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Setting a New Course: Understanding Districtwide Change Under a New Superintendent

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Setting a New Course: Understanding Districtwide Change Under a New Superintendent

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

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Professor Carol Van Vooren

2014
The Dissertation of Laura I. Philyaw is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

_________________________________________

University of California, San Diego
California State University, San Marcos
2014
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my family who has supported me throughout this journey.

To my husband, Ben who continuously encouraged me to do what he always knew I could. Without his constant willingness to do whatever was needed to help me and our family, I would not have been able to achieve this goal.

To my children, Nikolas, Alex, and Sebastian for whom I strive to model commitment, the importance of connections, and the calling for contribution.

And to my parents who have always inspired me to believe there are no limitations to learning and to the acquisition of knowledge and who instilled in me the value of education, as the key to opening the doors to personal fulfillment.
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I also want to acknowledge the support I received from my colleagues and superintendents. I am proud to say that I worked with leadership teams at both of my past districts that demonstrated their commitment to further the knowledge base of their principals, by supporting me in my decision to pursue this advanced degree. Their support highlighted the value they placed on learning at all levels.

I want to also acknowledge the district this study was based upon. The leadership practices occurring in that district, as demonstrated by that superintendent were inspirational. He is a model of effective current day leadership that deserves further study in the hopes of influencing other district leaders.
Vita

1992       Bachelor of Arts Degree, University of California, San Diego
1994       Master of Education Degree, University of San Diego
1994 – 1997  Youth and Family Counselor
1997 – 2005  Teacher, Oceanside Unified School District
2005 – 2007  Assistant Principal, Oceanside Unified School District
2007 – 2012  Principal, Oceanside Unified School District
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2014       Doctor of Education Degree, University of California, San Diego, California State University, San Marcos
Abstract Of The Dissertation

Setting a New Course: Understanding Districtwide Change Under a New Superintendent

by

Laura I. Philyaw

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California, San Diego, 2014

California State University, San Marcos, 2014

Professor Alan J. Daly, Chair

School districts are searching out ways to address the achievement gap by launching system wide reform initiatives. There is a growing body of research indicating the need for a district wide approach to implementing change initiatives where the responsibility does not lie solely on school sites (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). In response to the increasing demands of the position, there has been a marked rise in the turnover rates of superintendents, and yet reform efforts rely heavily on the leadership provided by this position to lead a district in a new direction to address student success for all. Districts that have found success in positively impacting student achievement have implemented changes that provided opportunities for learning through meaningful professional development, collaboration within and across the system, and a redefining of leadership roles. Within the organizational landscape of a district, the superintendent,
district leaders, and central office administrators are in a unique position of having the potential to play an integral role in the change process. They have access to many groups across the system, and can facilitate and support the learning required to successfully implement the change effort systemically. Sociocultural learning theory provides a lens to examine existing communities of practice and offers insight into the learning that occurs through the interactions that occur among work groups. These communities of practice offer a possible vehicle for the teaching and learning required to implement any given reform initiative. This research study seeks to identify how a new superintendent develops, diffuses, and enacts a systemic change effort across the district and the factors that support or constrain the required learning and the development of communities of practice during these initial phases.

*Keywords:* school reform, district reform, communities of practice, central office, sociocultural learning theory, superintendent turnover, superintendents
Chapter 1 Introduction

Problem Statement

In this era of increased accountability, districts across the country are in search of ways to ensure all students are achieving academic proficiency. There is an increasing interest in understanding how to successfully implement systemic district wide reform and how to launch initiatives that are understood and learned across the many levels throughout a system. Communities of practice is an applicable construct that explains the potential found in the interactions among these groups and how learning can occur through their interaction that will effect change. As an initiative is launched by a superintendent and district leadership, the role of central office administrators in facilitating learning, support, and dissemination of information can be a critical factor in the implementation process. Identifying and understanding how a new superintendent undertakes the development, diffusion, and enactment of systemic change efforts and the characteristics that may support or constrain the learning and development of communities of practice will shed light onto this critical period of transition. Exploring the interactions between the superintendent, district leadership, central office administrators, and site principals that influence effective implementation and the learning required is important. Without deep understanding and learning, change can only be superficial and daily practice will not truly be transformed (Honig, 2008; Gallucci, 2008).

New superintendents who are taking on this challenge are assuming their new roles across the nation as school boards search out qualified people to effectively
implement district reform efforts. The average tenure of superintendents is six to seven years and even less in urban school districts (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Natkin, Cooper, Alborano, Padilla, & Ghosh, 2002). The purpose of this study is to better understand this change process as a new superintendent develops, communicates, and implements a new district vision, mission, and values. This research will examine the connections between and among district, central, and site leadership and work to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that support or constrain the learning and development of communities of practice required to implement a change initiative district wide.

**Background**

“All students will learn” is the common mantra that can be repeatedly found directly stated if not inferred within the mission or vision statement of every school district across the country, but in this era of increased accountability, it is evident that there are some specific groups of children that are being left behind in the race towards academic success. With state and federal accountability systems, district leadership teams now have the tools to disaggregate student assessment data to examine their lack of sufficient academic progress. A gap exists in the levels of achievement of varying student groups that indicate incongruence with the espoused theory of our educational system and the theory in action. Not all students are learning at the same rate, and it is this misalignment that educational leaders are scrambling to address.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 delineates that by 2014 all students will show proficiency in the areas of English language arts and mathematics. The most recent
data from the California Department of Education indicates that 56.2% of students in grades two through eleven in California were proficient in English language arts and 58.4% were proficient in math. Additionally, the most recent data from 2011, shows that 666 districts across California are identified as being in Program Improvement out of 936 (California Department of Education, 2011). Because of this growing number of districts failing to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress targets set by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), they are categorized as in need of improvement under the threat of sanctions.

This fact points to an educational system that is not delivering on its promise of ensuring that all students learn and reveals that students from low income families and minority groups are not exhibiting academic success, creating the achievement gap.

The existing educational system has proven over decades now that students from low income families or students of color are not fulfilling the dream that was promised to all as the data shows that they are not achieving at the same rate as their White counterparts. “It is not only unconscionable but also economically imprudent to ignore the achievement gap that continues to exist between White and middle-class students and students belonging to one of the other disaggregated groups identified in the stat accountability system” (Koschereck, 2001, p.285). There is a sense of urgency to address this achievement gap and it will require action by all that serve students in their own capacity, from district leadership to central office staff, to site leadership and teachers. This action will need to encourage and support learning of reform initiatives through collaboration in a way that allows for deep reflection and understanding influencing daily practice (Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). It will be critical for school work settings to
become fertile grounds for connections to be made so that leaders across our educational systems will interact and sow the seeds of collaborative exchange to foster learning. This collaborative effort will ultimately nurture, celebrate, and maximize on the diversity that make up schools across the nation.

In response to this crisis, district leaders have made efforts to implement effective district wide initiatives that often depended on site leadership to implement change intended to affect instruction and lead to academic improvement. As schools and districts continue to fall short of exiting Program Improvement status, the task of the implementation of change initiatives has been acknowledged to be a mission that must be shared by more than just the site administrator. Daly and Finnigan (2010) explain how recent studies demonstrate the critical role that the central office plays in supporting district wide reform. “Improving INI schools is complex and difficult work that requires attention to the broader system in which schools reside” (Daly & Finnigan, 2010, p. 4).

While it has been established there is a need for a systemic approach to addressing district wide change, there is little argument that the superintendent is the person to initiate and lead this endeavor. As the chief executive officer of a district, the role of the superintendent includes being the manager of district resources, an advisor to the school board, a communicator to the community, and an instructional leader. The primary job of the superintendent is most often described to be that of increasing student achievement. In fact, 41% of school boards have identified raising student achievement as the primary mission of a superintendent (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). Because of the increased pressures of accountability and the complexities of the position, there is a high turnover
rate among superintendents. Understanding how a new superintendent undertakes the development, diffusion, and enactment of systemic district wide change effort and how the interactions between and among the superintendent, district leadership, central office, and site principals support or constrain the required learning and development of communities of practice is the focus of this study.

Theoretical Frameworks

**Context of district reform.** There is increasing interest in understanding how a new superintendent launches systemic district wide change efforts and how learning and the development of communities of practice is supported during this process through the interactions between and among the superintendent, district leaders, central office, and site principals. While many agree in order to close the achievement gap, efforts cannot be simply focused on school sites, a new look at these interactions is occurring. Many propose a redefining of district and central office jobs to be focused on supporting learning across the district versus tasks targeting managerial objectives and compliance issues (Burch & Spillane, 2004).

In order to support the learning required for coherent and effective implementation of any reform efforts across an organization, all levels across the system must contribute to the effort. The actions of superintendents, district and central office staff are taking center stage as having great potential for being a key resource for successful implementation of system wide change (Gallucci, 2003; Honig, 2008).
With the challenges facing district across the nation, the turnover among superintendents have increased dramatically, with an average tenure of six to seven years regardless of district size or location, and 2.75 years in urban school district (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Natkin et al, 2002). Challenges include school board involvement with management, district poverty level, and fiscal management. Understanding how a new superintendent approaches the development, diffusion, and enactment of a systemic change effort is an area that requires more inquiry in order to support these initiatives.

**Sociocultural learning theory.** Sociocultural learning theory offers a framework that defines learning as occurring in the context of social interactions. It is through these exchanges that meaning is made by the participants. Through the use of language during these interactions with others, the participant compares their own expertise with others and is exposed to new information. They then are able to compare their own level of knowledge or skill and within the given context absorb the new information. It is when a person is given ample opportunity to socially engage with others around a given topic, that learning can occur (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Stein & Coburn, 2008; Wenger, 1996, 1998, 2000). Through these interactions, the participant is able to recall the terms and language used as an anchor to accessing that new knowledge. They internally process the steps to develop the given skill. In time, it is through this self-talk and self-reflection that the participant begins to develop their new learning to the point of truly transforming their actions. It is at this time when the new knowledge or skill becomes automated for the participant, and the learning becomes an acquired skill. Sociocultural learning theory
emphasizes that it is through social interactions that learning takes place and offers an avenue for the internalization of a given skill (Vygotsky, 1986).

In implementing district wide change initiatives, it is critical for people across the organization to have the opportunity and the support to learn the reform. In applying sociocultural learning theory, training and development of all staff must occur in a manner where practitioners are able to verbally share and discuss the ideas. By doing so, there is better chance that daily practice will be influenced and a more coherent implementation of the change efforts can take place. These opportunities for social interactions to occur and learning to take place exist between and among groups of people who either have formal or informal ties known as communities of practice.

**Communities of practice.** The focus of sociocultural learning theory emphasizes that learning take place in the context of social interactions. Communities of practice is a construct that defines communities where these exchanges take place. These communities are groups of people that are bonded by a variety of ties, whether they be formal or informal. Communities of practice are groups of people that share common language and often common tasks. A person within an organization may belong to several different groups. Understanding who makes up these various communities within an organization can help define where these natural learning contexts exist.

If learning is what is needed to successfully implement reform across a district, and learning occurs in the context of social interactions, then it would be critical to be able to identify and understand where these communities of practice are across a district. By definition, the superintendent, district leaders, and central office administrators are in
the unique position within a district’s organizational structure to not be tied to any one school site. The nature of these roles is to work centrally out of the district office and touch many different communities of practice. They interact with site staff around the district, as well as with other district office administrators. Their positionality within a district allows for them to offer support, resources, and information to many sites. This study explores this more and searches to better understand the role of the superintendent, district leaders, and central office administrators play in the learning required and the development and support of communities of practice to successfully implement systemic reform efforts developed, diffused, and enacted by a new superintendent across a district.

**Purpose of the Study**

The issue of reform coherence and alignment across a district are often challenges that arise in organizational change efforts. How are the change efforts communicated, received, and supported across the district? When district wide reform initiatives are executed without sufficient emphasis placed on support of learning, disconnects and misalignment occurs (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Stein & Coburn, 2008). By identifying existing communities of practice across the district as a vehicle for learning, the intended change can take place (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Stein & Coburn, 2008; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). District leadership and central office administrators are in a unique position to be a part of many communities of practice across the organization and are able to support, encourage, and influence these interactions that can lead to learning.

This study examines how a new superintendent takes on the development, diffusion, and enactment of a new systemic district change effort across the organization.
Interviewing the superintendent, deputy superintendent, central office administrators, and site principals will provide insight into the evolution and development of the district vision, mission, and values, as well as how it was received, supported, and implemented. Through the analysis of all the data gathered, reform coherence will further be explored as patterns and common themes emerge, pointing to the level of alignment between action and the espoused vision and values.

By exploring this initial period of a new superintendent assuming their role, the study will shed light onto the dynamics surrounding the interaction between and among the superintendent, district leaders, central office administrators, and site principals. Factors that constrain or support the learning and collaboration required to implement any district change will surface as data is reviewed and analyzed.

Much of the past research has focused on principals and teachers and their critical role of implementing district reform efforts. There have been more recent studies examining the practices of successful district wide initiatives that have led to positive student outcomes for all students and the integral contributions that the district office had in supporting the change efforts (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Honig, 2009). Findings include descriptions of leadership decision making and common change elements that were implemented. The key role that superintendents play is critical and correlations have been found with superintendents tenure and student achievement (Myers, 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006), but there is limited research on the context of learning within communities of practice that exists for effective district wide reform to be successfully
implemented and sustained over time and the role that the superintendent, district leadership, and central office administrators had during that period of reform.

Increasing the knowledge base regarding the context of the relationships that either constrained or contributed to the implementation of district initiatives would help inform district leadership on possible challenges that may be faced during this process. By identifying these existing ties between and among district and site leaders the context of maximum learning that helped support the change efforts can also be better understood. This information would help inform superintendents and school boards in their decision making process that would lead to addressing the achievement gap and align their actions with their espoused theories that all students will learn and succeed.

**Research Questions**

This study explores how a new superintendent approaches the development, diffusion, and enactment of a systemic change effort with a new vision and how the interactions between the superintendent, district leadership, central office, and site principals support the learning and development of communities of practice required during the process of the initial implementation. As a new superintendent takes the reigns of a district, establishing a clear vision, mission, and purpose are important steps in laying out a foundation for a course of action. Working towards ensuring alignment between decisions and the established theory of action is the ongoing work of district leadership. In examining this period of flux, information will be gathered on the learning opportunities provided and the level of support offered in order to identify positive
influences during the process. The following outline the overarching research question with sub-questions that will drive this study:

- In what ways does a new superintendent develop, diffuse, and enact a new systemic change effort across a district?
  - How does a new superintendent communicate this new change strategy across the district?
  - How does a new superintendent promote a consistent message that supports the new mission and values espoused in his vision?
  - How is the district vision effectively implemented during the initial stages across the district from a leadership perspective?

**Methods**

I used qualitative methods with a case study design for this research. This approach facilitated my goal of understanding the factors that support or constrain the learning and development of communities of practice required to effectively implement systemic change surrounding the interactions between the superintendent, district office leadership, central office administrators, and site principals. I conducted face to face semi-structured interviews of district staff including the superintendent, deputy superintendent, central office administrators, and site principals. I applied this inductive approach in order to capture emerging themes that might give insight into the factors that support or constrain these interactions.
Interviews, observations, and reviewing of documents and artifacts were done to gather a well-rounded picture of the setting and experiences of the superintendent and different members of the district and site leadership teams at the onset of a new superintendent taking the helm of a large urban school district. This research examined the steps and approach taken in the launching of a new systemic change effort by a new leader in the district and will inform how these changes were developed, diffused, and enacted during the early implementation stage. This study was part of a larger research project occurring within the district that provided information to be reviewed. Other documents reviewed included meeting agendas and minutes, Twitter posts, school plans, and district strategic plans.

Significance of Study

In California, in 2011, 71% of districts are identified to be Program Improvement for not meeting the Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks as outlined by the NCLB (2001) legislation, demonstrating that specific student groups are not being as successful as their White counterparts (California Department of Education, 2011). In order to transform instructional practices in the classrooms, teachers must learn how to differentiate instruction to address the needs of all students. The superintendent, district leadership and central office have the potential to facilitate and support this learning through their involvement with existing communities of practice across a district. Through their interactions, central office staff can increase collaboration within and across the organization, supporting meaningful professional development to sites and
impacting instructional practice. In doing so, district initiatives can be implemented with fidelity to address the achievement gap.

As districts respond to the call of addressing the achievement gap, system wide initiatives are undertaken. New superintendents assume their roles and work towards steering districts in a new direction. Reform efforts are launched and it is in this process of initial implementation that needs to be examined. An understanding of existing communities of practice within the system and the role that central office plays, can allow for district leadership to maximize on this as a vehicle for learning and collaboration. During the reform process, the expectation is that site leadership ensure fidelity in the implementation by the teacher practitioners, yet there is often a disconnect in the understanding of the reform effort and practice continues unchanged. In order for district wide change initiatives to be effectively implemented, this issue of learning and understanding become paramount to the discussions of systemic change. By applying the construct of communities of practice, learning can be understood as a social process. By maximizing preexisting relationships and promoting new connections, central office is in the unique position to offer support and exchange information between and among sites. They can facilitate the change process in order for reform initiatives to be implemented effectively and with fidelity.

**Definition of Terms**
**District leadership** – This term refers to the highest levels of district leaders. This is also referred to the District Cabinet which includes the superintendent, deputy superintendent, and assistant superintendents.

**Central office administrators** – Central office administrators are administrators who are not assigned to a school site and work out of the district offices. They are people who are often termed as directors who oversee larger district departments.

**District Vision** – This refers to the goal of what the district strives to be for students.

**District Mission** – This refers to the daily goal of what the district wants to accomplish in their everyday service to students.

**District Values** – These are intended to be key characteristics that are valued and supported and are often at the core of all actions and messages.

**Twitter** - Twitter is a social media tool. It is used for micro blogging where people can post messages that are open for public viewing in 140 characters or less. People may choose to “follow” a person which allows for the follower to be notified of Tweets or postings done by the person being followed. A person may do their own postings or they may also “Re- Tweet” what someone else posted, expanding the number of recipients of the posted message. Tweets may include links to articles or other resources, as well.
As districts across the nation search out answers to ensure all students achieve academic success, reform initiatives are put into action, but often are not found to be successful. The achievement gap continues to widen, and educational leaders are left wondering, “What happened?” With time marching forward, more and more students of color and from low socioeconomic backgrounds are left behind the pack, the question of how district change can be implemented successfully comes to the surface.

Several have argued the challenges and failures with reform and policy implementation have been around learning (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Gallucci, 2008; Hubbard, Mehan & Stein, 2006; Levin & Fullan, 2008). The primary focus of this literature review will be on sociocultural learning theory and exploring communities of practice as a vehicle for teaching and learning of district initiatives. The role that central office plays during this process is of primary interest in exploring their positionality within the organization as a potential factor to support effective implementation. In this literature review, I will describe the social justice issue that establishes the urgency surrounding the need for effective district reform. I will include a review of work done around district reform efforts that were successful and the common elements identified that supported the change. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the context around districts looking to initiate reform efforts, the review will describe the challenges facing superintendents today and the increasing turnover rates as many attempt to fill these demanding positions. Studies done on district reform that highlight the role of central office and their interactions with sites are referenced to demonstrate their...
participation in communities of practice within and across the district and their potential positive correlational effect on learning.

District Reform and the Social Imperative

Identifying the impact of the student achievement gap that exists between specific student sub groups is critical in understanding this as a social justice issue. The discrepancy that exists contributes to a cycle of inequity in quality of living among minority students and their White counterparts. It is crucial for educational leaders to have an awareness of this impact and how it relates to the existence of racism in society today within the context of education. Because racism exists in everyday interactions, it is often discounted to not exist at all and is seen as “a normal and endemic component of our social fabric” (Lopez, 2003, p. 83). Excuses are often made to divert attention from the education provided by the school systems to family and environmental factors as being the cause for the discrepancy in student achievement between student groups. The current status on student achievement clearly indicates that educational leaders must evaluate an educational system that is not fulfilling on its promise to ensure that all students learn. It is the moral imperative of educational leaders to interrupt the cycle of belief that racism is a thing of the past and to work towards developing a system that supports all of the students it serves (Lopez, 2003).

With the accountability measures put into place with NCLB, clear evidence of the achievement gap is readily accessible for public use and has been positively viewed as a catalyst for change. There are examples of districts where the leadership confronted these discrepancies in achievement between minority students and students from low
income families with the progress made by their White counterparts in a public manner. In doing so, the role of district leadership was critical in challenging traditionally held district beliefs and practices to address the lack of achievement for some students. Strategic use of data by district leadership allowed for the leadership team to collaboratively discuss and analyze the information. Superintendents found success for their students by establishing a clear guiding message focused on teaching and learning, making the achievement gap a top priority. By exposing the truth regarding the differences of academic achievement for African American and Latino students as compared to White students, these superintendents communicated an expectation for site leadership and central office to collaborate and share out successful practices (Koschoreck, 2001; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

Deficit thinking is a theoretical framework utilized to explain the pervasiveness of the mindset in education at all levels that it was accepted and expected to think certain student groups would simply perform lower than their White counterparts. By confronting these assumptions among the leadership teams, superintendents developed an equity view as they searched out settings where this deficit thinking was disproven. With a clear directive from the superintendent, all district staff were challenged to reframe this perception of deficit thinking. Leaders were challenged to engage in a self-examination to expose a school system that was not supporting these students to succeed. As these superintendents experienced success, they continually raised the expectations even further. Through open collaboration and discussion, site leadership was involved in identifying these examples of success and charged with learning more about how to
transfer those practices to support student achievement (Cawelti, 2001; Maxcy, 2009; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). These studies reveal the positive results of systemic change that established a new vision and expectation where all students can learn and whereby all employees in the district share in the responsibility of ensuring that all students learn.

**Answering the Call: Effective District Wide Reform**

There is evidence of districts that are making progress towards addressing these social justice issues and disproving deficit thinking, ensuring that all students learn, including minority students and students from low income families. The body of research is growing on districts that have successfully implemented system wide reform efforts that have led to increased student achievement for all groups. These studies examine districts that serve minority students and students from low income families over the course of several years and have had success in improving academic growth. Best practices have been extrapolated from these large scale system wide reform efforts that have led to student success for all. The importance of a collaborative effort by all invested parties is central to effective change. “The heart of improvement lies in changing teaching and learning practices in thousands and thousands of classrooms, and this requires focused and sustained effort by all parts of the education system and its partners” (Levin & Fullan, 2008, p. 291).

Providing meaningful professional development, establishing a clear vision and plan of action, collaboration within and across the system, and redefining leadership roles are key decisions common among districts that found success in the implementation
process. Large scale empirical studies have been done on high poverty school districts that were reducing the achievement gap. After utilizing data to acknowledge poor performance and make instructional decisions, there were common elements found to contribute to the successful system wide changes. Focusing on students learning, there was a new approach to professional development provided to teachers and administrators that included content instruction and strategies, as well as ongoing support. Professional development was not limited to teachers, but included instruction and support of the new initiative at all levels across the organization. Leadership roles were redefined to take a more active part in the implementation of the initiatives through collaboration, monitoring and advising. These actions among others were shifts that supported learning and led to successful implementation of changes across a district that led to positive student performance (Cawelti, 2001; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

**Superintendent Demands and Turnover**

Developing, diffusing, and enacting change efforts across a district begin with the superintendent. Ultimately, it is the superintendent who offers their leadership in what to focus on, why it is important, and how it will be executed. The role of the superintendent has been described as daunting as their responsibilities include the management of fiscal resources and facilities, communicating with the public, instructional leader, overseer of student safety and advisor to the school board (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Myers, 2010). The success or failure of a district and the schools within its boundaries is dependent on the performance of the superintendent (Rammer, 2007).
With increased public accountability due to No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, there has been a dramatic increase in turnover of superintendents. The average tenure of superintendents is six to seven years and even less in urban school districts (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Natkin et al, 2002). According to the Council of Great City Schools (2003) the average tenure of urban superintendents was 2.75 years. School boards across the nation are scrambling at filling these positions with qualified people who can facilitate necessary change initiatives. It is because of these issues, a better understanding of how a new superintendent assumes these responsibilities is critical in supporting the learning and development of communities of practice to facilitate systemic change efforts across a district during the initial period of transition.

**The Role of Central Office in District Reform**

Adding to the knowledge base of effective implementation of district wide reform are studies that narrow the focus to be on the role of the central office and the staff that comprises the district office leadership. In identifying some of the key commonalities successful districts acted upon in implementing change efforts, the role of district leaders comes into play. Central office administrators and district leaders can take an integral part in providing meaningful professional development, establishing and contributing to collaboration across the system, actively participating in teaching and learning, and in the redefining of their own leadership roles. The intricacies of the positionality of district and central office staff within the organizational landscape are complex, and yet their potential for contribution is powerful. Work has been done in exploring these relationships to be interdependent and interrelated. The established roles of the district
and central office leadership has been defined to include providing instructional leadership and support, reorienting the organization, establishing policy coherence, and maintaining an equity focus. Although these roles are multifaceted, the evolution of instructional leadership and the implementation of initiatives must be a collective effort of the superintendent along with district and central office administrators (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, & Daly, 2008; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008).

There is substantial rhetoric that condemns the central office as being a barrier to change, but their unique position in a district’s organizational map cannot be ignored. Their potential for positive contribution to the change process is critical in the implementation of system wide reform efforts (Honig, 2009; Chrispeels et al., 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). District and central office staff can be viewed as an obstacle or as a supporter and it is important to identify the characteristics that influence their role. There is evidence that the assumption that teachers and principals will resist change efforts and a strong district role in a given initiative to be inaccurate. In fact, strong strategic involvement by district and central office administrators has been welcomed by sites when the responsibility of the implementation is shared and they are perceived to offer support to the site (Burch & Spillane, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Stein & Coburn, 2008). When this occurs, a deeper learning and understanding of the initiative occurs on the part of the practitioners, and any leadership turnover has less impact on its momentum. Sustainability of the reform effort can be achieved when there
is a clear direction for the district culture that is understood at all levels and the focus is maintained.

The importance of the role of central office has become even more critical in the current era of increased accountability for districts. As sites and districts nationwide are being identified as being in need of program improvement, the need for central office supporting underperforming school sites is required (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Daly, 2009; Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Mclaughlin & Talbert, 2003). Their involvement can support fidelity of implementation through their involvement in existing communities of practice in supporting the learning and understanding of initiatives where practice is transformed. Through their collaboration, central office is in the position to offer instruction and facilitate learning in the change process. Daly and Finnigan (2010) discuss the need for districts to shift their focus from individual sites to “engaging the entire system in a network of connections” (p.5). As districts initiate changes in an effort to exit Program Improvement status, the ability for central office leadership to positively interact with site leadership and teachers becomes integral during the reform process. Exchanges of information and ideas are facilitated through the communication among site and district leaders, and the frequency of this exchange is dependent on the strength of the social connections among people (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Daly, Moolenaar, Bolivar, & Burke, 2010; Stein & Coburn, 2008). Within a district that is identified as being in need of improvement, these interactions can often become strained due to stress, fear, and uncertainty. When this occurs, progress is limited and resistance prevails. This state contributes to the status quo which “limits the contribution and access to knowledge by
marginalizing individuals at the periphery, ultimately having a negative impact on knowledge sharing throughout an organization” (Daly & Finnigan, 2010, p. 29). In order to effectively implement coherent district wide reform, intentional steps must be taken to establish increased opportunities to develop ties among site leaders, as well as between site leadership and district and central office administrators (Daly, 2009; Daly & Finnigan, 2010, Burch & Spillane, 2004).

For learning to occur across an organization, the experience is based upon collective group learning and individuals learning from each other (Wenger, 1998; Wertsch; 1985, Senge; 2006). Gallucci (2008) explains how one can infer that systemic district change is an outcome of the learning that occurs throughout its members. In an effort to better understand effective implementation of district wide initiatives, it behooves educators to unpack this idea of the learning required to bring about change and the factors that may support (or constrain) this learning throughout a district. It has been argued the problem of coherent reform implementation is a problem of learning (Chrispeels et al. 2008; Honig, 2008; Hubbard, Mehan & Stein, 2006; Scott & Bagaka, 2004). By gaining a better understanding of how an organization gains new knowledge to change practice, a guide might be provided for educational leaders to support this learning within and across a district.

**Sociocultural Learning Theory**

Many learning theories focus on the individual learning and development of the mind. Because the nature of district reform involves many layers of people throughout the organizational structure to receive and act upon the new initiative, sociocultural
learning theory can be used as a lens to view the required learning involved in any change effort. Sociocultural learning theory includes consideration of the social and cultural context of interactions of people where learning occurs and provides a necessary perspective of the change process within an organization.

Sociocultural theories of learning define learning as occurring within a social context and through interactions with others. Learning is viewed as situated in everyday social settings or communities and involves changes in degrees of participation (Rogoff, 1990; Wenger 1996; Wertsch, 1985; Vygotsky, 1986). From this sociocultural perspective, learning “consists of a transformational and reciprocal constructive process”. This emphasizes the reciprocity between the people interacting and the social and cultural context in which they act (Billet, 1996; Rogoff, 1990). Viewing learning as a social process, sociocultural theory supports the idea learning occurs within the individual mind as the individual experiences instances of participation, interaction and engagement in activities where the learning is internalized and becomes a transformation of practice. (Galucci, 2003; Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988)

Vygotsky was one of the pioneers who began defining sociocultural learning theory. In explaining the learning process, Vygotsky veered away from other schools of thought that emphasized learning taking place through an individual’s acquisition of information in the mind. Instead, he pursued the idea that learning occurred through an individual’s social engagement with others and the social cultural contexts of that interaction impacts the learning that takes place (Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1985). Sociocultural learning theory contends it is through these engagements, learners socially
construct meaning of particular ideas and in the process develop and also potentially shape the habits of mind in their cultures (Wertsch, 1985). Individuals appropriate tools for thinking they gain from their interactions with social agents who guide and assist them in their cultural apprenticeship (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Rogoff, 1990).

In reference to district reform, it can be seen how change efforts require change in vision, mission, and practice. In order to effectively implement these efforts consistently, leaders must adopt a deep understanding of the initiative in order to transform their everyday instructional leadership and daily practice. To gain this level of transformative understanding, learning must take place, and the superintendent, district leaders, and central office administrators are in the unique position to act as these “social agents” who can support and facilitate these exchanges and ultimately the learning.

**Language.** Sociocultural learning theory looks deeply at the process of interacting and focuses on the language used during the exchange and the internal talk used in sense making during the acquisition of learning. Vygotsky made a point to explain the relationship between language and thought. He described the choice and use of words as a means to understand, demonstrate, and act on the material and social world (Wertsch, 1985; Rogoff, 1990). Much of Vygotsky’s work illustrated in his book *Thought and Language* focuses on the duality of use of language. Individuals use their language during social exchanges to identify, elaborate, and explain, working within the “social plane”. It is through this process that the individual is able later to recall and reflect on this interaction, accessing the language used and transform the experience, now working within the “internal plane”. The crucial role speech and language can have on
learning is an ongoing theme in Vygotsky’s work. Vygotsky (1986) contended that all higher order functions develop out of language-based social interaction. “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; the first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)” (Tharp Gallimore, 1988, p. 163).

Better comprehending the steps of acquiring new knowledge to reach a point of internalization and then transformation of practice is critical in being able to support the learning process. District leadership needs this understanding in order to be in a better position to support it of reform initiatives are expected to be implemented effectively across the system. Sociocultural learning theory offers a perspective of how learning occurs that can benefit districts in supporting these efforts.

**Where learning occurs: The ZPD.** The Zone of Proximal Development was introduced by Vygotsky to explain the process of learning and development in more detail and through its phases. It illustrates three general areas: what an individual already knows and can already do, what an individual can do with the help of someone more expert, and what an individual does not know and cannot do. “Assisted performance” identifies what an individual can do with help, with support from the environment, of others, and of self (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Rogoff, 1990). Our social interactions and culture define what it means to “know” something through our ability to demonstrate our capacity and competence of that skill. It is this difference between what the individual can do independently and what they can do with assistance where learning occurs and there is potential for transforming practice.
This notion has grand implications for the teaching and learning of district wide initiatives and how they are presented. “Teaching is good only when it awakens and rouses to life those functions which are in a state of maturing, which lie in the zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky in Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p. 31). Presenting initiatives to site leadership and establishing a supportive relationship with district and central office administrators would serve to support learning and a cohesive implementation of reform efforts.

There are four stages of the ZPD as presented by Tharp and Gallimore (1988). They further explain the fluid nature of the zones and changes in assistive relationships that may occur as an individual progresses through the learning process.

**Stage 1: Assisted Performance.** This is the first stage where information and ideas are first introduced to an individual. They may not understand how the information fits into their own daily work life. In the context of district reform, an example of this stage might be when a new initiative is presented at a leadership meeting to principals. Aiding the learning, this is a time where questions and answers might take place, as well as small group or whole group discussions. To facilitate understanding, guiding questions and scaffolding assistance would be provided. Rogoff (1990) explains the importance of understanding this stage as being a time when the individual may not fully understand the goals of the activity or initiative. Sociocultural learning theory supports providing the opportunity for social interactions to take place in order to process and further share and define the goals and/or sub-goals established. It is through each of these interactions that meaning is negotiated and internalized, but it highlights the strong
knowledge based needed by those presenting the new information and are the experts in
the novice-expert relationship (Chrispeels et al, 2008; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1985; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). In the novice-expert relationship within a district, the
superintendent, district leaders, and central office administrators could act as the
“experts” and the site principal would act as the novice. It is clear how critical it would
be for district leadership to have a clear understanding of the given initiative in order to
act in this assistive role where rich discussions can occur to support the change and
therefore support the notion of investing in the development of these “experts”, as well
(Gallucci, 2008; Honig, 2008; Burch & Spillane, 2004). Structuring situations to provide
maximum opportunities for scaffolding are part of the assistance provided by the
presenters or “experts”. Sociocultural learning theory describes this stage as a time
where goals and meaning are negotiated through the social exchanges taking place.
Goals are clarified, questions are asked, ideas are shared, and the presenter is able to
assess what other supports the learners may need to ensure the learning takes place.

As the learners gain knowledge and capacity, they are able to take on more
responsibility and ownership of the desired task and the presenter gradually releases
responsibility. Tharp & Gallimore (1988) explain how the purpose of stage 1 is to move
from “other-regulation” to “self-regulation” where the learner is able to perform the task
or accomplish the goal without assistance.

During implementation of a system wide effort, at this stage the learners would
understand the new task and have the ability to perform the task independently without
assistance from another, but it is still not at the point of total transformation as it is not automatized.

**Stage 2: Self-assistance.** This next stage moves beyond the idea the learner is able to perform the task or goal independently. Its focus is on self-regulation where the learner uses self-directed speech to guide their own actions. Access and use of this internal locus of control is a stage of the learning process before capacities are fully developed. This self-prompting used to assist the self in pursuit of fully learning and attaining the intended goal. (Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) At this stage, the learner may refer back to prompts to recall the steps needed to accomplish the task gained from prior interactions. This might include accessing reference materials, handbooks, acquiring feedback, recalling models of the intended behavior, or creating and referring to notes taken. Self-talk is a common strategy used by learners as they reflect upon their work and self-evaluate their implementation of the initiative. It is this use of language that Vygotsky referred to that was acquired from the assistance provider in stage 1 that is now being used and internalized to self-regulate (Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1985).

In this stage of learning, the individual is practicing performing the intended task, consciously self-supporting themselves. Within an organization attempting to change practice across the system, this is when the practitioners, whether that be principals, teachers, or central office staff, have absorbed the new information and training and are practicing the new skill or task. They are self-aware of their novice state and know they need some extra support. They may refer to their own notes, visualize what they have
seen in the past, consult with colleagues, and internally recall whatever supports they find necessary to perform the given objective.

**Stage 3: Internalization.** This stage marks the time when the desired learning becomes automatic for the learner. There is neither more need for external support to accomplish the goal nor any need for internal self-regulation. It can be said once the learner no longer uses the self-directed assistance; the learner has completed and exited the ZPD for the given task (Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Learners demonstrate confidence and full understanding of the given task or skill, and their capacity to explain their knowledge is solid. Within a system implementing district wide change, this would be the final goal to have all staff reach this stage of learning of a given initiative. In doing so, coherence would be achieved with a universal understanding of the reform effort and execution would be smooth. Vygotsky (1986) used the term “fossilized” to describe how these new learnings become engrained in the learner. Sociocultural learning theory further points out this stage is not permanent.

**Stage 4: Recursion.** Vygotsky explains how individuals are constantly at different stages of the ZPD for new skills and skills already acquired as maintenance and improvement are ongoing. This provides for a recurrent cycle accessing self-assistance and assistance from others (Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1985). Changes in work setting, job title, colleagues, personal stress, or life challenges can disrupt the automaticity and internalization of skills once owned by the learner. The reaction of the learner when needed is to revert back to stage 2, self-regulation. Using self-assistance strategies are tools for the learner to use. If they are unsuccessful,
reverting back to stage 1 is a viable and recommended option for learners in order for them to access outside assistance. “Just as the readiness of a teacher to repeat some earlier lesson for her pupils is one mark of excellent teaching, so one mark of excellent schooling is a system for providing opportunities to refresh teacher skills with occasional doses of assistance by others” (Tharp & Gallimore, p. 259). While this refers to teachers, it applies to all district employees expected to implement reform efforts across the organization. This supports the notion of offering ongoing professional development and opportunities for interaction for principals, central office administrators, and district leaders in order to ensure ongoing cultivation of the skills people have and learning of new ones required to implement district reform initiatives.

**Advancing through the ZPD**

In order to support continual improvement and learning, sociocultural learning theory describes the need for these supports and scaffolding to encourage deeper engagement in the specific learning activities. Within the ZPD model, there is a need for another individual to assist the learner. The term “novice-expert relationships” are defined as focusing on bringing the novice into fuller participation with a given activity. Honig (2008) explains it to be, “a relationship in which participants more expert at particular practices model those practices and create valued identity structures, social opportunities, and tools that reinforce those models for more novice participants” (p. 654). By modeling the goal behavior and processing this with the learner before and after, the learner is able to observe the execution of the targeted skill and understand the thinking behind the action. Honig (2008) brings up an issue in her study regarding
district reform and the role of central office. She illustrates the possibility of some central office administrators who might be in a position to act as the expert in these novice-expert relationships, but may not have the capability to do. She describes the reciprocity inherent in the activity of modeling and how through the interaction, the expert (in this case, the superintendent, district office leaders and central office administrators) will be able to reflect, examine, and transform their own practice, learning themselves from the experience of joint work.

As districts launch reform initiatives, capitalizing on the positionality of district and central office administrators will require investment in their own knowledge base in order for them to continually refine and improve their own expertise to share in facilitating learning. In doing so, they can act as active partners to site leaders and promote implementation coherence across the organization. Through their exchanges with principals, they will be able to guide this learning process through their instruction, scaffolding and modeling.

Rogoff (1990) expands upon this idea and adds to the work of Vygotsky by focusing on the notion of guided practice and apprenticeship as strategies for learning. Situated learning involves this notion of learning by doing. Rogoff (1990) emphasizes the active participation of the learner in engaging in a shared activity where learning occurs through communication that includes words as well as actions. These exchanges that occur in the ZPD are the crux of development and learning. Learners participate in activities they could not do so without assistance, using cultural tools (verbal and nonverbal language) they adapt for the activity they face.
In the educational setting, examples of this might include jointly observing a lesson and processing what was seen together, collaborating and sharing ideas and explaining the thought process. Co-facilitating a meeting, co-teaching a lesson, co-presenting professional development and providing feedback are other examples of guided practice that could support the learning required with systemic change.

**Vygotsky Space**

Sociocultural learning theory is based upon the Vygotskian sociohistorical notions describing learning and change as the internalization and transformation of cultural tools that occur as individuals participate in social practice (Gallucci, 2008). The Vygotsky Space shown in Figure 1 was adapted by Gallucci (2008) using the framework from Harre (1984) and combines the dynamics surrounding the interactions during the process of learning. It includes the connections between the individual and collective actions and public and private settings. The graphic is applied to the learning process of a teacher participating in a professional development experience involving coaching, modeling, and feedback in transforming her own practice in a study done by Gallucci (2003). The graphic describes the phases of development where information is first presented to the individual in public (Quadrant 1). The individual discusses the new information and internally processes the information (appropriation) to apply it to that person’s own practice (Quadrant 2). When individuals internalize the new information and apply it to their own work, their practice is transformed (Quadrant 3). When these new practices are shared and demonstrated, they become public, affecting more individuals in the organization (Quadrant 4). The Vygotsky Space is helpful in showcasing the potential
for learning within an organization as an individual is given the opportunity to socially process the new learning in a guided practice setting. Communities of practice are existing work groups that may offer these opportunities.

**Figure 1:** Vygotsky Space (in Gallucci, 2008 adapted from Harré, 1984)

**Communities of Practice**

Districts have several obstacles that arise along the path of implementation of a systemic change effort. The road to full effective implementation of any initiative is long and varied from its inception to its actual fruition in the delivery of instruction in the classroom. One of the integral components needed for effective implementation is the
teaching and learning that occurs at the site level that affects the degree of understanding of the initiative. To facilitate the intended change, it is this level of training and support that is required for reform coherence and fidelity of implementation of the initiative at school sites. (Galucci, 2003; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006; Stein & Coburn, 2008; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). The construct of communities of practice offers an identifiable vehicle whereby learning can occur within the social context of work for change to take place. It is through these formal and informal groups that exist within a district where information can be shared and exchanged regarding the common work around the intended change. Investigating how the superintendent, district leaders and central office administrators can be integrated into these communities of practice as both a resource and a support can offer vital information in their role as a catalyst for effective systemic reform implementation.

**Learning within Communities of Practice**

Communities of practice evolve over time when a group of people develop common practices and shared ways of doing things, interacting with each other to achieve a common purpose. As time passes, these groups of people develop a common language and shared understandings over their experience with the similar tasks they engage in within their larger organization. These group members have a connection that is based upon their work, but that often times develops into personal connections, as well. It is these communities that are based around work, that are defined as communities of practice and it is through their very interactions that learning can occur. (Gallucci, 2008; Honig, 2008; Wenger, 1996, 2000)
Through its members, it is within these communities where competency is also defined. These groups are the social “containers” of the competencies required and defined daily by its members within an organization. There are three main elements of a community of practice that contribute to establishing a setting where competencies and expectations are defined (Wenger 2000, 2002). Being involved in a joint enterprise, members share a common understanding about their community and keep each other accountable to those understandings and to be competent enough to contribute to it. Because the work of the group is based on social interactions, there is mutuality in the relationships and members follow established social norms that rely on trusted engagements. The community of practice is a gathering place where the collective expertise is based upon the knowledge and experience that each members brings. A community of practice has an inherent shared repertoire of resources that the group can access in its work and apply it appropriately.

Learning occurs when there is a misalignment with the experience of its members and the defined competency (Wenger 1998, 2000; Stein & Coburn, 2008). It is this interplay where the group members work towards trying to realign themselves and build up its knowledge and skills to meet the newly defined competency. The gap between the current experience and knowledge and the expected competency becomes the catalyst to progress. This could take the shape of a new member joining an established community of practice where the member’s knowledge and competency does not meet the expected competencies as established by the group (Wenger, 2000). In this instance, the single member works towards improving themselves and learning occurs. By the same token,
another example might occur when new information is brought to the group and as the group processes this, specific members may want to change the established definition of competency to expand it to include the new information. It is during this process of questioning and adaptation that learning also can occur for its members and for the collective group. It is this tension between competence and experience where learning takes place (Wenger, 1998, 2000).

A common barrier to effective district wide reform efforts is the issue of reform coherence across the system. Communities of practice offers an avenue in which to address this issue as new information is presented to different work groups across the organization and given the opportunity and support, learning can take place. This construct of communities of practice was utilized by Burch and Spillane (2004) and similarly applied in the study done by Stein and Coburn (2008). They conducted an empirical study that utilized an ethnographic design that analyzes the implementation of a district reform effort. They examined the issue of coherence and alignment of reform with practice across a district. Their findings indicated the disconnect that can occur when district wide reform efforts are executed without sufficient emphasis placed on providing teachers the opportunity to learn the essential tenets needed to change instruction. When this occurs, there is a lack of consistency in the fidelity of implementation of the initiative as practitioners do not develop a deep enough understanding to positively affect their instructional practice. By utilizing existing professional communities that exist throughout a district as a vehicle for learning, the transformation of the intended change can become a reality (Burch & Spillane, 2004;
Stein & Coburn, 2008; Vescio et al., 2008). The superintendent, district leaders, and central office administrators are in the unique position to be a part of many communities of practice across the organization and can facilitate this change to occur through its own participation in teaching and learning.

**Functional Communities of Practice**

It is important to note that not all communities of practice are productive positive groups within an organization. There are instances where communities of practice can collectively adopt an understanding to resist new ideas and knowledge, effectively denying any opportunities for growth or learning. In identifying the components of a community practice, it is critical to more clearly understand the potential they have in order to support progress.

A community of practice may have a focus on a *joint enterprise*, but coupled with that focus should be an established value for improvement through learning. The tone of the organization and more specifically, the group, should always be one of openness to ideas that challenge current practice in an effort to grow. The community of practice should foster a thirst for learning that would encourage all of its members to seek out new experiences and new knowledge to add to the collective expertise. When communities of practice do not value new knowledge or want to engage in new learning, they grow dependent on past practice, recycling prevailing strategies while denying any potential opportunities for change (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Hargreaves, 1984; Little, 1982). This action can stunt growth, and impede progress. In these situations, central office
administrators have the ability to gauge the temperature of the school or groups they are working with, evaluate the needs of the group and work towards addressing these issues.

The connections existing among the members of a community of practice are the oil that will keep the learning machine running. *Mutuality* refers to the reciprocal exchange that occurs between members, but is dependent on the depth of the existing connections. In order for a community of practice to be productive, interpersonal ties based upon mutual trust must exist where members are free to question past practice, address challenges, and share innovative ideas. When the environment where the community of practice lives becomes riddled with fear of failure and threats of consequences, the depth of exchanges among members become strained and the communities can become mere shells of what they once were (Daly, 2009; Chrispeels et al., 2008; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Vescio et al., 2008).

A community of practice develops a *shared repertoire* of resources from its members, but the group must be aware enough to recognize the need for constant further development of this repertoire. It must value new insights and new information and understand the possible impact it may have on their practice. A functional community of practice will have a deep understanding of its place within the organization, and the positive impact of learning on both the experience and competency of the group. Through the learning process, a community of practice can not only expand its own competency, but will ultimately increase its positive contribution to the organization. In building upon the groups *shared repertoire*, functional communities of practice within schools have found success in increasing academic achievement as they process new
information or initiatives (Gallucci, 2003; Vescio et al., 2007). In contrast, communities of practice that are insular in their reception of new information, fall into the trap of being stagnant in their practice and often find themselves left behind in the journey towards new implementations (Gallucci, 2003; Hargreaves, 1984; Little, 1982).

**Crossing Boundaries**

People belong to several communities of practice at once within and outside of an organization. These different communities may have obvious connections, while others may not, but promoting these connections among groups can increase not only the sense of collegiality, but also the number of opportunities for learning. As people cross boundaries between and among different communities of practice, the transference of knowledge can occur. As groups negotiate meaning out of these interactions, learning takes place and the potential for improvement and growth exists. Innovation can result out of boundary crossings as divergent thinking can often come together during these instances. Examples of these occurrences can be district professional development meetings for site principals, district leadership meetings, and principal planning meetings. It is at these experiential intersections where the potential for the superintendent, district leaders, and central office to have a positive influence when reform implementation is at its height.

As district wide change efforts are initiated, these efforts must be received, interpreted, and implemented by many groups. In order for these district initiatives to be successful, the practitioners must have an opportunity to learn them. By establishing and nurturing communities of practice across a district, a positive context for collaboration
and learning can be promoted. This nurturing is critical in developing functional communities of practice because of the direct influence that they have on the learning that takes place for its members. Communities of practice can be either strong or weak in their collaboration and open or insular in their reaction to innovation and new policies. The nature of a community of practice will affect the interpretation of the reform policy, the level of engagement in any professional development offered around the reform effort, and the types of changes to instructional practice that the practitioner would adopt (Gallucci, 2003).

The reality of progress towards district implementation of initiatives can be inhibited when there are conflicting understandings and agreements about the purpose and approach of application between the superintendent, district leaders, central office and site leadership (Chrispeels et al. 2008; Hubbard et al., 2006; Stein & Coburn, 2008). During the change process, conflicting opinions and experiences can surface, and if ignored can impede progress. It is important that opportunities are afforded to expose these developing perspectives as site leaders and teacher practitioners are learning and applying the new initiatives. By moving forward without acknowledging and addressing these differences at the onset, district wide reform efforts are often foiled before full implementation and fidelity becomes even more problematic. Reform coherence must be aligned among all people responsible for true buy in in order to carry out the given initiative with fidelity at the site level.
Successful Boundary Spanners

By accessing and valuing existing communities of practice and establishing collaborative relationships between the superintendent, district leaders, central office administrators, and site leadership, district reform efforts are better supported and are more successful (Gallucci, 2003, 2008; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006, Stein & Coburn, 2008). Setting formal structures that provide increased opportunities for these communities to gather and plan would fan the flames of collaboration, as well as increasing the amount of boundary crossings that occur where information can be shared between different communities of practice. These boundary crossings can create bridges between groups, but they can also be a source of division and separation (Wenger, 2000).

In order to maximize on these opportunities, the boundary processes must ensure that the expected action go through a high level of coordination to address the possible gap of concept inception all the way through implementation by the practitioner. Another important factor to consider is offering a clear explanation of the intended action in an effort to promote a deeper understanding of the reasons why accurate implementation is important for success. When there is a lack of coordination and explanation, and an action is expected to cross boundaries through several communities of practice, individual understandings and interpretations come into play and the integrity of the initiative is put into jeopardy (Daly et al., 2010; Honig, 2008; Stein & Coburn, 2008).

Another influencing factor involved in boundary processes is the level of input that different communities of practice have in the action steps of the given initiative. This ability to negotiate the meaning and implementation of the action can either promote
further engagement and learning, or it can highlight feelings of disconnect and divisions of power. When initiatives are implemented without input from practitioners or the opportunities to process and extract meaning, effective implementation is unsuccessful and met with resistance. For example, by increasing the level of collaboration and professional development around the specific change implementation, teachers’ perception of the effectiveness of the reform efforts are influenced. As teachers are given the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the initiative, their own perceptions are influenced. They have more buy in to the implementation and student achievement is positively influenced (Gallucci, 2008; Scott and Bagaka, 2004; Stein & Coburn, 2008).

Central Office as Buffers and Brokers

As people are members of different communities of practice, the role of the superintendent, district leadership, and central office administrators in district reform provides a unique opportunity for building bridges among groups, while providing information and resources. These positions can play the role of both brokers and buffers for a school site principal. They can broker between and among communities of practice across a district. They have the ability to impart knowledge and resources, as well as the ability to act as a buffer who helps facilitate the exchange. While this role can establish itself as a hub of positive interactions and learning, it can also be a role of disconnectedness and isolation without a true membership to a community of practice while always working towards creating bridges. Being able to establish strong relationships with people throughout the district would be a key characteristic for district
and central office staff to possess to be able to encourage connections and collaboration between communities of practice.

To address this issue of creating a system where the district and central office are established as a true support to sites, redefining these roles are necessary (Honig, 2009; Hubbard et al., 2006). Departing from the traditional approach of a directive district and central office to being more of a support where ideas and information are openly exchanged has been a step taken by districts looking for effective systemic change. Understanding the role of district and central office administrators as both bridges and buffers is integral in understanding exchanges that occur between sites and district office (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Honig, 2008; Stein & Coburn, 2008). Central office administrators act as a bridge between site leadership and district office administrators by delivering feedback to the central office and influencing modifications to policy at the district level in order to facilitate implementation of the initiatives at the site level (Honig, 2009, p. 392). District leaders and central office administrators also act as buffers between sites and district office, supporting site leaders to work within the parameters set by the district (Honig, 2009, p. 388). Acknowledging these critical roles of influence that district and central office has adds an important component to understanding how these positions can support systemic change across a district within each of its sites.

Refining the role of district and central office allows for them to be brokers who have a strategic position of allocating resources, knowledge, and ideas across a district. In acting as brokers and dispensing resources, the approach utilized by district leadership
is critical in successful implementation of any reform efforts at the site level. An authoritative approach can be problematic in the implementation of district wide reform versus a collaborative orientation. Four barriers that school sites described to be obstacles in productive interaction with district and central office include the perspective that school relationships were seen as low priorities, communication was based on directives instead of dialogue, district and central office lacked understanding of site issues, and district and central office had a lack of expertise around teaching and learning (Burch & Spillane, 2004). While the positionality of the district and central office has potential, the characteristics surrounding the quality of interactions is important to remember in order for those interactions to be meaningful and have a positive impact on site leaders and ultimately on student success.

Central Office Becoming a Part of Site Communities of Practice

Increasing ties in an effort to increase collaboration between central office and site leadership is a key component to reform coherence and effective implementation, but taking action towards this is a necessary but complex process. To have meaningful collaboration requires a truthful exchange of information and the comfort level to take risks in sharing ideas that work and are not working. Mandating an increase in communication and ties between site leadership and central office will not automatically lead to more effective collaboration. After careful examination of the context of being identified Program Improvement districts and Program Improvement sites, the connections between central office and site leadership can become strained and a lack of trust can emerge as barriers to collaboration (Chhuon, Gilkey, Gonzalez, Daly, &
Chrispeels, 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2010). Principals often feel vulnerable and under the threat of losing their jobs if they did not produce results (Chhuon et al., 2008, p. 250). Under these conditions, the exchange of information and support was limited, and therefore any change efforts attempted were constrained. In their study, the central office was attempting to launch district wide changes, but realized that the issue of lack of trust needed to be addressed in order for effective reform to take place where communication and collaboration could occur. The district leadership redesigned systems in order to increase the level of interaction and to encourage the development of working relationships between site leadership and central office.

There are examples of district reform efforts that increased their interactions between district and central office and site leadership in the form of collaboration that was defined through monitoring and control. In reaction to possible federal and state sanctions imposed upon a district identified to be in program improvement, plans to increase control over curriculum, instructional delivery, and the use of student data have often been implemented for a more centralized monitoring system. By exercising this blanket approach to address declining academic performance, the connections between sites and central office become one grounded in accountability. This constrains the level of information exchange that occurs between sites and district as trust is compromised and collaboration is defined to be that of a more binary relationship of monitoring level of implementations of directives (Daly et al., 2010; Maxcy, 2009). These reactions demonstrate how reform efforts intended to increase student achievement are negatively received at the site level by the people it was meant to support.
Microblogging as a Supportive Tool

There is an emerging interest in understanding the use of microblogging and its impact on teaching and learning. Twitter is a microblogging tool that allows for people to publicly post messages consisting of 140 characters or less. It has been identified as a communication tool and a means to disseminate information. The nature of Twitter participation revolves around the posting of information and the ability to follow particular people or groups as designated by using a hashtag and reading their postings. Twitter allows for not only text posts, but also the inclusion of pictures, videos, or links to other websites or resources.

Albeit limited, there is a growing body of work around the use of Twitter and how it might support both the distribution of information in a teaching environment, and the accessing of that information to promote learning through exposure to the content. Not only has it been found to promote access, but also as a means to facilitate interactions (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, & Meyer, 2010). Some work has been done specifically to investigate adult learning in both professional and higher education settings and the findings point to social media and Twitter as supportive tools (Junco, Elavsky, Heiberger, 2013; Cho, Ro, Littenberg-Tobias, 2013). They demonstrate how Twitter supported both the direct teaching of content, but also the informal exchanges that occur through social interactions as part of the learning process.

Twitter has been defined as a possible means to not only communicate information and resources, but also to promote virtual professional communities where interactions and feedback can be exchanged. “By connecting teachers to teachers,
scholars, and experts, such technologies have been portrayed as giving teachers access to more knowledge resources” (Cho, Ro, Littenberg-Tobias, 2013, p. 49). By creating these conditions, these virtual contacts are aligned with the tenets providing opportunities to foster learning through increasing potential social interactions. “Microblogging should be seen as a completely new form of communication that can support informal learning beyond classrooms” (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, & Meyer, 2010, p. 92). Because of the public nature of Twitter, access to information and time limitations on the virtual social exchanges do not exist, promoting and even possibly accelerating the learning process.

The use of social media as a tool to facilitate learning and fostering connections is an important factor to consider. If learning is required to implement effective change, and learning is a social process, it would be valuable to understand the role that social media and Twitter can have during the implementation of district wide change and how it can support this process.

Summary

In summary, today’s educational system is in crisis. With the onset of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), we have been able to measure and disaggregate data that paints a picture of disparity and inequity where it is evident that students that are minorities or from low income families are not showing the expected academic progress as White students. The current system of public education is failing to adequately prepare students to compete in and contribute to our society. This is a call to action for educational leaders to address this social injustice for the good of the collective future.
and our world. It is a call to confront truths, to challenge our current practice, and to influence change.

There is an increasing body of research that describes districts who have implemented effective system wide reform efforts to address the achievement gap. Common contributing factors can be extracted from research studies that emphasize the collective efforts of both district leadership, as well as site leadership that include meaningful professional development focused on teaching and learning, collaboration within and across the system at all levels, and a redefining of leadership roles (Anderson & Togneri, 2003; Burch & Spillane, 2004; Cawelti, 2001; Koschoreck, 2001; Levin & Fullan, 2008; Scheurich & Skrla, 2001). Reform coherence and a true understanding of the reform effort is an obstacle that occurs when attempting to implement change across a large organization. Different degrees of understanding exist among district leadership throughout the organization. If insufficient time and support are given for learning and understanding to take place, true change cannot occur and the reform efforts will fail. It is critical to take on the analytical lens to evaluate the effect that learning may have on the effectiveness of the implementation, directly influencing student impact and success (Scott & Bagaka, 2004; Stein & Coburn, 2008).

With the increase in turnover rates of superintendents across the country, gaining insight into how a new leader takes on this undertaking of implementing systemic change efforts is even more important now than ever. Along with all of the other responsibilities assigned to the position of superintendent, making changes to impact all students across the district is the focus. Understanding how a new superintendent develops, diffuses, and
enacts systemic change efforts during the initial phases will expose the factors that support or constrain the learning required and the development of communities of practice for effective implementation.

The issue of learning and understanding is paramount to effective district reform. Sociocultural learning theory provides a lens to explain the learning process as a joint construction of meaning occurring through social interactions and exchanges. The construct of communities of practice offers a way of addressing this by defining existing work groups as a vehicle in which this learning can take place for educators through their interactions. Because of the unique position that district and central office staff have within the organization, they have the opportunity to influence many different communities of practice across the district. In order to better facilitate this issue of learning, it can be seen how a superintendent, district leadership and central office administrators can be a strong supportive force in the implementation of effective district wide reform (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Daly & Finnigan, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). The role of district and central office administrators can be that of both bridges and buffers between district office and sites, dispersing knowledge and resources, as well as supporting the work within district parameters (Honig, 2009; Stein & Coburn, 2008). It is through these social exchanges that learning and understanding of the change initiative can take place at the site level where these changes are expected to be implemented, ensuring fidelity of implementation. The use of Twitter can be viewed as a means to promote access to information, as well as building connections (Cho, Ro,
Littenberg-Tobias, 2013). Twitter is a social media tool that therefore has the potential for supporting the change process.

To adequately address the achievement gap, further work must be done to better understand the factors that either contribute or constrain effective district wide change, the context of the learning that takes place within communities of practice and the role that central office staff can play during the reform process. Superintendents and district leadership would do well in being able to identify these existing communities of practice and make all efforts to enhance those relationships between sites and central office. In doing so, meaningful opportunities for learning and collaboration can occur that is more likely to impact practice and student achievement.

Figure 2: Theoretical Framework: A New Superintendent Takes the Helm
Chapter 3 Methods

As an increasing number of school sites and districts are identified as Program Improvement under the No Child Left Behind legislation (2001), the threat of sanctions looms for many. School districts and site leadership teams are vehemently searching out ways to address the achievement gap by launching system wide reform initiatives. There is a growing body of research indicating the need for a district wide approach to implementing change efforts where the responsibility does not lie solely on school sites and how this has led to positive outcomes for all students (Honig, 2008; Burch & Spillane, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). Districts that have found success in positively impacting student achievement have implemented changes that included providing meaningful professional development, collaboration within and across the system, and a redefining of leadership roles. School boards are in search of bringing on superintendents who will step up to this challenge and initiate change across their systems. As new leadership takes the helm, within the organizational landscape of a district, it is the central office staff that is in a unique position of having the potential to play an integral role in the change process. District leadership and central office administrators have access to many groups across the system, and can facilitate and support the learning required to impact instructional practices.

As school sites are identified as being Program Improvement, increased pressure and accountability exist to show an increase in levels of improvement for all students. School boards are in search of superintendents who will develop, diffuse, and enact a new change effort that will ensure their districts are doing all they can in meeting the needs of
all children. Exploring the interactions between the superintendent, district leaders, central office administrators, and site principals will shed light onto the factors that may support or constrain learning and the development of communities of practice during the initial phases of a new superintendent implementing a change effort. Examining these dynamics will help in understanding how to best facilitate this process. Increasing the knowledge base regarding the context of the relationships that either constrained or contributed to the implementation of district initiatives would help inform district leadership on possible challenges that may arise. By identifying these existing ties between and among district and site leaders, the context of maximum learning that helped support the change efforts can also be better understood. This information would help inform superintendents and school boards in their decision making process that would lead to addressing the achievement gap and align their actions with their espoused theories that all students will learn and succeed.

This research study sets the stage for understanding the development, diffusion, and enactment of a new district change effort when a new leader assumes his role as superintendent. It also examined the parts played by district office leaders and central office administrators supporting or constraining district reform efforts from the perspective of site principals in this era of accountability. This work sheds light on their potential influence on communities of practice across a district. It explored the dynamics surrounding the relationships between and among the superintendent, district leadership, central office staff and site principals and how these connections influence those
interactions, and therefore promote or constrain the learning required for implementation of any change effort.

**Theoretical Framework Overview**

As accountability measures increase due to the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), superintendents and school boards across the country search out initiatives to reform their districts in order to ensure all students succeed. With this mounting pressure, the turnover among superintendents have increased dramatically, with an average tenure of six to seven years regardless of district size or location, and 2.75 years in urban school district (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Natkin et al., 2002). Challenges include school board involvement with management, district poverty level, and fiscal management. Whether it be by their own volition or because they were not meeting the expectations of their school board members, superintendents who are able to remain in their positions for more than five years are more and more difficult to find. Therefore districts are not only scrambling to implement reform efforts, but they are often times doing so with a new leader at the helm. As these new superintendents assume their duties, establishing a new vision to support change efforts across the system is often the first step.

There is little argument that the role of superintendent is critical in leading a district on the right course. Effective superintendents are those that are able to “articulate a vision for children’s education, organize district support for that vision through personnel moves, share decision making, involve board members, use key instructional strategies, and evaluate and assess personnel and programs” according to a special report done by the Education Writers Association. The work done by an effective
superintendent has been seen to have a positive correlation with student achievement, as well as the amount of years of tenure they have within the same district (Waters & Marzano, 2006). As new superintendents assume their roles to lead a district in the direction that supports all students achieving, they begin by developing, diffusing, and enacting systemic change. Examining this initial phase of the change process is critical in identifying the factors that support or inhibit the required learning and development of communities of practice during with the interactions between a new superintendent, district leaders, central office administrators, and site principals.

Sociocultural learning theory is a useful lens in examining this change process across an organization. Learning occurs when there is a misalignment with the experience of its members and the defined competency (Wenger 1998, 2000; Stein & Coburn, 2008). It is this interplay where the group members work towards trying to realign themselves and build up its knowledge and skills to meet the newly defined competency. The gap between the current experience and knowledge and the expected competency becomes the catalyst to progress. This could take the shape of a new member joining an established community of practice where the member’s knowledge and competency does not meet the expected competencies as established by the group (Wenger, 2000). In this instance, the single member works towards improving themselves and learning occurs. By the same token, another example might occur when new information is brought to the group and as the group processes this, specific members may want to change the established definition of competency to expand it to include the new information. It is during this process of questioning and adaptation that
learning also can occur for its members and for the collective group. It is this tension between competence and experience where learning takes place (Wenger, 1998, 2000).

The construct of communities of practice offers an identifiable vehicle whereby learning can occur within the social context of work for change to take place. Sociocultural learning theory describes the learning process that occurs during these social interactions within communities of practice. It is through these formal and informal groups that exist within a district where information can be shared and exchanged regarding the common work around the intended change. Investigating how district leaders and central office administrators can be integrated into these communities of practice as both a resource and a support can offer vital information in their role as a catalyst for effective reform implementation.

By utilizing existing professional communities that exist throughout a district as a vehicle for learning, the transformation of the intended change can become a reality (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Stein & Coburn, 2008; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008). The superintendent, district leaders, and central office administrators are in the unique position to be a part of many communities of practice across the organization and can facilitate this change to occur systemically.

**Research Questions**

This research aims to better understand the process of change as a new superintendent develops, diffuses, and enacts systemic change effort across a district. This study explored the dynamics surrounding the interactions between the
superintendent, district leadership, central office administrators and site principals during these initial phases of implementation. It includes some inquiry into the process of developing and communicating the new district vision and values. The intent was to describe the interactions between the people holding these varying positions within the same district participating in the existing communities of practice and to examine how this relationship impacts the learning required. Establishing a deeper understanding of these interactions helped clarify the level of support that comes out of these connections, and therefore promote or inhibit the required learning for successful implementation of a new systemic change effort. The following are the research questions that drove this study:

- In what ways does a new superintendent develop, diffuse, and enact a new systemic change effort across a district?
  - How does a new superintendent communicate this new change strategy across the district?
  - How does a new superintendent promote a consistent message that supports the new mission and values espoused in his vision?
  - How is the district vision effectively implemented during the initial stages across the district from a leadership perspective?

**Methods**

I used a case study approach for my research driven primarily by qualitative methods. "Qualitative researchers seek answers to questions that stress how social
experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.11). This approach facilitated my goal of understanding the factors that support or constrain learning and the development of communities of practice among the superintendent, district office leadership, central office administrators, and site principals. I conducted face to face semi structured interviews in a case study to explore these relationships. I applied this inductive approach and drew upon the theoretical framework of sociocultural learning theory in order to capture emerging themes that gave insight into the factors that support or constrain these interactions to lead to learning and successful systemic implementation.

Qualitative research is an approach to understanding a social phenomenon in the context of its existence. Esterberg (2002) describes the ability to interpret and move back and forth between theory and evidence as central to conducting qualitative research. This research methodology explores the social context in an effort to gain understanding around a topic. Qualitative research employs inductive reasoning which begins with an examination of the world around you and your own development of a theory that explains what you are observing instead of beginning with a theory that you apply and test. This approach is also referred to as a grounded approach. Merriam (2009) describes qualitative research to be the “search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive” (p. 39).

My research interest lies in understanding district reform in the context of new leadership. I wanted to examine how a new superintendent develops, diffuses, and enacts
a systemic change effort with a district wide vision outlining key district values. Gaining insight into the dynamics surrounding the interactions between site principals and central office and district administrators during these initial phases of change when a new superintendent assumes his role and implements a new district vision provided valuable information about leadership in the context of change within an organization. It is the hope that this study will inform future school boards, superintendents, and district leaders of factors that support or constrain district reform efforts.

**District Context and Setting**

This research study took place in Sunnyville Unified School District (SUSD). This district serves approximately 22,000 students in grades preschool through grade 12. It consists of a total of 30 schools which include fifteen elementary schools, five middle schools, three comprehensive high schools, two alternative high schools, two schools for students with special needs, one k-8 school, one home-school/independent-study school, and one adult school. SUSD is made up of a diverse population of students that include approximately 3,000 in the special education program and more than 6,000 who are English Learners. The student demographics of SUSD include 58% qualifying for free lunch, 24% English Learners, 10% homeless, 60% Hispanic, 28% White, 4% African American, 3% Asian, 3% two or more races, 1% Filipino, and 1% Pacific Islander. According to the California Department of Education based upon the 2011-2012 Accountability Progress Reporting, Sunnyville Unified School District is identified as being in its third year in need of Program Improvement. Of those schools receiving Title I federal funding, ten elementary schools and three middle schools are identified as being
in need of Program Improvement. SUSD does not have any of its high schools as being in need of Program Improvement.

Sunnyville Unified School District extends 39 square miles across most of the city of Sunnyville, but also includes a large portion of its eastern neighboring city and some smaller unincorporated areas of two other neighboring cities. Enrollment has declined over the last couple of years from about 26,000 students in 2000 to approximately 22,000 in 2012. SUSD employs more than 2,000 people. This includes approximately 1,100 teachers, 1,000 support employees, and 75 administrators. Administrators include site principals, assistant principals, coordinators, and directors. District leadership team that makes up the cabinet include the superintendent, deputy superintendent, and two assistant superintendents.

The new superintendent of Sunnyville Unified School District was hired in July 2012. He was previously the Assistant Superintendent of Business Services in a neighboring unified school district for one year where he was also the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for the previous five years. He has an educational doctoral degree in organizational leadership and has done research in the area of social network theory. He has written and published several articles about the use of technology in education in preparing students with 21st century skills and the importance of trust in organizational relations. His predecessor was the superintendent in SUSD for six years. She resigned from her position to go into retirement last year, leaving her position open for new leadership.
My research is part of a larger multiyear study where social network mapping is being conducted at various intervals over two years. The new superintendent welcomed this work as he has an interest in bringing awareness to the district about connectedness, trust, and the interdependent nature of the educational system. Not only does he want to identify existing ties throughout the organization, but he also wants to provide professional development in this area to improve and expand these connections. District leadership, as well as central office administrators and site principals participate in taking online surveys where data is gathered regarding frequency of contacts between sites and district administrators, as well as data to indicate the nature of the contacts. My goal was to gather qualitative data in order to gain a deeper understanding of these connections and to gain some insight into factors that might promote or constrain learning and the development of communities of practice. LeCompte (1993) explains how “qualitative research seeks to construct descriptions of a total phenomenon”. My study consisting of interview adds to the broader work being done in the district in an effort to better understand the dynamics surrounding the interactions between site principals and district administrators in order to support implementation of district wide reform efforts.

**Research Design**

**Case study.** Merriam (2009) describes a case study to be an in depth description and analysis of a bounded system (p.40). My methodological approach was to conduct a qualitative case study. This decision stemmed from the fact this design is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation, rather than hypothesis testing; interpretation in context (Merriam, 2009, p. 42). Due to
the complexity involved in understanding connections between and among people and how this impacts learning and implementation of any change being introduced into a large organization, a case study was most appropriate. I wanted to gain insight into the conditions that promote or inhibit meaningful interactions which influence learning and collaboration with site principals, district leaders, and central office administrators. A case study design fit my research questions by examining these interactions within a particular district.

Social constructivism and interpretive approaches are about understanding and interpreting, not about predicting. According to Esterberg (2002), the purpose of this approach is to understand how given realities are produced. The focus is on understanding how people construct and interpret social reality. It is more about diagnosing and understanding why things are the way they are and focus on social interaction. My own interests lie in understanding the social dynamics among site principals and district leadership and how this may affect the learning required for successful implementation of district wide reform efforts. Understanding these specific interactions as a new superintendent develops, diffuses, and enacts a new systemic change effort and shifts the focus across the organization is of particular interest in identifying best practices in district reform.

**Participants.** For this study a sampling of 16 SUSD employees were invited to take part in the study. They included the superintendent, the deputy superintendent, central office administrators, and site principals within the district. They consisted of 11 principals from elementary, middle, and high school with a varying degree of experience.
Specific invitations for principals to participate in the study was based upon if they worked at a school identified to be in need of Program Improvement. A review of documents included information gathered from a larger research study utilizing social network mapping. The overall structure of the social network and the density of connections can support overall organizational goals (Daly & Finnigan, 2009). Factors that were considered were principals who had high frequency of contacts and who were central actors, as well as those who were outliers, or who had less frequency of contact. Network position, as well as gender, years of experience, years of experience in the district, school level, and ethnicity were also factors taken into account.

**Recruitment.** Being a part of a larger study, I was able to begin to build rapport with my target participants by attending district meetings where initial introductions were made, data was reviewed, and/or professional development was being provided. At the onset, I explained my piece of the study and the approach I was taking by interviewing participants with the intention to go deeper in understanding the factors that support or constrain the learning and development of communities of practice during the implementation of the new change effort. At subsequent meetings, people became more familiar with who I was so that when I did approach the possible participants, they felt more comfortable and agreed to openly talk to me. This was the groundwork in preparation for fruitful interviews that provided valuable insights.

Principals were recruited based on their meeting research criteria. I reached out to them via email to invite them to be part of this voluntary study. In order to gain a broad understanding, I was intentionally looking at interviewing principals from all levels
including high school, middle school, and elementary to gain a more comprehensive perspective.

In order to facilitate the process I offered to come to their office in order to conduct my interviews or to the place of their choice. I know how impacted principals and district leadership members are and in order to recruit them to participate in my study, I made all efforts to adapt to their schedule.

Data Collection

**Document review.** The superintendent solicited the support of UCSD and CSUSM and engaged in a partnership to apply social network theory in the development of a social network map of the district. His own initial decisions to initiate this work was influenced by his own research. Reviewing the key articles, studies, and significant works that contributed to the background knowledge the superintendent carries was a critical factor that was examined. This helped to support the depth of understanding to the development of the district vision by clarifying the perspective he brought into the district.

My research is part of a larger multiyear study where social network mapping is being conducted at various intervals over two years. District leadership including central office administrators and site principals participate in taking on line surveys where data is gathered regarding frequency of contacts between sites and district administrators, as well as data to indicate the nature of the contacts. I reviewed this data to better define existing connections and established communities of practice. This provided me with more
information and background of the participants with whom I conducted semi structured interviews.

Part of my study included a review of documents. I also collected and analyzed meeting agendas and minutes of district leadership meetings, school plans, district goals and strategic plans and existing information on district and site websites. School board agendas and minutes were also reviewed, looking for common themes both inductively and using the lens of sociocultural learning theory as the theoretical framework. These are instances when the communication of the new district vision was disseminated. I was looking for an alignment of vision and values with actions as presented by the superintendent.

The new superintendent of Sunnyville Unified is an avid user of technology and specifically of Twitter. This social media tool provides an archived record of all public communication the superintendent has posted on Twitter. Twitter posts by the superintendent during his first year in the position were coded and analyzed using Simply Measured, a social media analytics tool. In addition, further action stemming from the original Tweets were examined, as all participants interviewed stated they were Twitter followers of the superintendent.

**Interviews.** In order to understand the dynamics surrounding the interactions between central office leadership and site leadership, I conducted individualized face to face semi structured interviews with the superintendent, deputy superintendent, central office administrators, and site principals within the district. By conducting individual face to face in depth interviews, it “fostered learning about individual experiences and

Engaging with site principals within a district allowed for me to ask open ended questions to provide insight into their own perceptions and perspectives on the interactions that occur between the respective parties. Understanding the context of these conversations and the possible reservations that may exist in responding truthfully about support provided to school sites by central office leadership, semi-structured interviews with open ended questions was a fitting means for data collection. Interviews are “well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers” (Barriball & While, 1994, p. 330).

Other researchers in the field inquiring about the social dynamic between and among central office leadership and teachers have employed comparative case study designs using semi structured interviews as their primary source of data gathering (Gallucci, 2003; Honig, 2009; Stein & Coburn, 2008). In doing so, they were able to highlight the importance of the supportive interactions that took place during the implementation of district wide initiatives and the required learning that was either facilitated or hindered through these interactions.

The interviews for this study took place in an office setting with minimal distractions. I offered the participants a choice of location within the district that was most convenient for them. Participants opted to meet in their own offices and it was a familiar setting with access to any resources they wanted to use for reference. For the site principals, it was more comfortable for them to be interviewed at their own school.
sites and was conducive to open and honest exchanges. The intent was for the setting to be in their comfort zone, and I made all efforts to quickly build rapport and made the exchange as natural as possible. Once I met with them, I clearly explained the study and purpose of the interview again to them. I reiterated the voluntary nature of their role and assured them of the confidentiality surrounding any information shared. I explained the format of the semi structured interview to include some guiding questions, but the focus was for us to have a conversation to allow for me to learn more about the dynamics surrounding the interactions within and across their district.

Because the format was semi structured, this allowed for further probing in order to clarify and explore deeper and more complete answers. These questions were meant to be open ended and spurred thoughtful responses. By using the semi structured interview approach, other topics were explored as the conversation shifted in different directions. I did audio record the interviews and transcribed the tape recorded interviews into text. I also took notes of body language, as well to document more subtle forms of communication.

Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. After each interview, I wrote up memos on my observations and the responses were coded for data analysis. Once all interviews were completed and coded, categories and themes emerged.

**Data Analysis.** Once collected, all audio recordings of the interviews of all participants were transcribed into text. At the beginning, I used open coding to begin to identify some initial repeated themes or categories, using the lens of sociocultural learning theory as the theoretical framework, as well as being open to others that
surfaced. This text was analyzed and broken into text segments in order to code for patterns, themes, and categories. The coding process evolves and is refined over time (Esterberg, 2002). After several cycles of coding, consistent categories and themes emerged.

I then conduct focused coding where I was coding for specific repeated items I was looking for in the text. As consistent themes or categories continued to emerge, I tracked these separately and noted the frequency. Using this information, I wrote memos to capture my thought process and further help me to identify stronger emerging themes and patterns. I began to categorize quotes by those reoccurring themes. Once saturation occurred where there were no new themes emerging from the data, I was able to move forward with interpreting the themes and possible connections.

The documents reviewed were also analyzed and coded for common themes and patterns. Data gathered from both the documents reviewed and the coded interviews were further analyzed in search of intersecting points that indicated and supported the common threads. These common points are what provided insight into steps taken in the effective implementation of reform efforts in a district with new leadership.

Of the documents being reviewed, the Twitter posts for the first year of the new superintendent’s tenure were analyzed. These posts were written by the superintendent and were made public by using this social media micro blogging tool. Twitter has been identified as a tool to help disseminate ideas and provides an archived account of all posts. Because of this, using Twitter posts as data is an increasingly popular approach in research (Highfield, Kirchhoff, Nicolai, 2010; Huberman, Romero, Wu, 2008). In this
study, all the participants stated they were following the superintendent on Twitter. I further examined common hashtags used in the postings by participants to target the SUSD community. This allowed for me to narrow the Twitter posts to those specifically aimed at SUSD. I was also able to view posts that had further action done by people, tracking pertinent information as perceived by the Twitter followers of the superintendent. This offered another channel of data to identify how the new district vision, mission, and values are communicated to the public. These posts were also coded and grouped by themes. A social media analytics tool from Simply Measured was used to examine this data.

By analyzing all data gathered, this helped to identify both the communication and implementation of the new district vision and how it was received. Interviews with the superintendent, deputy superintendent, and central office administrators helped determine the role the district leadership took in this initial roll out process. By interviewing the principals, the interpretation and reception of this change initiative was heard. This study offers a better understanding of the factors that supported or constrained the implementation of this new vision across a district from a leadership perspective. In reviewing all existing data gathered and documents, including the coded interviews and Twitter posts, the consistency of message and coherence of that vision with daily practice and action was an important aspect of analysis, contributing to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of this process.

Ethical Considerations
In the context of this research study and while conducting interviews, there are several ethical issues to guard against. It is possible interview participants may have experienced some level of distress as they reflected upon their job performance or the accountability pressures placed upon schools identified to be in need of Program Improvement. While sharing their feelings and thoughts about the support or lack of, participants may have felt uncomfortable and anxious. They may have had reservations about describing interactions with central office administrators or district leadership that could be perceived as negative. They may have had reservations of sharing their disagreement with the new vision and feel concerned about the level of implementation they have been able to do. This may have caused site principals to be fearful of possible retaliation from their work superiors who have influence over the evaluation of principals. To address this, I took steps to ensure all participants of their anonymity in participating and explained how all identifiable information was protected.

Another ethical consideration I considered is the confidentiality of all information shared. Knowing that the completed study will be open for the public, I protected the anonymity of all participants by using fictitious names and codes for identification. In this study, I made all efforts to mask any possible information that would disclose the identity the district or of any of my participants.

**Conclusion**

With the onset of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), we have been able to measure and disaggregate data that paints a picture of disparity and inequity where it is evident that students that are minorities or from low income families are not showing the
expected academic progress as White students. The current system of public education is failing to adequately prepare students to compete in and contribute to our society. This is a call to action for educational leaders to address this social injustice for the good of the collective future and our world. It is a call to confront truths, to challenge our current practice, and to influence change.

As more and more turnover occurs with superintendents across the country, new leaders are assuming taking on the role of superintendents and with that, they come with new ideas, plans, and visions for the future. Districts then enter into a phase of transition as new initiatives and in many instances, a new way of operating are set into motion. Understanding how this change process occurs and received across the organization is necessary in order to efficiently implement reform efforts.

The issue of learning and understanding by the members of the district leadership team which includes the superintendent, district cabinet, central office administrators, and site principals, is paramount to effective district reform. The construct of communities of practice offers a way of addressing this by defining existing work groups as a vehicle in which learning can take place for educators through their interactions. Because of the unique position that central office staff have within the organization, as well as district leaders, they have the opportunity to influence many different communities of practice across the district. In order to better facilitate this issue of learning, it can be seen how the role of the district and central office can be a strong supportive force in the implementation of effective district wide reform (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Daly & Finnigan, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). The role of these administrators can be
that of both bridges and buffers between district office and sites, dispersing knowledge and resources, as well as supporting the work within district parameters (Honig, 2009; Stein & Coburn, 2008). It is through these social exchanges that learning and understanding of the change initiative can take place at the site level where these changes are expected to be implemented, ensuring fidelity of implementation.

To adequately address the achievement gap, further work must be done to better understand the factors that either contribute or constrain effective district wide change, the context of the learning that takes place within communities of practice and the role that district and central office administrators can play during the reform process. Gaining a better understanding of the dynamics surrounding the interactions between district and central office leadership and site principals is critical in ensuring effective support to implement change. District leadership would do well in being able to identify these existing communities of practice and make all efforts to enhance those relationships between sites and central office to support the change process and new superintendents who have taken on these positions in this era of increased accountability. In doing so, meaningful opportunities for learning and collaboration can occur that is more likely to impact practice and student achievement.
Chapter 4 Findings

“People understand that it’s kind of the dawning of a new day and we’re heading in a different direction now” Principal 10.

Findings

Understanding how a new superintendent takes the helm of a large urban district will be examined through the voices of district leadership members, along with the steps taken to effectively develop, diffuse, and enact a change effort across the organization. This qualitative case study was conducted in large urban school district, Sunnyville Unified School District and focuses on the first year the new superintendent assumed his position. It consisted of an analysis of sixteen semi structured interviews, as well as document reviews including the Twitter feed of the superintendent during this first year. All qualitative data gathered through the interviews, as well as the document reviews, will be shared. The findings indicate a specific approach taken in the development, diffusion and enactment of the change effort that set the stage for the learning required for the change to begin to impact practice across the organization. This approach focuses on improving communication, connectedness, and consistency. In addition, a key finding in this study was the impact of the use of social media and Twitter and how it was found to be a key contributing factor during this process. In this chapter, findings will be presented and organized by the guiding research question and the emerging themes. Common prevalent themes will be highlighted, as well as emerging barriers. A section specifically addressing the findings around the use of Twitter is included and a final
summary will end the chapter. To better understand the context of the study, a brief description of the participants is provided.

**Participants**

Semi structured interviews were conducted with various members of the district leadership team to gather a broad interpretation of the experiences in a district under new leadership during his first year in the position. A total of sixteen interviews were done with representation from all levels of site principals to include elementary, middle and high school. Central office staff, the deputy superintendent, as well as the superintendent were also interviewed.

**Table 1: Breakdown of Interview Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Principals</th>
<th>Central Office Staff</th>
<th>Deputy Superintendent</th>
<th>Superintendent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

Recorded interviews were first transcribed and were all examined with a first cycle of coding. Descriptive coding was done to summarize thoughts, as well as in vivo coding where actual quoted words were highlighted. Once all transcriptions and documents went through the first cycle of coding, a second round of coding was completed. During this second round, information was reorganized and reanalyzed. Common themes, patterns, and categories emerged.
Research Question

• In what ways does a new superintendent develop, diffuse, and enact a new systemic change effort across a district?

*I think the biggest change with our new superintendent and the focus on relationships and moving the district forward has really been the mission, vision, and values that was developed. We were a district without those.*

District Office 1.

Development and Diffusion of Change Effort

Focus on Stakeholder Buy In

From the onset of taking the position of superintendent, this new leader quickly made himself open to feedback on what was needed in the district. He described a process he called “on-boarding” which he attributed to a book called *The First Ninety Days* by Michael Watkins.

It's funny, just in the past couple of weeks, two new superintendent asked me, "What did you do on your transition? What do you recommend?" and to both of them, I said, “Read that book, use that process, map out a strategy because if you don't have a strategy your time will be occupied by other things that may or may not really have the biggest impact in those early stages and you have to set up … I believe you have to set a positive tone early. If you don't, it's going to make things more difficult forever. (Sup)

The “on boarding” process emphasized the importance of meeting with key stakeholders, before you actually start work. He explains how he organized individual meetings with each school board member, the cabinet board, the union presidents, and
other community and school leaders. In those meetings, he asked three questions which he describes,

What's going well in Sunnyville? What are some opportunities to improve and what else do I need to know moving into this new job? Those meetings gave me a lot more information than even what I knew prior. There were similar themes. Each individual might have particular interests but there were themes that emerged through those meetings, so that was a very useful process. (Sup)

During this initial phase, he received information that he used as a guide in his initial acts as superintendent. One of those actions, included implementing a district wide change effort to develop, diffuse, and enact the district’s mission, vision, and values. “Those were things that I focused on in the early going is how do we improve our communication systems, how do we build relationships, and because that had been something that was an articulated need in the on-boarding process and the collective perspective of all of those leaders was right on track. It was great” (Sup).

**Active Inclusivity of All Feedback**

He describes having a road map ready in the interview of things he wanted to address in the district, but with feedback, he refined this plan, “...to me there were some easy wins, improve communication, focus on connectedness and relationships, and those are natural opportunities for me” (Sup). To realize this, he set forth in increasing his own connectedness across the district. He knew he wanted to gain a deep understanding of the organization he was now leading.

…but I had an objective that by January I was going to get to every school and every classroom and so that just made sense for everyone to meet your new leader. As a superintendent, you want to go see where are your
schools? Who are your teachers? What programs are you offering? What's the student experience like? (Sup).

It was evident by his actions, the new superintendent was acting upon his desire to meet and connect with members of the organization. This increase in visibility and building ties across the district was directly aligned with the mission, vision, and values that was going to be developed.

Further identifying the need and after receiving feedback, the new superintendent engaged in a process to develop the district mission, vision, and values. The approach he took in doing this is critical to identify in an effort to better understand the factors that have contributed to a positive reception of this initiative. “Whatever the superintendent is doing, he is doing it right” (Principal 7). Each participant interviewed, spoke about the inclusive nature of the process and how they believed this was a key factor in its overall acceptance.

Everything was very collaborative. Let me hear what you think. Let’s get all stakeholders involved. We’re not going to move too fast. (Principal 10)

One of the first things that he did, the superintendent did when he came in is, he brought everyone in the world who wanted to be a part of it together to develop a vision, mission and values for the district. You do see the people underneath him referencing that, ‘This is where we're going and this is what we should be focusing on. This is how we treat each other. (Principal 1)

It was very public which helped for the transparency and the trust. (Principal 9)

They [the mission, vision, values] are not his because he didn’t develop them. We developed them. (Principal 7)

There were several meetings that were held during this process, and the new superintendent included all stakeholders. He included both certificated and classified
staff, parents and community members, teachers and administrators, site staff and district office staff. He held small group meetings, as well as public forums. He intentionally wanted to include all that were willing to be a part of the development of these critical guides. He described the process as an, “Open, inclusive process designed by interested volunteers from the leadership team and multiple stages of feedback and trying to clarify the things that are most important and so it's been a good process” (Sup). As he reflects upon it, he recognizes the investment that occurs by all those who participated in the process and the deep understanding and commitment that can be an outcome of that engagement.

I think we have a lot more work to do in terms of reinforcing it, but the initial, at last that's been really well received. I think part of the reason it's been well received is that the community has been engaged in the process, so this isn't his vision as the new superintendent. This is our vision collectively that we together are going to work on achieving. Even here we’ve got people saying, “That word there, I remember when we talked about it at this stage of the process.” I think that just feels like a great sense of ownership, so I think that has been instrumental in the success to-date. (Sup)

After approximately six months of compiling all the feedback from all the different stakeholders, the district was able to articulate their findings in a consolidated mission, vision, and values.

The district vision developed collaboratively is as follows: Our vision in the SUSD is to be the model of educational excellence and innovation. The district mission developed collaboratively is as follows: The purpose of the SUSD is to inspire each and
every student to persevere as a critical thinking individual who collaborates to solve real world problems. The district values developed collaboratively are as follows:

- **Respect** – Treat people with dignity.
- **Trust** – Having confidence that every decision focuses on the best interests of students.
- **Collaboration** – Working in a collective partnership with clear two-way dialogue that builds relationships among home, school and the community.

The focus on communication is demonstrated through the decisions and actions surrounding the development and the diffusion of the new district mission, vision, and values. Once these were developed, the superintendent took specific action to communicate this to the organization.

What is amazing to me is you get out in the field and there are teachers that don’t know the goals. They don’t know the new vision statement. One of my questions is, “How long does it take to get from here all the way down into the depth of here? (District Administrator 2)

**Superintendent Consistently Revisiting Initiative**

In understanding the actions taken by a new superintendent, initiating change across the organization, the diffusion of information around this initiative is another important aspect to consider. Once the mission, vision, and values were developed, communicating this new change across the district was the next step. In many of the interviews, one of the key aspects to this communication was the consistent revisiting of the message in many settings. The new superintendent intentionally revisited them in all contexts.
They have to just be at the forefront of just about every meeting, every interaction. It has to be a living reference in order to really guide our work. Now that we're at these planning stages, it's really exciting because it's all kind of lined up; you know, why are we here and what are we trying to do, how we behave, the goals are right in line with those … the roles and responsibilities. We're not quite there yet, but we at least have a road map including who's responsible for innovation. (Sup)

All the participants described how the mission, vision, and values were frequently referenced by the new superintendent in all of his presentations to the leadership team.

“The mission, vision, and values, those are all there, that’s how he starts everything. Everything he starts by reviewing the process. Any speech he makes, anytime he is presenting to us, he always ties it back in. It’s amazing how he always ties it back in to those three things” (Principal 7). In addition, in reviewing district documents to include school plans, website communications, employee roles and responsibilities, and staff expectations, the district mission, vision, and values can be seen. Specifically, in regards to the school plans, this participant describes some of the changes, “We loosened it (school plans) this year and not in a way that's loosy goosy, but we modified it to match our mission, vision and values, our framework, of really focusing on building relationships, the collaboration part” (District Administrator 3). There is a consistency across the documents reviewed to show examples of these new district changes.

Superintendent Maintains Direct Visibility to Organization

Once we had it [the mission, vision, values], then there's the question of how do you make sure everybody knows it … we did things like on a staff buy back day in January, I addressed every employee; all 2,000. We had groups of 250 cycled through and I did about an hour long talk on the vision, mission and values with lots of other communication. (Sup).
In addition to the leadership group, the new superintendent directly communicated with all district employees at a district wide professional development day in January. Both certificated and classified staff were included in this presentation. Because of the size of the district, the day was held at one of the high schools, and there were rotations of approximately 600 people at a time in the gymnasium to hear his presentation. It was an opportunity to not only directly hear from the new leader and learn more about him, but a time to share the work that had occurred and the direction they were headed as a district. Many of the participants interviewed in this study referred to this event as being a significantly impactful experience for all that were present.

I think it’s been pretty good especially with like the buy-back day that we did in January. I think that was a huge thing of just showing what our message is as far as a district and where we’re trying to go with it and build in our new mission and values statement has just been really good just to show what we’re trying to do and where our vision is and what we’re trying to do as a district. (Principal 6)

Not only was this event an opportunity to communicate the new mission, vision, and values of the district, but the event became more than that. It was described as a time where the district was able to see and hear the new superintendent and gain a deeper understanding of their leader.

He presented to, at different times, all classified members and all certificated members. The session I was with, with about 600 employees, he got a standing ovation. For now, this is his introduction to everyone, “This is my end. This is what I’m about. This is what I believe. This is where we're going. This is what we can do for kids.” I've never seen such a thing in my life. (Principal 1)

**Emerging Barriers to Initiative Surfaced**
While this event was well received by those that attended and were able to hear the message directly from the new superintendent, there are still challenges. Several of the participants spoke about the barriers still to overcome and the work needed to be rebuild relationships that were damaged in the past. “We’d lost for the last six years a lot of trust in our district. We had difficult leadership issues and there was a lot of distress and I think there's one word to describe it and that it poor communication which caused a lot of distress. I think that's one of our biggest issues to overcome” (District Administrator 4).

In increasing consistent communication around the new district mission, vision, and values, from the participant feedback all agreed on that this message was revisited, but communicating this to all members of the organization is challenging due to the number of employees across the district. All participants are part of the district leadership group, but several commented on the efforts needed to diffuse this message to site employees and teachers not included on the leadership team.

It's hard. We're not there. (Laughs) We're not even close. (Laughter) We're not even close… The message just started this year, really in say January. I don't feel that I'm worried about my job because these test scores are going to come out right now and that that's going to be my demise right there. I don't feel that way, but then I hear him speak often when my teachers don't yet, and then they have key times, but they don't hear that message. They hear it from me, but it's like really. I don't trust you, kind of thing. That was one of the reasons why I wanted to invite him to [come speak to the staff]. (Principal 2)

While the January district wide presentation was viewed as a success in both diffusing the new mission, vision, and values, it was only one opportunity for the entire district to listen to the new superintendent directly. From a leadership perspective, the message was
consistently communicated and revisited, but these opportunities did not exist for teachers and others. The participants did explain their understanding to be that the continued communication of the new change efforts of the mission, vision, and values were to be carried forth by site leaders to school staffs, the trust factor was still a barrier.

In general however, it’s discussed actually at principal meetings and a lot of time was spent on this at different principal meetings. How it trickles down to the staff that’s supposed to go out. The principal is supposed to go out and kind of live the mission and model it. (Principal 9).

One participant described the challenge to come from miscommunication shared among teachers. Within informal communities of practice, teachers share information that is inaccurate. The participant explained it was important to address these “rumors” in order to ensure correct information was being disseminated.

I think there’s still some things that are unclear because some teachers are hearing one thing and they’re … because it’s just that grapevine type effect that you hear things through the grapevine and people are questioning things. I always say if you don’t hear it from me, you don’t hear it from the top, then don’t worry about it. (Principal 6)

He has a great relationship, but what the teachers hear and what he says a lot is changed … yeah, because it is going through filters. I’m excited he's going to speak again. We have another buy-back in August and he's going to speak again, and I think it's important for them to hear him and not us telling them what he's saying because hopefully those barriers of mistrust that have been built, not by him but by the past, will come down. (District Administrator 3)

The need for additional opportunities for all people across the district to listen to the new superintendent directly was evident. At the beginning of the following year, he had planned on presenting again to all employees across the district, giving everyone another opportunity to hear his message.
Superintendent Uses Social Media to Diffuse Message across District

Another means to communicate and diffuse an initiative is via social media. In this study, the superintendent used social media as a key tool in disseminating and reinforcing his message across the district. He actively uses social media as a means to communicate and connect.

I've used social media in every role that I've had and I don't know how you would lead without it in the current climate. I found it to be a strategy that promotes transparency and openness and kind of immediacy. It's been absolutely instrumental in emergencies and disaster situations, …and it also builds a foundation for everyday interactions. To me, it's just foundational to leadership in the current context. (Sup)

This intentional use of social media by the new superintendent is a recurring point that is mentioned throughout this study by each participant. It is referred to in the aspect of communication, connectedness, diffusion, and the reinforcement of behaviors aligned with the mission, vision, and values. It is of particular importance to recognize this approach as every participant interviewed in this study, spoke of his use of Twitter as a critical means of supporting his message around the district’s mission, vision, and values, as well as promoting examples of the enactment of these items. “He blogs and he twitters and he is talking about it [the mission, vision, and values] at every meeting” (District Administrator 4). His use of Twitter is described a way to encourage and build connections across the district.

We’re not little islands anymore. Relationships, it is what it is, but opening that social media for everyone so you get to see, “Oh, look at School X. They did this. That’s a great idea,” and celebrate, that’s great. That’s what makes us a different school district from what we were last year. This change, I’m telling you, that’s happened, it’s a great … What you see now
in Sunnyville, you’re looking at different districts, the one before and this one here. Very, very, very different. (Principal 8)

Because of the prevalent use of Twitter and social media by the new superintendent that was frequently mentioned by all sixteen participants in this study, a separate section in this chapter will specifically examine its application and influence.

**Superintendent’s Actions Aligned to Espoused Mission, Vision, and Values**

To promote a consistent message, a close examination of the level of alignment of actions to the espoused mission and values must take place. When observable actions occur that are aligned with the new mission and values stated in the vision, the message conveyed is perceived to be consistent. As the participants in this study describe the new superintendent, it is his actions that surface as key indicators of the intentional steps he takes to promote his change initiative. The values collaboratively developed are respect, trust, and collaboration. The vision states that they district will be the “model of educational excellence and innovation” and the mission is to “inspire every student to persevere as critical-thinking individuals who collaborate to solve real-world problems.” The participants were able to directly identify how the actions of the new superintendent aligned with the new espoused change initiative. “He talks about collaboration. He models collaboration. He talks about respect and he models respect. He models the values.” (Principal 7)

**Superintendent Actions Aligned with Value of Respect**

The district wide buy-back day which was a training offered to every employee in the district was conducted in January. At this training, the new superintendent decided to
create an event where staff from across the district could share their own expertise and facilitate learning workshops. Instead of bringing experts from outside of the district or from private vendors, he elected to draw upon and highlight the talent found within the district. This decision was described by the participants as a celebration of the people and of the organization. “He valued the teachers within the district and had them present (at the district buy back day). It wasn’t people from the outside. That’s pretty powerful” (Principal 7). By creating this opportunity to showcase the district’s own, the participants describe this act to be an example of the respect he has for individuals, as well as fostering this value for the district’s own people.

The consistency of his actions is directly aligned with the espoused value of respect. This inclusivity was demonstrated not only at the district buy-back day, but was described to occur on a regular basis. The new superintendent actively models his respect for others through his actions.

It's amazing and it's been through communication, it's been through modeling. He invites you to meetings, even to meetings that have primarily been secretive before, like executive things. He invites other people to those meetings, he asks for your input, he'll email you directly… He asks for a lot of opinions and then asks for a lot of feedback. (District Administrator 3).

This participant describes her experience of being included in conversations where she felt her opinion was valued, exemplifying his respect.

Another participant explained how she has observed him interact with people from across the district and how all of those exchanges were done in a way that modeled respect.
It was creating an environment where we could explore what we could do. It was the enthusiasm in bringing a refreshing new viewpoint, appreciating people. He loves people and you can tell when he's talking to them. He can talk to anybody from the custodian to another superintendent. He doesn't talk down to people. He talks at their level. (District Administrator 4).

By visiting each school site and each classroom, several of the participants described these to be significant steps in demonstrating respect for site staff across the district. Taking the time to visit and meet all staff and students was a way to build connections and begin to establish throughout the organization. “He has visited twice, twice this year. Not just to come and sit in my office. The first visit he went in every single classroom. We introduced him to every student on our campus….He listens. He asks questions, “What do you need?” (Principal 7).

The time and effort made to meet and offer support to this principal was impactful and promoted her feeling of connectedness to the mission, vision, and values of the district. Another participant describes,

Your superintendent comes into your classroom, visits your students, saying hello to you, things like those, those are things that one may think that we have that in our district, that sets the tone. That sets the tone of what the gentleman is about….respect. (Principal 8)

**Superintendent Actions Aligned with Value of Trust**

Trust was identified by all participants as an area of challenge for the district based upon the past experiences. There was an element of fear and reprisals that was prevalent with the prior administration as described by the leaders that were interviewed in this study. With the new superintendent, the values that were adopted suggested a change in the manner people interacted with each other, which in turn would begin to
mend the trust that had been damaged. One example was shared where there was an issue with a communication that someone brought up to the superintendent. “He addressed (the misalignment) that we have the same message but we’re delivering it differently and we'll work on that for you. People felt free enough to say something about it without retribution. He saw a consistent theme of concern and he addressed it to everybody immediately, which was nice. The voices were heard. I think that we’re at the point in time where we’re looking for the consistency and that helped” (Principal 1).

When the district values were developed, trust refers to having the confidence that all decisions are based on what is in the best interest of students. Participants described the consistency of his actions with this. “Every time he speaks, you know that at the center of the presentation, at the center of the speech, you have the student. He puts the student right in the center. “This is what we’re here for.” He doesn’t put data, he doesn’t put teachers, he doesn’t put administration; he puts the student at the center of the conversation” (Principal 8).

In the end, the participants felt like his actions were aligned with the mission, vision, and values. They felt he was communicating this verbally, via social media, as well as through his decisions and actions. “(People will follow him because) Because they trust him. They like his message. He's in the time period now where people are looking for the consistency” (Principal 1).

Superintendent Actions Aligned with Value of Collaboration
The new superintendent models the value of collaboration by actively taking part in conversations with principals. He values the exchange of ideas as part of the process to improve and learn. One participant made this observation about his role in the principal meetings.

He attends our meetings. They focus on professional development, professional growth, and leadership. He is at all of those. He presents on leadership. He gives his part and then what he did is he sat there and received information. He didn’t get up and go back to the district. He sat and participated in the activities with us. He listened to us and shared his insight. It was very valuable. (Principal 7).

Not only was his presentation of information viewed as valuable, but his participation with the learning process that occurred afterwards was seen to be equally valuable. The principal participant who shared this example not only learned from his contributions to the conversations, but also appreciated his willingness to work and learn alongside them. This choice demonstrated the importance the superintendent was placing on collaboration to the point of his own engagement with the group.

Through his actions, another participant believes to define the attributes of the new superintendent. It is these attributes that are aligned with the district values as shown through his actions. “He is all about collaboration and relationships and focusing on what’s right for students” (District Administrator 1). This participant adds that he encouraged collaboration outside of the district by making connections beyond the boundaries of their district lines, building partnerships all over the state and outside of the state to work with them. By doing this, the new superintendent made some changes in how district business was conducted.
He’s a collaborative leader, the way he is structuring the District Office and organizing. People are more collaborative. They know that the values are important, so they’re more respectful and then yeah, and the more collaborative. That part was him being collaborative and having respect and then you will build the trust. (Principal 4).

**Superintendent Demonstrates Consistency in Practice**

The new superintendent has been described by each of the participants to consistently be aligned in his actions with the mission, vision, and values. His presentations, postings, and decisions demonstrate his commitment to the adopted change initiative. “There's been a lot of change since our new superintendent came focused on innovation. His two keywords are innovation and excellence.” (Principal 1) The terms excellence and innovation are highlighted in the new district vision. These are terms he refers to frequently and consistently models in his presentations. “He is modeling that innovation and then principals go back and they model that. It’s getting down there” (Principal 7). This is an area of expertise for the new superintendent. He describes himself as a “techie” and has presented at several national technology conferences. When he is presenting to district leadership, he tries to teach a new technology tool for others to use.

He is such a good leader in that area. Every meeting we go to, he is using some piece of technology. Some piece of something. Some program, I don’t even know all the different things he’s done, that we could use here too. He’s just using it and when you see him using it, “Okay, I can do that too. (Principal 7).

Specific actions were taken by the superintendent to ensure alignment of actions to the espoused mission, vision, and values. Actual structural changes were implemented. He had plans to develop principal cluster groups to further develop
communities of practice and encourage connections and collaboration. He renamed his human resources department to human relations department, highlighting the value of relationships as the real resource to draw upon. In addition, he demonstrated his commitment by changing the hiring process for the district. One participant explained how the district hiring now had a new lens to focus on the mission, vision, and values.

You could see how everything is ranked even from the hiring process. When we were looking at letters of recommendation, you had to look for evidence of the values of respect, trust and collaboration in the letters of recommendation for somebody to get link to get on the eligibility list. (Principal 4).

Hiring new personnel to add to the team has significant implications, and to recognize these new values to be critical enough to scan the letter of recommendation is telling to the commitment held to this new district change initiative.

**Barriers Emerged During the Change Process**

While the new superintendent was described by all participants to be a model of alignment with actions to the espoused values in the mission and vision, there were examples of misalignment, as well.

There are still a lot of pockets out there of people that just they are not onboard. I don’t know why. I guess I have to be patient and know that it is the start. We made that huge leap and it will trickle down but we’ve got to get more support for our principals too in that regard and help with it. They don’t know how to take the message and deliver it. (District Administrator 1).

Several of the participants referred back to the history that will need to be overcome in order to move forward. The past feeling of fear is an influencing factor that may be holding back the forward movement.
Getting that information out to more people [is what we need]. Like I see principals who are really excited about all these changes, but I see some hesitation … from others. Maybe people who’ve been here longer, because it's almost like they're waiting for the other shoe to drop. (District Administrator 3).

Participants describe how the message is there, but there are some people who are resisting the change. They are described as almost inhibiting the true adoption of the new mission, vision, and values. While the information is being provided, one participant describes an example where the message has not been delivered.

We’re going to get everybody to read it. I mean everybody. You have that, and the principal is going to see it over and over and over again, and everything is available to you. You have the PowerPoints, you’ve got all this stuff. How is it then that [some] teacher leaders will look at you and say, ‘I’ve never seen that before.’ People from the leadership teams of campuses say this,…then, of course, then it trickles down hill and well, if they haven’t seen it, then these guys haven’t seen it. I called it a clogged artery. (District Administrator 2)

There are examples of misalignment and of resistance, but most of the participants describe this as a huge change that takes time. While there may be barriers along the way, the participants overwhelmingly describe this first year as a first step in a series of steps where the new mission, vision, and values will eventually take a lasting hold. “Is the message consistently being enacted? “I would say no, not yet but it’s definitely a work in progress. There’s definitely room for improvement and it’s just because we have certain people that have not had the privilege of living through this development….You definitely see inconsistencies” (Principal 9). Some participants indicated the value of being involved in the development of the mission, vision, and values as being critical to their understanding and internalization of the change process. While a concerted effort was done to involve people and communicate the change, there were still some who were
not given sufficient information about it. The participants conceded that this process takes time. “Until then, yes, the change is unfolding with time. People are changing and … it just takes time” (Principal 4).

**Superintendent Uses Social Media to Promote Consistency**

The new superintendent involved in this study is an avid user of social media. All the participants commented on this and viewed it as a means that promoted connectedness and collaboration, as they were able to see what was occurring across the district. As the new superintendent visited different school sites or attended various meetings or presentations, he would Tweet about what he saw. This contributes to the feeling of staff that they are valued and it is cause to share and celebrate the work being done around the district. “They notice him coming to the school. That in and of itself is inspiring to them that he actually came in, viewed their classroom. He's a social media (laughs) fanatic. He Tweets after each visit. You feel like wow, he's noticing the things that we're doing in our class” (Principal 2). More about the use of Twitter will be discussed later in this chapter.

**Supporting Factors and Constraints for Learning and the Development of Communities of Practice**

The premise of this paper is that in order for a change effort to be effectively implemented, it is necessary to allow the learning required around the change to occur. Applying the lens of sociocultural learning theory, learning occurs in a social context, best occurring when people have the opportunity to interact and exchange ideas around
the new topic or initiative. Communities of practice is the vehicle used to describe
groups of people that are in a work context and that have social exchanges, facilitating
learning to take place. In this study, a new superintendent takes the helm of a larger
district, and identifies the need to develop and diffuse new district mission, vision, and
values with the intent that these will be enacted across the organization. The new
superintendent clearly begins his work with the intent to build connectedness across the
system through improved communication, collaboration, and trust. Each participant
describes circumstances how specific steps have occurred to build these connections and
communication among site leaders, central office administrators, and the superintendent.
By building these ties, the stage is set to promote more social engagement, thereby
promoting learning opportunities and the development of communities of practice.

**Reported Past Historical Constraints on Learning and Developing Communities of
Practice**

All the participants made reference to the challenges of the past, prior to the new
superintendent. They described a high sense of fear and lack of trust between teachers
and administrators, between administrators and district leadership, and particularly with
their prior superintendent. One participant describes, “In the past, the culture was that
you didn’t ask for help. You either knew it or you figured it out but you didn’t show that
weakness of not knowing everything” (Principal 10). This fear was an obstacle to
collaboration and building connections. It significantly limited the opportunities for
social exchanges between and among site leaders, district office administrators, and the
superintendent. The perception of the site principals was to ask questions indicated
incompetence and would put their jobs at risk. This fear not only limited access to information and support from district administrators, but it also impacted the interactions they had with each other. “In the past principals didn’t trust the district office or each other. When you [district] are getting rid of 30% of your staff every year, it doesn’t lead to trust. Now I see collaboration” (Principal 7). Several participants explain the intensity of fear and distrust from the past still exists, but is dissipating.

Interesting, the ones that were new to the district, who have been here only as long as I have, seeing their fear, the contagious aspects of fear. They got it even though they hadn’t been here. They got it from their network in a way. To watch it start to go away, though, has been interesting. That’s been something. I think some are much more isolated, almost by choice. They have a lot of options but they don’t choose to ask people. I noticed that started to shift in the last two months before the end of the school year. (District Administrator 2)

Isolation caused by fear and a lack of trust are key factors identified by the participants to inhibit social exchanges. Because of this, communities of practice cannot grow and are limited in their use. Without these healthy social contexts, the depth of learning is impacted.

**Reported Supporting Factors of Learning and Developing Communities of Practice**

In contrast, all the participants in the study were able to identify a change occurring throughout the district. They were able to describe the interactions between central office administrators and district leaders to be more supportive and helpful. Several examples were given where site principals felt comfortable and encouraged to access information, resources, and support from district office administrators. “There has been a change of expectations. I know there are a lot more emails and phone calls [to
central office] now because people have that comfort that they didn’t have before”

(Principal 10). Specific factors were described by one participant as he connected their actions to be aligned with the district mission, vision, and values.

There is a willingness to listen, I think there is a basic understanding that we’re working on this together. It’s a work in progress and we are working together, where before I thought it was more top down…It’s more like, this is our goal and here is how we’re going to get there together. Once again I think they are modeling that collaboration and respect. (Principal 10).

In this quote, the principal is describing a new perception being enacted whereby both site leaders and central office administrators are unified, working towards the same purpose. Several participants shared this sense of diminished isolation and an increased feeling of connectedness with central office and the superintendent. “They are just very responsive and helpful. You don’t feel like you have to figure it out all on your own” (Principal 10). This sense of team is a contributing factor that encourages the development of communities of practice. In doing so, it further promotes the social context for learning to occur, and true enactment of the new mission, vision, and values to take hold across the organization.

This change is described by the participants as emanating from the new leadership. His increased visibility at the school sites had significantly opened up access to him. “He’s approachable. He is transparent, doesn’t have an agenda. Or if he has one it is this: is it a student-centered model education. When you have those, I think, it works … You see him, he’s totally approachable” (Principal 8). He has been described as attending all meetings and visiting all school sites, dramatically increasing the amount of
contact he has with people across the district. This accessibility, coupled with his approachability, has promoted communication, collaboration, and connectedness.

I’ve had some really good superintendents but not really an instructional leader and just being able to be that innovative like he’s been for us. To be able to give us those opportunities to try things new and be so positive all the time. Never being fearful of going to see him. (Principal 6).

Another emerging theme that surfaced from each of the participants, was the specific approach taken by the new superintendent to promote learning among the leadership team. Several participants describe him to be a great resource of information. During his presentations to the principals and district administrators, he will often share professional readings, video clips, websites, or research articles.

He brings a sense of professionalism to the profession and is always referencing different authors, different texts, different ideas. There's some people that either are aware of those things or he mentioned some, they write down and they go. Then there's the people that it doesn't stick. I would say there is a need for it. He's still able to move the organization forward even though some people don't really get or follow through or understand what he's talking about sometimes. (Principal 1)

While this principal explains how he appreciates the opportunity to learn more by accessing these other resources, he also identifies a common barrier. There are people who may not use the information to grow their own knowledge base. There are those who might not want to take the time to further their own professional growth and who are satisfied with their current level of practice.

Several of the participants shared their increased access to learning opportunities through the use of Twitter by the new superintendent. They explained how he would often Tweet about activities or learning strategies that he saw at other schools. He also
often Tweeted professional articles or links to educational resources. Several participants explained their own use of Twitter and how they felt it was a tool to promote their own professional growth. This will be further described in a separate section in this chapter.

**Enactment of Change Effort**

An examination of effective implementation of this new superintendent’s change initiative around the mission, vision, and values, is limited to the first year of his tenure. Within that first year, both the development and ongoing diffusion of this message has occurred. Even though year one is still considered early, there is evidence of an enactment of the mission, vision, and values. Participants were able to describe situations where they followed the model set by the superintendent, and acted upon it at their own sites or in their own roles. For the purposes of this study, these examples are considered initial efforts of implementation.

**Internalization of change by Site Principals**

In describing the district as a whole, this participant speaks about the changes being seen at all levels because of the mission, vision, and values. “He [superintendent] is embodying the mission, vision, and values, the district office is embodying that, the administrators are embodying it, and it’s starting to get to the teachers are feeling it as well” (Principal 7). The general sentiment shared was that the mission, vision, and values were important and there were efforts made to follow those. Not only were principals following his lead, but they described the means offered to support this. Several of the principals referred to the superintendent’s knowledge base around
relationships, instruction, business, and leadership. They also often included the superintendent’s use of research and his leadership around teaching the principals. He consistently included references to outside resources for principals and teachers to access to further their own professional growth. One principal describes the superintendent’s focus on teaching and learning and how this impacts his own practice as a site leader:

Learning is supported by new avenues being opened, things I wouldn't have known about or thought about. He brings them to the surface or exposes them from within … we'll be sitting in a meeting with him and I'll be on my phone ordering books off of Amazon that he's referenced or videos or authors or quotes. Then I tie those into what I'm doing here. Whenever he presented, it’s.... there’s something to take away. I would rather listen to him all day than do anything else more at district meetings. I feel smarter after listening to him. (Principal 1)

Principal participants shared their own experiences of enacting the changes at their own sites with their own staff. They shared how they took what the superintendent had modeled, and applied the same process. For this site administrator, he was a part of the district development, and thought it applicable and important to facilitate this at his own school site.

While the district was going through their mission, vision, and values building, I was doing the same thing here. I was on the superintendent’s task force for developing the mission, so I modeled it for here and we developed that ourselves, including our parents. I now take our district mission, vision, and values, along with our school’s and put them on all of the documents I give to teachers. The agendas, notes, things like that. He does that. I’m trying to model that here at this site. (Principal 7)

In addition, not only did this principal apply the steps in the process of developing his site mission, vision, and values, but he actually enacts the values in his decision making process. In his explanation, it was evident that he was truly internalizing the values
espoused in the mission and vision developed for the district and models it himself in his actions at his school site.

Also, the message is the same with the way that he presents in his mission and vision. This is where we are. If you look at the mission and vision from our district, the student is at the center of the conversation. That’s something that, to me, is very valuable as an instructional leader or as a principal, because that’s around my conversations with my staff. When we have to make decisions, it has to be, ‘Is this going to be our focus? Is it in the best interest of our students?’ That’s the end of the conversation. To me, he and I are on the same page. That’s why he continues to be like the model for me. A very inspirational guy. (Principal 8)

Other participants shared their experiences around the enactment of the mission, vision, and values. They describe it as impacting how business is done on a daily basis at the school sites.

There’s been positive changes and vision and a mission and values that actually mean something, so that’s impacting change in how everybody is working at the site because you know our mission and vision and values has to follow the district….It’s linked for hiring people, the way we spend our money, our budget, everything is linked to this vision, mission, values. I’m going to launch when my staff comes back. I have a 90 minute meeting with them and I’m going to launch some of this and show them the connections so they can realize, “Oh, they are just words on papers but these are important, it is the goal. (Principal 4)

Participants also shared how the mission, vision, and values has impacted their communication and collaboration. They describe their new approach to taking risks and sharing knowledge and the learning that comes with those interactions.

You can really start to see people branching out and getting ideas. You will … I get emails from principals who say, “Hey, I saw this,” or, “I read about this. I want to try this. What do you think? Do you think I'll get any feedback,” or, “Do you think I'll get any push back from the district,” and I think it’s changing that mindset that the district isn’t … that's not what we're about anymore, that it's really important for them to feel like they can have their teachers try new things. (District Administrator 3)
In addition, participants were able to share some of their own ideas to promote collaboration among the principal groups. They were able to share some of their feelings around being in more formal settings and their desire to be in a more informal community of practice.

One of the difficulties is, when we’re in, this is my thought, when we're in principal meetings, it's always very formal. I didn't always feel that I can say what I want to say or ask questions I want to say in those groups because I don't want to either look incompetent or anything else. I guess that's probably a cultural issue. (Principal 1).

Several participants suggested more opportunities to engage in conversations with their colleagues in a less structured format to identify both their needs and to collaborate on ideas.

It’s good for us to be all on the same page and to have heard the same message and understand the same concepts, but at some point for us as an administrative group we need that time to direct our own conversations and our own collaborations. (Principal 10).

**Internalization of Change by Central Office and District Administrators**

For central office and district administrators, the enacting of the mission, vision, and values also impacts the manner in which communication and collaboration occurs. They also share about how they want to not only adopt this new approach for themselves, but for all in their departments.

We all know we advertised it, we put it out so it's out there, it's up here, we talk about it, we want to emulate those, we want to internalize it ourselves so that for my directors and supervisors that are beneath me, they'll see that I'm doing it so they'll do it and pass it on to their employees. It's just this constant one message. (District Administrator 4).
Some of the district office administrators who participated in this study still identified the challenges involved with this change. Not only was the consistency of the message critical, they described the tendencies for some to resist the changes. While these resistors wanted to keep things status quo, it was clear that it was important to keep the momentum of continual learning and growing.

You can't put your head in the sand and deny it and just keep doing what you're doing. You're not going to succeed or you can say, “I'm going to embrace the change,” and then what do I have to do to be a part of that and make effective decisions that will affect the way I change my own area? He is definitely, this movement forward, this redirection is actually causing us to relearn things and be better I think. (District Administrator 4)

We want to improve communication and so it trickles down into every single employee of this school district knows and has the same information as the rest that right now with this linear way that we do things, it’s like it is all at the top and down. We are changing that. We still have that but we are changing the components of it, so this cluster network that we are starting for next year, it is going to be huge. (District Administrator 1)

Structural changes were explained to be a next step of the new superintendent for the following school year. These changes would promote the development of communities of practice where principals would be in smaller cluster groups for collaboration. By increasing opportunities for social interaction, a ripe landscape is set for more learning to occur as principals are able to work together.

One participant shared their thoughts around the impact this is having on teacher interactions, as well. The fact that principals and district leaders are enacting the mission, vision, and values encourages collaboration among teachers.
You’re going to get in trouble. You can’t.” Today I don’t get so much of that. People see possibilities. They feel like they can say something and not get punished, which is crazy. In that aspect, having those divisions, values and goals, it’s just set a whole new tone. I don’t think before, the tone was just no. Today those, because innovation, the minute that word is in there, then heads are up and they’re going, “Oh, I could do that.” That has changed everything completely. (District Administrator 2)

Impact of Superintendent Use of Social Media and Twitter

In this study, the use of social media by the new superintendent was a key component to the new systemic change efforts across the district. It was a tool that was identified by all sixteen participants in the study as being a means of communication, a means to connect with happenings across a large system, and a means to promote learning and values. It was new medium that was quickly applied and adopted. The new superintendent describes himself as an avid user of social media.

I know from experience and research that an easy entry into communication is to open yourself up to input and feedback. I think the first week on the job I did a … well, I launched a Twitter feed, a YouTube channel, and a blog. (Sup.).

From that first step, he did an call out to all families and employees of the district to let them know there were some new items to look for on their website. Not only was it a means for people to communicate with him, but it was a way for him to communicate with the entire organization and the public at large. One participant commented, “People got on Twitter just to follow the superintendent” (Principal 10).

For district staff, he describes the spread of the use of social media as a social phenomenon that was not mandated or even set as a formal expectation. He explained how he first presented it to the school board and to cabinet and how he offered a quick voluntary tutorial to expose the leadership team about how to use it.
I will bring in a social media policy and we'll share the policy and guidance with the staff. If they're interested in doing it, they're more than welcome to it. It's not a requirement or a mandate, but they are permitted to use it as long as they use the policy as guidance,” and it just took off. Without any mandate, it has spread like wildfire. Every school now has some social media presence, and a lot of our staff … I mean, it has gone viral. It kind of I think spread organically as opposed to through directives. (Sup)

In reflecting on how he decides what to Tweet, the superintendent shared his philosophy.

Something that I heard a couple of years ago was a comment along the lines of 'you share what you value' and I remember that being important as an opportunity to amplify those things that are important. Primarily, I use it to share things that I think are good and worthy of celebration, but that could be almost any aspect of what we do in schools. (Sup).

His perspective around the use of Twitter is not only to be informative, but also to influence. His strong desire to share the important work being done in his district was evident and is demonstrated by the items he Tweets to the public. “Anything that I think will reinforce good things, beneficial things for students, I will celebrate through that expression of sharing” (Sup).

In this study, the document review included an examination of the new superintendent’s Twitter feed from July 1, 2012 through July 1, 2013. This marks his first year in the position. During this time frame he posted 834 Tweets. He finished this period of time with 1,298 followers.

Twitter Improved Communication across the District

“I think that Twitter will go a long way to help kind of give a voice to what’s occurring here” (Principal 9).
Each participant in the study shared about how the use of Twitter has been a way to provide information to all. It is a public means of sharing what is occurring throughout the district. As the superintendent attended meetings, presentations, community events, or school visitations, he actively Tweeted about his experiences. “When he visits schools, there’s a positive Tweet out, night events that he goes to – positive tweet about that event” (Principal 10). Participants described how these occasions were shared and talked about by the staff. It promoted a feeling of pride and respect. The idea of the superintendent Tweeting about something he saw in the classroom of a teacher at a school site was a topic openly discussed and celebrated throughout the district. “It is a conversation [what he Tweets and notices] heard everywhere and then the ones that are techie are like, “Oh,” they’ll email out to everyone. “Look what the superintendent tweeted about us.” That kind of thing.” (Principal 2). Another participant explains it this way:

We’re not little islands anymore. Relationships, it is what it is, but opening that social media for everyone so you get to see, “Oh, look at this school. They did this. That’s a great idea,” and celebrate, that’s great. That’s what makes us a different school district from what we were last year. This change, I’m telling you, that’s happened, it’s a great … What you see now, you’re looking at a different district, the one before and this one here today. Very, very, very different. (Principal 8)

The use of social media was viewed a tool that was transforming the district. It was breaking down walls and opening windows to view what was happening around the organization. It was a new method of publicly acknowledging work being done at all levels. The frequent use of Twitter by the superintendent was viewed as an open way to share what he was doing and have a glimpse into what he was thinking. It was described in several interviews as a factor that was contributing to the reparations to past negative
opinions of the district leadership. It was promoting trust through the transparency it
provided. “His Tweets make for a transparent feel amongst the ranks and the groups and
kind of we’re all in this together and I’m not hiding anything from you.” (Principal 10)

In addition, the postings done by the superintendent were viewed as a means to
conveying a consistent message. Because of the size of the district, communication to all
can be problematic and messages can be distorted in the dissemination, as described
previously in the interviews. While not all people will access these avenues offered
through social media, they are opportunities for the superintendent to directly post a
public comment for anyone to view. In addition, it should be noted that the
superintendent began a Spanish Twitter feed to facilitate the communication outreach to
the Spanish speaking community the district serves. Not only did the superintendent
describe this as being a valuable tool, but it was also described to be so by participants of
the study.

The thing I really like about Twitter is that not just principals can get that. Community gets that. Teachers can get it. We can all be getting that common message. If he is posting, and he does freely post about the common core, then when I’m having conversations with parents, they did already have the opportunity to hear what the superintendent is saying about it. (Principal 7).

To better understand the messages included in the Tweets, the actual posts were
coded for keywords using a social media analytics tool. The posts were analyzed for both
frequently used words in the messages, as well as intentional directed posts as indicated
by applying the # strategy. By using a #, messages are flagged for specific audiences or
subjects. For example, it can be seen that his most frequently used keyword is the use of
“#SUNNY”. This has been publicly identified as part of his core communication
platform. SUNNY directly refers to their district. Other key words include school, students, innovation, excellence, and collaboration.

![Top Keywords Within Tweets](image)

**Figure 3: Top Keywords Within Tweets**

Twitter use can manifest in many different ways. In this study, there is clear evidence that it is being used in a manner that directly supports and reinforces the district change effort launched by the superintendent. His own knowledge and appreciation of its potential influence impacts how he uses it. In examining the data of frequently used keywords, it can be seen that his postings are mostly about the district and are directed to the district using the #SUNNY. His posts highlight the schools he visits and are focused on students. His consistent reference to the district mission, vision, and values demonstrate his clear focus on aligning his communication around his intended change efforts.

**Twitter Promoted the Building of Connections**
Twitter is a public forum where people can post messages. It is a means to build ties virtually. In this study, Twitter was actively used by the superintendent in his goal to improve communication and connectedness. In doing so, he has also set the stage for learning to occur by expanding and developing existing communities of practice across the district. In his words, the superintendent explains the benefits of Twitter and social media. “What is the foundation of learning? There is an exchange of information and so social media enables that exchange in very different ways than in the past. Yeah, I think it's a tool for connectedness and learning” (Sup). Participants of the study, also add to this perspective by sharing their own thoughts on the use of this tool.

He's been the impetus for people getting onto that type of thing for social, professional growth. From there, I've seen it on Twitter with different people's networks growing and they're following certain hashtag chats or they're connected with educators from across the world in getting ideas and passing ideas off each other. I'm more willing to open myself up to vulnerability on Twitter than I am at a principals' meeting. (Principal 1)

The figure below tracks the path of the original Tweet and how it acts as a connector with people. The superintendent posted 834 Tweets total during his first year. It can be seen that of his 1,298 followers, approximately one third of them (361 followers) engaged with his posts and did something more with them using Twitter. Of the 361 people who actively engaged with the posts, they then either replied, retweeted, mentioned, or favorite the posts. Those 361 people, have an average number of 465 followers each. This again, indicates he has many influential followers, and demonstrates the expanding connections that can result from the use of Twitter. Of particular significance is the net outcome of what happened at the end of the cycle of the original Twitter posts. As seen below, of the 834 posts, there were 1,693 external link clicks which refer to an action
beyond the actual Tweet. These clicks would be accessing the links to videos, articles, websites, and other pertinent professional learning resources.

**Twitter Engagement Megaphone**

**Twitter Contributed to Learning and the Development of Knowledge for Leaders**

One of the first things the new superintendent did was to promote his use of social media. He began to do this independently and let the public know. This opened the door for people to follow him and to read what he was posting. He himself explained his intentionality around what he was posting and his understanding that he would post items he thought were important and would benefit students. This could be in the form of highlighting specific effective instructional programs or strategies or resources for educators.

![Figure 4: Twitter Engagement Megaphone](image_url)
All sixteen participants in this study spoke about the use of Twitter by the new superintendent. They referred to it as a means to improve communication, provide information and resources to teachers, principals and the community, and to build connections. The frequent use of it by the new superintendent promoted a feeling of transparency to his actions and his opinions. Participants specifically spoke about his decisions around what he posted. They described the positive reception among principals and teachers when he posted items about what he saw during school site visits and they viewed this also as an opportunity for learning. Many of his Tweets were about professional resources for common core standards, technology, and innovative practices. “Oh, yes, his Twitter posts do support learning by communicating and sharing ideas. Instead of going to many conferences and websites, you get common core resources, the technology resources, innovation resources and digital learning, and flip classrooms, a
bunch” (Principal 4). They included links to videos, articles, books, and websites and participants shared their perspective of Twitter being a means to promote learning.

The above chart shows the Tweets done by the superintendent and ones that included different types of links.

He makes it known what he's reading, what he likes, where he's at, if he follows tweets. He's active on Twitter so many of us have become active on Twitter and other … he's also been on Pinterest….There's people who I think under any situation would want themselves to grow and would look for the opportunity for growth in any way. He’s providing that for those people. (Principal 1)

The nature of Twitter is a public posting of comments. The approach taken by the new superintendent is to use this as a means to promote learning by offering resources. Ultimately, it is the decision of the viewer of those postings to decide how to act upon the Twitter posts. One participant describes the value in accessing and applying the resources provided via Twitter and the new superintendent for those that take advantage of the opportunity.

He talked about sharing ideas and a lot of people signed up for Twitter automatically right then. It's stuck with some. I know the ones that's stuck with it are getting a lot of professional growth from it, kind of like the people who will read, will go get those books, those articles and those things. (Principal 1)

The chart below indicates the engagement his Twitter followers have with his posts and the actions they are taking after reading them. These actions may include Replies, Retweets, Mentions, and Favorites. The follower replies to a Tweet by directly
responding to him. Retweeting a Twitter post sends the message out to the user’s followers, thus amplifying the original message. This action is especially significant in this setting as the superintendent works towards diffusing a consistent message and the amplification would directly expand the number of people who receive it. Mentioning refers to a follower who is naming the superintendent in their own post. The Mentioning data is important in gauging his broadened exposure. The number of Favorites indicated followers who purposefully mark the Twitter post as a favorite and might encourage others to read it. The data below is indicative of the further actions the superintendent’s followers are doing and how they are using the Twitter posts. They suggest a redistribution of knowledge and learning, as well as an amplification of the ties and connectedness he is trying to build.

![Engagement Breakdown Table](image)

**Figure 6: Engagement Breakdown**

Through the use of Twitter, the new superintendent set the stage for ideas and resources to be shared. In doing so, not only are people across the district accessing information, they are also making connections. As the superintendent posts an item he
saw at a specific school in the district, viewers are able to identify individuals at that school to follow up on the information. Principals and teachers are now given these glimpses into resources they might normally now have known about occurring across the organization. “We've been encouraged to better use technology, embrace technology and social media to get our message out and to learn from others” (Principal 1). The use of social media in these instances, have opened the doors to more opportunities for learning, as well as promoting the building of ties. One participant explains how information about the work being done across the district has enticed more people to participate and contribute.

Oh, absolutely, because you get people who will either see something or say, “I didn't know there was a work group for writing in K-2. If you're going to have another meeting, can I be on that committee?” or, “When does that committee meet?” You do get a lot more people … you can tell people are starting to follow each other and trying to find out what's going on. When we had our big buyback last year he made it a “This is the Twitter # for today,” and so many people gave such positive feedback saying … ‘This was the best thing we'd done.’ (District Administrator 3)

**Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways a new superintendent develops, diffuses, and enacts a new systemic change effort across a district. Key findings demonstrated his focus to be on improving communication, promoting connectedness, and being consistent. Every step taken in the development, diffusion, and enactment of the new district change effort has been done with this approach of ensuring improved communication, connectedness, and consistency. Maintaining these focal points, are contributing factors that support the learning required to effectively implement
this change. In addition, the superintendent included a concerted effort to use and apply the benefits of Twitter during this process, which was demonstrated to be an effective contributing factor that supported the change process.

In this study, the new superintendent took specific steps to meet with key stakeholders both individually and in small groups to gain a deeper understanding of the district. In doing so, he identified a need to establish a new district mission, vision, and values that would be the cornerstone from which all other work would be built. The development of these was done through a process where he again met with different groups to gather their input. Both open public forums were held, as well as smaller group meetings with stakeholders including certificated and classified staff, management, parent and community groups.

In order to best understand from a leadership perspective, the approach taken by this new superintendent, not only was the development of the mission, vision, and values examined, but also the diffusion and enactment of this district change effort was explored. Subquestions were developed to gain a deeper understanding of this first year of the superintendent that focused on how these were communicated across the organization by the superintendent, how he promoted a consistent messaging of the change effort, what were promoting or constraining factors to the learning required, and how was it effectively implemented. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with various principals, district administrators, and the superintendent. Document reviews were also done to include an examination of the use of Twitter by the superintendent and his Twitter posts for his first year.
**Superintendent Focused on Communication**

The new superintendent took specific steps in maximizing the diffusion of the change initiative. Once the new district mission, vision, and values were developed, he made a conscious effort to revisit this message at all opportunities. He would consistently restate or make reference to the district mission, vision, and values in his public presentation to parents, community groups, district leadership, and all district staff. It was included on any printed or posted material when appropriate and was included on the district website.

**Superintendent Focused on Connectedness**

The new superintendent made it his goal to visit every school site and classroom across the district by January. This was a huge endeavor due to the size of the district, but was significantly impactful in communicating the message of the district mission, vision, and values. Through his actions, he was able to directly meet and connect with the staff and students he serves. In addition, he organized a district wide buy back day where he was able to facilitate his presentation directly to all district staff, sharing the new direction of the district, placing the mission, vision, and values at the forefront.

The new superintendent launched an aggressive use of social media to convey the new district message. He describes himself as an avid user of technology and social media, and had a deep understanding of these tools as a means to reinforce a message and highlight what is important. Being completely committed to the new change effort and
embodying the new district mission, vision, and values, by using Twitter, he would post information and resources that supported this district initiative.

**Superintendent Focused on Consistency of Message**

Consistency of message is not only based on verbal communication, but can also be interpreted as an alignment of actions to the espoused values in the mission and vision. Respect, trust, and collaboration are the espoused values collaboratively developed for the district. These were consistently modeled by the superintendent in the manner in which he presented, what he presented on, and how he conducted his work. Excellence and innovation are focus areas for the vision statement collaboratively developed to as the direction of the district. These key tenets are ones that are evident in the superintendent’s actions observed by the participants in this study through his modeling and use of technology during his presentations.

The superintendent’s use of Twitter was another means to promote the district mission, vision, and values. On his posts, he demonstrated respect for the work being done across the organization by highlighting these publicly with his posts. He promoted collaboration and trust as his actions and opinions were transparent via his posts on Twitter. His intentional use of Twitter to promote topics, practices, and resources was a way to support learning and the building of connections across the district.

**Promoting Factors for Learning**

Historically, it was a common description of the participants that there was a significant amount of fear and distrust among and between teachers, principals, central
office, district administrators, and the superintendent. All of the participants shared the feeling that this was dissipating. The alignment of actions to the espoused values in the vision was setting the stage for an increase in collaboration and connectedness. The superintendent was described as actively promoting collaboration. Central office offered help, information, and support.

Through the use of Twitter, the superintendent promoted learning in his posting of information and resources. By highlighting instructional practices or strategies from school sites, connections could be made by teachers and administrators in the sharing of knowledge.

**Resulting Enactment and Effective Implementation**

There were several examples given by the participants of situations where they took what they learned from a presentation done by the superintendent and used it back with their own school staffs. There were stories of instances where they took the actual process of the development of the mission, vision, and values and repeated it at their sites. There were other examples of principals using resources, articles, or video clips they learned about from the superintendent to use at a site professional development they were facilitating. Several participants shared their application of the district mission, vision, and values in the way they conduct their work.

Many participants explained their improved perception of how central office and district administrators worked with principals. There were several examples of enactment that were observed describing a significant increased sense of support being
offered in a collaborative nature from the district to the sites. The superintendent was frequently mentioned in his approachability and accessibility, as well.

**Superintendent Used Social Media and Twitter**

The theoretical framework used as a lens in this study is sociocultural learning theory that explains how learning occurs in a social context where individuals can interact and exchange ideas around a topic. Communities of practice is a group of people working towards a common goal that have established formal or informal ties that facilitate these exchanges to occur. In this study, Twitter can be seen as a catalyst for both of these key elements required for change to take hold across a large organization. Through the use of Twitter, the new superintendent employed a new method of both building connections and exchanging information, all a means to facilitate learning during these initial times of significant change. Another participant shares their perspective on the use of social media in the district. “So it's really important for them (principals and teachers) to be able to try these new things and they are, by going out and finding them, reading about them, researching them. It's funny how we all follow each other around Pinterest and we're all following each other on Twitter and things that we hadn't done in the past, but ways for them to make connections to people outside of our district” (District Administrator 3).
Chapter 5 Discussion

In this era of high stakes accountability for student, school, and district performance, the demands are significant on the superintendent of any given school district. Because of this, school boards and communities are searching for strong leadership that will be able to step into the role of superintendent and implement district wide change initiatives, moving their district forward towards ensuring that all students succeed. The purpose of this study is to better understand how a new superintendent undertakes the development, diffusion, and enactment of systemic change efforts. In addition, understanding the characteristics that support or constrain the learning and development of communities of practice will shed light onto this critical period of transition. This study explores the interactions between the superintendent, district leadership, central office administrators, and site principals that influence effective implementation and the learning required for the change to transform practice.

Without deep understanding and learning, change can only be superficial and daily practice will not truly be transformed (Honig, 2008; Gallucci, 2008). The importance of supporting the learning required to effectively implement an initiative is a foundational tenet in this study. The theoretical framework of sociocultural learning theory is used as a lens in understanding how learning occurs. It emphasizes that it is through the context of social interactions that learning takes place and the chance to internalize the given skill occurs. It is when a person is given ample opportunity to socially engage with others around a given topic, that learning can occur (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Stein & Coburn, 2008; Wenger, 1996,1998,2000).
Communities of practice describe the vehicle in which these interactions that support the learning can occur. Communities of practice are a construct that is defined as groups of people that have both formal and informal ties, share a common language and often common tasks. These groups engage in social exchanges whereby information is shared, compared, and reflected upon, leading to learning. This study applies the theoretical framework of sociocultural learning theory to the construct of communities of practice in an effort to best understand the ideal conditions for a change initiative to be effectively implemented across a district. Facilitating the learning process by increasing connectedness across the district is clearly necessary in district reform efforts. This study further examines factors that support or constrain learning and the possible role that interactions between the superintendent, district leadership, central office administrators, and site principals has on this process.

This qualitative study was conducted in a larger urban district during the first year of a new superintendent’s tenure. The study included a coding and analysis of sixteen semi-structured interviews, as well as document reviews. The document review included an examination of the new superintendent’s use of social media and Twitter. All Twitter posts done by the superintendent from July 1, 2012 through July 1, 2013 were coded using a social media analytics tool.

Summary of Findings

The overarching research question this study was based upon is as follows:
In what ways does a new superintendent develop, diffuse, and enact a new systemic change effort across a district?

There were four key findings that emerged from this study. The new superintendent focused on improving communication, promoting connectedness, and maintaining consistency throughout the process of the developing, diffusing, and enacting the change process. In addition, the superintendent used Twitter as a tool to promote this process and the findings demonstrate its effectiveness.

**Communication**

The superintendent took specific steps in meeting with different stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of the state of the district. He met with the school board individually, his leadership cabinet, union leaders, parent and community leaders. After doing so, he identified a common need in the lack of mission, vision, and values for the district. This was to be his change initiative that he was implementing district wide. He initiated a process where he organized meetings with site principals and central office administrators to assist in facilitating meetings to collaborative develop a new mission, vision, and values for the district. The process was done in an extremely public and inclusive manner, and was well received by all.

Once the new district mission, vision, and values were developed, there were three key steps taken by the new superintendent to diffuse this change effort. The new superintendent consistently revisited the mission, vision, and values at any opportunity possible. It was publicly posted on the district web site. All presentations he did for the
school board, district leaders, site principals, or any district staff, he would consciously tie in the mission, vision, and values as a reminder of their purpose, their new direction, and the way in which they conducted their business and treated people. This frequent reference by the superintendent was instrumental in the diffusion through communication.

**Connectedness**

It was a priority for the superintendent to visit each school site and classroom across the district to build connectedness. He actively engaged with principals, teachers, and students as he visited each campus at least twice throughout the school year. He entered over 1,000 classrooms across the district. In doing so, he was able to communicate his message directly to people at all levels across the organization. All of the participants spoke about approachable demeanor and his modeling of respect as seen through his interactions with people at all levels of the organization. He also organized a district wide buy back day where he presented to large groups of staff that rotated through to see his presentation. During this day, all district employees had the opportunity to hear from him directly.

In addition, he made plans for structural changes where he was developing principal clusters. These clusters were to be smaller groups who would meet throughout the upcoming school year. This structure would promote collaboration and learning among site leaders as they shared ideas and knowledge.
The new superintendent aggressively used social media and Twitter to further communicate the new change effort. This was a medium that was directly coming from him. He posts Twitter comments frequently and posts things he sees as important information. This approach promoted the communication significantly as reported by each participant in the study.

**Consistency**

The findings indicate a high level of alignment of actions of the new superintendent to the espoused values in the mission and vision. All of the participants in the study described him to consistently be modeling the values through the manner in which he presents and communicates. Respect, trust, collaboration, and innovation were all observable traits that the participants described the superintendent to embody. Decisions made were described to be clearly aligned and were contributing factors to increasing trust.

Creating principal clusters was one example of actions supporting the espoused value of collaboration. In addition, his shift with hiring practices is another such example where his expectation was that all new hires would exhibit their core organizational values of respect, trust, and collaboration. His focus on connections can be seen in his renaming of the human resources department to the department of human relations.

The new superintendent used Twitter as another means to consistently reinforce the mission, vision and values. His frequent use promoted a feeling of trust and collaboration as his actions and opinions were transparent through the Twitter posts. By
using Twitter to highlight effective practices he saw around the district, he was modeling his respect of the work being done. Sharing knowledge, ideas, and resources through Twitter was a direct way for him to publicly promote learning and building connections throughout the organization. The high value he placed on open communication can also be seen in his implementation of a Spanish Twitter feed to further promote the district message to the Spanish speaking community the district serves.

**Promoting Factors for Learning**

Overcoming the historical challenges as described by the participants was an important step in this first year of the superintendent. They described an environment laden with fear and distrust. All the participants in this study shared their hopes as they felt there was more collaboration and support. The strong alignment of actions with the espoused values was a key factor in improving the levels of trust of the superintendent. With this strong leadership, connections were being reestablished. The participants shared they felt that central office was more accessible, helpful, and supportive. As collaboration increases, social exchanges increase and learning can take place. Participants shared an increased feeling in the promotion of teaching and learning among district leaders and site principals.

The new superintendent actively uses Twitter as a means to share resources and information. His posts include links to articles, books, videos, and other websites to promote professional learning. By posting an effective teaching practice or strategy he observed at a school site, he not only shares that information, but he also offers a connection between the viewers and those at the school site. In doing so, people can
follow up with that teacher or principal on further discussing and learning. His use of Twitter was referenced by all sixteen participants as being a key tool for communication, connectedness, and learning.

**Social Media and Twitter**

In this study, the new superintendent applied the use of Twitter as a new method of both building connections and exchanging information. This was done as a means to facilitate the required learning during this initial time of significant change. In this study, Twitter can be seen as a catalyst for both of the key elements required for change to take hold across a large organization through its promotion of learning through social interactions and building of ties among people.

All participants spoke about the use of Twitter by the superintendent. They identified as a tool that offered resources and information, as well as opportunities to connect with other within and outside of the district. During his first year in office, the superintendent had 1,298 followers. Of his 834 Tweets, many include specific opportunities for professional learning with links to articles, books, videos, and other resources. It can also be seen that of his Twitter followers, 361 acted upon his posts further, suggesting they are engaging with the resources more in depth. In addition, the combined followers of those 361 people come out to be 167,869. This suggests that the original posts of the superintendent are amplified in the amount of people he can further reach.
Discussion of Findings

In this study, a new superintendent took the helm as the leader of a large urban district and steered his ship in a new direction. Coming in to a new work environment, he began by understanding the climate of his district and quickly identified they required a map of where they were going and how they would get there. He identified the need to develop a new district mission, vision, and values and this would be his change initiative. He believed this would help guide them as they redefined who they were, what was their goal, and how they would achieve it. But this realization did not happen in isolation. His approach was open and inclusive to all. He asked for feedback from all stakeholders, and collaboratively developed these guiding district tenets. In doing so, the development process was achieved and well received as there was an understanding across the district.
that this was in fact done collaboratively and do ownership was distributed among all who participated in the process.

The dissemination of this change initiative was critical as the superintendent focused in on improving communication and building connectedness across the district. These goals were closely interrelated with the espoused values of respect, trust, and collaboration and would one would foster the other. Knowing this, the superintendent was frequently revisited the new mission, vision, and values in all settings. He ensured he has an opportunity to directly verbalize this message by interacting with school site staffs, as well as presenting at the district buy back day to all district employees.

He promoted consistency to the district mission, vision, and values through his alignment of actions to the values espoused. From his content in presentations, to the use of technology to promote and model innovation, to the manner in which he interacted with all people, to his decisions on what to post on Twitter, his actions were consistent with his message. This public demonstration of consistent behavior all promoted an increase in trust and collaboration. Increasing these two aspects set the stage for an increase in learning and ultimately more opportunities for people to engage around his message and the change efforts. By increasing the connections, communities of practice are developed and learning can occur. When this learning occurs, people can internalize the changes and daily practice is altered.

There were several instances of people including principals, central office administrators, and district leaders where they were enacting the district change initiated by the new superintendent. Following the modeling demonstrated by the superintendent,
others applied the district mission, vision, and values in their own role in the district. They used it as a basis for decision making, as an approach on how to interact with others, and as a goal that drove them to learn more to become the model district for excellence and innovation.

One of the outcomes from this study is the finding of how social media and Twitter can support the work being done around district change. In this study, the impact of the use of Twitter by the superintendent was significant and there was consistency and coherence with the interview data and the Twitter data gathered. In all aspects of this study, Twitter was used in support to improving communication and promoting connectedness. It was identified as offering a level of transparency that encouraged trust and collaboration. The new superintendent used it as a means to highlight what he felt was important in a public forum so that all could not only know about it, but also know how to connect with that person. He used it to provide professional learning opportunities by including in the posts, links to articles, video clips, and other resources.

There is an emerging interest in the use of social media and Twitter and how it might help promote “personal learning networks”. These networks are described to provide professionals in the field of education with a significant amount of knowledge and resources. “Information streams can be tailored toward one’s interests. Networks of professional relationships can be accessed for support.” (Cho, Ro, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2013) There has been some documented evidence that Twitter does promote the development of “new professional ties, leveraging those ties to increase their access to
information and passing on that new information to others” (Forte, Humphreys, and Park, 2012).

This study supports the emerging literature around Twitter. It indicates a strong potential for the use of Twitter as a means to promote learning. It allows for an increase in social ties in a virtual space, and while this may not lead to an actual social exchange in person, in the context of this study all occurring within the same district, there is a likelihood that the people involved can in fact connect in person. In a large organization where connections can be distant, Twitter facilitates more immediacy around the contact, and may contribute to further ongoing exchanges, thus promoting learning.

**Implications for Leadership Practice**

This study focuses on how a new superintendent develops, diffuses, and enacts district wide change. In this study, there is no doubt how much impact the leadership of the superintendent has on the direction a district takes. During the first year in his position, the superintendent identified a need and implemented a new district mission, vision, and values. Being in a large urban district, this superintendent took specific steps that others can learn from as district leaders across the nation search out ways to improve the service offered to students.

In developing the change initiative, he was inclusive in his approach, being open, soliciting feedback, and listening to all stakeholders including school board members, union leaders, district cabinet, principals, teachers, parents, and community members. In the diffusion of the new district mission, vision, and values, he consistently revisited the
message, as well as modeled it in his own daily practice. He focused on communication and building connectedness among all district members by being highly visible and accessible through his school visitations and public presentations. He actively promoted and encouraged collaboration across the organization and modeled innovation through his own use. In addition, the study demonstrates the effectiveness of using social media in support of the implementation of district wide change. The superintendent actively used Twitter to promote learning through his posting of resources and building connections. Through this study, it can be seen how Twitter was a means to both promote ties among people and exchange information, all of which are necessary to facilitate learning for a change initiative.

The participants of this study shared many examples of the enactment of the mission, vision, and values. They described how these were applied to their daily work and interactions in their respective roles in the district, thus suggesting the effectiveness of the implementation. The implications for leadership of this study are significant and can be used in other districts or organizations, implementing district wide change.

**Implications for Social Justice**

As districts across the country respond to the call of addressing the achievement gap, system wide initiatives are launched. District leaders attempt to implement reform efforts in order to change the organization and steer it in a direction to meet the needs of all students. School boards and communities search for superintendents who are able to take this challenge. As these new superintendents assume their positions, it is critical to
gain a deeper understanding of this initial transitional time and identify an effective approach.

In this study, the new superintendent valued the key components to support a district wide change initiative. He promoted connectedness and collaboration across the organization, thus setting the stage for social exchanges. It is through social interaction that the learning required for the change effort to transform practice occur. His purposeful work towards building the ties among all staff across the district promoted the development of communities of practice, creating a setting fertile for the seeds of change to grow.

The implications of this are significant. Through the actions taken by the superintendent during his first year in the position, the participants in this study expressed an air of hope. They cited several examples of applying the new change effort and using the mission, vision, and values in their own practice. They described how they modeled these district tenets and indicated an internalization of the intended change. While this study focuses on the initial stages of change, current and future superintendents and district leaders across the educational system should note the outcome of this study in an effort to better understand how to promote collaboration and learning that can begin to impact daily practice.

Limitations of the Study

The nature of this research was a case study focusing in on one district during one school year. An inherent limitation in doing a case study are the situational
circumstances that exist within one single work environment as it is bounded by the historical influences specific to this particular district. In addition, the study included only people in leadership positions throughout the district and did not include any teachers. The diffusion and enactment findings are all based upon a leadership perspective and adding viewpoint of teachers would assist in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the intended change effort. Further limitations of the study include the number of interviews conducted. Each participant was interviewed on one occasion affecting the data being pulled to be reflective of that person’s perspective at one moment in time. Doing further follow up interviews would give an even deeper understanding of the actual internalization process occurring within the participants as they might be able to further share other instances of them applying the mission, vision, and values. The short time frame of the study is also a significant limitation as it is focused on the new superintendent’s first year in his position.

**Areas for Future Research**

As indicated in the limitations, there are several opportunities for further research. As more superintendents and district leadership use social media, it would be of great benefit to better understand the impact this is having in other districts. Research and comparing multiple districts where social media is begin used and measuring their intended purpose and effectiveness would give more insight into evaluating social media as a viable tool to effect change.

This study focused on the use of Twitter, but other social media use should be explored (Pinterest, Facebook, Blogspot, etc.) in the context of communication, building
connectedness, and learning. With the exponential growth of technology and social media tools, it is important for district leaders and educators to be able to evaluate these tools and their possible purposes. Using social media takes time and a concerted effort to maintain its use. It is important to further investigate this area in order to be in a position of making a well informed decision about which tool is worth the time investment.

During the document review of the Twitter posts, a social media analytics tool was used. In reviewing these reports, the possible amplification of a post or message was noted. This area in particular is significant in evaluating a tool potential for influence. Further research in this area would be able to confirm if this amplification is realized over time. Understanding the actual reach these social media tools can have is important, but in this context, it is the follow up interviews to interact with participants to confirm if the message impacted their learning is of most importance. Delving into the Twitter data, it indicates when followers further act upon the original Twitter post to go outside of Twitter to view the resource links. What happens then is what might confirm how this tool does contribute to learning. These answers would come from extended research and interviews into the Twitter data, as well as communicating from more participants. Insight into the sustainability of the change effort would also be gained. Having multiple opportunities to gather data from the participants would indicate if these changes and internalizations are lasting or not.

It would be of great value to extend the time line of this study. Studying the actions of the new superintendent in his second year and beyond would allow for more insight into the work being done across the district.
Conclusion

District and community leaders across the nation are continually searching out ways to ensure that they fulfill their promise that all children will be academically supported and the achievement gap will be eradicated. There is a sense of urgency to this call, not only in the field of education but in the community at large. As superintendents assume their roles and responsibilities, the challenges are great and the stakes are high. Change efforts are launched across school systems with the intent to alter daily practice at all levels of the organization. There is research indicating that when district wide reform initiatives are executed without sufficient emphasis placed on support of learning, disconnect and misalignment occurs (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Stein & Coburn, 2008; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

This study examined how a new superintendent developed, diffused, and enacted a new systemic change effort across a district. It demonstrated the key role of the superintendent as the person who sets the tone and whose actions are influential to all who are watching. By promoting communication, connectedness, and collaboration, a fertile ground ripe for learning is established. It is the hope that these seeds of new learning will continue to be nurtured to grow into the foundation of sustainable change.
Appendix A Recruitment Letter

Hello fellow principals,

As you know I am now a second year doctoral student with the Joint Doctoral Program with UCSD and CSUSM. As part of my degree, I will complete a dissertation. The intent of my study will be to better understand the dynamics surrounding the interactions between district office leadership and site principals in an effort to identify positive factors that support district wide change. To do this, I plan to interview ten to fifteen different principals from within your school district.

I know how busy you must be. I too am an elementary school principal. My goal is to add to the field of research in the area of leadership that may benefit all principals in our position. Results of this study may add both theoretical and empirical research to inform superintendents, districts, and other administration responsible for implementing and supporting district change initiatives.

Please let me know if you would be willing to participate in my study. The interview should take no more than 45-60 minutes of your time at a time and location most beneficial to you. All data collected will be absolutely confidential and cannot be traced back to individual participants, and any links between codes, names, or districts will be permanently deleted upon completion of the dissertation.

Attached you will find a consent form with more information. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to sign the consent form at the time of the interview. You
will also have an opportunity to ask any questions before giving your consent. Of course, participation is voluntary and you may opt out at any time during the study.

Please email me or call me at (760) 274-6578 for more information or to arrange a time for an interview. Thank you in advance for your consideration of participation.

Appreciatively,

Laura Philyaw
Appendix B Draft Interview Questions for Principals

To principals:

1. Tell me about your school? Population you serve, parent involvement, strengths and accomplishments, areas you are working on?

2. Tell me about any district initiatives you are currently implementing at your site this year?

3. Tell me about your district leadership meetings? How often do you have them? Who is invited? Who participates and what are they about?

4. What is important in your district? How do you know?

5. How are things this year with a new superintendent? How are things the same or different?

6. Can you describe nature of the contacts you have with central office administrators? Include the frequency and reasons.

7. Tell me about your experiences with interacting with central office administrators.

8. Tell me about how your learning is supported?

9. Tell me about an instance where you interacted with central office that you found helpful.
   a. What was the context and were other people there?

10. Can you describe the contributing factors that supported the interaction to be positive?

11. What communities of practice do you belong to that are most helpful to you?
12. Is there a particular central office administrator that you feel most comfortable?
   
   Describe the characteristics that support this interaction.

13. What type of support provided by central office administrators would be most impactful to your role as an instructional leader?

14. Do you use Twitter for work? Who are you following?

15. Have you ever posted anything on Twitter that is work related? Have you ever re-Tweeted anything you have read that is work related?
Appendix C Draft Interview Questions for Superintendent

To Superintendent:

1. Tell me about yourself.
   a. What is most important to you in being superintendent?
   b. What do you see your role as?
   c. What have been your professional influences?
   d. What drew you to SUSD?

2. Tell me about this first year for you in SUSD.
   a. What have you learned about the district?
   b. Have you had any surprises?
   c. What are you excited about?
   d. What are you concerned about?

3. Tell me about the district’s new vision, values, and mission.
   a. How did you develop this?
   b. Who was involved?
   c. What were some influencing factors? Readings?

4. How have you communicated this new vision?
   b. What level of learning has occurred around this change effort?

5. Tell me about your plans for the district.
   a. What do you want to see happen in SUSD?
   b. What are the steps?
c. How will you use the social network data?

d. How do you foster interconnectedness?

e. What are your biggest challenges?
Appendix D Draft Interview Protocol for District Leadership

To Central Office Administrator / Assistant Superintendent:

1. Tell me about SUSD
   a. What are the strengths?
   b. What are the areas to improve upon?
   c. What are the next steps for SUSD?
   d. What needs to happen to achieve those steps?
   e. What are the obstacles?

2. Tell me about your new superintendent
   a. Were you part of the interview process?
   b. Did you have input into what you thought SUSD should have as a leader?
   c. Did you support his selection?
   d. How is he being received across the district?
      i. With central office?
      ii. With site principals?
      iii. With the unions?
      iv. With the community?
   e. What has he been working on? Where are his next steps?

3. Tell me about your interactions with site principals?
   a. How do you receive communication from the sites?
   b. How do you disseminate information to the sites?
   c. Who from the district do you have the most interaction with?
d. How often are you at the district office? At school sites?

e. Are you involved with collaborating with principals?

f. How do you or your department support learning for the principals?

4. Do you use Twitter for work? Who are you following?

5. Have you ever posted anything on Twitter that is work related? Have you ever re-Tweeted anything you have read that is work related?
Appendix E Document Protocol

Document reviewed will have the following lens of questions:

1. Is there evidence of the district vision?
2. Is there evidence of the district values?
3. Is there evidence of the district mission?
4. Is there evidence of supporting interconnectedness, collaboration, or communication?
5. Is there evidence of language that supports a focus on students?
6. Is there evidence of language that supports innovation?
7. Is there evidence of language that supports sharing ideas and welcoming input?
References


