

THE INFLUENCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY PLANS ON HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOL  
DISTRICTS

A Doctoral Research Project  
Presented to  
Associate Professor, Deborah Shea  
Doctoral Committee Chair  
Esteves School of Education  
The Sage Colleges

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Education  
In Educational Leadership

Debbie L. Ripchick  
October 15, 2015

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative comparative case study explored how two historically high performing school districts in the Capital Region of New York responded to the identification of a School in Need of a Local Assistance Plan for one or more subgroups. This study found that leaders within the case districts filtered the mandated plan elements through the lens of the vision and mission and what was already being implemented in the district thereby creating policy coherence. The ability to mediate the impact of policy to the system is a valuable survival skill and a requisite for an integrated, cohesive response to policy which at the rapid pace systems experience it today could be quite disruptive (Skrla & Rorrer, 2006). Furthermore, leaders within the case districts spoke of the designation as the external catalyst that allowed them to foreground issues of equity by engaging in conversation and professional development regarding beliefs about students and student subgroups and to make better use of data. References to actions that define the four interrelated roles of instructional leadership, foregrounding equity, creating policy coherence, and re-orienting the organization were made by leaders in the case districts (Rorrer et al., 2008). This study also found that the leaders within the case districts acted consistently with previous research (Skrla & Rorrer, 2006), that indicates that there has been a shift in the field that accountability policies based upon high stakes tests have given validity to the need to focus upon subgroups of students and achievement.

**Suggested Keywords:** high performing school districts, accountability, district role.

## Acknowledgements

Persistence and passion have served me well in my career to date; however, I only learned the true meaning of both with the undertaking of my doctoral journey. When I was too tired to persist, my desire to be a better leader, thinker, and researcher carried me forward. While it has not been an easy journey, it has been a rewarding one full of people who also deserve mention here.

First, I want to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Deborah Shea and professor/dissertation committee member, Dr. Francesca Durand for their patience, guidance, and critical feedback at just the right time. Without them, this dissertation would not have been possible.

I am also deeply indebted to my “Ark family” for their encouragement and support, without which I may never have set out on this journey in the first place. You have inspired me to remain fearless and persist.

Finally, I have to thank my husband, Jon, and our beautiful little boy, Ben. Jon, you took on the tasks of keeping the house running and whisking Ben away for the weekend at a moment’s notice when I needed to work. Without you, it would not have been possible. You are courageous for taking this leap with me and for moving halfway across the country in the middle of it. To my son, Ben, thank you for being my biggest cheerleader and inspiration. I missed quite a few bedtime stories, but you never complained. Most importantly, as a child who learns differently you have taught me the true meaning of courage and resiliency. I marvel at how hard you have worked without giving up and I am reminded that “courage doesn’t always roar, sometimes it’s the quiet voice at the end of the day whispering, *‘I will try again tomorrow.’*” --Mary Anne Radmacher

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Since winning a Race to the Top (RttT) grant in 2010, school districts in New York State have been working to implement the necessary requirements under these laws through what is commonly referred to as the Regents Reform Agenda. Since that time, school districts in New York State have had to revise and adopt curriculum aligned to the Common Core State Standards, ensure compliance with policies related to assessment systems, manage data and use it to inform instruction, re-open union contracts to negotiate teacher and principal evaluation, modify long-term budget plans and look for ways to fund new mandates that stemmed from both the Race to the Top (RttT) initiative (2009) and the Education and Secondary Education Act Flexibility Waiver (2011), granted to New York State (Mitchell, 2012). To do any of this effectively requires a good deal of time and funding. However, in an effort to change behavior quickly as policy levers are intended to do, implementation timelines have been short. This has brought concerns about whether districts have the capacity to do all of this work at this pace (Mitchell, 2012). With ESEA Flexibility waivers in place through 2019 and RttT grants in place for New York State school districts (New York State Department of Education, 2015), it is worth asking what happens when we move away from using state tests as measurement tools, and, instead, use them primarily as “policy levers?” (Welner, 2013).

In 2009 President Barack Obama signed into law the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA). Under ARRA, states and local school districts were given \$90 billion to prevent layoffs and update facilities, and it also included *Race to the Top* (RttT) that added \$4.35 billion to induce reform (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). RttT was a voluntary competitive grant and promised more funding to states for education reform.



However, it also came with mandates for state education departments and local districts. These mandates were designed as an enticement for states to adopt federal policies prior to the re-authorization of ESEA which had expired in 2007. Under RttT, states were challenged to significantly improve student outcomes. This included aiming for substantial gains in student achievement, particularly for underachieving subgroups, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring students are college and career ready. The grant process required “ambitious plans” in four core education reform areas: (a) adoption of standards and assessments, (b) building data systems that measure student growth and success and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction, (c) recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals where they are needed most, (d) and turning around the lowest-achieving schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

New York State is one of nine states to win the initial round of RttT funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). As such, the state agreed to the adoption of Common Core Standards and new assessments aligned with these standards along with annual performance reviews for teachers indicating whether they are effective (New York State Department of Education, 2010). While New York State and local school districts were working to implement these measures under the New York State Regents Reform Agenda, President Obama announced the ESEA Flexibility Waivers one year later (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). New York State applied and received this waiver in 2012. This added additional mandates for system leaders in New York State.

Under the waiver, districts will no longer be rated as making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP); however, subgroups will be monitored in each school for whether they each make AYP. Therefore, a district can remain in Good Standing under the new differentiated

accountability system yet have one or more buildings in which a subgroup does not close the achievement gap at the rate it is required to do so (New York State Union of Teachers, 2013). As a result, individual buildings within districts can be identified as having subgroups that do not make AYP requiring the district to create a Local Assistance Plan (LAP) in partnership with stakeholders for that building and those subgroups. A LAP is required for any district that is not a focus or priority district and has a school building in which one of the following occur: a) fails to make AYP for one or more subgroups on an accountability measure for three consecutive years, or b) has large gaps in achievement on an accountability measure for one or more subgroups and has not made sufficient progress in reducing or closing the gap, or c) is located in a non-Focus District but is among the lowest in the state for the performance of one or more subgroups for which the school is not showing progress (New York State Union of Teachers, 2013).

A district that has a building identified as requiring a LAP, will have to use the state approved Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness (DTSDE) with a group of stakeholders in the district. According to the New York State Department of Education, this tool “compares a school and district's practices to the optimal conditions of learning, as defined by the Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness (DTSDE) rubric” (New York State Department of Education, 2012). A plan must be created from this tool that is approved by the local board of education and posted on the district’s website (New York State Department of Education, 2012; New York State Union of Teachers, 2013).

New York State used the 2012-2013 New York State Grades 3-8 English Language Arts and Mathematics scores and graduation rate to determine accountability status for 2014-2015. The 2012-2013 NYS Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics assessments were the first

tests measuring Common Core Standards and the waiver marks the first time districts are required to meet targets set for each subgroup within each building (New York State Department of Education, 2012). This resulted in some districts, who traditionally met AYP based upon the whole student population, are now facing unprecedented identification by the state for population subgroups. This confluence of events creates unique local contexts for further exploration.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The poverty rate in our public schools has, for the first time, reached the majority level of 51% nationwide. While historically less prevalent in suburban areas, it is beginning to reach suburban school districts (Suitt, 2015; Frankenberg, 2013). In fact, the rate of increase in “suburban poor” grew by 139% between the years 2008-2012, three times faster than urban areas (Kneebone, 2014). Yet, educational reformers driving educational policy and educational researchers have largely overlooked this fact (Frankenberg, 2013). Frankenberg (2013) underscores the problem when she notes that there is very little educational literature that addresses the simultaneous phenomena of “suburbanization” and diversity in the public schools.

At the same time that the rate of poverty is rising in the suburbs, accountability policies are spotlighting the issue of the student achievement gap for students who live in poverty versus those who do not, as well as students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and minority students. While urban districts are more likely to face achievement gap issues, suburban districts are now facing the same problems and finding themselves under the same policies and mandates for improvement as their urban counterparts. Given that this is a newly illuminated phenomenon there is a gap in the research in how previously

high performing school districts are influenced by and respond to mandated accountability policies to close the achievement gap for students who are economically disadvantaged. Research does exist to support the ways in which districts respond to external policies. Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of this literature and proposed a framework that consists of four interrelated roles district leaders assume when leading change that promotes equity. This framework will be used to examine the cases in this study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study is to understand the influence of mandated accountability policies in two historically high performing districts in the Capital Region of New York State.

### **Research Questions**

The central research question is as follows:

How do superintendents, central office administrators, and principals in high performing school districts respond to the identification of a School in Need of a Local Action Plan (LAP) for one or more subgroups?

Sub questions are as follows:

1. What do district and school leaders know about academic achievement for this subpopulation that led to the school being identified as a Local Assistance Plan School and how does/did this inform improvement planning decisions at the building level when creating and implementing the required Local Assistance Plan (LAP)?
2. How well do the elements of the Local Assistance Plan (Self-Assessment Template) align with district priorities?

3. What opportunities and challenges are identified by district and school leaders as a result of the identification of a School in Need of a Local Action Plan (LAP) for one or more subgroups?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study examines the data through the theoretical framework proposed by Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008). In that theoretical framework, the district, as an organized collective of leaders, performs four interrelated roles when enacting policy for reform that advances achievement and equity: a) providing instructional leadership, b) re-orienting the organization, c) establishing policy coherence, and d) maintaining an equity focus (Rorrer et al., 2008). This theoretical framework will be used to identify the ways in which the leaders in high performing districts use these inter-related roles to make sense of and respond to the state accountability policy. How the district creates policy coherence and foregrounds equity issues are central to the accountability era in which all districts now operate.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is aimed at filling a research gap on how historically high performing school districts in the Capital Region of New York respond to the identification of a School in Need of a Local Action Plan for one or more subgroups. It is hoped that a better understanding will aid districts similar in composition and promote more effective policy. Elmore (1997) states that local districts *and* the federal government will become “spectators” in the state-to-school struggle unless they can find some way to participate in it productively” (p. 44). As Lee and Wong (2004) point out there are “very few studies that examine the extent to which different socioeconomic groups benefit from accountability policies, with adequate support for schooling conditions and resources” (p. 799). While it is not within the scope of this

study to look at outcomes, it is hoped that this study and its exploration of the impact of policy mandates on school districts that have been historically high performing, have adequate resources, and adequate schooling conditions may contribute to the policy dialogue and the literature.

This study will add to the dialogue on policy implementation at the local level as well as understand the degree to which the DTSDE mandated plan components under the policy are adequate in this context. This dissertation's literature review will discuss the following:

- Key Policies and Laws Leading to Current Standards-Based Accountability
- Policy Levers and the Achievement Gap
- Leading Change that Promotes Equity and Achievement for All Students
- District Response to Policy Mandates

### **Definition of Terms**

*Average Need/Resource Category:* The Need/Resource Categories are “a measure of a district’s ability to meet the needs of its students with local resources. It is the ratio of the estimated poverty percentage to the combined Wealth Ratio” (New York State Department of Education, 2010). A low or average need compared to the local capacity means that these districts have a greater ability to meet the needs of its students with local resources than a district with high needs and low resources. (New York State Department of Education, 2010).

*Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):* The State is responsible for determining the methods and procedures for measuring adequate yearly progress. Adequate yearly progress as defined by a State describes the amount of yearly improvement each Title I school and district is expected to make in order to enable low-achieving children to meet

high performance levels expected of all children. (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b)

*Common Core State Standards:* The Common Core is a set of academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade (“About the Standards,” 2014).

*Diagnostic Tool for School District Effectiveness (DTSDE):* A template for creating a Local Assistance Plan (LAP) created by the State Department of Education. This tool asks the district to compare a school and district's practices to the optimal conditions of learning in six areas: a) District Leadership and Capacity, b) School Leader Practices and Decisions, c) Curriculum Development and Support, d) Teacher Practices and Support, e) Student Social Emotional and Developmental Health, and f) Family and Community Engagement. If a district finds itself anything lower than “Effective” in one of the six categories, it must discuss how it will address the area in its LAP (New York State Department of Education, 2012b).

*Economically Disadvantaged:* Economically disadvantaged students are those who participate in, or whose family participates in, economic assistance programs, such as the free or reduced-price lunch programs, Social Security Insurance (SSI), Food Stamps, Foster Care, Refugee Assistance (cash or medical assistance), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), Safety Net Assistance (SNA), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), or Family Assistance: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). If one student in a family is identified as low

income, all students from that household (economic unit) may be identified as low income. (New York State Department of Education, 2015b)

*Local Assistance Plan (LAP):* A plan that is developed with a group of stakeholders in the district to raise student achievement for the identified subgroup in a particular building. The district must use the state approved Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness (DTSDE). A plan must be created from this tool that is approved by the local board of education and posted on the district's website (New York State Department of Education, 2015d).

*New York State Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility Waiver:*

In September 2011, President Obama announced an ESEA regulatory flexibility initiative, based upon the Secretary of Education's authority to issue waivers. New York State was granted a waiver from the mandate of 100% proficiency by 2014 under No Child Left Behind (2001) provided it adopted Common Core Standards, teacher evaluation systems, and accountability for subgroups in all buildings (New York State Department of Education, 2012a).

*Subgroup:* For accountability purposes in NYS, disaggregated data is reported for the following groups of students: All, Students with Disabilities, Native American, Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, Limited English Proficiency, Economically Disadvantaged, and Multiracial. (OCM BOCES, n.d.).

### **Delimitation/Scope**

This is a study of districts and the participants in this study were district level members of the leadership team. The leadership teams, inclusive of the superintendent and assistant superintendent as well as the building principal for the building that required a



Local Assistance Plan (LAP), were in the best position to speak about changes in practices and policies at the district level. School districts were chosen from all of the districts which have appeared in the *Albany Business Review* in the top 20 of the 85 districts in the Capital Region over the past five years and which also appear on the 2014-2015 New York State Department of Education Accountability Status list as requiring a LAP plan for one or more buildings. Delimitations of this study include the choice to focus upon suburban school districts. Therefore, it may not be generalizable to urban or rural districts. Additionally, the design of the study to focus upon only historically high performing school districts is another delimitation. The researcher chose this scope of work to examine how high performing school systems respond to policy mandates which affect all school districts. Given the relative wealth and overall high performance of these districts it could be assumed they have the resources, leadership and capacity to respond to the mandate in ways non historically high performing school districts may not.

### **Limitation of the Study**

The generalizability of the study is limited due to the small number of cases being analyzed, the experience level of leaders, and the nature of all leaders interviewed.

This qualitative study is limited to two case districts in the Capital Region of New York State and may not be generalizable to other districts or replicable due both to the nature of qualitative research, state, and region chosen for study. Other states may or may not be under the same ESEA flexibility waivers and local governance and contexts for school districts are obviously different and a different result may be obtained.

This study is also limited in that the system leaders within both case districts are experienced system leaders. It may not be generalizable to system leaders who are new to a system or who are only one to two years into their tenure.

This study is also limited by the nature of whom the researcher chose to interview—system leaders and the building leader of the identified school building. Different responses may have been obtained if the researcher had interviewed other leaders within the district, instructional coaches, or teachers. It is hoped that the experiences and responses of those chosen from historically high performing school districts may help to inform the policy dialogue.

### **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation has five chapters. The remaining four chapters of this dissertation are organized in the following manner: Chapter 2 highlights the key policies and laws that focus on accountability which have led to an unprecedented number of mandates impacting system leaders currently. This is followed by an exploration of the impact of these policy levers upon the achievement gap. The role of the district and how to lead change under the accountability system in New York State is the focus of the second half of the chapter. Chapter 3 details the methodology for this qualitative comparative case study and the framework used for analysis proposed by Rorrer, et al. (2008) which outlines four interrelated roles system leaders use to lead for equity. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study including the relationship to the four interrelated roles, as well as new data. Chapter 5 draws conclusions from the findings and makes recommendations for both practice and policy as well as areas for further study.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

School districts are charged with raising student achievement amidst competing mandates generated by a complex and layered system of policymaking in the United States (Louis, 2012; 2013). Not only has the role of the federal government and state education agencies expanded, but the United States has also moved toward national standards; a complete shift from where reform began with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. This shift began with the 1983 report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled *A Nation at Risk*, in which it was asserted, among other things, that foreign students were poised to outpace our students academically. The underlying premise for reform in education that our society requires higher levels of knowledge than it has in the past continues today (Vinovskis, 2009). As a result, school district leaders in the United States find themselves facing an unprecedented number of mandates as a result of federal, state, and local policy (Louis, 2012; 2013).

In 1997, Richard Elmore noted that incongruence between policies happens because of one “fundamental principle of U.S. politics—that political decisions and actions are the result of competing groups with different resources and capacities vying for influence in a constitutional system that encourages conflict as an antidote to the concentration of power” (p.42). Elmore (1997) asserted that there would be a more intensified focus on content standards because those are easy targets for organized interests, but said standards would just be a vehicle in the drive to accountability. He also predicted the inevitable lack of coherence at the national or state level in terms of accountability policies and related mandates. As he predicted, the ensuing 18 years have brought incentives to adopt national standards with greater accountability measures (Goals 2000: Educate America Act; Elementary and

Secondary Education Reauthorization Act, 1994; No Child Left Behind, 2001; American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, 2009).

This chapter will briefly review the key legislation that lead to the current context of accountability policies and mandates in New York State. Next, literature that highlights both the positive and negative effects of policy aimed at closing the achievement gap will be presented. The chapter shifts at this point to the practical lens of how systems and system leaders lead change that promotes equity and achievement for all students and the role of the school district in this endeavor. Chapter two concludes with a framework for defining the role of the system leader and the school district as an institutional actor in the era of accountability proposed by Rorrer et al. (2008). The four roles delineated in the Rorrer et al. (2008) framework are one lens through which the case districts will be analyzed for the ways in which school districts may mediate the impact of the number of mandates from both the state and federal government within the local context.

The purpose of this study is to understand the influence of mandated accountability plans on historically high performing school districts in the Capital Region of New York. A better understanding of current policy is needed to promote more effective future policy. This study also intends to add to the dialogue about how a high performing school district responds to the mandate to change in order to ensure equity for students who live in poverty within the district.

### **Key Legislation and Events Leading to Current Standards-Based Accountability Policies**

In 1983, The National Commission on Excellence in Education released its report entitled *A Nation at Risk*. This report concluded that the nation's schools were failing and called for reform in education predicated upon "excellence and high expectations for all

students” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 20). It also underscored that education is tied to economic success and the power of the nation. The report recommended that schools, colleges and universities adopt high standards that could be measured, that principals and district leaders must play a crucial role in garnering support for this, and that the federal government had the “primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education” (pp. 40-41). The report also concluded that the federal government should “collect data and statistics about education in general” (p.41). In sum, national attention was brought to the fact that the nation’s schools were underperforming and that the nation’s economic future was at risk if reform did not happen quickly.

*A Nation at Risk* (1983) initiated the modern history of education reform in which accountability measures increased through policies and laws including the Goals 2000: Educate American Act of 1994 and the Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Reauthorization Act of 1994, and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001.

Under NCLB (2001), expectations for student proficiency toward state standards increased toward the goal of 100% proficient by 2014. However, with a national fiscal crisis in 2007, education funding was at risk. In 2009, President Obama passed the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) (2009) which dramatically increased education funding. Under ARRA, states and local school districts were given \$90 billion to prevent layoffs and update facilities and keep spending at 2008 levels. The Act also included *Race to the Top* (RttT), a competitive grant that added \$4.35 billion of funding to states for education reform (U.S. Department of Education, 2009c). In order to receive the grant, state departments of education in partnership with local districts were challenged to significantly improve student outcomes. This included aiming for substantial gains in student

achievement, particularly for underachieving subgroups, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring students are college and career ready. The grant process required “ambitious plans” in four core education reform areas: a) adoption of standards and assessments, b) building data systems that measure student growth and success and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction, c) recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals where they are needed most; and d) turning around the lowest-achieving schools (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2009c). Two states won the initial round of applications and nine states won the second round, including New York (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a).

In 2011, President Obama announced that his administration was giving states flexibility from certain provisions of NCLB (2001) under ESEA Flexibility Waivers (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The U.S. Department of Education stated that it would give flexibility regarding some NCLB requirements “in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). As a result, waivers were granted to 43 states to provide relief from the NCLB mandate of 100% proficiency by 2014, as long as state education departments agreed to adopt Common Core Standards, teacher evaluation systems, and accountability for subgroups (New York State Union of Teachers, 2013).

### **Accountability in New York State**

In 2012, New York was granted a waiver from some of the requirements of the ESEA (1965), also known as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and it was renewed in 2015 (New York State Department of Education, 2012a). The New York State ESEA Waiver

calculates Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in a similar manner as NCLB; however, it is only calculated for subgroups. As a result of the waiver, New York State maintains that it can now set more realistic goals for closing the achievement gap for subgroups of students (New York State Department of Education, 2012a). The stated goal by New York State is “to reduce by half for each ESEA accountability group the percentage of students who are not proficient or on track to proficiency in terms of college and career readiness in English Language Arts and mathematics (New York State Department of Education, 2012a).

According to a fact sheet put out by the New York State Department of Education entitled “Ten things to Know about the ESEA Waiver” Annual Measurable Objectives and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) are being calculated and used differently. The new calculation determines whether students are proficient or “making acceptable growth toward proficiency” (New York State Department of Education, n.d.). The document further states that AYP is now used in a more limited way “as part of the process of identifying Reward Schools and Schools requiring Local Assistance Plans and no longer is the key determinant of a school or a district’s accountability status” (New York State Department of Education, n.d.). Therefore, this results in some districts that have traditionally met AYP based on the whole student population facing unprecedented identification by the state.

A Local Assistance Plan (LAP) is required for any district that is not a focus or priority district and has a school building in which one of the following occur: 1) fails to make AYP for one or more subgroups on an accountability measure for three consecutive years; or 2) has large gaps in achievement on an accountability measure for one or more subgroups and has not made sufficient progress in reducing or closing the gap; or 3) is located in a non-focus district but is among the lowest in the state for the performance of one

or more subgroups for which the school is not showing progress (New York State Union of Teachers, 2013).

A district that has a building identified as requiring a Local Assistance Plan will have to use the state approved Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness (DTSDE) with a group of stakeholders in the district. According to the New York State Department of Education, this tool “compares a school and district's practices to the optimal conditions of learning, as defined by the Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness (DTSDE) rubric” (New York State Department of Education, 2012b). A plan must be created from this tool that is approved by the local board of education and posted on the district’s website (New York State Department of Education, 2012a; New York State Union of Teachers, 2013).

As noted previously under New York’s waiver, suburban areas are beginning to see the pressure for accountability for subgroups of students in its elementary schools similar to what large urban and small city schools have been experiencing since the enactment of NCLB. Whether they have the capacity, resources and ability to balance the prescribed accountability plans and raise student achievement where this has failed in other areas, is yet to be seen. However, this study will fill a gap in the knowledge about how historically high performing school districts in suburban areas respond to the accountability policies. It is a timely case study that may shed some light on what has been a chronic issue in the goal to raise student achievement for all.

This section outlined key policies and legislation in education reform leading up to the current context of reform in New York State. The next section highlights the impact of policy on closing the achievement gap and then the chapter shifts to how districts can



respond in order to lead change that promotes equity and achievement for all students, since policy impacts all system leaders.

### **Policy Levers and the Achievement Gap**

The impact of policy on the achievement gap is a topic in the literature upon which there is no consensus.

Lee and Wong (2004) found in the time period prior to NCLB (1990 to 2000) that the Black-White achievement gap remained the same. They also found that the achievement gap between students who qualified for free and reduced lunch and those who did not remained the same from 1990-2000. This led them to conclude that states that had adopted accountability policies had not had a negative effect on student achievement and certainly the gap did not widen (Lee & Wong, 2004).

A look at the data post-NCLB indicates that there have been gains overall. According to Paul Manna (2011), states that have had consistency in the testing system, have shown gains in student achievement scores, but rather inconsistently across grade levels and subjects since the introduction of NCLB. Chudowsky, Chudowsky, and Kober (2009) looked at long term data on state trends from 2001 to 2008 for the Center for Education Policy and also found that “student achievement, as measured by the percentages of students reaching various achievement levels, has generally increased across the board since 2002” (p.1). The conclusion is that NCLB has increased student achievement, but it should be noted that the achievement gap still remains, just as it did pre-NCLB.

Demonstrating again that there is no clear consensus in the literature about the impact of accountability policies on the achievement gap, Lee and Reeves (2012) found that state reading trends both pre and post-NCLB have remained the same or declined since NCLB and

“experienced setbacks to previous gains” realized prior to NCLB (p. 224). They add that while this is true, the magnitude of the gains or losses in the post-NCLB period were relatively small with mixed patterns of progress in narrowing achievement gaps. Again, mathematics continued to show significant progress in narrowing the gap. Dee and Jacobs (2010) confirm this with their findings that the increase in test scores for students in reading have not improved comparably to the gains made in the lower grades in mathematics. They found that students who live in poverty made bigger gains in mathematics than they did in reading. While Olson (2002) and Lee & Reeves (2012) found that the achievement gap had narrowed some in mathematics, the gap was being closed at a quicker pace pre-NCLB. While there is no consensus on how post-NCLB (2001) policies have impacted the achievement gap, it is clear from the literature cited above that there still remains an achievement gap.

While attempts to quantify gains in closing the achievement gap have been elusive, Scheurich et al (2000) argue that accountability systems for economically disadvantaged students are neither all good nor all bad. On one hand, they found that there is research that supports the idea that large numbers of at-risk students are being forced to drop out or are being pushed out by accountability systems. On the other hand, they maintain that this may be an historic moment in which equity for students of color and those who live in poverty is brought to the forefront, acknowledged, and no longer accepted. Lee and Wong (2004) assert that raising standards and using high stakes tests may narrow the achievement gap by motivating schools to close the gap at a faster rate than it is raised for non-disadvantaged students. Nagle, Yunker, and Malmgren (2006) point out that the message is also clear “school systems will no longer be judged successful unless they successfully teach all

learners” (p. 37). The question remains as to-how best to reach all learners given the existing structure of schools and school districts and in the twenty-five years since researchers have looked at the effect of accountability policies on the achievement gap, it still remains (Chudowsky et al., 2009; Dee, 2010; Lee & Reeves, 2012; Lee & Wong, 2004; Olson, 2002; Scheurich et al., 2000).

In sum, the push for accountability targets for subgroups of students divided up by race, economic status, or students with disabilities has been viewed as both positive for drawing attention to the issue as well as creating both real and potentially negative consequences like narrowing of the curriculum and “de-skilling teachers” (Scheurich et al, 2000).

National policy makers and state education agencies have looked at the results from over 25 years of accountability and they have continued to adjust and reward schools and districts for how well they serve certain populations of students. This leaves system leaders with knowledge of the history of reform in the position of wondering how to lead in a way that promotes equity and achievement for students who live in poverty while at the same time keeping an eye on accountability policy and implementing accountability measures.

Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan and Foley (2004) suggest that the answer does not lie solely in policy. They maintain that

...local schools know students best. Second, the state should not be making decisions about individual students. Instead, the role of the state is to ensure all students’ access to high quality teaching to guarantee their success. In the spirit of democracy and local innovation, schools and districts assume primary responsibility over both assessment and its relation to retention, promotion, and graduation decisions. A

central tenet is the accountability of schools and districts to the communities they serve. (pp. 61-62).

### **Leading Change that Promotes Equity and Achievement for All Students**

There is agreement that closing the achievement gap and meeting the needs of diverse learners is a more complex situation than just implementing accountability measures (Elmore, 1997; Lee & Reeves, 2012; Nagle, Yunker, & Malmgren, 2006; Sunderman, 2013; Vinovskis, 2009).

In fact, Sunderman (2013) suggests that federal policy since the 1960's has shifted radically from an understanding of the structural and funding inequities for economically disadvantaged students to the current atmosphere of federal policy in which societal issues are downplayed or often overlooked under the guise of being objective. Since these policies have largely ignored the inequity that exists, there is a movement to lead for social justice and equity in which societal factors are examined (Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Scheurich et al, 2000; Sunderman, 2013). Since students living in poverty make up over 50% of students in public schools in the United States for the first time, it is imperative that the issue be highlighted (Suits, 2015). The problem has gotten so large that Steve Suits (2015) at the Southern Education Foundation wrote that it is no longer an issue of fairness. He went on to state "the success or failure [of economically disadvantaged students] will determine the entire body of human capital and educational potential that the nation will possess in the future" (p. 4).

Sunderman (2013) proposes focusing on schooling conditions and the within school policies and practices that are relevant to facilitating learning. Larson and Murtadha (2002) argue that we should ask instead how those hardships affect the freedom of these students to

achieve while simultaneously inviting the community to be a part of the discussion. They found that “the adoption of high stakes testing has silenced discussion of curriculum and closed school doors to the insights, concerns, and needs of the families served by schools” (p. 146). They also state that leaders must question the top down decision-making that is happening because it keeps citizens who live in poverty out of the decision-making. Trujillo & Renee (2012) also argue for the inclusion of the stakeholder in the community through a more democratic theory of education.

Finally, in places with accountability policies that are having a positive impact upon equity, researchers have found that there are also lower class sizes and more equitable funding (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson & Koschoreck, 2004).

The previous sections have chronicled the history of education reform initiatives, the rise of standards-based reform along with the call for measurable progress through accountability plans, and whether those policies have had an impact to subgroups measured on these standards. This section highlights the role of the district in meeting performance targets set by the various policies and legislation by both the federal government and the state education agencies.

### **Role of the District**

The era of accountability has brought with it studies to determine the role best served by the district office. However, the literature largely addresses urban school districts. Trujillo (2013) analyzed fifty studies focused upon district policies, processes, conditions and behavior affecting classroom behavior. What she found was that the research to date on district effectiveness is similar to the correlates of effective schools in that districts must have a clear mission or vision; frequent monitoring progress; promote strong instructional

leadership, and have high expectations for students and teachers. Trujillo (2013) concludes that the research focuses upon technical aspects (e.g. structure of district and district office, curriculum, and managerial elements). She notes that this may be because these are the strongest ways in which to affect district performance through test scores. Given the increased focus on performance under NCLB (2001) and the ESEA waiver (2011) provided by state education agencies, it would make sense that districts would focus on aligning all standards and assessments to the curriculum. She also concluded that central office has a greater reach than the individual school in its ability to make large-scale change focused on testing. However, Trujillo (2013) also suggests that this takes a “reductionist view” of the purpose of education. She also maintains that this is bound to lead to blaming the district when they fail to meet achievement targets for economically disadvantaged and minority groups. Finally, Trujillo (2013) found that the research minimized the “pervasive roles that class, race, or ideology played in these schools, and how these factors interacted with the technical dimensions of schools to produce certain patterns in student outcomes” (p. 433). Once again this highlights the reality that the policies by federal and state education agencies dismiss or ignore the context of living in poverty and historical issues associated with race and equity found in society (Elmore, 1997; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Scheurich et al, 2000; Sen, 1992; Sunderman, 2013), all of which are factors outside of the district’s purview.

Leithwood and Louis (2012) advise that district policies and practices about instruction can be powerful enough to impact teachers. This is done through the relationship between the district office and the building level leader suggesting that this partnership is critical to school reform because it facilitates principal learning (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Leithwood and Louis (2012) also found that higher performing

districts communicated a strong belief in principals and teachers, built consensus around core expectations, differentiated support to schools based on compliance and skill, and set clear expectations for school leadership by recruiting and providing training to principals.

Both studies highlight the fact that one of the roles played by the district is that of support to the building, in particular the building principal. In sum, districts that have policies, practices, and behaviors that clearly communicate high and consistent expectations, monitor frequently, and provide a high degree of support to the building are higher achieving (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Elmore, 1996; Leithwood & Louis, 2013; Trujillo, 2013)

Elmore (1996) suggests that in addition to creating and articulating what it means for teachers to teach and learners to learn at high levels, districts must create organizational structures that allow educators and building leaders to work on “problems of practice” (p. 20). Meaning, teachers can observe practice directly to solve an instructional issue and then adjust through trial and error and feedback. Additionally, districts must create intentional processes for the reproduction of successes (Elmore, 1996). To that end, he proposes experimenting with incremental growth models for teachers, concentrating those who have grown across buildings or encouraging good practitioners to start a new school using the “genetic material” of their own knowledge and understanding to recruit new teachers. He also stresses the need to disseminate good teaching practices across schools. Alternatively, if districts do not do this type of work and accountability policies continue to use high-stakes tests in teacher evaluation policies, Welner (2013) asserts that preparation for the test will become the job of teaching.

Elmore (2002) proposes that districts “design everyone’s work primarily in terms of improving the capacity and performance of someone else—system administrators of

principals and teachers, principals of teachers, teachers of students. In a well-developed system, the order should be reversed as well (p. 30). This would involve a restructuring of the district office which is corroborated by research in high performing districts in California and New York City (Elmore, 2000; Honig, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). Honig (2009) studied districts that created positions within the district office to do just this type of work through a small schools office (SSO). She found them to be boundary spanners who helped both the district office perform their duties better as well as provide support to the buildings. In this way, everyone's work was designed to improve the performance and capacity of someone else. The most significant finding in this study is that the administrators' ability to build capacity (building knowledge and relationships between the buildings and other central office administrators) showed promise as "levers of central office change" (p. 417). The study concluded that it is worth investing in people within central offices to engage in new work practices. When there is communication in both directions, as Elmore (2000) suggests, the district is a learning organization that learns to do the right things in its own setting. Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, and McLaughlin (2002) called this "nested learning communities."

Hannaway and Kimball (1998) did the first systematic analysis of the progress of standards-based reform in U.S. school districts, and what they found was that districts play an important role. Moreover, bigger districts had more resources to promote reform. They noted that in districts with larger concentrations of poverty, the effects on the district were moderated.

Studies have also shown that districts can play a key role through the policy system and as an agent in promoting, or inhibiting, the improvement of teaching and learning.



(Elmore, 1997; Elmore & Burney, 1998, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Which is similar to another role for the district supported in recent literature as one of creating “policy coherence” (Elmore, 1992; Louis and Robinson, 2012; Honig & Hatch, 2004). Honig and Hatch (2004) define policy coherence as “an ongoing process in which schools and school district central offices work together to help schools manage external demands” (p. 26). Elmore (1992) suggests that “one possible reason for the continued existence of local districts is that they provide a “valuable buffer against precipitous shifts in state and national policy that are inconsistent with local preferences (p. 103). Louis and Robinson (2012) explain that the context in which schools operate is layered and complex. Not only are there multiple external mandates but also there is an internal context of reform that is also situated within the beliefs of the leaders of the district. They, in turn, translate the policy into something that fits within their context

Currently, there are two ways to look at crafting coherence between the external and the internal (Louis & Robinson, 2012). The first is an “outside-in” approach. That is, to have policymakers make fewer and better-aligned reform demands. However, Louis and Robinson (2012) concede that the policy may be coherent; however, it may not be interpreted that way at the district and school level. The second approach is the inside-out approach—where schools create the solutions that fit their local context from a menu of options. This is similar to what New York State has put in place for districts with schools that have subgroups not meeting performance targets. School leaders are free to shape, in partnership with the district and community, a proposal that fits the criteria of the New York State Local Assistance Plan (LAP). Louis and Robinson (2012) concluded that if leaders within the district cannot establish a clear internal agenda, an external policy will not help them do so.

They go on to state “even those leaders who have a clear reform focus do not necessarily have the strategic skills required to integrate it with the external policy framework” (p. 633).

Overall, Louis and Robinson (2012) found that leaders at the building level who believed that the external mandate gave them clarity and focus, aligned everything to the standards and were successful. Leaders within the district that could not make sense of the external mandate stated that the targets kept changing or that they were impossible to meet. Since they did not agree with the policy it was more difficult to affect change. This underscores the important role district office and building principals play in making sense of policies.

Overall, the findings of this study according to Louis and Robinson (2012)

...confirmed the importance of developing school leaders with a clear educational vision that is grounded in understanding of their teachers and families, and the knowledge and skills to partner with their own teachers and their district office in its pursuit. They develop the capacity to bridge the external accountability demands and specific localized needs. (p. 659)

Honig and Hatch (2004) report three activities that the act of crafting coherence entails: (a) schools establish their own goals and strategies which are specific and open ended to allow for adaptation, (b) schools use their goals and strategies as the basis for deciding whether to bridge or buffer external demands accomplished through partnership with the district who interprets the schools’ decision and is the local supporter of it and, (c) district office supports the decision making process by continually searching for and using information about school goals, strategies, and experiences to inform their own operations. They stress that it is necessary to continuously use the feedback loops to adapt. In this way,

the system uses the information to create a script for responding which leads to the setting of goals and strategies.

### **District Response to Policy Mandates**

This leaves both federal and state policy makers with much to consider when proposing reforms and certainly has an influence on the local school district. While closing the achievement gap remains the priority for federal, state, and local educational leaders, how that is to be done under the current policies is not clear. Instead, the influence of multiple mandates and policies continue to mount while local leaders look for ways to meet the needs of their most diverse learners.

Terry (2010) found that districts respond to policy mandates in three developmental stages. She maintains that districts do not automatically progress past stage one, an information gathering stage during which the district determines whether they will comply with the mandate. An affirmative decision to do so moves them from compliance into commitment where they address internal management issues and align structures, resources, and responsibilities to comply with the mandate. In order to move into stage three, or the capacity building stage, the district must decide to confront cultural beliefs and practices that are in conflict with the mandate, use resources to leverage change, and implement innovative practices. This is where real change occurs.

Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) define the role of the district willing to undertake change in the era of accountability and this is examined in the next section as it is germane to the analysis of the case districts in this study.

### **Four essential roles for districts leading for equity in the era of accountability.**

The previous section highlighted the research on the role of both the school and the school district and underscores that the district is a necessary agent in bringing about true reform. What becomes clear, then, in an era of accountability is that the district must fully understand its roles and how to create policy coherence in order to raise student achievement for all students, in particular, those the legislation was exclusively designed to help beginning with ESEA (1965). Rohrer et al. (2009) conducted a narrative synthesis in which four primary and interdependent roles were identified in the literature as reform oriented roles toward the improvement of instruction and advancing equity. They provide a framework for the four interdependent roles played by a district with a reform stance: instructional leadership, reorienting the organization, establishing policy coherence, and maintaining an equity focus. It is this last role of maintaining an equity focus that Rorrer et al. (2008) suggest has the capability to disrupt institutional inequities and create sustainable change. This study explores whether an outside mandate influences a high performing school district to foreground equity. Can external mandates be the catalyst that casts enough doubt on a system to highlight inequities within the system that cause the gap?

The first role performed by districts undertaking reform or change described by Rorrer et al. (2008) is instructional leader. While acknowledging that there is no agreed upon definition for the term in the literature to date, generating the will to reform and building the capacity to do so are solidly mentioned in all research on instructional leaders. The research in this area addresses the need to mobilize personnel, manage change and all of its stages, make district and school linkages, apply consistent pressure on schools, and provide targeted support. These have been discussed in the research by Leithwood & Louis (2012) and

Marzano and Waters (2009) and summarized in Rorrer et al. (2008) framework as instructional leadership. Elmore (2000) also calls this “reciprocity of accountability and capacity” that is, with formal authority to hold someone accountable, there is an equal responsibility to ensure that they have the capacity to do what is being asked.

The second role involves reorienting the organization which involves aligning the structures and processes to support systemic reform. Rorrer et al. (2008) define this role as one in which leadership must re-define the beliefs, expectations, and norms within the district and then shift the structures within the district to support them. Kotter (2002) described this as communicating and removing obstacles and Bolman and Deal (2008) describe this within the structural frame as building structures to support the change process.

Rorrer et al. (2008) describe changing the culture through the use of feedback loops between the district and the school. Elmore (2000) also describes this recursive process as a focus on organized, social learning. He explains that the district has to learn to do the right thing through an ongoing process of dialogue. The feedback loop described by Rorrer et al. (2008) demonstrates one way to do this in practice.

The third role played by districts is to establish policy coherence. In the current era of accountability in education, this role is critical. District leadership, school principals and classroom teachers are awash in policy mandates on a daily basis. Therefore, Rorrer et al (2008) describe the imperative for districts to move beyond just compliance with a mandate. They describe coherence as molding a policy mandate to “district-specific derivatives” (p. 323). Terry (2010) is careful to point out that districts can choose to stop at merely compliance with a policy mandate, however, Rorrer et al. (2008) argue that in order to achieve systemic reform districts will need to respond by adapting the policy for their own

purposes. Honig & Hatch (2004) describe this process on a continuum ranging from buffering the district from the policy to bridging in which districts align their own needs with the policy.

Rorrer & Skrla (2005) found that district leaders integrate state accountability policies into district goals rather than imposing accountability on schools. The key findings from this study were that districts possess interest and agency when it comes to shaping policy at the state level. They argue that districts are units of local governance in a federal system and as such can mobilize support or buffer others from it. They also found that districts mediate state and federal policy in order to maintain their legitimacy, and by integrating the external policy with local reform efforts, they play a valid and integral role in reform.

The final, and most important, role of the district when working toward closing the achievement gap is to maintain an equity focus. The district must acknowledge inequities within its structures and practices that have perpetuated inequity in student achievement (Rorrer et al., 2008). Furthermore, the district must own these past inequities without making excuses and work toward changing the culture within the district. Rorrer et al. (2008) define the qualities of a leader who foregrounds equity as one who responds with sincere commitment to improving the learning of all students and understands that it will not be a quick fix. The role of the leader requires that district leaders discuss the inequities that have been reinforced historically and within their own system. Rorrer et al. (2008) point out that recent research shows that districts are capable of disrupting and displacing institutionalized structures and practices that perpetuate inequity in student achievement but it is only a recent focus of study.

In order for district leaders to disrupt institutionalized structures and practices effectively, there must be transparency with student achievement data and leaders must put a plan into place that includes developing programs and teaching strategies that lead to higher achievement. They must also monitor results, align curriculum, and assessments and use research to inform planning for improvement (Rorrer et al., 2008).

Rorrer et al. (2008) found that organizational change to date has used cause-effect relationships to show how to manage change. Research to date has not focused on the interdependency and interrelatedness of the four roles. Rorrer et al. (2008) maintain that there is a tension in the research to date between centralized and decentralized power and tight and loose coupling. Districts are complex and they are a mix of tight and loose coupling. Weick states “a tight coupling in one part of the system can occur only if there is a loose coupling in another part of the system” and that “it may be the pattern of couplings that produces the observed outcomes” (p. 10). With that foundation, Rorrer et al. (2008) propose their framework of the four roles of the district and use Weick’s premise that while predominately loose, there is “variable coupling” in the roles just as there is variable coupling in the system itself. Weick (1976) also stated: “tight control over core values allows loosely coupled systems to survive and cohere through idiosyncratic local adaptations” (p. 113). These “patterns” or “couplings” are the foundation upon which Rorrer et al. (2008) base their framework and in using this framework as a lens in this study, the degree to which leaders within the case districts use the four roles will be analyzed. Additionally, since tight control over core values is something that most high performing school districts share in common—otherwise they would not be high performing—whether this is evident in the case districts is also a focus of the study.

## Summary

There have been a variety of efforts to reform education in this country since The National Commission on Excellence in Education issued its report (1983). While these efforts have been far reaching, there has not been much improvement (Vinovskis, 2009). Vinovskis asserts that most recent studies have ended with the enactment of NCLB; leaving largely unexplored the influence of NCLB at the state and local level.

This lack of research is particularly true regarding how the influence of policy mandates on historically high performing school districts trying to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged and students with disabilities in New York State. This study fills a portion of the gap on how accountability plans, introduced under NCLB (2001) and further defined under the ESEA flexibility waivers (2011), influence the local level to address inequity.

This study is timely in that under the ESEA Flexibility Waiver (2011) in New York State, school districts that have been relatively high performing are now feeling the impact of accountability plans which have historically only been imposed upon the lowest performing schools in the state. This is happening at the same time they are working to implement APPR, Common Core State Standards, and the creation of robust data systems to inform teaching and learning. This has forced them to determine what their role and response will be in relation to the accountability policies in effect for the 2014-2015 school year.

While there have been numerous strategies, programs, and organizational structures tried in this same time period under the accountability designations of NCLB, none of them have proven effective (Welner & Mathis, 2015). Inasmuch as high performing districts share many of the attributes of effective districts, have an average amount of resources to expend and hold tight to their core values, whether an external mandate poses a challenge to those



core values and causes a district to use the interrelated roles proposed by Rorrer et al. (2008) may inform other systems and add to the dialogue on policy. Furthermore, the degree to which these four roles may be used to foreground equity and disrupt institutionalized inequity within their own system may also do the same.

As noted earlier Lee and Wong (2004) point out there are “very few studies that examine the extent to which different socioeconomic groups benefit from accountability policies, with adequate support for schooling conditions and resources” (p. 799). While it is not within the scope of this study to look at outcomes, it is hoped that this study and its exploration of the impact of policy mandates on school districts that have been historically high performing, have adequate resources, and adequate schooling conditions may contribute to the policy dialogue.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

The purpose of this research study is to better understand how leaders in historically high performing school districts respond to a change in status for one or more subgroups within a building. The study examined two historically high performing districts that remain in good standing overall; however, each district was required to respond with a plan on behalf of one building that failed to close the achievement gap for the economically disadvantaged subgroup of students at the anticipated rate set by the state. The degree to which this presented opportunities and challenges remains relatively unexplored in districts that have an overall high performance rate. Previous studies have focused on the attempt to close the achievement gap in the lowest performing school districts nationwide (Council of Great City Schools, 2015; Dee, 2012; McMurrer, 2012; U.S. Department of Education; 2014). This study explored the achievement gap in a new way; taking a closer look through a case study analysis to examine necessary changes in high performing districts. This chapter includes the purpose of the research, the design of the study, data collection instruments and procedures, data storage, analysis methods and limitations of the study.

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to understand the influence of mandated accountability changes in two historically high performing districts in the Capital Region of New York State.

The study used interviews and document review with a purposeful sample of two identified districts with one or more buildings under this designation in the Capital Region of New York State. The study included central office leadership teams (defined as

superintendent, and curriculum leader) and building level leadership in the two case districts-  
-defined as principal.

### **Research Design**

The researcher used a qualitative comparative case study design. Two cases meeting the criteria identified in the sampling method section agreed to participate in order to provide the researcher with the best information to understand the problem or central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). In this basic qualitative study, the unit of analysis was the district which Creswell (2012) describes as a bounded system, which means “that the case is separated out for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries.” In this study, the cases are bounded by the same time period and attributes. That is, they are high performing and have not yet closed the achievement gap. Merriam (2009) defines a case study as one that limits the number of people involved and interviewed. This study is best suited to case study because there are only six historically high performing school districts going through this particular process in the Capital Region of New York State. Given that these districts and this particular situation exist in a real-world context for the first time under the ESEA flexibility waiver for New York State, the researcher assumes, as Yin (2014) states, that understanding this issue is one that involves important “contextual conditions” (p. 16). Furthermore, as the issue of historically high performing districts with a building on a state list for one or more subgroups is a new phenomenon, this research lends itself best to a case study in order to illuminate how these cases approach mandated change aimed at closing a newly identified achievement gap.

Moreover, an exploration of how high performing school districts enact the four interrelated roles necessary to achieve reform proposed by Rorrer et al. (2008) will add to the

body of research being compiled on advancing equity. Rorrer et al. (2008) proposed that future research explore case study in districts that vary in their composition and context—socially, politically, and economically. Since case studies are designed to provide a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon, it is possible that the use of case study in this research may bring about understanding that in turn can affect and perhaps improve practice in similarly composed districts and/or inform policy (Merriam, 2009).

### **Research Questions**

Central Question: How do superintendents, central office administrators, and principals in high performing school districts respond to the identification of a School in Need of a Local Assistance Plan for one or more subgroups?

Sub Question 1: What do district and school leaders know about academic achievement for this subgroup that led to the school being identified as LAP school and how did/does this inform planning decisions at the building level when creating and implementing the required LAP?

Sub Question 2: How well do the elements of the Local Assistance Plan align with district priorities?

Sub Question 3: What opportunities and challenges are identified by district and school leaders as a result of the identification of this subgroup?

### **Target Population and Sampling Method**

The target population for this study were school districts in NYS who had been previously identified as historically high performing and have since been put on a LAP for one (or more) schools.

For this study, historically high performing is defined as appearing in the *Albany Business Review* in the top 20 of the 85 districts in the Capital Region over the the past five years (“Schools Report,” 2010; Cooper, 2011; Vlahos, 2012; Schwartz, 2013; Rogers, 2014). Most of these districts have appeared in the top twenty for at least ten years; however, all of the six have consecutively appeared in the past five years. The *Albany Business Review* ranks schools by region using the New York State Department of Education and the State Comptroller’s office data to make its determinations each year (“Schools report ranking methodology,” 2013). The calculation used to arrive at the rankings each year used a weighted calculation of the total percentage of students passing tests in ELA, Math, and Science for elementary and Regents exams and for those who received a 65 or higher on the global history and geography, and U.S. history and government Regents exams. Additionally, a weighted score for graduation was given that took into account students who had graduated with a Regents diploma with an advanced designation, percentage of high school completers, and percentage of seniors who planned to attend college or some form of post-secondary schooling (“Schools report ranking methodology,” 2013.) Using these criteria, the researcher was able to set a standard definition of historically high performing within the same region.

The *Albany Business Review* was chosen as a source because it uses data from the New York State Department of Education and State Comptroller’s office for its calculations. Additionally, it is locally accepted as a reputable source with districts prominently displaying the rankings on websites and in publications.

The researcher identified six districts ranked within the top 20 of districts in the Capital Region within the past five years by the *Albany Business Review* who met these criteria. The six districts were identified as in Need of a Local Assistance Plan for the 2014-

2015 school year for a gap in performance for economically disadvantaged students or students with disabilities. The designation status were calculated using 2013 New York State Assessment scores.

All six districts had a New York State Need/Resource Capacity category of low or average as defined by New York State. The Need/Resource Categories are “a measure of a district’s ability to meet the needs of its students with local resources. It is the ratio of the estimated poverty percentage to the combined Wealth Ratio” (New York State Department of Education, 2010b). A low or average need compared to the local capacity means that these districts have a greater ability to meet the needs of students with local resources easier than a district with high needs and low resources. (New York State Department of Education, 2010b).

### **Sample**

The sample consisted of two districts with at least three leaders within the district agreeing to participate. In these two districts, the following people were interviewed: school superintendents, district level administrators (defined as curriculum leaders and directors at the district office) and the building principal in the identified building for the 2014-2015 school year. This study used the district as its unit of analysis and, therefore, leadership from both the district and building level were necessary to interview because working together they comprise all of the decision makers within the district who can affect student achievement positively (Waters and Marzano, 2006). They ultimately make decisions related to the allocation of resources to support the plan as well as what the plan will entail. Based upon the cumulative research of Timothy Waters and Walter Marzano (2006) we know that both building leaders and system leaders can positively impact student achievement.

Secondly, Tina Trujillo (2013) analyzed fifty primary documents on district effectiveness and concluded that

...districts matter for student outcomes. Repeated findings about the properties of districts that are linked with test gains underscore that central offices likely enjoy a comparative advantage over individual schools in the large-scale organizing and aligning of curricular, instructional, and other resources in the service of testing. (p. 442)

Trujillo goes on to state that there are very practical strategies that district leaders can enact as part of a district plan to raise student achievement via testing. These are referred to as the technical dimensions that districts can use to raise student achievement. This information from the literature review guided the selection of district office personnel charged with these dimensions in the case study districts for economically disadvantaged subgroups and to account for the technical dimensions of the study. These dimensions are reflected in sub question 1 and the related interview questions.

The researcher felt that given the timing of this research study with both districts just generating and implementing the plan, the perspectives of leaders would be more germane to study versus a year two implementation where the design might have been to study whether the intended goals were reached. This study also sought to use a framework in which system leaders acting on behalf of the district assume four distinct roles (Rorrer et al., 2008). Inclusion of other stakeholders would not fit this particular framework. Additionally, the researcher was also interested in gaining a better understanding of the socio-political and normative contexts in which district leaders and building leaders operate. These dimensions

are reflected in sub questions 2 and 3, which are also tied to the framework by Rorrer et al. (2008).

Finally this study sought to investigate the response to mandated change and the ways in which district and building leadership balanced reforms within the local context within these four roles, therefore, it was necessary to interview superintendents, curriculum leaders, directors, and building principals of the buildings identified with an achievement gap.

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

The study began after the Institutional Review Board of the Sage Colleges gave its approval (see Appendix B for approval letter). An initial letter of introduction was sent to the superintendent of each of the six districts appearing on the state list as requiring Local Assistance Plans. Two superintendents contacted the researchers with agreement to participate by letter and e-mail within two weeks of the initial letter being sent. No follow-up was required. The two district superintendents agreed and signed informed consent forms which outlined the time commitment, confidentiality measures, and potential minimal risk. Participants were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time. All participants were informed that the information provided to the researcher would remain confidential and securely stored on a password protected hard drive until completion of the study. Data remained protected throughout the course of the study.

To further protect the confidentiality of the participants, the districts are referred to as District 1 and District 2. All interviewee participants are referred to as Leader within District 1 or 2. Interviews took place in each participant's office between February 2015 and March 2015. Each interview was digitally recorded and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The researcher took notes during the interviews and collected publically available documents



including brochures, board of education meeting minutes, and mission and vision statements. A transcript of the interview was provided to each participant to check for accuracy. All participants verified the transcripts within one week.

### **Interview Questions**

A semi-structured interview protocol was followed. The researcher began with an assurance that participation would be kept confidential and pseudonyms would be assigned. The participants were also informed about how to contact the researcher or the dissertation chair in the event questions arose. The interview contained fourteen questions. The questions are derived from the literature review themes and a crosswalk was created by theme to the research question and overarching research questions for the study. See Appendix A for interview protocol.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Validity in a qualitative study is defined by how well the research findings match reality (Merriam, 2009). In qualitative research, “reality” is how the people in the study understand the world. In order to ensure validity, the researcher must “understand the perspective of those involved in the phenomenon of interest to uncover the complexity of human behavior in a contextual framework, and to present a holistic interpretation of what is happening” (Merriam, 2009, p. 215). This is accomplished through the “richly descriptive” final product (Merriam, 2009, p. 16). Data is presented in the form of quotes to support the findings of the study. In creating a detailed description of both the context and the findings through adequate quotes, a qualitative study can be more generalizable (Merriam, 2009, p. 227). Lincoln and Guba (1985) said, “the best way to ensure the possibility of transferability is to create a thick rich description of the sending context so that someone in a potential

receiving context may assess the similarity between them and...the study (as cited in Merriam, 2008, p. 227).

The methods of data collection can also ensure validity. Multiple sources of data and people with different perspectives within the district were interviewed in order to ensure validity through triangulation. Triangulation “is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research” (Cresswell, 2012, p. 259). The researcher used a semi-structured interview protocol with three members of the district leadership team. Combining these interviews with relevant documents collected from each site provided source triangulation (Merriam, 2009). In these two case studies, the perspectives of the district leadership team are corroborated through identified themes running through several of the interviews. To further triangulate the data, those themes were checked against district documents that were publically available. The study, therefore, draws on multiple sources of information. The researcher had a colleague look at the raw data to “assess whether the findings are plausible based on the data” (Merriam, 2009). Finally, member checking of the transcripts was used to increase validity.

Reliability within a qualitative study is achieved when the results are consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 2009; Cresswell, 2012). Merriam (2009) maintains that rather than expecting that outsiders would get the same results, the researcher is looking for the outsiders to “agree that given the data collected, the results make sense—they are consistent and dependable” (p. 221). In order to ensure reliability, the researcher used triangulation and peer examination as discussed previously. Additionally, the researcher kept memos of how

the results were reached. These memos describe the decisions made and also how the codes were derived. This is discussed separately in the data analysis section.

The researcher has taken care in the selection of the cases for study in order to enhance generalizability to a larger group of educators. Given that there has been a great deal of attention paid to urban districts and turnaround strategies under the School Improvement Grant, analyses performed by various agencies and the U.S. Department of Education (American Institute for School Research, 2006; U.S. Department of Education; 2014), a different context has been chosen in order for the reader to be able to draw comparisons from what a typical suburban district in a state with an approved ESEA waiver has experienced in trying to close the achievement gap. This study will be generalizable to the extent that other suburban districts share similar attributes and circumstances regarding state and federal policy mandates.

The researcher intends to guard against her own personal bias in order to increase the validity of the study. The researcher's background includes experiences working in larger suburban districts as well as in an urban elementary school where 90% of the students lived in poverty. The researcher took great care in guarding against bias that arises from her background by creating an interview protocol and questions which were approved by The Sage Colleges Institutional Review Board. The researcher also took care to be reflective about the data through a review of the memos kept while documenting the findings and by the process of triangulation. As mentioned above, the researcher asked a colleague to be a "critical friend." Yin (2014) calls this being open to contrary evidence. The process entailed asking the colleague whether the findings match the data and whether the colleague could offer alternative explanations.

## Data Analysis

After verification of the transcripts by the participants, the researcher organized the data by codes in *QSR International's NVivo 10* qualitative data analysis software (2013). The researcher determined codes *a priori* based on the framework by Rorrer et al. (2008) outlining the four roles districts assume in educational reform. This theoretical framework was used to determine whether leaders in both districts used these inter-related roles to make sense of, and respond to, the state accountability policy. How districts create policy coherence and foreground equity issues are central to the accountability era in which all districts now operate.

The use of this theoretical framework allowed the researcher to ground the study in all of the current research on how district offices and building level leaders balance reform and local priorities while ensuring achievement for all students while looking for emerging themes and patterns in the ways in which both case districts responded to a state mandate.

Transcripts of the interviews as well as documents in both districts were analyzed using coding that was established *a priori* based on the framework by Rorrer et al. (2008) outlining the four roles districts assume in educational reform. The transcripts were coded under one of the four roles if it was obvious that the district had taken action in this role. For example, text coded under “equity focus” meant that the district acknowledged past inequities or the gap, but also took action to disrupt or displace structures that limited opportunity or access. Additionally, they may also have taken steps to make data more transparent and available. The code “instructional leadership” indicated some type of proactive leadership behavior that brought people together to address the issue. Leaders within the district took steps to build capacity and the necessary conditions for change. The

code “policy coherence” meant the district actively mediated, coordinated, or synthesized external policy into district policy. Finally, “re-orienting the organization” was coded if the district took steps to refine or align organizational structures and processes; change district culture; refine beliefs, expectations or norms; or focus upon implementing systems that create a culture of professionalism centered on providing professional development with high expectations.

The roles and subsequent actions in those roles of this theoretical framework were used to determine whether leaders in both districts used these inter-related roles to make sense of, and respond to, the state accountability policy. Common themes unrelated to the four roles also emerged in the coding process and will also be discussed. Documents reviewed and analyzed included the finalized Local Assistance Plan, Mission and Vision Statements, Board Meeting Agendas and Minutes, as well as Response to Intervention Plans. New York State policy documents, inclusive of the Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness were also reviewed and analyzed.

The following table lists and further defines these codes with examples.

Table 1

*Codes Established a priori.*

Code	Definition	Example
Instructional Leadership	Generating will to reform; building the capacity to do so.	“We meet as a team three times a year. I get substitute teachers to cover classrooms and myself, the classroom teachers, all the reading specialists, the special ed teacher assigned to that grade level, and, the math coach, if we're talking about math, will come together for two hours.” (Leader, District 1)
Reorienting the Organization	Refining and aligning organizational structures and processes, change district culture, refine beliefs, expectations and norms. Align district operations with goals for improvement.	“So we actually have a literacy coach at the elementary school this year who her primary focus is to make sure that small group guided reading is off the ground in every classroom.” (Leader, District 2)
Reorienting the Organization (continued)	Refining and aligning organizational structures and processes, change district culture, refine beliefs, expectations and norms. Align district operations with goals for improvement.	“During our data day it's very easy for the conversation to shift..... Okay, but we can't control parents, so let's not get too worked up on that. We can't control the social services maybe not intervening as much as we would like them to, but what do we control?” (Leader, District 1)
Policy Coherence	Mediating federal, state and local policy. State policies are interpreted in light of the long-range vision. Policies that fit the long-range vision are embraced.	“Our goal in doing this plan was to mirror as much of it, the district's vision, into the LAP to make sure that it wasn't an isolated document but that they worked in conjunction with one another.” (Leader, District 1)

Table 1 (continued)

*Codes Established a priori.*

Equity Focus	Owning past inequities or the gap. Highlighting inequities in the system. Foregrounding equity by disrupting institutionalized structures that limit opportunity or access. Increasing the availability and transparency of data	“I’m in charge of redoing our guidance plan and that is one of the things we talk about on a regular basis – tying those services together. Access and opportunity... we want to make sure that kids have access to rigorous classes regardless of whether or not... where they are from on the socio-economic spectrum. And if those classes are heavily populated by people of the higher end of the spectrum then we need to find a way to make sure that people of lower socio-economic status have the same opportunities to access that.” (Leader, District 1)
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*QSR International’s NVivo 10* qualitative data analysis software (2013) was then used while coding interview transcripts for emerging themes and patterns, or an inductive approach.

This is also called open-coding.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations of this study include the choice to focus upon suburban school districts. Therefore, it may not be generalizable to urban or rural districts. Additionally, the design of the study to focus upon only historically high performing school districts is another delimitation. The researcher chose this scope of work out of curiosity about how systems with reputations for being high performing respond to policy mandates which affect all school districts.

This qualitative study is limited to two case districts in the Capital Region of New York State and may not be generalizable to other districts or replicable due both to the nature

of qualitative research, state, and region chosen for study. Other states may or may not be under the same ESEA flexibility waivers and local governance and contexts for school districts are obviously different and a different result may be obtained.

This study is also limited by the nature of whom the researcher chose to interview—system leaders and the building leader of the identified school building. Different responses may have been obtained if the researcher had interviewed other leaders within the district, instructional coaches, or teachers. It is hoped that the experiences and responses of historically high performing school districts may help to inform the policy dialogue.



## Chapter 4: Data Analysis

The purpose of this research was to explore the influence of mandated accountability policies in two historically high performing districts in the Capital Region of New York State. Further, the study was designed to explore whether the two case districts responded to the external mandate by assuming the four essential roles in reform toward the improvement of instruction and the advancement of equity proposed by Rorrer et al. (2008). Rorrer et al. (2008) proposed that an understanding of “the potential of districts as institutional actors to disrupt inequity and serve in roles that, instead, promote equity and social justice” will be achieved through broad methodological approaches (343). Inasmuch as historically high performing districts under newly mandated accountability policies in New York are required to foreground issues of equity because of the targets set for economically disadvantaged subgroups, one stated goal of this study was whether the case districts assumed any of these roles.

The following question and sub questions guided the research:

**Central Question:** How do superintendents, central office administrators, and principals in high performing school districts respond to the identification of a School in Need of a Local Action Plan (LAP) for one or more subgroups?

**Sub questions:**

1. What do district and school leaders know about academic achievement for this subpopulation that led to the school being identified as a Local Assistance Plan School and how does this inform improvement planning decisions at the building level when creating and implementing the required Local Assistance Plan (LAP).

2. How well do the elements of the LAP align with district priorities?
3. What opportunities and challenges are acknowledged by district and school leaders as a result of the identification of a School in Need of a Local Action Plan (LAP) for one or more subgroups?

### **Characteristics of Case Districts**

Face to face interviews were conducted in two historically high performing school districts in order to answer the research questions. Participants included the leadership in the two case districts consisting of the superintendent, assistant superintendent in charge of curriculum and instruction, and the building principals in the schools where the target for the economically disadvantaged subgroup was not met indicating an achievement gap.

This section will briefly describe the characteristics of the participating districts and the leaders who were interviewed. In order to maintain confidentiality, the districts will be referred to as District 1 and District 2 and some details will be described in general terms. Leaders within the districts will simply be referred to as Leader within District 1 or District 2.

Both case districts are located in the suburbs of the Capital Region of New York State and are multiple building districts. Enrollment for both districts is over 4,000 students (New York State Department of Education, 2014) According to the most recent data available on the data site from the New York State Department of Education (2014), both districts are above 75% White, and share similar percentages of economically disadvantaged students, with a rate of between 15 percent and 20 percent (New York State Department of Education, 2014). As noted earlier, they share an average needs/resource ratio according to New York State's Information Reporting System on the New York State Department of Education

website (2015a). What this means according to the definition by New York State “Similar Schools” document (2004) is as follows:

This amalgam of demographic data for the school districts combines the best indicator of educational need (school district student poverty) with the financial resources of the school district, district enrollment and district land area, to place districts into six distinctly different categories. Each category is generally accepted as containing a distinct type of district. Each district in a category faces similar challenges, and is able to draw on comparable levels of resources. Districts in different categories are less comparable.

In sum, both case districts share the same level of resources, have multiple buildings and similar administrative structures. The administrative structure includes a superintendent, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and building principals. In District 1, leaders interviewed have over five years of experience as leaders at various levels within the district. In District 2, all of the leaders interviewed also had at least five years of experience as leaders, although not all within District 2. All of these leaders were interviewed face to face for this research study and documentary evidence was collected.

### **Research Findings**

The two case districts in this study were identified by the New York State Department of Education as having a gap in student achievement for economically disadvantaged students as compared to non-economically disadvantaged students. They were both required to use the New York State Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness with a group of stakeholders to prepare a local plan for improvement for economically

disadvantaged students within the identified building. Both districts used stakeholder groups comprised of the school leadership team and district office leadership.

The research questions that guided this study and the related interview questions along with the corresponding framework roles will be discussed in the next section.

### **Previous Knowledge Regarding the Subgroup and the Impact to Planning**

*Sub question 1: What do district and school leaders know about academic achievement for this subgroup that led to the school being identified as LAP school and how did/does this inform planning decisions at the building level when creating and implementing the required LAP?*

Leaders within both case districts stated that multiple sources of data on student achievement were available and collected on all students in the districts. They also indicated that they primarily used those systems to inform intervention programs for the lowest achieving students; however, the degree to which it was disaggregated by subgroup was not clear in either district. Leaders in both case districts indicated a need post-designation to create a more comprehensive system of data monitoring. They also indicated that the district would need to provide training and assistance in its use by building leaders and teachers to inform instruction. The Local Assistance Plans in both districts confirm that resources and activities are proposed to do this.

**District 1.** District 1 leaders indicate that they collect data using Fountas and Pinnell, *Student Reading Inventory*, *Student Math Inventory*, DIBELS, local measures, state assessments, attendance records, and teacher anecdotal information for every student. District leaders also compare the district to other districts and look at grade frequency distribution. All leaders within the district indicated that they collect data on subgroups. Targets are set for all subgroups within the district and progress toward those goals are reported to the board of education. Leaders within the district stated that the data gathered on the economically disadvantaged subgroup prior to the LAP designation was used to inform Tier 1 instruction and the RtI process. One leader explained it in the following manner:

The data is used to really inform not only Tier 1 instruction but also to determine what types of supports that we're going to provide students. So whether it's AIS support through reading teachers or if it's a special education student making particular modifications to the IEP. In the broader sense, it's really Tier 1 instruction and differentiating that instruction to meet the needs of as many students as you can in the classroom without necessarily adding additional support. So it's Tier 1. Then, reading instruction is Tier 2, and then typically special education, or Tier 3. (Leader, District 1)

The district adopted a new mathematics program last year and hired a mathematics coach and this year they have implemented a new reading series. Mathematics coaches and reading specialists are to be members of the data team meetings this year according to LAP documents.

Leaders indicated that prior to the designation (which coincided with adoption of Common Core Assessments) they largely used locally created assessments causing an inflated level of performance of students in RtI.

When we started taking a look at how the system itself had been laid out, we noticed that most of the Response to Intervention stuff was home-built around the curriculum that we were teaching. And there was very little that was norm referenced nationally, so what we were finding was very high achievement levels...it was pretty much generated from in-house assessments that were made. So, we were benchmarking ourselves against the curriculum that we were actually teaching, not against any national norm referenced anything. So every year, people would report to the school board our internal assessment numbers and we'd have 90% proficient, based on stuff that was a lot more subjective than what we've changed it to. (Leader, District 1).

This leader went on to state that Common Core tests are built to determine what it takes to graduate. Their plan has been to focus on curriculum mapping to fill in identified curricula gaps and to refine the assessment system to include measures that are computer based, adapt to the perceived skill level of the student, and provide more predictive results of a student's actual reading and mathematics levels.

While leaders acknowledged that they monitored their subpopulation's progress toward numerical targets each year, they indicate that they still were not as aware of the gap as they should have been. When asked how they were using the disaggregated data, one leader replied:

Not to the effect that we should have. We're still, from a central office perspective, trying to get a handle on the depth that we go into with the data. Like right now,

we're looking at more aggregate than anything else. And we're trying to work with the principals to get them to look at the data on a more individual level. We're just not quite there yet. (Leader, District 1)

While districtwide reporting of achievement targets for subgroups has been a practice of the district as verified through the face to face interviews, board meeting minutes, and five-year target goals published by the district, the assessments used to measure achievement prior to the 2014-2015 school year were locally designed, normed against their own curriculum, and aggregated across the buildings according to leaders within the district. As a result, the data was not transparent enough to fully know the extent of the gap. Now leaders in the district are working to foster a culture of using data to inform instruction. According to one leader, this has had an impact in the classroom. This leader stated:

I think we have a better understanding of what we need to work on, certainly, and I think we're seeing a lot of strategies in the classroom that are changing. There is less dependence on the teacher and more opportunity for the students to engage in deeper thinking and to really understand their own thinking when they are, for example in math, trying to solve a problem. Or, when they're reading or writing to understand their own use of language and the areas that they need to improve upon and understand where their strengths and deficits are. (Leader, District 1).

The district is also focused upon using data to inform instruction with data team meetings in place with all service providers. This is in addition to the weekly communication within the building. One leader summed up the change in the following way:

Now we have the data meetings and these assessments. Our plan now in general is that I have really asked people to focus on a couple of big things: Collaboration with

colleagues amongst grade-level teams but then also the service providers. I really look for people to be meeting in person, once a week or once every two weeks at the very least there should be some communication via email in regard to here's what we're working on in this intervention group, here's how so and so is progressing, and do you have any questions or concerns? (Leader, District 1)

In all of the responses from leaders within the district it was not clear how data was disaggregated and provided to the building principals and teachers prior to the requirement of a LAP. The LAP document submitted to the state by the district includes an emphasis on individual learning plans driven by data meetings at the building level inclusive of all service providers. This was also confirmed by leaders within the district when asked what the plan is now for raising student achievement for this subpopulation.



**District 2.** District 2 leaders collect Fountas and Pinnell reading level data, report card and state testing data. The district has replaced its computer based assessment system, *iReady*, with locally created internal assessments for the 2014-2015 school year. Consistent with District 1, District 2 has a five-year vision with identified objectives. District 2 provides each building principal with a central report for each student that can be sorted on a variety of demographic data. The report can also compare all district elementary students to one another. District leaders identified two issues with the use of data for the district: (1) it is not clear whether the building principals sort the data by demographics as compared to the larger body or by subgroups (2) and given that data is reported quarterly, or yearly as is the case with state testing data, it is old data. One leader described it as a “post mortem” look at the data (Leader, District 2). Leaders within the district indicated that they prefer to focus upon progress monitoring to ensure growth for all students. They also indicate that implementation of progress monitoring is a process upon which they are currently working.

Leaders within the district acknowledged being aware of the gap between economically disadvantaged students and non-economically disadvantaged students at least two years prior to the designation. In that time, they worked to research a new literacy and mathematics program which was formally adopted for the current school year to ensure consistency in the curriculum. According to leaders, weekly common skills have been articulated and must be embedded in lessons to provide explicit literacy instruction. In addition, they used the data to allocate services based upon need through the use of math and literacy coaches as well as progress monitoring. District leaders also indicate a focus on small group reading instruction informed by data collected. Leaders in the district acknowledge that the identified building for a LAP is not the neediest building, and that even

though they were aware of the gap they were somewhat surprised to learn of the formal designation of this particular building as in need of a LAP.

Assessment and the collection and use of assessment data is also a primary focus of the district now according to leaders, board minutes, and the LAP submitted to the New York State Department of Education. Leaders in the district have worked with the faculty to create common assessments. Additionally, the plan going forward is to train teachers in the LAP building to access the student results and use the data to inform instruction. Through the use of two systems—one for longitudinal state data and the second for longitudinal student assessment data within district—teachers and administrators will work to “turn assessment data into goal directed instruction” (Local Assistance Plan Document). One leader within the district noted the need to use the data more effectively in the following way:

I think what it does is it's a wakeup call. When you think you're doing a pretty good job sometimes you forget that if you're not looking at the data closely, and looking at it from a drill-down level, you sometimes will miss that you're not really servicing certain groups of students within your population. So overall you might look really good, but then when you start to peel back the onion, you realize you're not really servicing certain students. I think it helps us to keep our focus on all of our students and to not just get caught up in the idea that generally, we're doing very well, so isn't that a nice thing? (Leader, District 2)

How leaders in the district use data has been influenced by this designation and disaggregating it or “peeling back the onion” as this leader noted is the beginning of working toward a focus upon equity.

**Summary.** Two findings emerged based upon the evidence above regarding the use of data prior to being identified as a district with a school requiring a LAP.

The first finding that emerged is that these two high performing school districts regularly collected, analyzed and disseminated data to the building level in an effort to raise student achievement. This information was distributed to teachers to inform student placement into Response to Intervention (RtI)/Academic Intervention Services (AIS). The degree to which the data was disaggregated by subgroup at the building level compared to the larger body is unclear. It is evident that they both knew there was an achievement gap. However, they did not know the gap was large enough to propel them into having to comply with a mandate to raise student achievement for this subgroup.

The second finding that emerged is that a high performing school districts uses its data to align curriculum to the Common Core Standards through curriculum mapping, adopting new curricula materials, and adopting/adapting new or existing assessments in response to the curricula changes.

After a historically high performing school district has been identified for lack of achievement for a subgroup, the evidence suggests two findings. First, high performing districts recognize the need to implement a real-time systematic and comprehensive system for data and data analysis that extends to the school building level and into the classroom. Leaders within the case districts directly state evidence supportive of this finding. They both indicate that data was disseminated to the building level, but how much that data was manipulated prior to the LAP school designation to inform instructional strategies was inconsistent as noted by district leaders. This supports the finding that there is a need to implement a more comprehensive system that extends into the classroom.

Second, it is not enough to just get the data to the building level. Leaders indicate that they are now working on the creation of a culture of using data to progress monitor and effectively inform instruction. Two examples provide evidence of this finding. The first comes from District 2 when one leader indicated that “it isn’t just a matter of where students are...we are asking, ‘what is the culture of improvement that we are trying to foster and facilitate with the adults to create a culture of learning?’” (Leader, District 2) A leader in District 1 further illuminated the challenge in creating this shift of mindset in the organization when this leader stated, “people have not quite adjusted to that yet. It’s hard, and I don’t blame them because for years and years and years and years, under the old standards and assessments, this district did very, very well. Now the game has changed and we need to up the game (Leader, District 1).”

Finally, this study was also designed to examine whether high performing school districts adopt the four roles proposed by Rorrer et al. (2008) in working to raise student achievement and lead for equity: acting as an instructional leader, creating policy coherence, re-orienting the organization, and leading with an equity focus. As noted above, an equity focus is evident once the state designated both districts as in need of a LAP based on a subgroup failing to demonstrate progress toward closing the achievement gap. There is an acknowledgement and ownership of the gap with plans to increase the availability and transparency of data. However, whether leaders in the district will report the disaggregated data going forward is not mentioned.

### **Alignment of Local Assistance Plan Elements to District Priorities**

*Research sub question 2: How well do the elements of the Local Assistance Plan align with district priorities?*

Leaders within both districts expressed the belief that the diagnostic and self-review template had limited usefulness. That is, leaders within both districts felt that going through the document prompted dialogue that led to what went into the finalized plan rather than the template itself prompting them to come up with an “activity” under each domain. Leaders within both districts expressed strong desires to align what they were doing with district priorities and initiatives already underway to create policy coherence.

District 1. District 1 felt the DTSDE document helped to inform its work in a limited way. There was some variability in the responses regarding the usefulness of the template. One leader felt that it helped very little because “it did not address in a clear and succinct way curriculum, instruction, and assessment” (Leader, District 1). Another leader felt it was not perfect; however, the template did help focus leaders in the district on some parental engagement issues. Another leader summed up the feeling that it had mixed usefulness for stakeholders when this leader stated that “the document is not perfect, but it did structure the direction for the district to build the plan the way they [the state] wanted it” (Leader, District 1). While the usefulness of the document is limited according to leaders, they said that the process of going through the document and the dialogue that ensued did allow two problems to emerge aside from the need to align curriculum, instruction and assessment.

The first problem identified is the need to engage parents of students who are economically disadvantaged. All leaders in the district commented upon the need to “make parents feel included and involved” and that the district needs to “create a bridge and reach out to them” (Leaders, District 1).

The second problem that emerged for leaders was that of “paternalism” (Leader, District 1). All leaders within the district acknowledge that within the LAP school,

.....there was a lot of effort, but a lot of the effort was spent kind of wanting to help the students to the point of almost enabling them versus really making them independent learners and helping them to develop the skills to be independent learners. I think it comes from educators having big hearts and wanting all their students to not only succeed, but also feel good” (Leader, District 1).

As a result, leaders in the district are working on helping teachers understand that raising expectations for these students is the answer to raising student achievement.

All leaders within the district unanimously agree that the resulting plan fits the existing priorities for the district because as one leader stated, we “mirrored the district’s vision in the LAP” (Leader, District 1). In fact, leaders stated that due to the length of the document, it was easy to “get off track” and so it was necessary to “filter everything back through the vision and mission” (Leaders, District 1). Leaders also described this as “making it fit.” Which, under the Rorrer et al. (2008) framework for the four interrelated roles of the district in raising student achievement, is the act of “creating policy coherence.”

In terms of whether adjustments were made to initiatives or priorities already underway, leaders within the district stated that “nothing was off the table” and that the designation was the catalyst for doing some things “sooner rather than later” (Leaders, District 1). One district leader noted that since the designated school is not a Title I school in the district it caused them to more quickly extend programs from Title 1 buildings into the LAP school and to the secondary level in order to eliminate systemic inequity. The expanded programs create bridges between the district, social services, and parents. The recognition of this inequity in the system is a newly acquired “equity focus” stance as described by Rorrer

et al. (2008) in an effort to eliminate systemic inequities that prevent all students from succeeding, especially those who are at-risk.

In sum, leaders within District 1 used the process of engaging in dialogue, more than the tool, to identify what needed to be in its LAP. As a result of data collection and ongoing conversations, district leaders recognized the need to more effectively align curriculum, instruction, and assessment. However, the conversations surrounding the LAP also focused them upon the need to change some of the norms and culture of the district by changing mindsets to eliminate paternalism and build student motivation. Finally, district leaders recognized that not all stakeholders are involved in the process and they are working to include more parents and to provide social service programs throughout the district and not just at Title I schools.

**District 2.** District 2 did not view the DTSDE document as a helpful tool and felt that it was “laborious,” “cumbersome,” “repetitive,” and “difficult to use to get to the ultimate plan” (Leaders, District 2). All leaders acknowledged setting the self-assessment tool itself aside and reflecting upon what they really needed to do, systemically, in order to raise student achievement for this subgroup. There was acknowledgement by district leaders that they understood why it was necessary for the state to provide one model; however, they also noted that all districts have different needs and are in different places regarding improvement of student achievement.

To that end, leaders described the process of creating the plan as asking the following questions based upon the data they had already gathered and the years of experience of the principal of the building rather than relying on the tool:

We set the plan aside and said, ‘What would we do if we could do anything?’ and ‘how do we make sure that that is in alignment with our priorities across the district?’ We understand that these students who have performance gaps exist in all of our elementary schools. So how do we make sure that we take a system approach to this? We started off with asking, ‘What are we doing as a district?’ and we talked about how it fit in terms of existing priorities. We already knew we wanted to adopt a new ELA series because it would give that consistent research-based skill instruction throughout the year and really help teachers have a better understanding of what they need to be teaching that is aligned to the Common Core. (Leader, District 2)

The resulting plan focuses on four key areas and aligns an action plan for achieving it. The four areas addressed in the plan, some of which were highlighted under question 1, are: 1) consistent implementation of a new literacy series with support from a literacy coach; 2) small group instruction informed by data and targeted to individual students; 3) academic intervention supports that match student needs with programs, and a 4) school wide focus upon “grit.” (Leader, District 2).

All leaders acknowledged that these were things they were already planning to do across the district in a systemic approach to raise student achievement for all students. The fourth element of focusing upon “grit” is unique to the LAP school. Leaders also felt strongly that they must not “run after the plan,” because to do so would make it temporary if scores went up. Faculty and staff would be quick to assume activities implemented were the reason for the score increases, and would revert back to what they had previously done. Leaders also noted that the tool allowed enough flexibility for them to address the substantive



aspects of the template and final plan with what they were already doing. Another leader in the district described the way they approached the process as follows:

I see plans like that as minimum guidance and if you don't have another vision in place. As a system we take the education of kids extremely seriously. I'm not saying that other places don't and accountability for performance is important. Subsequently, we want to do those things that are consistent with those values and beliefs that we hold as an educational institution. (Leader, District 2).

As a result of the approach taken by District 2, the final plan is an outline of the key priorities for the district and not just the LAP school in the district. One leader described it as "imposing our priorities on the LAP" rather than the mandate imposing priorities on the district. This is also indicative of creating policy coherence.

Leaders all agree that no existing initiatives or priorities would have to be adjusted as a result of the designation. One leader expressed this in the following way:

We really try very hard to be steadfast in our focus and not allow things to come knock us off our game. We may get information, be it through our internal data or data provided to us... and I say this as a system... provided to us by an external body that causes us to reconsider or look at our focus and adjust it or put higher priorities somewhere else. But for the most part, we typically know and know more than what we learn in terms of external reports coming inside. (Leader, District 2)

This is consistent across all of the interviews with leaders in the district. Another leader went on to further state how this makes the LAP school initiatives align with district priorities.

So it's not necessarily an Elementary X thing because of the subgroup; it's something that we need to do because our demographics are changing, so the system is

changing. And those things lend to the larger notion of deeper learning, of how do we really understand our students as students and how do we understand our students as learners and what do we need to do to teach, in fact, in the way they learn? And learn more effectively so that's consistent with what we hope will be the outcome of the LAP process at Elementary X and at the same time the outcome of the LAP process of Elementary X is consistent with what we're focused on as a school district. And I think that's important. I think having a consistent focus is important because then people realize they're not just doing something to satisfy a mandate. (Leader, District 2)

To that end, this same leader also explained that to do things this way meant that they would ultimately be successful districtwide, rather than in just one school. This leader further shared that the district will

...realign the plan with the direction that we're going because at the end of the day we'll get off this list but we're going to continue doing what we're doing anyway. So we're not doing stuff just to get off the list. And I think the plan was partially some of that and I think the hope was if people find success they'll continue doing it. So it was a repositioning of our goals to meet the plan versus using the plan to decide our goals. (Leader, District 2)

The designation has caused leaders and faculty members in the district to reflect upon the whole system and to openly discuss whether there is bias on the part of adults which could lead to system inequities. This is similar to District 1. One leader described the process and dialogue as evolving in the following manner from a focus upon "grit" to a conversation about adult biases:

It has turned into a conversation about the flexibility of staff, to see their roles differently in relationship to kids and it turns into a conversation about adult biases, about different kids from different demographic groups and what assumptions are we making and how are we trying to impose our biases on kids? It turns into a conversation about cultural competence by staff, so that's what I mean by the exposure piece in a good sense. It lends itself to us asking a lot of key questions and lessons learned in Elementary X are lessons that we then have to reflect on the rest of the system, to ask those same questions. Because if it happens here there's a good likelihood it could happen there. (Leader, District 2)

District leaders used the process required by the designation of a school requiring a LAP to examine what they were doing by filtering it back through the values and beliefs or vision and mission to create a coherent, systemic approach to raising student achievement for this subpopulation across the district.

**Summary.** While the DTSDE document itself may have mixed use, it appears that the process required as a result of the designation was fruitful for leaders within both districts in creating the opportunity to reflect about the needs of the district and some systemic inequities as is evidenced previously. Leaders in both districts noted that going through the document did illuminate some areas of focus that paralleled those in the self-assessment template, but they were not the “key issues.” For example, the self-assessment process using the tool highlighted for them that they could do more work in the area of parental involvement, but it was the process of bringing everyone together in reflection that pointed both districts toward the key issues of aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment, fostering student resiliency and motivation, and addressing adult biases or paternalism within the system.

While the process was helpful, leaders unanimously mentioned having to keep bringing all of the proposed ideas back to the vision or mission or be “led off track,” indicating that it was a priority to maintain policy coherence for the district. One leader summed it up as creating policy coherence and avoidance of having a “parallel” line of initiatives running which could be interpreted as “short-term” and avoiding real engagement (Leader, District 2).

### **Opportunities and Challenges of the Designation**

*Research sub question 3. What opportunities and challenges are acknowledged by district and school leaders as a result of the identification of a School in Need of a Local Action Plan (LAP) for one or more subgroups?*

Leaders in both districts acknowledged that the designation was an opportunity to address systemic beliefs about subgroups of students while at the same time embracing a new

*higher* norm for student achievement for this subgroup. It was also felt by leaders within both districts that the current, accelerated rate of policy mandates as well as incoherence of them for raising student achievement presents challenges.

**District 1.** Leaders in District 1 identified various opportunities as a result of the designation. The first is to use the designation as an outside catalyst to embrace change and higher standards for all students. The district felt that the designation provided an outside perspective that validated the need to raise student achievement for this subgroup. Given that this is a historically high performing school district, the idea that there is a need to change is lent credibility by it coming from an outside source. One leader framed it in the following way:

The designation was helpful in that it made it very apparent to all staff that there was a concern, and sometimes that's not a bad thing. For a leader to identify it is one thing and to kind of point it out, but when the state also identifies it, that also brings reinforcement. (Leader, District 1)

Not only was the designation an opportunity to lend credibility to the fact that change needs to happen, it also served to re-define expectations for this subgroup or set a new norm for acceptable performance levels. This occurred because the designated building is not a Title I building. This sent a very clear message described by one leader in the following way:

I think the LAP designation though made it very clear to everyone--and it was an outside perspective--that we have surrounding schools that are having students from this sub-group be more successful and that makes you pause and think, well, you know what, those are schools just a mile away, who have a higher free or reduced lunch rate than us, and they're not getting designated, but why aren't they getting

designated? Well, because the discrepancy between advantaged students and disadvantaged is not that big. I mean, it's there, but it's not as big. So, the opportunity, I would say, with the designation is that it raised a global awareness amongst the school community that we need to take some steps. It got us going in having the conversation around student achievement for every student. (Leader, District 1).

While outside validation that change is necessary helped to “re-define” what high performing means for all students, it also creates a window of opportunity to foreground issues of equity.

Another leader explained it in this way:

Well, when No Child Left Behind came in all school districts were mandated to be responsible for the performance of all of their students, and students were designated into subgroups, a lot of people, I think, were concerned about tests and all of the testing, et cetera. I think one of the good things that came out of that was that it forced school districts to focus on their subgroups. And so I think this kind of accountability is actually a good thing because I think what it does is it's a wakeup call. (Leader, District 1).

Challenges identified by leaders in the district are shifting the mindsets of the adults to the new level of rigor required, the current educational climate and its impact upon budget, and creating policy coherence. The first challenge arises because the district has always been high performing. As a result of the designation and the data it had collected, new assessments were brought in that were better aligned to the Common Core. As a result, one leader described the challenge in the following way:

We have a lot of people who are questioning the [new computer based assessments], that it's too hard and the kids are scoring really low, but the problem is, it's nationally

normed. So, we're comparing apples to apples, and they've increased the rigor there to match what they expect to be happening down the road from the new assessments to try and help be predictive. People have not quite adjusted to that yet. It's hard, and I don't blame them because for years and years and years and years, under the old standards and assessments, this district did very, very well. Now the game has changed and we need to up the game. (Leader, District 1)

Another challenge faced by the district is the ability to budget for the planned programs delineated in the LAP. At the time of the interviews in District 1, leaders indicated that they were still going through the budget process so it was difficult to say how they would be able to support the Local Assistance Plan in Elementary X. The budget is set to include the extension of an afterschool program that links social services to the families that need it as well as provide academic support for students who are economically disadvantaged. One district leader noted that the budget allocations being released late by the state were an interesting footnote to this whole process as they were trying to support the plan, but noted, "where those resources are coming from yet, I don't know. So, I'd love to tell you yes, we're reallocating, but until we get through the budget piece, I'm not sure" (Leader, District 1).

This serves to underscore the current educational climate in New York State which was also identified as a challenge by district leaders. District leaders define the focus of education in New York State as one that is more focused on politics and budget rather than on students. This was discussed as something that makes it even more difficult for districts to create policy coherence as more mandates are created at the state level. One leader stated, "Well, I think there's the challenge of all the change that's going on in public education right

now and trying to balance that with keeping our focus on all of our students.” Another leader in reference to all of the mandates stated,

There are so many balls up in the air right now that districts are juggling between. You've got to do training for APPR, and you've got to do this initiative and that initiative and there are so many initiatives that are often tied back to the vision.

(Leader, District 1)

In the end, leaders agreed that they try to focus upon students and student needs and do what they can to influence policy. One leader summed it up in this way:

We are really trying not to focus on the politics surrounding public education or the issues of budget, but really about students and what we can do in our school districts and in our communities to make sure that all of our students are successful. So that's something that we're kind of working on. You'll probably see some things in the near future, like letters to the editor and other documents that will come out from this group that will kind of make a statement about look, you know, enough talk about politics and budgets. Let's talk about kids because that's what it really boils down to.

(Leader, District 1)

Leaders within the district described a focus on students and the teaching and learning environment while simultaneously assuming the role of creating policy coherence in order to navigate the difficult broader educational context.



**District 2.** Leaders in District 2 also identified opportunities and challenges as a result of the identification. Leaders in the district felt that the accountability movement has provided an opportunity to shift the dialogue to embrace change and promote higher standards for all students. The main areas of focus include the allocation of resources toward professional development for principals and teachers in small group instructional strategies and to work on the understanding and elimination of cultural bias in order to raise student achievement.

As with District 1, leaders in District 2 also felt that mandated accountability policies provided the catalyst to embrace change that will benefit all students. One leader stated it in this way:

External accountability has helped keep us all accountable for all students, which is a blessing. So I think that shifted focus has been accepted as responsibility at [District 2], and we believe in that. It is very important to us. Do we need somebody next year to come tell us that? Probably not. But was the system as a whole and us, specifically, positively impacted from that change as part of No Child Left Behind? Yes. I think the entire educational system benefited from it. (Leader, District 2)

Rather than view the designation and added focus upon subgroups as a negative event or to focus upon the difficulty of the task, the district indicated that it views this as its responsibility and the imperative to change is there because of externally mandated accountability policies. Another leader explained it in the following way,

I think it is the opportunity to show the people that if we concert our efforts and pool our resources and roll up our sleeves that we can make some difference with this. We

actually can perhaps move the numbers with this population, not just hold up our hands and say, there's nothing we can do”(Leader, District 2).

Finally, a third leader summed up the position of the district in the following way:

When these things--these types of designations occur-- I look quickly beyond whatever that data point is and do not perseverate on why are we on this list? It becomes irrelevant. It becomes an opportunity for us to really assess where we are and subsequently get into an improvement mode and continuous improvement mode and ask ourselves what can we do differently and how do we do it differently and, more important, how do we sustain it over time? (Leader, District 2)

Overall, leaders in the district view external accountability as an opportunity to engage in change that is sustained and improves the system as a whole. Again, providing evidence that that mandated accountability plans are viewed as an opportunity to promote change and that there is a spoken commitment to do so.

Leaders within the district viewed the designation as an opportunity to provide resources to the LAP school toward sustainable improvement. The LAP school has more support from the literacy coach and instructional leadership training for the building principal. The training for principals is not specific to the LAP school but are now strategically implemented districtwide as one leader indicated, “there has been a big shift toward particular principals understanding the actual instructional programs that are either existing or being implemented in an expert manner” (Leader, District 2). Leaders within the district feel that a focus upon providing both teachers and the principal support will ensure implementation of the new curriculum with fidelity in order to raise student achievement. The designation by the state and raising awareness in the district of appropriate pedagogical

shifts has placed some pressure upon the LAP school, but with the added professional development and literacy coach, district leaders felt “added pressure *with support* [emphasis added] is achievable. So, we are not just adding pressure and hoping that we have good outcomes. We are adding pressure and being very strategic about *how* [emphasis added] we support it so we can anticipate and predict good outcomes” (Leader, District 2). The focus upon classroom instruction and instructional leadership by the principal and good small group instruction in literacy are the first two components of the LAP and the district feels the designation has created the opportunity to allocate resources toward these goals.

Finally, district leaders viewed the designation as an opportunity to begin to address system inequities or what they term “cultural bias” in order to “re-orient the organization” (Rorrer et al. 2008). As noted previously, the process of using the self-assessment tool, rather than the tool itself, led district leaders in dialogue that evolved from a focus upon fostering motivation and grit in students to adult biases that influence students. This became a districtwide focus. The district viewed the designation as an opportunity to improve the whole system for all students with the goal of ensuring that adults see students in terms of who they are as learners and what story the data tells about them rather than seeing them as one leader described as “green check marks or red x’s” (Leader, District 2).

Another leader described the district’s plan to bring all teacher and administrators together for professional development on this topic in the following way:

The panel members that we have selected are teachers in our system that have been making a difference for students from various backgrounds....That our cultures are so much deeper and color blindness is only somewhere in the middle of the continuum in terms of understanding culture and it gets you off of the potential bias but it doesn't

get you to a point where we respect and understand each child to the point that we can positively impact their instruction and having the student feel invested in the educational system. Because when the educational system meets them, or in some way reflects them back... background, heritage, cultures, things that they hold near and dear to them, it bridges what is very often a huge gap for students between school and home and families. So that is one form of professional development we're doing for all. (Leader, District 2)

District leaders embrace the designation of one school as a good thing or opportunity to expose systemic issues. Another leader describes it in the following way:

What assumptions are we making and how are we trying to impose our biases on kids? It turns into a conversation about cultural competence by staff, so that's what I mean by the exposure piece in a good sense. (Leader, District 2)

Again, the designation is viewed by leaders as a positive catalyst for change in so long as it aligns with the values and beliefs or vision and mission of the district.

Challenges identified by leaders within the district include getting teachers to use responsive teaching that is data informed, the unclear or contradictory policies by the state, and finding a way to balance it all. One leader confirmed it in this way:

Okay. I think the biggest challenge comes in what I would consider to be responsive teaching. So it doesn't matter to me what the subgroup is. Whether it's the economically disadvantaged or ELLs or our accelerated students. Teachers, at that moment, need to be able to collect data and then make informed decisions on how to move that group forward, and that's where I feel like the biggest challenge lies in education in general. (Leader, District 2)

A second challenge identified by district leaders is the way policy or mandates get translated or communicated to the field as well as policies by the state that are contradictory. Leaders within the district indicated that they were not notified that they were required to write a LAP before they were told why they needed to do so. Leaders stated that they had to go into their own data and make a guess before it was finally explained to them months later. One leader indicated that the state later acknowledged the issue and was working on a plan to communicate more effectively next time. This type of confusion and lack of clarity on policy is further underscored in statements by other leaders within the district.

...right now the logic of some of the things is, at best, questionable in my mind. And so we're constantly trying to do this interface of how do we bring the pieces together? In some cases, they come together nicely and in some cases they're absolutely in contradiction with each other... So it is a challenge, the politics of education, makes that a little bit difficult because it doesn't lend to consistency. It doesn't lend to a long-term vision. It doesn't lend to creating clear road maps to success. (Leader, District 2)

**Summary.** Leaders within both districts identified opportunities to use the designation as a catalyst to embrace change and foreground issues of equity by engaging in conversation regarding beliefs about student subgroups to erase any “cultural bias” or “paternalism” within the system. Additionally, it is an opportunity to change the mindset of the district to embrace a new norm for performance for all students.

Leaders within both districts also identified challenges within the larger educational climate in New York State. The first is the accelerated rate of policy demanding change. The second is the illogical sequence of those policies which makes it difficult to focus on

students and create policy coherence. Despite the challenges, leaders within both districts have found a way to focus on systemic change that focuses on both changing the mindset of adults and setting high instructional standards. The ability to do this is predicated upon leaders within the district responding by using the four roles defined by Rorrer et al. (2008) to create coherent and systemic change. These roles will be explored in the next section which answers the central question of the study.

### **Response to Designation**

The purpose of this research was to explore the influence of mandated accountability policies in two historically high performing districts in the Capital Region of New York State. Further, the study was designed to explore whether leaders within the two case districts responded to the external mandate by assuming the four essential roles in reform toward the improvement of instruction and the advancement of equity proposed by Rorrer et al. (2008). Rorrer et al. (2008) proposed that an understanding of “the potential of districts as institutional actors to disrupt inequity and serve in roles that, instead, promote equity and social justice” will be achieved through broad methodological approaches (p. 343). Inasmuch as historically high performing districts under newly mandated accountability policies in New York are required to foreground issues of equity because of the growth targets set for economically disadvantaged subgroups, whether leaders within the case districts assumed any of these roles was one stated goal of the study.

To reiterate, the central question for this study asked— how do superintendents, central office administrators, and principals in high performing school districts respond to the identification of a school in Need of a Local Assistance Plan for one or more subpopulations?

Overall, the four roles guided leaders in both districts in their response to external policy mandates. Leaders used all four roles to respond to the identification of a school in Need of Local Assistance Plan for one or more subpopulations. Leaders used the roles of instructional leadership, foregrounding equity, and creating policy coherence when formulating the plan or response to the mandate; however, all findings are also grounded in the role of re-orienting the organization to support instructional shifts and to begin to discuss changing the culture of the organization. In this case, all leaders within both districts are aware that some norms and beliefs must be addressed. In these two cases, the evidence suggests that there is a commitment to making some changes; however, whether the elements of the plan are enough to create capacity for systemic change in foregrounding equity remains unanswered. The next section illustrates how the findings are related to the roles assumed by leaders within the case districts.

To further determine which roles were assumed by leaders, responses that were coded according to the four roles were quantified using a matrix and counting the number of responses for each role by leaders within the district. This was done to determine whether one role was referenced more frequently than another. It was found that creating an equity focus and instructional leadership were the most often cited role by leaders in District 1 with only five responses fewer for instructional leadership. Instructional leadership and re-orienting the organization were the most referenced role by leaders in District 2 with only ten responses difference between the two roles. It is important to note that while some roles were referenced more than others, the distribution of responses across all four roles is relatively equal in both districts.

The ways in which leaders within the case districts assumed these roles will be discussed in the following sections organized by role.

**Instructional leadership.** Rorrer et al. (2008) conducted a research synthesis of the literature on all four roles to arrive at a description of the elements in each role. In that analysis, instructional leadership contains two essential elements: “generating the will to reform” and “building the capacity to do so” (p. 315). They note that this role is the bridge between policy mandates and the actual implementation of policy.

Leaders in District 1 responded to the policy mandate with the attitude that if they pulled together, they could make a difference with this subgroup. This role is most apparent in the following statement by one leader in reaction to the designation as an opportunity “to be able to retrain people, to refocus effort, to say, ‘Hey, guys, it’s not us saying it. This is what we got. Now let’s all get together and figure out how to address it and fix it’” (Leader, District 1). Part of instructional leadership is acquiring the new knowledge needed to re-train people and then motivating them to want to do it in order to build capacity. Throughout the interviews, all three leaders in District 1 indicated that they were focused on helping teachers with instructional strategies that support the Common Core and data driven instructional training.

Similarly, leaders within District 2 stated the same desire to ensure teachers were supported. “I think much of it comes down to supporting the teachers to do the right thing, communicating the right messages, providing the right supports, empowering them. That's where we wanted to put our focus” (Leader, District 2). It is widely recognized across all leaders within both districts that whatever was being asked of them through the diagnostic



and review template, the focus had to remain on how best to reach the classroom which is evidenced through this most often cited role.

One leader in District 1 spoke in detail about the instructional leadership provided by the district in training teachers to come together to use data to inform instruction through data meetings. These meetings are new as a result of the LAP.

We come together for two hours and go through any student who is currently getting extra services, special ed. or not special ed., and AIS and that's when we'll have that discussion about programmatic changes, instructional shift changes and as far as what really should we be focusing on now with them, and how so. (Leader, District 1)

Leaders in District 1 also noted that with the implementation of a new reading series, they hold vertical team meetings to serve as a venue where they can talk about implementation. In addition, leaders in the district are aware that consistency in implementation is the key to providing equitable instruction. One leader framed it in this way:

I've tried to stress that as we implement new reading programs, which we're doing this year, it's important that everyone's on the same page. You don't have to be exactly identical, but we shouldn't have one person doing what should be an hour lesson in 20 minutes, and then other people being faithful to a program for an hour. We should be relatively consistent because part of the achievement gap happens because of the instructional gap. (Leader, District 1)

Leaders in District 1 indicated that it is the principal who works with teachers to create capacity; whereas in District 2, all three leaders mentioned creating capacity through the use of instructional coaches.

The approach taken by leaders in District 2 is to provide coaches in mathematics and literacy to all buildings with priority access given to the LAP school as a way to build capacity in the district. One leader in District 2 framed the difference between typical professional development and the leaders within the district assuming more of an instructional leadership role that creates capacity within the system. “I mentioned the literacy coach helping with that implementation, not just doing what we usually do for teachers, just have one or two trainings and then send them off on their way, but having somebody who can follow through with them on a regular basis” (Leader, District 2). Another leader in District 2 framed the importance of the coaches in this manner,

The most important is that the coach can put her money where her mouth is. She doesn't just run a PD session and say, “this is how to do guided reading,” or, “this is what you ought to be doing because this is what Fountas and Pinnell says it is.” It is, “Now that I've done this, I look forward to an opportunity to come in and monitor your classroom, look at your plan book, and I'll come do the whole thing. You tell me what you're teaching and all you have to do is sit back and watch, and then you're going to critique me, what would you do differently, what would you feel comfortable with, and then I'm going to come back and I'm going to come back until you feel like this is in a place where you're really comfortable with it. (Leader, District 2)

Leaders within District 2 place importance on providing professional development and support to teachers that will build capacity rather than something that is external and does not translate into classroom practice. One leader described it by saying, “You can introduce something to a teacher intellectually, outside of the setting, but absent any sort of practical

application based on what that teacher's daily constraints are, it falls horribly short” (Leader, District 2). The ability of leaders to recognize the support needed and to build the will to change is evident throughout conversations with leaders in the district. This same leader said of the district’s focus upon providing coaches that, “We're doing it ourselves and I think we're getting some of the best return we've seen” (Leader, District 2).

Finally, a third leader within District 2 spoke about how instructional leadership and building capacity is the key to creating sustainability versus satisfying a mandate via a LAP for one building. This leader summed it up by stating, “We never want to be in the business to simply satisfy mandates because we’re only, at best in my opinion, getting 75% effort, because all people want to do is get across that minimum line and stop versus trying to reach their mastery level (Leader, District 2).

**Maintaining an equity focus.** There are two attributes in this role according to Rorrer et al. (2008): “owning past inequity, including highlighting inequities in system and culture and foregrounding equity, including increasing availability and transparency of data” (p. 328). As noted earlier in this chapter, text coded under “equity focus” meant that leaders within the district acknowledged past inequities or the gap, but also took action to disrupt or displace structures that limited opportunity or access. Additionally, they are taking steps to make data more transparent and available.

Leaders within both case districts acknowledged that the designation of having an achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and non-economically disadvantaged students sent a clear signal to them that they needed to look deeper at what was happening from a system and building level. One leader-acknowledged the inequity and stated it in this way:

It's clearly an indication that, particularly in this case, for us in ELA, that the performance comparatively was not up to par, so, subsequently forcing us to ask the question, "why?" Because of the system--we do things very systematically--so it wasn't necessarily an issue of one building doing something differently from a program perspective. So, we had to dig in a little deeper in terms of what's actually happening within the building itself, and recognize also that there are demographic issues with kids and those things factor into play. (Leader, District 2)

Leaders also acknowledged that they are working on disaggregating data within the district to "break out the subgroups and try to see how they perform in comparison to the larger body" (Leader, District 2).

Similarly leaders in District 1 acknowledged and owned the gap in performance between economically disadvantaged and students who are not economically disadvantaged. One leader within District 1 stated, "We should have been more aware of that gap. We should have taken steps earlier to prevent that from happening." Leaders in District 1 indicated that while they knew there was an achievement gap, the way in which they also used the data was not what it should have been and, therefore, leaders have used that information to inform the current focus: to increase the availability, transparency, and use of district data.

Finally, in both districts leaders have begun to focus upon helping teachers to understand that raising expectations is the best way to help students in this subgroup. All references to foregrounding issues of equity occurred simultaneously with references to re-orienting the organization. This will be discussed in the next section.

**Re-orienting the organization.** According to Rorrer et al. (2008), districts refine organizational structures and processes and alter district culture to align with their educational reform goals when assuming the role of re-orienting the organization. The responses to the interview questions by leaders within both districts indicate that this is something they are focused upon as they look to respond to the policy mandate to raise student achievement for economically disadvantaged students. The self-study undertaken by leaders within both case districts revealed that while there certainly were areas in which they needed to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as provide training for teachers, they also needed to change some of the district culture or beliefs and practices associated with students in this subgroup.

In District 1, leaders reference the role of re-orienting the organization within the context of creating an equity focus as they look to change the district culture and beliefs about economically disadvantaged students. References to this role did not occur without reference to simultaneously working on equity. One leader in District 1 framed it this way:

The other thing that came out of it, I think, that was interesting is that it wasn't that it was a lack of effort. I think the word "refocus" is the right term. There was a lot of effort, but a lot of the effort was spent kind of wanting to help the students to the point of almost enabling them versus really making them independent learners and helping them to develop the skills to be independent learners. I think it comes from educators having big hearts and wanting all their students to not only succeed, but also feel good. Sometimes we forget that we need to focus on specific skills and specific knowledge and equip them so that they can be successful on their own. I

think that was something that this study kind of helped us to see. It came out of this... out of this work that we were doing. (Leader, District 1).

In contrast, leaders simultaneously referenced providing instructional leadership with re-orienting the organization in District 2. Leaders in District 2 also referenced changing district culture to address inequities with re-orienting the organization, but to a lesser degree than District 1. That is, whenever leaders mentioned instructional leadership or addressing inequity, they also spoke about the need to a) align instructional resources and support or b) change the way adults in the district “see” students to be more “culturally relevant” for those students.

**Policy coherence.** In order to be coded under the role of “policy coherence” leaders stated that they actively mediated, coordinated, or synthesized external policy into district policy. As mentioned previously, the designation represented both a challenge as well as an opportunity to align outside policy with internal needs and local context. The creation of policy coherence involves “mediating federal, state, and local policy and aligning resources” (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 323). Rorrer et al. (2008) also summarizes this role as the act of district leadership “molding policies into district specific derivatives.”

In speaking about the LAP, all district leaders in both case districts mentioned that they were able to build the plan to reflect the district vision. One leader in District 1 stated that the goal “was to mirror as much of it, the district's vision, into the LAP to make sure that it wasn't an isolated document but that they worked in conjunction with one another,” indicative of the desire to mediate policy to fit the long-range mission of the district (Leader, District 1).

Leaders in District 1 described the process of creating the LAP in the following way:

It was an opportunity to be reflective and to get teacher input, be collaborative and come up with some very specific actions to help students in this sub-group achieve and we also were thoughtful in relating it to the vision. That way we weren't creating yet ten new initiatives but instead we were connecting them all through that filter, which is very important, that filter of your district vision (Leader, District 1).

Similarly, Leaders in District 2 added that there are any number of mandates that they are forced to deal with and the decision comes down to whether it fits the vision and mission of the district. Leaders in District 2 echoed what Leaders in District 1 stated about not creating new initiatives. “Instead of trying to run after the plan we said, ‘this is what we’re doing and so we’re going to impose what we’re doing into the plan versus having the plan creating a parallel set of implementations that are contrary to what we’re doing as a school district’” (Leader, District 2).

District 2 leaders also described the process of complying with mandates and creating policy coherence as “doing those things that are consistent with those values and beliefs that we hold as an educational institution (Leader, District 2). It is clear from the responses of leaders within both districts that creating policy coherence allows the district to keep the focus on initiatives already underway by marrying the new mandates to them as well as ensuring that they hold to their values and beliefs by filtering all of the external information through that lens.

One leader in District 2 acknowledged that what the mandate was asking them to do did not fit with what they felt they needed to be addressing when this leader said, “When we looked at those elements of the LAP, we didn’t feel as though those were the sections that

were going to help our student achievement” (Leader, District 2). This same leader went on to describe how they were able to create policy coherence in the following way:

Again, I said we set the plan aside and said, “What would we do if we could do anything?”, and “how do we make sure that that's in alignment with our priorities across the district?” Because like I said, these students who have performance gaps exist in all of our elementary schools. So how do we make sure that we take a system approach to this? We started off with asking, “What are we doing as a district?” and we talked about how it fit in terms of existing priorities. (Leader, District 2)

Leaders within both case districts are firmly committed to the vision and mission of the district and responses indicate that they remain focused on what is needed despite external mandates. Leaders in District 2 explained this in the following way:

We may get information, be it through our internal data or data provided to us... and I say this as a system... provided to us by an external body that causes us to reconsider or look at our focus and adjust it or put higher priorities somewhere else. But for the most part, we typically know and know more than what we learn in terms of external reports coming inside. (Leader, District 2)

References to the role of creating policy coherence indicate that this is something leaders within both districts do consider and it is a role that exists for them simultaneously with the other three roles.

Finally, one of the challenges mentioned by leaders in District 1 and highlighted under research question two above, is the difficulty in creating policy coherence in light of how the relationship with the State Department of Education has changed over the last fifteen to twenty years. One leader in District 1 noted the following:



It was a very collaborative relationship where people from the field were regularly brought into the state education department to advise, to sit on committees, to score and write questions for exams and do all those things, and in the last 10, 15 years, there's been a total disconnect, where the field is really... we are just basically told what to do. And our feeling is that state education department, when it was functioning as a partner with us, was a great support to the work that we were doing in our schools, and we need that kind of relationship again. So we're really kind of reaching out. That's one of the things that we talked about was reaching out and saying, 'You know, we just want to have that kind of collaborative relationship again. It'll benefit our students when the State Education Department is in tune with what's really happening in the field and understanding how their policies and regulations impact the work that we do.' We're not getting the kind of support that we need to do the work. So we also need to make people aware of how the work gets done at the ground level. And, again, keep the focus on our students because we want all students to be successful. (Leader, District 1).

Similarly, leaders in District 2 spoke about this same difficulty that arises from the increased number of mandates by the State Department of Education in the following way:

We live in an era of accountability and an era where we have more data points than one can desire. And some point us in the right direction and some point us in the direction of things that, okay, so what if we do all of these things to satisfy or get over this particular threshold, does it really change the quality of the experience for kids? (Leader, District 2).

This leader went on to state that policy coherence is one way of ensuring that leaders within the district attempt to keep the focus on students. This leader spoke about the number of goals schools currently have for students from ensuring they have a variety of experiences to infusing technology into the curricula and practicing responsive teaching. The difficulty in doing so was explained in this way:

All of the things that every parent desires for their child we want our system to be able to effectively do that and how do we do that as well as ensure that they satisfy assessment benchmarks? Ensure that we're implementing new curricular changes with appropriate due diligence? So the challenge isn't, 'Can we balance those things?' The challenge is, 'Can we be aware of those things in a logical sequence that we can effectively do it?'" (Leader, District 2)

The role of creating policy coherence is referenced by leaders as something that they are cognizant of and seek to do despite the difficulties inherent in the current educational context of New York State.

**Summary.** *How do superintendents, central office administrators, and principals in high performing school districts respond to the identification of a school in need of a Local Assistance Plan for one or more subpopulations?*

Rorrer et al. (2008) proposed that districts are capable of disrupting and displacing institutionalized structures and practices that perpetuate inequity in student achievement through four interrelated roles which were used as deductive themes to ground the study. In sum, this study found that both case districts interpreted the state mandate in light of their own vision and mission. Leaders within both districts referenced what can be defined as all four roles in responding to the mandate. They were aware of the gap prior to being

designated and they both viewed the mandate as a helpful external catalyst for change giving validity to the need for change. However, how to effect that change was not guided by the diagnostic tool or elements of the mandate, but through holding tight to core values stated in the mission and vision. Leaders within both districts interpreted the state policy and diagnostic tool in light of the district vision and integrated what was required into what they were already doing. If it did not fit, it was not included in the plan. In short, both districts found the state mandated self-assessment and diagnostic tool helpful in some ways and not in others. Largely, they defaulted to interpreting its elements in light of the vision and mission of the district. Therefore, both districts held tight to their core values and integrated what fit in the tool and ignored what did not. Both districts found the guidance from the state unwieldy and sometimes a distraction from the vision in favor of activities.

## **Chapter 5: Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of mandated accountability policies in two historically high performing districts in the Capital Region of New York State. Further, the study was designed to explore whether the two case districts responded to the external mandate by leaders within the district assuming the four essential roles in reform toward the improvement of instruction and the advancement of equity proposed by Rorrer et al. (2008). The study was designed to discover the response of leaders to the designation through exploring (1) what districts knew prior to the designation about the identified subgroup and how that informed its planning (2) whether the elements of the LAP aligned with district priorities and (3) what opportunities and challenges were identified as a result of the designation.

This study found that the designation was a helpful external catalyst for promoting change in the use of data to foreground issues of inequity. It also found that leaders within both districts interpreted the state mandate in light of their own vision and mission to create policy coherence and minimize disruption to the system which may or may not be related to both systems having experienced system leaders. Leaders within the case districts used internal and external assessment data and were aware of the gap prior to being designated; however, neither district knew in advance that the gap was large enough to meet the state criteria for designation. Leaders within both districts interpreted the state policy and diagnostic tool in light of the district vision and integrated what was required into what they were already doing. If it did not fit, it was not included in the plan. In short, leaders within both districts found the state mandated self-assessment and diagnostic tool helpful in some ways and not as helpful in others. Largely, they defaulted to interpreting its elements in light

of the vision and mission of the district. Therefore, leaders within both districts held tight to their core values and integrated what fit in the tool and ignored what did not. Leaders in both districts found the guidance from the state unwieldy and sometimes a distraction from the vision in favor of activities. The process caused the leaders within the case districts to reference what can be defined as “instructional leadership,” foregrounding equity,” “creating policy coherence,” and “re-orienting the organization” in order to work toward elimination of the achievement gap (Rorrer et al., 2008).

This chapter consists of a summary of the findings of the study, conclusions, and recommendations.

### **Summary of Findings**

**Previous knowledge regarding subgroup and the impact to planning.** Leaders within the case districts regularly collected and analyzed data for the subgroup; however, it was not clear to what degree the data was distributed and looked at in a disaggregated way at the building level. While leaders within both districts were also aware of a gap in performance between students who were economically disadvantaged and those who were not, the data was not transparent enough to know the depth of the gap in the context of other students in that demographic group. The state designation was somewhat of a surprise to leaders in both districts. This is further evidence that guidance from the state regarding how designations would be made for the 2014-2015 school year did not precede the actual designations.

As a result of the designation, leaders within the case districts recognized the need to implement a real-time systematic and comprehensive system for data and data analysis that extended to the school building level. The act of creating that system and disaggregating the

data refer to the roles of instructional leadership and foregrounding equity. Additionally, it is clear that they understand that it is not enough to ensure that the data is available at the building level. Leaders within the case districts referred to creating a culture of using data to inform instruction effectively which relates to the role of re-orienting the organization. The evidence suggests that the designation was a catalyst in promoting change in the way the case districts use and analyze data.

**Alignment of local assistance plan elements to district priorities.** Leaders within the case districts used the district vision and mission to guide them in conversation throughout the process of responding to the mandate rather than using the state template as a guide for creation of the plan. One leader described the difficulty of using the state template in this way:

I understand the difficulty of say, for instance, the State Education Department trying to have a single model that they want to send out to every school and it becomes that square peg trying to get into a round hole because every school, while we may all be on the same list, we all have very different circumstances and we could be on the same list for the same type or designated cohort of kids, but we all have still different needs and we're all in different places. And this was a good example. (Leader, District 2)

Leaders within the case districts found the template periodically helpful in giving them some “talking points” or in “guiding conversations” (Leaders, District 1). The action of filtering the template through the lens of the vision and mission, and what was already being implemented in the district, is an example of how leaders within both case districts created policy coherence for themselves so that the state mandate did not become another set of

initiatives or usurp what was already in motion in the district for raising student achievement. This also creates the least amount of disruption to the system as a whole. Given that the superintendents of these two districts are experienced leaders, it seems logical that they would seek to mediate the impact of the designation.

**Opportunities and challenges of the designation.** Leaders within the case districts identified opportunities and challenges that arose as a result of the designation. The most significant finding was that leaders within the case districts recognized the designation as an opportunity to change; however, the evidence suggests that case districts made minimal changes to what they were already going to do for the upcoming school year by altering the amount of time allocated for coaching, meetings, or in extending programs already in existence in the district.

Leaders within the case districts spoke of the designation as an opportunity to foreground issues of equity by engaging in conversation and professional development regarding beliefs about students and student subgroups and to make better use of data. The issues of “cultural bias” and “paternalism” within the system were referenced by leaders and the act of engaging in those conversations and providing professional development on working with students who live in poverty and cultural literacy indicates a willingness by leaders within the case districts to foreground equity issues and to re-orient the organization by replacing old norms and beliefs with new ones. The willingness and motivation to engage in these discussions demonstrates commitment to the roles of foregrounding equity and providing instructional leadership (Rorrer et al, 2008). The plan to continue these discussions or ensure that the initiative reaches the classroom level was not discussed. Therefore, Terry (2010) would describe this as reaching stage 2.

As noted earlier Terry (2010) describes four developmental stages in the response to external mandates: a) the information gathering stage in which districts determine whether they will comply, b) the affirmative stage wherein the district commits by addressing internal management issues, aligning structures, resources and responsibilities to comply, c) the capacity building stage in which the district must decide to confront cultural beliefs and practices that are in conflict with the mandate, use resources to leverage change, and implement innovative practices. The evidence suggests that neither district has yet reached the capacity stage or what is described by Terry (2010) as stage 3 which involves the following components:

Districts' Stage 3 responses have three components: actively confronting ideological conflicts with mandate requirements and district cultural beliefs and practices, leveraging resources to build district capacity for change, and *innovating practices* [emphasis added] to increase learning outcomes. In contrast to early Stage 2 responses, which focus on a more superficial commitment to change, Stage 3 is marked by a deepened belief that 'business as usual' will not suffice to meet mandate requirements (p. 103).

Additionally, the degree to which data would be transparent and disaggregated was also not discussed in interviews or in the Local Assistance Plans.

It is worth noting that the leaders within the case districts did use the designation as an opportunity to change the mindset of the district to embrace a new norm for performance for all students—again, demonstrating how the role of re-orienting the organization occurs simultaneously with instructional leadership and foregrounding equity. Again, the changes to what was already in motion were minimal suggesting that the act of creating policy



coherence and minimizing the impact to the district may have been more important at this stage.

Challenges reported by leaders within the case districts pointed to the larger educational context within which the system is situated. Therefore, what remains a challenge is the manner in which leaders maintain policy coherence by ensuring that all new initiatives fit with existing ones and within the vision and mission, as well as within the district's resources. This has become harder with diminishing fiscal resources and an increasing number of mandates.

**Response to designation.** The study revealed that leaders within both districts viewed the policy mandate as bringing some validity to the need to change as long as it fit within the parameters of what the district already had committed to doing within the stated vision and mission. They responded by simultaneously focusing on student need and the core of teaching and learning while changing norms and beliefs and remaining attentive to the politics of education. As the aforementioned findings emerged, references to actions that define the four interrelated roles of instructional leadership, foregrounding equity, creating policy coherence, and re-orienting the organization were also made by leaders in the case districts (Rorrer et al., 2008).

A preponderance of the evidence suggests that historically high performing school districts respond in a measured way to state mandates by marrying the requirements of the mandate to what they have already committed to doing in the local context and incrementally adding to that plan anything that exposes a conflict between what they believe and value and where they are performing. By using a process of dialogue and reflection coupled with external information they are able to commit to change through assumption of the four roles

described by Rorrer et al., (2008). The evidence also suggests that the case districts possess the correlates of effective school districts, allowing them to simultaneously foreground equity and align structures, processes, and resources that support student achievement while working toward changing some underlying assumptions and beliefs.

While external forces in the era of accountability could be disruptive to the system, in these two case districts, leaders within the system were able to mediate its impact while working to incrementally improve the system. The relative equal distribution of responses between the four roles suggest that system leaders sought to minimize the immediate impact of the designation and ensuing mandate and chose to continue focusing upon initiatives already underway or supports that were already in place for this particular subgroup. This was possible because the New York State policy gives districts significant latitude in drafting a LAP. However, it was also suggested by leaders within one of the case districts that they were not even told why they were designated which may have caused them to be wary about being disruptive to the system without all of the information in hand. The leaders within both case districts were able to make the plan fit within the existing priorities of the district.

This finding that leaders within the district sought to minimize the impact of the policy mandate is also supported by the fact that leaders in the two case districts were asked to describe the plan for raising student achievement with this particular subgroup both prior to and after the designation. Leaders in both districts indicated that outside of the need to use data more effectively to inform instruction across the district, the plan remains the same for this subgroup. A relative equal distribution of the responses across the four roles is indicative of the fact that the district does provide supports and has strategies for foregrounding equity; however, little was changed as a result of the designation. Stated

another way, the district equally sought to mediate the impact of the policy. If there had been a significantly disproportionate number of references to an equity focus and re-orienting the organization, one might conclude that the district had implemented new or innovative practices to disrupt or foreground equity and there was a greater need to “re-orient the organization.” Conversely in these two cases, more references to re-orienting the organization occurred simultaneously with instructional practices or in making data more transparent (also an equity focus) rather than in changing norms and beliefs related to foregrounding equity.

That is not to say that leaders within the case districts did not seek to foreground equity through changing beliefs within the system with regard to the subgroup. All leaders indicated this is something they discussed and provided professional development upon; however, since these are the only two actions referenced, the degree to which this accountability plan has foregrounded equity is only at the commitment stage to working toward change (Terry, 2010).

## **Conclusions**

One major conclusion of this study based on the findings suggests that historically high performing school districts possess leaders who are able to mediate external accountability policies to minimize impact to the system. While mediating policy is a positive response (Skrla & Rorrer, 2006), in the case of a high performing school district, it also ensures compliance without truly foregrounding equity which is the one facet of the policy that high performing school districts have not mastered.

There is much evidence in speaking with the leaders in the case districts that they possess almost all of what Trujillo (2013) outlines as the correlates of district effectiveness in

her meta-analysis: a clear mission or vision; frequent progress monitoring; strong instructional leadership, and high expectations for students and teachers. This undoubtedly factors into the districts' ability to mediate the impact of the policy to the system because an effective system has strong leadership. The work of Louis and Robinson (2012) support the finding that when the district has a clear agenda and reform focus, leaders must also have the "skills required to integrate with the external policy framework" (p. 633). The findings of this study suggest an ability to create policy coherence by the leaders in the case districts and it is also notable that both districts have experienced system leaders who set the tone for the leadership team within the district. In the case of these two experienced policy mediators a positive response to policy was to minimize the impact to the system absent more definitive guidance by the state.

Whether another school district with a less experienced system leader could achieve the same result is a question that surfaces as a result of this study. Additionally, whether a less experienced superintendent would seek to disrupt the system to innovate and foreground equity is another question that arises. Equally intriguing would be whether a lesser performing school district would seek to mediate the impact or seek to be more disruptive of the system.

Overall, it is concluded that the two experienced superintendents in the case districts in this study sought to mediate the impact of the policy and minimize disruption to the system because the policy had enough flexibility in it to do so and the policy lacked guidance on how to foreground equity. It is also not clear to what degree the state's lack of explanation prior to the designation may have made it more difficult to do much else other than preserve the system in this short time frame without all of the information. Inasmuch as

the superintendent is also charged with keeping stability in the district, the ability to mediate the impact of policy to the system is a valuable organizational survival skill and a requisite for an integrated, cohesive response to policy which at the rapid pace systems experience it today could be quite disruptive (Skrla & Rorrer, 2006).

With that said, it can also be concluded that the case districts are on the right track despite a lack of guidance or partnership with the state in attending to issues surrounding assessment and data. Going forward, it would be necessary to disaggregate the data, compare buildings transparently, and make campus based decisions based upon the need identified in the data.

Consistent with previous research (Skrla & Rorrer, 2006), there has been a shift in the field that accountability policies based upon high stakes tests have given validity to the need to focus upon subgroups of students and achievement. The case districts in this study embraced these expectations.

Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that rather than adopt a short-term performance mode stance where the district looks to meet an accountability standard, it has embraced the richness that can evolve from dialogue (Senge, 1990).

### **Policy and Practice Recommendations**

The New York State Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness which districts use to guide them in creation of a Local Assistance Plan has six tenets in the following order: Tenet 1: District Leadership and Capacity; Tenet 2: School Leader Practices and Decisions; Tenet 3: Curriculum Development and Support; Tenet 4: Teacher Practices and Support; Tenet 5: Student Social Emotional and Developmental Health; and Tenet 6: Family and Community Engagement. Given that the entire reason for having to create a

Local Assistance Plan is to ensure equity and close the achievement gap, and given that high performing school districts who possess the correlates of effective school districts will already have the four other tenets in place, it is recommended that New York State amend its self-assessment and review template to highlight the foregrounding of equity issues while maintaining the flexibility to leverage local contexts and knowledge.

That is, Tenet 1: District Leadership and Capacity should also include a statement of practice around leading for social justice or foregrounding equity. Guidance should be provided with ways in which systems can ensure they are not perpetuating inequities. Sunderman (2013) proposes focusing on schooling conditions and the within school policies and practices that are relevant to facilitating the learning of racially and ethnically diverse students. A focus on disaggregating data should be prominent under Tenet 1 and Tenet 2.

Tenet 6: Family and Community Engagement should foreground the need to create true school-family partnership. In order to do so, the document should highlight *reciprocal* communication in order to understand some of the inequities the system may set-up as well. Larson and Murtadha (2002) argue that we should ask instead how hardships affect the freedom of these students to achieve while at the same time inviting the community to be a part of the discussion. They found that “the adoption of high stakes testing has silenced discussion of curriculum and closed school doors to the insights, concerns, and needs of the families served by schools” (p. 146). They also state that leaders must question the top down decision-making that is happening because it keeps citizens who live in poverty out of the decision-making. Trujillo & Renee (2012) also argue for the inclusion of the stakeholder in the community through a more democratic theory of education.

Again, the ability to mediate policy to prevent unnecessary disruption to the system and to be able to continue the work of the district already in progress is a valuable and necessary skill; therefore, accountability policies should continue to be flexible enough to leverage local knowledge and contexts. That is, allowing skilled superintendents and their leadership teams latitude to focus only upon reform where it is truly needed. Sritanchia and Pasmore (1996) suggest that the system learns when there is a cycle of individual doubt that leads to learning through rich dialogue within the system, which in turn leads to organizational conviction. Policies that remain flexible—like the requirements for creating a Local Assistance Plan—will allow the system itself to leverage its internal knowledge through this process and continue this learning cycle. This is what Louis & Robinson (2012) call the inside-out approach to policy wherein districts can choose from a menu of options that are flexible enough to fit local needs rather than a true one-size-fits-all approach.

One way in which New York State may keep flexibility, but work toward systemic change at the local level is to consider changing the district status if there is a LAP school within the district. That is, New York State allows a district to remain in good standing if it has a building in LAP status; however, its neighbor Massachusetts, uses the lowest performing building within the district in order to assign a level (Massachusetts, 2012) in order to promote a district response to the issue. This avoids what is happening in New York where suburban districts have one neighborhood with a disproportionate amount of economically disadvantaged students not performing well while the district itself remains in good standing and the rest of the building principals view it as a problem only for the identified building. While both require a district response, being viewed as only as good as

your lowest performing building by the eyes of the state and the public at large, might create more urgency to address the achievement gap that occurs through systemic inequity.

Given that the era of accountability is predicated upon using policy to reform education, it is imperative that the two systems forge a stronger partnership with a unified approach to reform leaving less room for misinterpretation of policy at the local level which inhibits change. Both districts spoke of a willingness to and engagement with working to influence policy and desire to partner with the state. It is understandable that school districts are getting mixed messages about accountability and foregrounding issues of equity. When the New York State test scores were released in 2015, no mention was made of gains or losses by economically disadvantaged subgroups in the press release. Data was released by race only which sends the message to districts that either poverty is not the issue or poverty and race may be interchangeable terms. The statement made by New York State Department of Education on August 13, 2015 was as follows:

Progress for Black and Hispanic students held steady in 2015 ELA and math. While the percentage of students scoring at the proficient level edged up slightly in both subjects, Black and Hispanic students still face a significant achievement gap. English Language Learners (ELLs) also made small gains in 2015 in ELA and math but still lag behind their non-ELL peers. However, in New York City, Ever ELLs—students who received ELL services in years prior to the 2014-2015 school year but not during the 2014-2015 school year—had higher levels of ELA and math proficiency than NYC students who never received ELL services.

The New York State Department of Education should seek to partner with districts to find and use innovative practices to promote systemic change, but that cannot happen until there



is consistent agreement on poverty as a valid, and in these two cases, primary cause of the achievement gap.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Poverty is the largest problem facing schools today and is a national dilemma, thus it is worth pursuing in further studies. Given that more data is available today than previously at the district and building level, it is easier than it has ever been to do this.

One area in which study is needed is in understanding how much district leaders know about foregrounding equity or eliminating inequities in the system for students who are economically disadvantaged.

Furthermore, how can you implement innovative practices that disrupt inequities while largely maintaining equilibrium within the system? It would be interesting to explore whether less experienced superintendents in designated districts innovate more with the premise being that more experienced system leaders might be more likely to make non-disruptive system decisions based upon wisdom of accumulated years of experience. That said, in order to foreground equity you do not need to disrupt everything, but a level of disruption is necessary in order to change. Simply creating policy coherence makes sure everything stays the same.

The case districts in this study collect and use data regularly, but state that they have not fully used it to the depth possible. This leads to another recommended study of the data monitoring practices of principals and other leaders who beat the odds to close the achievement gap in high performing school districts.

A further study could examine the partnership between state and local districts and whether there are practices/partnerships in states that are closing the gap that are more collaborative or two-way.

Finally, it would be worth exploring whether the elements of the plan discussed by leaders in this study reached other building principals and/or the classroom level.

### **Closing Statement**

Educational policy and the role of the district in interpreting and then implementing those policies is a multi-faceted and complex undertaking. However, until both State Educational Agencies, and Local Educational Agencies endeavor to partner and commit to the same language and goals—by using best practices and research on closing the achievement gap for all students and, in particular, those who are economically disadvantaged—New York State school districts will continue to comply and even commit to some changes, but in the interest of preserving the entire system not much will change. A fair amount of trust will need to be built up again before this can happen.

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## Appendix A

### **Interview Protocol for Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Pupil Personnel and Building Level Leader/Principal**

#### Introduction:

Hello. My name is Debbie Ripchick. I am a doctoral candidate at Sage College of Albany in the Educational Leadership Department. I am conducting dissertation research in partial completion of my doctoral degree on the impact of mandated accountability plans on high performing school districts.

Thank you so much for taking the time to help me with this study. With your permission, I am going to ask you a series of questions and will listen to your answers. All answers are confidential and your identity will not be revealed. I anticipate that this interview will take approximately 45 minutes.

First, let me go over a few things that you need to know about the interview:

I would like to tape the interview to make sure that I accurately capture the information that you are providing. If you would prefer that we do not record, that is okay.

If you do grant me permission to tape, you may ask at any time to stop the recorder. If you are reluctant to continue the interview at any time, let me know, and we will stop.

Before we start, I must have your consent in writing (I will provide informed consent form if interviewee has not brought one with him/her and ensure it is filled out and signed).

District Interviewee Name/Title: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Please state your position and how long you have served in the position.
2. As you know, X building was recently designated as in need of a local assistance plan. What do you think this means?

If necessary prompt with:

From NYSED's point of view? From school district's point of view? From a student point of view?

3. Aside from state test scores, what types of data do you collect on students?
4. Did you already have data collected on this particular subgroup?
  - a) If yes, how were you using it?

**Interview Protocol for Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Pupil Personnel and Building Level Leader/Principal**

5. How well, if at all, did the required elements of the local assistance plan help inform your work?
6. What was the district plan for raising student achievement with this subgroup?
  - a.) What is it now?
7. How does this plan fit within the existing priorities for the district?
8. Are there any existing initiatives or priorities that will have to be adjusted? If so, which ones and how so?
9. What resources, if any, were re-allocated to implement the LAP?
10. How do you think the mandated accountability policy will affect your district's policies and practices in the future?
11. What do you see as the biggest challenge right now for the district or the school with regard to raising student achievement for this subgroup?
12. What professional development opportunities are provided to all leaders within the district in meeting the needs of this subgroup?
13. Do you have any external partners, including the state department of education, who are assisting you with raising student achievement for this subgroup? If so, how long have you been working with them?
14. Is there anything else that you would like me to know about the district and its response to the state's requirement for a local assistance plan?