achievement when properly used. As the board did not respect the prior superintendent who selected the device, they were generally supportive of my recommendation to bring in a new device. As was generally the case with the board, their support was not unconditional. They wanted assurances that the tool would be used in ways that would lead to student achievement. They wanted assurances that the tool would not sit on the shelf and gather dust. Finally, they wanted to see reports from the assessment tool that would convince them that it was being used in its highest and best use form to the benefit of students. Again, upon hearing these conditions, I left my ego at the door, placed aside my feelings of being insulted that I would do anything other than what they were suggesting, and pressed onward. In truth, we learned valuable lessons from this experience about governance and leadership.

First, the administrative team learned that the standards-based instruction that was supposed to have been taking place in classrooms—and in fact was evident in lesson plans and in posted standards on the wall for daily teaching—was not being well assessed and was not, therefore, occurring in the ways administrators thought they were observing at all.

Second, administrators learned, and subsequently passed along to their teachers, that calibration of standards for several courses was in need of major repair.

Third, formative assessments for gauging student achievement were in short supply and in need of further development. In several subject core subject areas, teachers were not able to evaluate students individually or in groups to look for trends in their learning, or for wholes in teaching.

Finally, professional learning communities that could study the formative assessment data that were now starting to be developed needed to be developed and properly trained. It became very clear, very quickly, that teachers needed to better understand how to use the data they were beginning to receive to better inform their teacher practice.
The most positive outcome of this experience for governance was that is valuable to identify those high leverage choices or decisions that, once made, have positive rippling effects throughout the organization. Because I had seen from personal experience what the same decision had meant to teachers in two other districts, I could predict what the impact of this decision would be on this district. Further, there were no impediments to making this decision from board distrust or other influences to negate the positive impact of this decision. Since, implementation of this decision, state API (Academic Performance Indicator) scores have risen at rates higher than most of the comprehensive high schools within our region, and our closing of the achievement gap for Latino students and English Learners is almost unsurpassed in the region.

The other lesson in governance to be learned, in terms of board and superintendent relations, is that the healthy tension created by the board by demanding feedback on progress to prove the purchase was effective is a necessary component of the decision. Knowing that administration had to answer, not only to the superintendent, but also to the entire community through the auspices of the board, helped all concerned know just how important they all were to student success.

Standards-Based, Aligned Curriculum

Much has been written in the previous section about the decision to review, realign, and implement newer, standards-based curricula that are aligned from vertically within a discipline and horizontally across disciplines. As stated in the previous section, the decision to pursue new data manipulation software led almost immediately into the discussion about standards-based and aligned instructional delivery. I have stated previously that the board was in alignment with the superintendent concerning this and related decisions. A review of Table 3.1, page 47, Item 10, wherein the board was seeking standards-based, aligned course through course guides, supports the same goal outlined by the superintendent and administrative team. As with the data manipulation software, the board, and the administration were in alignment. Vargas, both before his election and after it, also supported this goal. In his case, he was simply interested in having the goal apply to all students. That stated, he offered no resistance or argument in opposition to the goal.

As expected, this decision, as with other decisions wherein alignment of all existed, the decision could be made quickly, with funds determined and allocated, and implementation occurring soon after the decision. The ease with which these goals were implemented leads to the inescapable conclusion that taking some time to build capacity in support of a decision is preferable to fighting opposition later. It is potentially also an argument not to tackle issues that will drain human and material resources when there is
significant discord about definition of said issues and/or how issues can be resolved, unless said issues are directly in the critical path of student achievement. In the case of standards-based instruction and alignment of curriculum, there was relative consensus around what needed to be accomplished. That consensus led to swift decisions, swift board approval, and swift implementation.

**Professional Development to Improve Practice, Subject Competence, and Assessment**

Items 10, 14, 15, and 20 in Table 3.1 are connected to the concept of highly qualified teachers who are competent in all facets of their jobs. The board expressed a clear desire for teachers to be competent in all facets of their jobs. Vargas, in arguing in favor of increased graduation rates for Latino students and for at-risk students to be taught by the most competent teachers, was supportive of those administrative decisions that supported that agenda, including improving subject competence, developments of assessments that inform instruction, and improved differentiated practice. Again, there appears to be no significant roadblock to leadership when the board and the administration, under the leadership of the superintendent, agree on the issue and the general direction to be taken in making decisions in support of the issue. Further, in his pre-board role as a member of the public, Vargas was also in support of this direction by administration, even if he did not believe in the individual administrators in charge of implementing decisions around professional development. In this case a priority of the superintendent expressed as early as the interview process prior to hire enjoyed general agreement among board, community, as expressed by Vargas, and the superintendent.

**Effective Communication with Parents**

Again, as early as the interview process prior to hire, I expressed a clear desire to improve communications with parents by implementing a system of communication home that included phone dialer ability to multiple phones, communication via email, and information disseminated in both English and Spanish, the districts’ primary languages. Board members also expressed a desire for better communication during my interview, and the community wanted better communication, as they stated in their items of importance in the job description, but how communication was to be achieved was a point of constant contention. Further, the board, in listing the issues they wanted addressed, shortly after the election of 2006, did not see fit to list communication as one of the list of items they wanted addressed. Although individual board members had expressed a desire for increased numbers of parent meetings, more personal phone calls, or
changing the time of day during which communications were attempted they
seemed unclear of how to achieve more effective communication. That
stated, they still wanted to see more effective communication occur. The
decision to implement a communication system came to rest on whether or
not such system would increase attendance and, in so doing, pay for itself.
In fact, it did pay for itself several times over in increased attendance at
school. Over three years, attendance increased almost three percent, which
translated into approximately $340,000 in increased revenue to the district.
Further, increased attendance has supported other program enhancements,
such as tutoring, behavioral and social intervention for at-risk students, and
other engagement activities for students. In turn, those improvements
supported increased achievement on state testing instruments and improved
graduation rates. Although both administration and the board were aware of
the positive effects of increased student attendance, it was important for me
as superintendent to know that unless I could make the financial argument
work—that increased attendance would occur, as seen in other instances in
which the communication system had been implemented—I was not going to
be able to pass this expenditure through the board. It became important to
know which board member carried weight with respect to facilities decisions
with respect to the other board members. In fact, knowing the expertise of
each board member in the eyes of the other board members became
paramount. Academic initiatives would likely not be approved unless the
board member seen as the expert in the area of curriculum and instruction
approved of said initiative. Legal issues became the purview of another
board member who is an attorney. It became true that if a particular
program, initiative, or contract met the approval of the board member seen
as the expert with respect to the item, then the remainder of the board was
likely to follow suit.

Meaningful Relationships with Adults

Items 3, 13, and 19, from the board’s stated issues, after the board
election of 2006, pertain to student engagement by adults. They are all
attempts to place students with adults in smaller numbers, in order to
provide the opportunity for greater connection to students. In the case of
class size, (see Table 3.1, No. 13) there was concern about advanced or AP
classes having fewer students at the expense of other core classes that had
to add numbers to meet staffing requirements. Placing administrators in
direct contact with students (see Table 3.1, Nos. 3 & 19), express the
board’s desire to have as many adults as possible among students during
school at break times and after school at extra-curricular events.
Concerning this level of adult engagement, I was an ambivalent
superintendent, one who knew the value of being among students to hear
their personal stories, address their individual needs, and thereby gain
information that became primary source material for decisions that affected
them. Against that advantage, I weighed the disadvantage of having highly
paid administrators spend time among students when they needed to
perform other duties that would ultimately benefit those same students. It
must be noted that district and site facilities were shared, and moving
among students was easily accessible to district administrators. As
superintendent, my decision would have been to remove district
administrators from supervision duties. The majority of the board wanted it
this way because this was the culture of the district, and they knew it to be
an effective practice over the years. They measured effectiveness by means
of anecdotally counting the times that such intervention with students by
administrators helped a student in need, resolved a facility or program issue
that would not have been resolved but for the presence of the administrator
on duty, or uncovered a teacher issue that might have otherwise gone
unattended. This was a decision I was not going to win. Was it
micromanagement? Yes. Did the board care that it was not their place to
micromanage in this way? Absolutely not! They were resolute in their
conviction that this was the best way to administer to students, teachers,
and other staff, and they were not interested in arguments to the contrary.
I was not going to win this issue. Therefore, I determined to lose gracefully
and to fully implement their decision. Although administrators have come to
me over the years to argue that there is not enough time to accomplish all
the other duties they are assigned, they know fully that this is our practice.
It does reap benefits to administration, but I am always asking myself if the
benefits are worth the costs. Finally, it is very clear that any such cost-
benefit analysis would fall on deaf ears. We continue to implement this
decision daily.

Board and Superintendent Relationships after November 2008

On November 4, 2008, Vargas was elected to the board. Vargas’
comments to the board as a member of the public, either through his own
comments or through his spouse, diminished after his election to the board.
In the three-year period prior to his election, he commented to the board 24
times (see Appendix A) on topics including student rights, student discipline,
and legality of district actions. Comments during the two years after his
election to the board diminished, but did not disappear. In the three years
prior to his election, 24 comments were directed to the board by himself or
his wife. In the two years after his election, 10 such comments occurred.
However, comment types did not change. After his election, comment types
still addressed student rights, student discipline, and legality of district
actions. His comments as a member of the public did not change, except
somewhat in frequency, from an average of eight comments per year prior
to election to an average of five, post election.
What did change were attitudes of the board to him with regard to the responses of individual board members in discourse. I heard from all other board members in individual comments to me that, although they may not agree with his methodology for creating change—the public humiliation others perceived that he wanted for administrators who made errors in judgment or misapplied the rules—they agreed with his concern that all students deserved the best teachers, courses, and chance for success after school.

During the last three years of fiscal stress in the district, when program cuts threatened students who were in greatest need of academic and student service intervention, such as reductions in English Learner aides or counseling services for first-time college attendees through Cal-SOAP services, Vargas was joined by all other members of the board in saving those programs over others. The board chose to allow increased class size in advanced placement and honors classes rather than diminish programs for the most at-risk students. Though staying ahead of sanctions that come with California’s Program Improvement status designation was always a factor, it was true that the board believed that if all students received the best teaching, and those who needed academic and student service support received it, then the entire school would profit in the end. Vargas just reinforced that belief on the board.

Board Decision-Making and Fiscal Stress

In the 2007-2008 fiscal year, the board recognized that, although the past three years had seen what the new board perceived as a period of fiscal waste, the district was relatively flush, with reserves that totaled approximately $11 million in combined fund balances. Although about $5 million stood in reserves restricted for construction use, the total was still about 40% of the district’s $27 million budget. The previous superintendent had asked faculty and administrators what wish list items they had for their classes and made purchases accordingly.

When I arrived in 2006, there was a program feature implemented in years past that I wanted to resurrect, as it had been eliminated at the conclusion of the then recently concluded negotiations. I wanted to bring back the department head in the manner it had once existed, that of coach, lead person for curriculum in each subject area department, and chief input-provider to administration. I considered this a leverage point for implementing curricular reform in assessment, effective practice, and evaluation. I had concluded from earlier study in my doctoral program at that effective decision-making involved clear understanding about how the most effective decisions were made, implemented, and evaluated. Review of studies including “Who has the D” (Rogers & Blenko, 2006), “Why Measure Performance: Different Purposes Require Different Measures”
(Behn, 2003), and “Rethinking Scale: Moving Beyond Numbers to Deep and Lasting Change” (Coburn, 2003) helped me decide that, in this environment, if I was going to transform practice in ways that served all students, I needed a team of leaders at the ground level that would inform and understand change, provide valuable feedback to administration, and coach teachers within their departments. This was a measured investment that I believed would support reform and would be supported by the board because it fit their own cultural model for success. The total cost of the reinstatement of these positions within the district’s large, comprehensive high school was $150,000, including release periods and stipend costs, per contract. I believed we could afford it, and I knew it would improve student success.

Almost immediately after I reinstated the program, updating it for today’s pedagogy, the economy began to turn and the board had to consider making reductions to the budget. The board was faced with making the most difficult cuts in the district’s history. Going into the difficult economic circumstances which are now the norm for this district and all California schools, the district had been financially healthy, due in part to long term slow growth in enrollment and to conservative district budgeting, both of which contributed to the healthy fund balances described above. Operational budgets provided positive year-end operational balances routinely. Now, for the first time, the district knew that unless reductions were made to operations, negative operational balances would lead quickly to qualified or negative state certification. In other words the district would soon be considered bankrupt and subject to state takeover.

The board began considering which programs to keep and which to reduce or cut entirely. The manner in which budget reductions were recommended to the board involved the following steps:

1. The district’s chief financial officer (CFO) spoke to staff, both classified and certificated, and to the community at large, requesting that they consider how the budget might best be reduced. The CFO requested and received several electronic suggestions for cutting the budget that were summarized by category.

2. Administration submitted their proposed reductions to the CFO, and there was discussion at the administrative level concerning which recommended reductions made sense and which did not. To consider effectiveness or proposed cuts, administration considered which programs were necessary to promote attendance, another means of maximizing revenues. In addition to consideration for which programs maximized attendance, consideration in support for maintaining programs was given for any program that would leverage student success. In other words, administration had to consider which programs gave the greatest bang for the buck.
3. Once a series of proposed reductions was achieved by administration, it was submitted to me for final consideration and proposal to the board. In truth, by the time administration was at the point of making a recommendation, I had been involved in multiple discussions about it. What went to the board was a well-considered plan.

It would be incorrect to say that the politics of decisions did not enter into discussions with the board. I believe that such conversations were undertaken from a healthy perspective. Instead of considering what impact reduction of a program would have from the perspective of the amount of screaming that would occur publicly—thereby giving most consideration to the squeakiest wheel—the board was apprised of what the public outcry might be concerning specific programs and people. They were advised that there would be an outcry from the public, as none of the programs proposed for reduction were superfluous; all had their place in support of students.

Table 3.3 portrays the downward trend in revenue from the high revenue point achieved in the 2007-2008 fiscal year to the most recent, 2010-2011 fiscal year.

Table 3.3

California “Guaranteed” Revenue per Student, Actual Revenue per Student, and Actual Total Revenue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California Proposition 98 Guarantee Funding*</td>
<td>$6,728</td>
<td>$7,107</td>
<td>$7,408</td>
<td>$7,378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base Revenue Limit per Average Daily Attendance (BRL/ADA)*</td>
<td>$6,728</td>
<td>$6,550</td>
<td>$5,795</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Dollar Revenue (Millions)</td>
<td>$27.2</td>
<td>$27.6</td>
<td>$24.9</td>
<td>$25.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: School Services of California.

From 2008-2009 to 2010-2011, revenue decreased by $2.2 million, or just under 9% of revenue, without a commensurate decline in enrollment. This decline created the circumstance of the first layoff of staff in the history of the district. By anyone’s estimation, the loss of almost one-tenth of a
budget requires hard decisions about priorities, given these two truths that (a) approximately 85% of the district’s budget is allocated to personnel, and (b) most of the personnel is collectively bargained. To reduce personnel costs, the only sure way to achieve reductions is to reduce particular kinds of services, and then only within the limits of the law and collective bargaining agreements. In California, reduction of certificated staff must be accomplished before certain knowledge of the next year’s revenue is known. Recently, a study of Ohio superintendents (Thomas Fordham Institute, 2011) questioned the assumptions that current law and collective bargaining agreements should be so prescriptive in states across the country. The study argues that more autonomy in decision-making granted to superintendents would produce higher achievement and more efficiency in operations. I will discuss this study further below. For the moment, it is sufficient to note that the above pressures were at play in considering fiscal decisions undertaken by the district governance structure in my district.

These facts made the decision-making process of the board, and the trust that the board had in their relationship with me, all-important. I had worked very hard since my 2006 arrival to the district to earn the trust and respect of the board. With all board members, save Vargas, I earned respect. The most pronounced example of this earned trust was a conversation I had with another board member just after the beginning of my third year with the district. I had made a point of introducing my wife and family to the board. I had made every attempt to let board members know about my personal character. I wanted the board to know that my word was my bond and that I did not hide agendas.

It was important to make the board understand that maintaining division chairs was critical to the success of teachers and students. It was possible to decide to increase class size by an average of two students per class without impacting student achievement our administrative team concluded. It was not possible to reduce or eliminate the services of division chairs, who provided critical leadership and teacher support, without significantly impacting student achievement and teacher competency administration determined. Further, while teachers in the rank and file argued in favor of their department chairs, union leadership argued against keeping department chairs. The union had another agenda, and it was both understandable and predictable. Union interests argued in favor of teachers’ compensation and working conditions. Individual teachers argued in support of student success. Once again, the Ohio superintendents study (Thomas Fordham Institute, 2011) is instructive. Ohio superintendents believed, as I do, that the interests of union leadership seem to diverge from students’ interests for greater achievement. In one of the findings from the Ohio study, superintendents conclude that the “collective bargaining system needs fundamental transformation” (p. 15). There were several comments
from this study that bemoaned the constraints on management authority that have occurred since the onset of collective bargaining in education.

I was having my own inner dialogue over how much I could count on the board’s trust while I was conducting the outer dialog with the board about my desire to reinstitute teacher leaders in the form of department heads. As noted above such outer dialogue was necessary because the laws of California and the nation protect teacher rights and regulate funding in ways that limit the power of the superintendent. As noted, the recent survey of superintendents in Ohio (Thomas Fordham Institute, 2011) reflected my own experience in education as a superintendent and as an assistant superintendent for human resources. In this period of extreme fiscal stress for most education agencies in the state, the same themes expressed in the Ohio study were in evidence in my everyday dealings as a superintendent.

One of the findings in the Ohio study (Thomas Fordham Institute, 2011) states “Superintendents believe that strengthening managerial authority over staff would be decisive to delivering gains in student achievement in their districts, even more decisive than increased funding...” (p. 10). My ability to release ineffective staff members is severely curtailed by state law under present state mandates. In a recent case, my district spent just under $70,000 to bring an ineffective teacher to the point of resigning from a teaching position. The case stopped just prior to going to a state-mandated hearing that would have exhausted another $50,000 of district resources, not including the enormous expense of human resources necessary to prevail in a dismissal case.

In another example, upon my arrival as superintendent, I was presented with two unfair labor practice charges emanating from the just concluded negotiations. In those negotiations—negotiations that had occurred under the prior superintendent—the district had desired to change the daily schedule for students, a change that would have increased the amount of time teachers spent supervising students by a range of between nine and thirteen minutes per day. It would only minimally lengthen, by approximately five minutes, the actual workday of teachers. Because any change in working conditions is subject to collective bargaining in California, as regulated by the Public Employees Relations Board (PERB), these changes were subject to negotiations and resultant unavoidable salary increases. Had the union prevailed, the district would have had to increase overall salaries for teachers by one million dollars. This was a 10% increase in teacher salaries from the proposed schedule change, a figure the district could not afford. In the end, the district simply opted out of the schedule change and reverted back to the prior schedule with its appurtenant salaries.

Ohio superintendents argued that items such as the two examples just described could be avoided, and accrue to the benefit of student achievement, if superintendents had more managerial authority over their
organizations. The Ohio study (Thomas Fordham Institute, 2011) found that superintendents overwhelming believe that authority to make decisions is even more important than money. In an overwhelming majority, 72% of superintendents indicated that greater managerial authority would result in greater student achievement. When faced with choosing between more managerial authority and greater funding, 50% preferred greater managerial authority, as compared with 44% who favored higher funding levels (p. 10). Given the extraordinary nature of the times, including fiscal stress not seen since the Great Depression, this is an extraordinary finding.

My own experience is that fiscal stress is more than simply not enough money. Just as the Ohio survey of superintendents found, my own experience as superintendent is that a great portion of fiscal stress derives from the combination of asphyxiating salary schedules and other terms in collective bargaining agreements and state mandates concerning teacher hiring, firing, and evaluation. It is not the subject of this paper, but I believe a study of the correlation of number of items in collective bargaining agreements governing teacher working conditions in given districts compared to the fiscal health of those districts would reveal that as management discretion and authority diminish, districts face increasing financial stress. A similar study of those same constrictions in collective bargaining agreements compared to student success would reveal that the more management authority districts possess, the higher their student achievement is likely to be. These are certainly worth a look, as this Ohio study (Thomas Fordham Institute, 2011) indicates.

As we faced the difficult financial decisions before us, our fiscal stress forced the board to measure their trust in me as superintendent sooner and more completely than they might otherwise have done. Although they were responsible for the fiscal solvency of the district, they understood that their day-to-day involvement with curriculum and instruction—though they understood it at a macro level—was not sufficient to make decisions about which programs and personnel were most important to student success. Our administrative team was able to teach the board what the team considered most necessary, knowing that all programs considered for reduction were there for good reason. Choosing among “good” programs required administration to determine which programs achieved the highest value.

Chapter 4

Findings and Conclusions

Findings

Findings and conclusions drawn from telling these personal stories as a participant observer are structured to answer my chosen research question:
As a first-time district superintendent, what roadblocks stand in the way of effectively leading the district? Findings and conclusions are arranged around my chosen theme, board and administrative team relationships, including the primary board and administrative relationship, that of the board and the superintendent. All must fit into the context of a district that is negotiating its way through changing fiscal distress and shifting demographic conditions.

Conclusions

As stated at the outset of this paper, there are just over 1,000 sitting superintendents serving a like number of local educational agencies (LEA’s) in California, serving 6.2 million students (California Department of Education, 2009). Shared knowledge and experience is in relatively short supply from those who serve in the profession every day. Time for learning from each other is limited, and that is especially true the further one goes from concentrated urban populations.

The purpose of this inquiry has been to interpret a representative sample of my experiences as a first-time superintendent over the past almost five years during a period that has been characterized by constant fiscal stress, organizational uncertainty, and shifting demographic populations. My objective has been to communicate my own personal experiences in a form I hope will help others to make sense of my observations and interpretations. The chosen methodology for this inquiry comes from the emerging field of “Autoethnography.” Similar to conventional ethnography, auto-ethnographic methods require the researcher to systematically gather and sort data, to express such data in a manner that follows the conventions of the field, and to present and interpret findings in a manner acceptable by the field’s official journals and research publications.

In this study, I address this essential question: As a first-time district superintendent, what roadblocks stand in the way of effectively leading the district? In unraveling the answer to this question, I have explored significant bottlenecks to leadership that a first-time superintendent faces in a district context that includes pronounced shifts in the linguistic, socio-cultural, and political landscape, and ever worsening persistent fiscal stress.

To help make sense of this research, I applied the theoretical perspectives of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its Latin derivative, Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCRIT), and the theory known as Sensemaking and Sensegiving to inform my observations. After considering three narrative themes in relating my stories, (a) changing district finances, (b) board and administrative leadership relationships, and (c) community relations in a community affected by shifting demographic conditions, I chose to focus on the theme concerning board and administrative leadership relationships.
This theme was explored after I first provided a description of the cultural settings at work within the district. Then, through storytelling by relating episodes, I described events around a seminal event of governance in the district, the election of a Latino board member in the district who had been at the forefront of advocacy for Latino students prior to his election. I considered how this election affected governance, including key arenas of board and leadership inter-relationships, (a) board and superintendent, (b) superintendent and administrative team, and (c) board and the administrative team.

The findings and conclusions drawn from this research have been designed to offer additional understandings to first-time superintendents who serve in relatively small districts with rapidly changing demographics, specifically where growing populations of Latino students, with socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic challenges require new service models and interventions. Accepting the deficiencies and shortfalls of this methodology, described above at some length, there is sufficient acceptance of autoethnography as a qualitative device from which valuable conclusions and findings can provide helpful information to superintendents, particularly first-time superintendents, who must make decisions that affect their districts’ students daily.

Finally, this research has the potential to raise other questions around effective leadership and governance for future researchers to consider, as educators continue to look for ways to analyze and share experiences of superintendents, and in particular, first-time superintendents, in the hope that such work contributes to making superintendents better and more competent in their jobs.

Roadblocks Emanating from Relationship Disconnection Between Board and Superintendent/Administration

I had identified five strategic objectives I believed would leverage student success when I arrived at the district, objectives designed to increase student achievement:

1. Create a safe school environment by creating, implementing, enforcing, and monitoring clear, consistent, predictable rules of conduct, known as “The Code.”
2. Acquire, implement, and monitor use of a powerful, data manipulation device that could disaggregate data in a variety of ways to measure learning.
3. Implement a standards-based, aligned curriculum in all core subject areas.
4. Implement professional development in a variety of areas, including effective practice, improving subject matter competence, assessment, and differentiation strategies.
5. Create an effective means of communicating with parents about their students.
6. Increase opportunities to engage students through meaningful relationships with adults.

The board knew something I learned quickly; if I wanted to remain superintendent of this district, I needed to respond to their dictates, and soon.

They did not yet know if they could trust me.

Finding #1

Making decisions as superintendent through the process of sensemaking and sensegiving, especially in small district communities, involves creating trust with the board as an entity, even if trust with individual members is not achieved. I found no other way to implement my own plan for the district without creating an environment of trust in order to create sufficient influence through my sensegiving activities. For example, the decision early on to engage another data manipulation software company required some level of trust from the board that was over and above the data that projected student success. It was not enough for the board to know that in similar districts, with similar demographics and within the geographic region of this district, the software led to greater student success as teachers became more comfortable with using the software. As superintendent, I had to win their trust to ensure that my recommended purchase would find its way into district use.

Similarly, when I considered a communication device that would not only make communication at home available in more media, but would get information home quicker and with greater accuracy, and had the added benefit of supporting increased student attendance at school, it was not enough to present data from similar districts of the success of the software. The board had to see it in action, review its success, and then apply the lessons learned as to whether or not I, as superintendent, could be trusted to conduct similar evaluation administratively to all decisions.

It is important to reflect back on the Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) paper that explained the need for conducting long-term research by stating: Because the development or revision of organizational interpretive schemes is typically a subtle and evolving process, traditional survey methods and even in-depth interviews cannot adequately reveal the nature and sequence of changes taking place. Instead, research approaches designed to investigate such processes must be non-intrusive, longitudinal, and capable of tracing the unfolding changes. Such research needs to be 'interpretive' in nature, which implies an alternative paradigm applied to the study of strategic change. (p. 435)
The nature of this kind of research is that understandings develop over time after deep reflections result in making sense of experiences that then, through sensegiving inform decision-making and leadership. Doing so involves admission that developing understandings involve unavoidable subjectivity that must be embraced, acknowledged, and admitted to readers. I freely admit that this finding is subjective, and that it involves decisions and actions that I took as superintendent relative to my board. A different type of leadership with different decisions might have evolved into a different conclusion. As active participant, I was making sense out of the data and experiences around me. I determined how to build trust with the board in my own way. I concluded that trust with the board was essential to moving the district forward. Was it the only way to make progress? Because I am who I am and experienced what I experienced, I concluded that trust was an essential quality. Could I have gone about building trust differently? Perhaps I could have, but taking my own survival into account, and considering my perception of the board’s needs, my approach seemed appropriate. Letting them know that their concerns were as important to me as they were to the board was my way of telling them that I could be trusted with their most precious collective concern, their district.

Once a trusting relationship was assumed, they became more able to let me lead with the items I knew were important to the district to progress. How did they progress in developing that trust, and how did I foster development of their trust? They saw a well-developed plan for student achievement consistent with their own philosophy of student success. They saw examples of that plan being implemented and achieving results in state measurement devices. They saw our district’s achievement compared to surrounding districts to form a basis for evaluating the state data.

The above served as a means for creating a governance model that worked for our district and for the board in total. However, the process did not work well for Vargas.

Finding #2

The effects of CRT and LatCrit concerning the existence of racism in institutions can only be mitigated over time, with concentrated, deliberate work that first acknowledges the reality of this world view and then seeks to assuage its effects through continuous hard work at building trusting relationships through authentic actions that have this specific objective in mind—that of mitigating the effects of institutional racism. A corollary to this is that the type of work that occurs from positive, transformative acts that comes from those who have sufficiently dealt with the effects of racism in their lives. That truth applies to me as superintendent and chief executive officer of the district just as much as it applies to Vargas as board member.
For me to simply conclude that Vargas had to face the hurts he encountered in life through his own oppression and not face my institutional connection to his issues as a White male—thereby dealing with my own part in institutional racism—would be inauthentic at best. I had to constantly remind myself that the lens through which I saw the world was not the same lens as Vargas. I also had to understand that Vargas did not—and does not—believe that I am even willing to undertake such an exercise. NCEE training teaches that those who address the hurts that occur early in life from institutional racism, by talking and being actively heard non-judgmentally, essentially engage in a healing process that, once undertaken, supports clear and creative thinking. Inability to engage in healing from oppression leads to deficit model thinking. Such was the case too often in my dealings with Vargas.

I can only conclude that Vargas’ own deep-seeded distrust of authority, built honestly through experience in dealing with district authority in particular and White dominant authority in general, would not allow him to trust the governance model—even in the face of positive results for Latinos. It was my experience that my White face was in the way of his being able to meet in meaningful ways to support achievement. He trusted his advocacy model more. Continuing to complain about the issues that bothered him and caused him to run for the board from an outsider’s perspective, even though he was now on the inside, was more comfortable for him. LatCrit (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) theory was alive and well in him in its deficit model form and not in the transformative application that changes institutions for the better, as in the case of the walkouts in Los Angeles inner-city high schools of 1968 (Solorzano, 1991). He was continuing to achieve transformation in governance by advocating from the outside to achieve change in governance within the district. He apparently thought that his view of the effects of his tactics from without was enough to stay in the seat of power as board member, even though he periodically wondered aloud whether or not he was serving his constituents while sitting as a member of the board. My observation of his struggle about this caused me to wonder what he thought about the positive data on attendance, discipline, and success that have occurred as a result of the implementation of the plan described earlier in this paper. His acceptance of responsibility for the plan and his lack of satisfaction at the positive results from its implementation seem to be at odds with the board as a whole. He continued to apply the part of LatCrit Theory (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) that operates from the perspective that one must throw out current governance structures and replace them with new ones to effect positive change. This application belies the positive results resulting from implementation of the plan put in place by leadership, as implemented through the superintendent. This appears to be a difficult hurdle to cross for me as a superintendent. It is a major roadblock to continued reform, as it places leadership in the position
of having to react to outside issues of advocacy, rather than spending time improving at the implementation of the current leadership plan for student success.

For my part as superintendent, I believed then, that building some credibility by becoming a positive actor in the community for the underserved was essential to positive governance and improving relationships between the board and the superintendent. I believed that if I could not convince Vargas and others that I not only understood something about their struggles but also was trying to do something about those struggles, then they would not allow me to act as their leader. Leadership involves an investment of personal time on the part of the leader—time that is not on the district’s clock—especially when that leader is a first-time superintendent. One must build one’s own credibility as a leader.

Chapter 5

Implications for Research

I confess that, upon reviewing my stories and the data that helped create them, I am experiencing some of the same angst that other autoethnographers have shared. Do the conclusions taken from relating my personal stories in these three thematic areas provide any information that can be useful to the profession of superintendent, or are these exercises in alternating self-congratulation and self-doubt? I have concerns about subjectivity and representation concerning the data chosen, the stories shared, and the conclusions drawn. Wall (2008) states:

My experience as an autoethnographer, enmeshed in the study of my life experiences, prompts me to question the value of distance between the researcher and the field of research. If my lived experience can be equated to traditional ethnographic participant observation (being actively involved in the field), it is interesting to ask “how much participation is participation enough? Might one... become so involved as to make observation itself virtually impossible? (p. 42)

With that as a backdrop, I will move forward, however trepid, with the belief that it is possible that lessons learned from the telling of these stories as a participant observer will provide some insight to those first-time superintendents who grapple with these same, or similar decisions and situations daily. Therefore, I have hope and some conviction that there is something of value to be offered in this study. Further, I have some basic belief that this research will raise other questions for future researchers to consider, as educators continue to struggle to collect, analyze, and share the experiences of superintendents, and in particular, first-time superintendents, in the hope that such work contributes to making superintendents better and more competent at performing their jobs.
Personal Growth as a Part of Leadership

Future research needs to include the place of personal growth on issues of equity as they connect with issues of governance and leadership. Throughout this autoethnographic study of the roadblocks to effective governance, I have faced dealing with my own demons about race and working effectively with the board. I find myself constantly running up against issues that board members have experienced in their lives or events that have occurred in my life that affect the way I approach leadership decisions, my relationship with the board, and governance in general. Work by the National Coalition for Equity in Education (NCEE) seems to provide good guidance about the value of self-healing from issues of oppression as a means of developing clearer thinking that leads to better relationships and more effective governance. Although Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) were not addressing the concept of healing from oppression in their application of CRT/LatCrit, in considering my own struggles with Vargas, both before and after his election to the board, I believe that perhaps a limitation of CRT/LatCrit is a lack of attention to the power of self-healing in creating transformational behavior. My own experience is that such healing supports the transformative, positive behavior about which Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) write.

Next, the sensemaking and sensegiving processes of Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), when considered with my own reflective process, support the notion that work around the concept, something I will refer to here as looping, may be an important component of deriving meaning through sensemaking and sensegiving. Throughout my reflective work in relating the episodes that address my research question, I had to loop back to key episodes at various times, in ways that view those key episodes from a different angle or vantage point. Looping back to the same episode from a different perspective helps create richer meaning from the episode. Revisiting the same episode in other surrounding circumstances may help create richer meaning that leads to better decisions for the organization in the long run. Revisiting an event in this fashion of looping back, when applied in the light of additional passage of time, creates additional data in the sensemaking, sensegiving, and decision-making process, and is worth further study if it creates better meaning leading to better decisions.

For first-time superintendents in relatively smaller school districts, the reflective work of autoethnography to produce meaning that leads to better governance can be an effective tool for understanding the work of the superintendent. This process has been a rich and rewarding experience.

Finally, the recent study of Ohio superintendents (Thomas Fordham Institute, 2011), as it applies to governance viewed through ethnographic and autoethnographic eyes, bears further study. Though not part of my own study, a study of the correlation of collective bargaining agreements’
constraints on working conditions—a historically significant component of managerial authority—with either student achievement or persistent fiscal stress would shed important light on the ability to govern effectively amid numbing constraints. Many times during my reading of the Ohio study (Thomas Fordham Institute, 2011), I found myself thinking, “Of course, that is the way things are today in the land of governance. Who does not know that?”

If this study helps other first-time superintendents in smaller districts who may be geographically separated from leadership support, then I feel I have made a contribution to the profession. However, if this study does no more than make me, through deep reflection to make sense out of the events I see occurring around me, a better superintendent in my own district, then I have still made a contribution to the profession. That contribution will serve the students in my district, whom I have grown to love and for whom, I only want the best. These students deserve every chance for success in life, and I must continue to develop and become better at my craft so that they will have such opportunities for success. That would be a legacy worth having!
References


Appendix A

Public Comments on Advocacy Issues by Vargas

Comment Subject(s): (1) Student Rights, (2) Due Process, (3) Retaliation, (4) Legality, (5) Public Hearing Law, (6) Discipline

Key Words: Graduation, Discipline, Due Process, Hispanic (Latino), Suspension/Expulsion, Complaint, Discrimination

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<th>Comment Summary</th>
<th>Key Words</th>
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<td>2-8-06</td>
<td>3, 4, 6</td>
<td>Parent Vargas read several quotes and a list of concerns that have been expressed in the past such as the previous zero tolerance policy, fear of retribution, micro management; staff morale; bathrooms with windows; campus supervisors singling out students. He noted that the seven-period day was implemented to meet Board policy. He stated that the current administration has been reviewing how to improve male Latino achievement and brought the AVID program to the campus. Mr. Vargas stated that the Superintendent suggested student advisories and tutorials so teachers could be advocates for students, which would mean more &quot;face time.&quot;</td>
<td>Discipline, Hispanic (Latino), Graduation</td>
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<tr>
<td>3-29-06</td>
<td>1, 4</td>
<td>Mr. Vargas expressed disappointment that the Board did not approve implementation of the Pathways program. He noted that CBEDS data shows that 35% - 40% of the students who start in the 9th grade do not graduate from this school, and, of those students, the majority are Hispanic. Mr. Vargas stated that the Pathways program would provide more options for students; that reducing the summer school program is not serving students; that the school’s number one job is not to send kids to college – it is to provide a high school education to as many kids as possible.</td>
<td>Hispanic (Latino), Graduation, Discrimination</td>
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<td>4-19-06</td>
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<td>Parent Vargas stated that three to four out of ten incoming freshmen students will not graduate from San Benito High School.</td>
<td>Graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10-06</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parent Vargas urged the Board to look at alternative education programs such as Pathways, which was designed for students who are struggling, as well as, students who want to challenge themselves. He stated that 35% to 40% of entering freshmen students do not graduate from San Benito High School.</td>
<td>Graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-23-06</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Parent Vargas stated that she has submitted a complaint to the Superintendent for the school’s violation of federal and state laws. She explained that the student emergency cards had a signature line for parents to indicate they had received the Annual Notification to Parents of Rights (parent handbook); however, the parent handbooks were not yet sent out to parents.</td>
<td>Complaint</td>
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<tr>
<td>3-7-07</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parent Vargas spoke about the benefits of Challenge Day and encouraged the school to provide Challenge Day for every student and every teacher. Mr. Vargas stated that many students do not have caring adults in their lives at home or at school, and, sometimes school is the safest place kids have in their lives. Mr. Vargas also commented that the campus should be safe and caring; not just safe; and that consequences should be fair and equitable. Mr. Vargas commented that Zero Tolerance was used in the past to pick and choose which kids attend San Benito High School.</td>
<td>Graduation, Discipline</td>
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Public Comments on Advocacy Issues by Vargas

Comment Subject(s): (1) Student Rights, (2) Due Process, (3) Retaliation, (4) Legality, (5) Public Hearing Law, (6) Discipline

Key Words: Graduation, Discipline, Due Process, Hispanic (Latino), Suspension/Expulsion, Complaint, Discrimination

4-18-07 1, 3, 5 Parent Vargas stated that, in the process of helping a family whose student was suspended, she asserted that the behavior contract for returning students has not been revised. Parent Vargas stated that in the past San Benito High School taught parents not to make waves or their students will suffer retaliation. Mr. Vargas commented that the recent revision to Board Bylaw 9335, regarding public comments, removes the opportunity for the public to speak about an item on the agenda unless plans are made ahead of time...

5-9-07 1, 6 Parent Vargas stated that for years he has been requesting information from the District detailing how much money is spent because of graffiti and vandalism in order to establish whether or not the expense for video cameras is economically sound. He noted that school climate and bullying would not be revealed by video cameras. Mr. Vargas stated that he believes that poor campus design, overcrowding, lack of student attachment to the school and parent involvement are areas that take priority to address student safety. He also noted that last year the Board approved fencing for the campus, but that has not been accomplished yet.

5-23-07 1, 2, 4, 6 Parent Vargas stated that members of the Student Support Services Department recently gave a presentation to 8th graders at the middle schools. He reported that his sixth child who will entering the high school next year interpreted the high school message as all about becoming behaviorally or academically ineligible, experiencing freshman hazing, and being caught if he does anything wrong at the high school. Mr. Vargas stated that the high school’s message should be more positive and not instill fear in the 8th grade students. Mr. Vargas also noted that he has been bringing up the point that a large percentage of incoming 9th graders do not graduate from San Benito High School.

Ms. Vargas stated that she has had children in San Benito High School over the past ten years, and that the student intervention contract has been increased from 18 weeks to 36 weeks; also, the police are called in whenever there is a fight, which results in students having to appear before the Probation Department. Ms. Vargas stated that the school does hold staff accountable for breaking the Education Code laws, such as charging for workbooks. Ms. Vargas cited several Education Codes that she believes the school violates, such as notifying parents of rules pertaining to student discipline. Ms. Vargas reported that Board Policy requires ten days advance notice of a request to place an item on the Board’s meeting agenda, and that she has repeatedly submitted a request for the Board to review the student behavior (intervention/support) contract, to no avail.
Appendix A (continued)

Public Comments on Advocacy Issues by Vargas

**Comment Subject(s):** (1) Student Rights, (2) Due Process, (3) Retaliation, (4) Legality, (5) Public Hearing Law, (6) Discipline

**Key Words:** Graduation, Discipline, Due Process, Hispanic (Latino), Suspension/Expulsion, Complaint, Discrimination

8-22-07 2, 6  
Parent Vargas referred to teacher Phil Clark’s comments to the Board at its July 13th meeting about student discipline, and comments he hears about bringing Zero Tolerance back. He expressed concern that Hispanic students tend to be expelled more than white students.

9-12-07 1, 2, 4, 6  
Parent Vargas expressed concern because he believes more than half of the school’s Hispanic freshman students do not graduate from San Benito High School; many of them are credit deficient. He also noted that grading reports to the Board confirm that economically disadvantaged and Latino students receive the most failing grades. Mr. Vargas also pointed out that Hispanic students receive more suspensions and expulsions than other students. He explained that his concern is that the Board has not discussed the problem or given direction to the administration. Mr. Vargas stated that the Advisory Committee to the former Superintendent studied the problem and developed strategies to address the needs of Latino students; in addition, an action plan was developed and became part of the school’s self study for the WASC accreditation visit. Mr. Vargas stated that he does not observe that the action plan has been implemented.

10-10-07 1, 6  
Parent Vargas read a portion of the July 13, 2007 Board meeting minutes regarding grading reports and student discipline. He expressed concern that economically disadvantaged students and Latino male students receive the most failing grades, and that Hispanic males and females have a higher suspension rate than other students. Mr. Vargas requested an independent audit of the discipline data. Mr. Vargas stated that his analysis of CBEDS data shows that more than 40% of the entering 9th graders do not graduate from San Benito High School. He requested that the Board agendize the issue for discussion.

10-24-07 1, 2, 4  
Parent Vargas referenced the July 13, 2007 Board meeting and the student discipline report that was presented at that time. He noted that he has made public comments to the Board at each of its meetings since that time about the issues related to the discipline report. Mr. Vargas read passages from the July 13, 2007 Board meeting minutes noting that Hispanic male and female students tend to be suspended more than other students. He also stated that he has reported to the Board numerous times that his analysis of CBEDS data shows that only 60% of Hispanic 9th graders become 12th graders, while 78% of Anglo 9th graders become seniors. Mr. Vargas stated that he is repeating his request for a third party audit to determine why Hispanic students have a higher attrition than Anglo students.
Appendix A (continued)

Public Comments on Advocacy Issues by Vargas

Comment Subject(s): (1) Student Rights, (2) Due Process, (3) Retaliation, (4) Legality, (5) Public Hearing Law, (6) Discipline

Key Words: Graduation, Discipline, Due Process, Hispanic (Latino), Suspension/Expulsion, Complaint, Discrimination

11-14-07  1  Parent Vargas stated that the “achievement gap” is actually an “opportunity gap.” He referenced the July 13, 2007 Board meeting with regard to the grading report; that Latino students receive the most failing grades; and with reference to the discipline report findings that Latino males and females tend to be suspended more than white students even though the number of discipline incidences for Latino students is lower than previous years. Mr. Vargas stated that the percentage of white students who begin as 9th graders and graduate is much higher than the percentage of Latino students. He also commented that if a student cannot earn a grade higher than a D grade in academic classes, the counselors should be calling the student in to meet and figure out how to best educate the student. During his comments to the Board, Mr. Vargas stated that although the Board cannot engage in conversation regarding public comments about items not on the agenda, the Board can refer the issue to the administration. Mr. Vargas asked the Board to initiate a third party, independent audit of why the achievement gap exists at San Benito High School.

12-11-07  1, 6  Parent Vargas stated that he has communicated the same message to the Board at almost every meeting for the past five months regarding the grading and discipline reports presented at the July 13, 2007 Board meeting. The reports show that economically disadvantaged Latino students receive the most failing grades and that Latino males and females tend to be suspended more than white students. Mr. Vargas referred to CBEDS cohort data showing a larger attrition rate for Latino high school students than that of white students. During his comments to the Board, Mr. Vargas stated that he is aware that the Board cannot have discussions regarding public comments about items not on the agenda; however, the Board can refer the issue to the administration. Mr. Vargas asked the Board to initiate a third party, independent audit of why the achievement gap and discipline disparity exists at San Benito High School and to develop an action plan with benchmarks to address those issues.

1-30-08  1, 2, 4, 6  Parent Vargas stated that he would like to address issues that deserve the Board’s attention and referred to the grading and discipline reports presented at the July 13, 2007 Board meeting. The reports show that economically disadvantaged Latino students receive the most failing grades and Latino males and females tend to be suspended more than white students. Mr. Vargas referred to CBEDS cohort data showing a larger attrition rate for Latino high school students than that of white students. During his comments to the Board, Mr. Vargas stated that there is an achievement gap crisis at San Benito High School, and urged the public to contact Board members, State Assembly leaders, newspapers, and the Governor. Mr. Vargas cited CBEDS data for the years 1995-2007 regarding the percentages of 9th graders who graduate from the high school, noting that the percentage of Latino students who finish high school and graduate is much less than the percentage of Anglo students. During his comments, Mr. Vargas spoke about the State Superintendent’s focus on the achievement gap and his feeling that a Board workshop last fall, that was suggested by the Superintendent, did not occur. Mr. Vargas stated that he is, again, asking the Board to initiate a third party, independent audit of why the achievement gap and discipline disparity exists at San Benito High School and to develop an action plan with benchmarks to address those issues.
Comment Subject(s): (1) Student Rights, (2) Due Process, (3) Retaliation, (4) Legality, (5) Public Hearing Law, (6) Discipline

Key Words: Graduation, Discipline, Due Process, Hispanic (Latino), Suspension/Expulsion, Complaint, Discrimination

2-13-08  1, 6
Parent Vargas stated that at every Board meeting since August 2007, he has spoken about the discipline report presented at the Board’s July 13, 2007 meeting. He requested that the Board implement an impartial third party audit of the discipline data for the previous three years to determine consistent practices; that semester and annual reports be standardized so they can be compared; that a plan of action to eliminate discipline disparities and student achievement gaps; and that all reports be given to the Board at meetings on regular intervals. Mr. Vargas requested that the Board place this matter on its next agenda.

3-11-08  1, 4, 6
Parent Vargas stated that at every Board meeting since August 2007, he has spoken about the discipline report presented at the Board’s July 13, 2007 meeting. He requested that the Board implement an impartial third party audit of the discipline data for the previous three years to determine consistent practices; that semester and annual reports be standardized so they can be compared; that a plan of action to eliminate discipline disparities and student achievement gaps; and that all reports be presented to the Board at their meetings on regular intervals. Mr. Vargas requested that the Board place this matter on its next agenda.

4-9-08   5, 6
Parent Vargas stated that Education Code 35145.5 establishes the right of members of the public to place items of school business on the Board’s agenda. Vargas stated that at every regular meeting of the Board, beginning with the September 12, 2007 Board meeting, he has requested that the Board agendize four specific items regarding a discipline report presented to the Board at its July 2007 meeting.

4-23-08  1, 5, 6
Parent Vargas stated that he perceives discrimination and inequity in the way people are treated by the Board; that this is his tenth request to agendize certain items regarding a discipline report at the Board’s July 2007 meeting; that a public comment made only once at last month’s meeting by person who is female, blond, and more attractive than he, was placed on this Board agenda. Mr. Vargas explained that this situation offends him.

5-7-08   5, 6
Parent Vargas stated that he has spoken about the July 13, 2007 discipline report to the Board at every Board meeting since September, and at every Board meeting since February he has submitted a written request to the Board to agendize his listed items related to the July 2007 discipline report.
Appendix A (continued)

Public Comments on Advocacy Issues by Vargas

Comment Subject(s): (1) Student Rights, (2) Due Process, (3) Retaliation, (4) Legality, (5) Public Hearing Law, (6) Discipline

Key Words: Graduation, Discipline, Due Process, Hispanic (Latino), Suspension/Expulsion, Complaint, Discrimination

5-21-08 1, 2, 4, 6
Parent Vargas stated that he has made many requests for certain items related to the discipline report at the July 13, 2007 Board meeting, to be put on the Boards agenda. He stated that it is his understanding that the items will be on the agenda Board’s June 11, 2008 annual workshop meeting. He read aloud his requested agenda items. Ms. Vargas spoke about her son’s report to her that Latino students who did not bring their books to class were sent to the office by the teacher and “white students” were not sent to the office. She stated that the teacher returned her phone call and had a different version of what happened. Ms. Vargas stated concern that, unless this is made public and addressed, these incidents will continue to happen. Graduation, Discipline, Due Process, Discrimination

10-8-08 1, 2, 4, 6
Parent Vargas reviewed the history of reports to the Board regarding campus security such as fencing and cameras. He suggested that the school focus on improving campus climate rather than security cameras. Due Process, Discipline, Discrimination

11-19-08 1, 4, 5
Parent and recently elected Board member Vargas, whose term begins in December, reported that he received the November 5 Board packet with a notation inside that the October 8 Board meeting minutes would be sent to the Board under separate cover; that he did not receive a copy of those minutes prior to the November 5 Board meeting, and, therefore, was unable to review them before they were approved. He noted that the section of the minutes regarding public comments does not completely state the concern he expressed about campus security measures; that the point he made which was not reflected in the minutes is that fencing and funding for fencing was approved by the Board in August of 2006 and that there were discussions multiple times at subsequent meetings, but fencing has been ignored for whatever reason. Mr. Vargas also commented that he researched the Brown Act and found that the Attorney General of California stated that, “Agendas or any other writings except for records exempt from disclosure under Section 6254 of the Public Records Act, distributed to all or majority of the members of the legislative body for discussion or consideration at a public meeting, are disclosable to the public upon request and shall be made available without delay to members of the public.” Mr. Vargas stated that he regularly requests a Board packet and that the Board may have been given materials, such as minutes for approval. He requested a copy of documents relating to anything the Board will consider at this meeting that was not included in the original packet he received.
Comment Subject(s): (1) Student Rights, (2) Due Process, (3) Retaliation, (4) Legality, (5) Public Hearing Law, (6) Discipline

Key Words: Graduation, Discipline, Due Process, Hispanic (Latino), Suspension/Expulsion, Complaint, Discrimination

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<td>Discrimination: 8/33%</td>
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12-8-08

Board President Administered the Oath of Office to Newly Elected Member Vargas.

Ms. Vargas stated that she believes the Board violates its own policies and that staff do not obey the education laws and Board Policies. Ms. Vargas stated that the school makes decisions that financially burden families, such as the recent dress code. She also stated she feels communications from the school to parents are inadequate. Ms. Vargas stated that she receives Board packets but does not always receive information given to Board members prior to their meetings; as required by the Brown Act, that information is purposely hidden from the public. She cited an example of discipline infraction reports and using percentages instead of actual numbers.

1-28-09 1, 4, 5, 6

Ms. Vargas stated that she believes employees are not following policies and administrative regulations; an example is a student being searched without parent notification. In addition, Ms. Vargas commented that if only male Latinos are searched, that is discrimination; that she believes students have the right to know who is accusing them; searches performed by female employees on male students is not acceptable that students are being asked to sign behavior contracts without parents being contacted.

3-4-09 1, 2, 4, 6

Ms. Vargas, wife of board member Vargas, stated that she would like to inform the board that she attends Board meetings, has children who have been enrolled in the high school since 1994, and that she is an advocate for any parent seeking help with discipline issues. Ms. Vargas stated that parents inform her that the school does not notify them of their students' appeal rights when they are suspended; that the District is using a policy for due process that the Board deleted a year ago, which states the Principal or designee has the authority to suspend. Ms. Vargas said she believes employees are not following policies and administrative regulations; an example is a student being searched without parent notification. In addition, Ms. Vargas commented that if only male Latinos are searched, that is discrimination; that she believes students have the right to know who is accusing them; searches performed by female employees on male students is not acceptable that students are being asked to sign behavior contracts without parents being contacted.
Appendix A (continued)

Public Comments on Advocacy Issues by Vargas

Comment Subject(s): (1) Student Rights, (2) Due Process, (3) Retaliation, (4) Legality, (5) Public Hearing Law, (6) Discipline

Key Words: Graduation, Discipline, Due Process, Hispanic (Latino), Suspension/Expulsion, Complaint, Discrimination

9-9-09  1, 2, 4, 6  Parent Vargas expressed concerns regarding the administering of breathalyzer tests at school dances/activities, citing Title XX, section 1232H, as the related Federal regulation. She spoke about the need for clarification of this policy with regard to sanitary procedures during this involuntary testing and its impact on pupil and parent rights.

9-23-09  1, 4  Parent Vargas, parent of a senior, spoke about concerns resulting from a recent Progress Report in which her student noted a reduction in class points for being unable to meet a deadline for returning a school document with a parental signature. She stated that lack of parental participation should not be reflected in the student’s grades or lack of ability to pay fees or purchase expensive project materials. Additionally, she noted that on Class Syllabi and/or Course Expectations distributed by some teachers, she has noted that 20% of a class grade is often attributed to student participation. Ms. Vargas spoke about how difficult it must be for one teacher to document and keep track of participation for over 30 students per course. In closing, she stated that a student’s academic grade should reflect the curriculum.

8-11-10  1, 3, 4  Trustee Vargas expressed a concern about students who may not qualify for the fee waiver under the Migrant program or the Federal Free Lunch regulations, yet still may be experiencing a hardship, such that they are unable to pay the transportation fee. Trustee Vargas spoke about the numerous times that he has counseled students who have read the forms and felt that they didn’t qualify under any of the stated options. He spoke about these students’ hesitancy to speak with the coaches and/or ask for special consideration, emphasizing that this kind of circumstance has always been his greatest area of concern because the forms do not specifically address this scenario.

8-25-10  1, 2, 4, 6  Ms. Vargas referred to section 48911 of Education Code, saying that her experience in helping a student over this past summer, and many times previously, has been that assistant principals at SBHS do not follow due process of education law with regard to student suspensions. In the incidence of a physical altercation issue that she addressed this summer, she spoke about victims being punished instead of attackers, and attackers who did not lose the privileges of participating in the Independent Study program or participating in cheer events. Ms. Vargas requested an opportunity to review the details of this particular suspension issue in which she was involved, with the Board at a future closed session meeting. She stated that inasmuch as she has brought similar issues before the Board numerous times, she may eventually find it necessary to enlist the services of a civil attorney.
Appendix A (continued)

Public Comments on Advocacy Issues by Vargas

Comment Subject(s): (1) Student Rights, (2) Due Process, (3) Retaliation, (4) Legality, (5) Public Hearing Law, (6) Discipline
Key Words: Graduation, Discipline, Due Process, Hispanic (Latino), Suspension/Expulsion, Complaint, Discrimination

9-8-10  1, 2, 3, 4, 6  Ms. Vargas spoke about the need for the Board of Trustees to intervene with regard to incidents when students and parents are denied their rights and dignity. She referred to numerous issues in which she has assisted parents at their request, asking, "Why are civil rights for students not honored at school?" She referred to a Stanford University "Prison Project," by Phil Zimbardo, drawing similarities which she believes exist at the high school, in terms of students being addressed by student number, windows in the lavatories, etc. She implored the Board to look into such considerations as due process not being given; lack of hearings for both sides of a discipline issue; allowing parents/students the right to have another party present at the hearing with the right to question and or complain, without fear of retaliation. Quoting Benjamin Franklin, she spoke about the school's apparent "Trade of liberty for security."

9-22-10  2, 4  Trustee Vargas also noted that the referenced Ed Code indicates that there are several ways such selections are determined and he asked for clarification of the nomination process.

10-12-10  1, 2, 4, 6  Parent Vargas stated that one month prior she had come to the Board with a list of rights that she felt many students—to whom she had given assistance, at their family's request—did not receive from site administration, especially with regard to the suspension process. She stated that the Board determined that the district administration would respond to these expressed concerns. She wished to clarify that it is now her desire to review the following issues with the Board of Trustees directly, and not with the administration. Trustee Vargas asked for confirmation that at the Board of Trustees meeting dated September 8, Ms. Vargas had asked the Board to respond. Ms. Vargas concurred, saying, "Yes, I prefer the Board to respond."

11-3-10  1, 4, 6  Trustee Vargas also spoke about Ms. Vargas' numerous attempts – over a span of ten years and in spite of snickering in the audience on many occasions – saying that she has gone through the process and she deserves to be heard in her attempts to hold disciplinary staff to the same strict standards to which students are held. He spoke about a few specific and general inconsistencies that he has noted regarding dress code, school dances, and other discipline scenarios, asking the Board to participate in resolving issues of students' rights.
Appendix A (continued)

Public Comments on Advocacy Issues by Vargas

**Comment Subject(s):** (1) Student Rights, (2) Due Process, (3) Retaliation, (4) Legality, (5) Public Hearing Law, (6) Discipline

**Key Words:** Graduation, Discipline, Due Process, Hispanic (Latino), Suspension/Expulsion, Complaint, Discrimination

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