DISTRICT INFLUENCE ON PRINCIPALS’ EFFICACY AND SENSEMAKING IN THEIR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

by

Vera N. Azah

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Graduate Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Part of a larger study of high-performing districts in Ontario, this mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) study identified school district actions perceived by principals to help them make sense of their leadership work and contribute to their sense of efficacy in carrying out that work.

Qualitative data included interviews with 23 principals, 10 senior district leaders, and 5 trustees in two high-performing districts in the province. Narrative analysis was used to analyze these data. Quantitative data were provided by the responses of 1,563 principals and 250 senior district leaders to two forms of a survey which included sub-sets of questions about variables of special interest to this study. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the survey results.

Interview results showed that in the two study districts, each of 12 district actions framing the study were perceived to influence principals’ efficacy or principals’ sensemaking or both. Of those 12 district actions, principals in one of the two study districts identified 8 of the 12 district actions as especially influential in helping them to make sense of their work and to develop their sense of efficacy for carrying out that work; 10 of the 12 district actions were identified by principals in the second study district.

Four of the 12 district actions were common across the responses of principals in both study districts including: networking interactions among principals; job-embedded and regional professional development opportunities; support from superintendents with the writing of school
improvement plans; and emphasis and support with data interpretation and use for decision making processes.

Except for one of these four district actions (use of evidence for decision making), survey results pointed to the same sets of district actions as particularly influential to both principals’ efficacy and sensemaking.

This research adds to the understanding of what districts do that helps their school leaders work more effectively. Implications are identified for the actions of district leaders and for future research.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

All good managers must occasionally be leaders…, and all good leaders had better be good managers…at least some of the time if they are not to be brought down by technical snafus or organizational messiness. Indeed, one of the enormous challenges of great leadership is the seamless blending of the more operational-managerial dimensions with the visionary leadership functions. (Van Wart, 1998, p. 25)

The overall purpose of this study was to identify district actions that make a significant contribution to the development of (a) school leaders’ sense of efficacy about meeting the challenges they face and (b) their ability to make sense of their instructional leadership responsibilities. This introductory chapter describes the background for the study, identifies the research questions guiding the study, and discusses its significance.

Background

The Importance of School Leadership

This study is embedded in a much larger stream of research aimed at determining how to improve the contributions that schools make to student achievement. Along with curriculum standards, professional development, school culture and effective instruction, for example, school leadership is a central focus of this larger body of research. Considerable evidence now points to such leadership, especially on the part of principals, as a significant explanation for variation in student achievement across schools (e.g., Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2006; Cotton, 2003; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) and “instructional” approaches to such leadership are associated with the largest proportion of this explanation (e.g., Robinson, 2007). This research suggests that leadership is second only to classroom instruction in improving

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1 See Hattie (2009) for an overview of variables pursued in this larger stream.
achievement for all students and closing the gap between successful and underachieving students (Hershberg & Robertson-Kraft, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004).

**Leadership as a Social Practice Aimed at Sensemaking**

The literature includes many different definitions of leadership. For purposes of this study, leadership was defined as *a social activity through which individuals or groups influence the understandings and actions of others toward the accomplishment of organizational goals.* This definition highlights the importance of social interaction and sensemaking as a key part of what is entailed in exercising leadership (e.g., Pye, 2005; Thomson & Hall, 2011). That is, the sense leaders make of their work is significantly influenced by the social interactions they have with others in their work contexts. Similarly, the social interactions others have with leaders have an influence on their sense making as well. Leaders influence their colleagues’ sense of purpose and the actions they take to accomplish those purposes through social interactions of many different types. So “meaning and action are inextricably entangled; meaning begets action begets meaning” (Ray & Goppelt, 2011, p. 59). As leaders interact with stakeholders within their organizations, they engage in a process of meaning making resulting in observable leadership behaviors and actions. These observable behaviors have been shown to have both direct and indirect effects on teachers’ classroom practices and at least indirect effects on student learning.

This practice of making meaning is particularly important for institutions and organizations such as the school system. It provides a fundamental basis for explaining why people (leaders in particular) do what they do to improve schools. A sensemaking approach to understanding school leadership does not simply provide a contribution to knowledge in the field but might also be helpful to active school leaders in pursuit of ways to implement successful leadership practices shown through research to improve schools. Thomson and Hall (2011)
suggest that “sensemaking…is part of the missing link between the categories developed by leadership scholars and the everyday change work of real leaders” (p. 401). Further, I suggest that to conceptualize leadership as sensemaking in action provides school system leaders with an understanding of their daily activities for school improvement - leading and organizing, and how to improve the interaction between people. Similarly, other researchers have suggested that sensemaking provides the basis of actions and the need to explain those actions and the causes associated with different events (Czarniawska, 2008; Krumm & Holmstrom, 2011). This study is concerned with what districts do that shapes principals’ sensemaking about the programs, policies, and practices they should implement in their schools.

**Successful Leadership and Leader Efficacy**

There is considerable evidence indicating that self-efficacy is an important part of the explanation for leadership success (McCormick, 2001) and that successful district actions contribute to school leader efficacy (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Such efficacy, in turn, shapes school leaders’ behaviors or practices. Efficacy research suggests that “given appropriate skills and adequate incentives…efficacy expectations are a major determinant of people’s choice of activities, how much effort they will expend and how long they will sustain effort in dealing with stressful situations” (Bandura, 1997, p. 77). This research indicates that leaders’ belief in their ability to lead encourages them to develop different ways of accomplishing their goals and how to persist when faced with challenges. Also, research by Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) found that only when districts improve the efficacy of their principals do districts have a demonstrable effect on student achievement. District actions that enhance principals’ sense of efficacy in their ability to lead schools help principals with their school improvement efforts.
By now, a significant body of evidence points to “instructional leadership” practices on the part of school leaders as having the greatest influence on what teachers do and how much students learn. One early source of such evidence can be found in the effective schools literature, which proclaims the significance of principals as instructional leaders and links instructional leadership approaches to higher student achievement (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). These approaches to leadership include such practices as: curriculum development, implementation of new instructional strategies, mentoring novice staff, modeling instruction, walk-throughs, providing professional development (PD) opportunities and teacher supervision (Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2006). What is less well known is how those leadership potentials are developed in school leaders, and how districts influence principals’ understanding of their instructional leadership and the efficacy in their capacities to enact instructional leadership practices. This study aims to broaden that knowledge.

**Districts as Contexts for School Leaders’ Work**

One of the most important questions arising from evidence about instructional leadership effects on student achievement is “How do school leaders acquire the capacities and dispositions needed to exercise such leadership?” While a relatively few number of initial preparation programs designed to provide principals with those dispositions and capacities are clearly exemplary (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007), most are reported to be limited in scope, guided by relatively low standards, and unlikely to prepare principals adequately for even the initial challenges they face on the job (Tucker & Codding, 2002; von Frank, 2010). In addition, however, it is unrealistic to expect the dispositions and capacities required for successful instructional leadership to be mastered by aspirants or novices, no matter how elaborate their initial training. School leaders themselves typically attribute less formal
sources much greater weight in their own development (Flessa, as discussed in Hughes, 2005) and one study has pointed to the district as by far the most significant influence on school leaders’ development (Coffin & Leithwood, 2000) even before school leaders had become as visibly accountable to districts as they are at present.

School districts have a strong stake in ensuring the success of their school leaders. District actions have been shown to have direct and indirect effects on teaching, learning and overall student achievement. Furthermore, district organizations are a central feature of the context in which school leaders work and learn on the job, with uniquely powerful opportunities to foster that learning in directions most appropriate for district missions. Very little research is available, however, about how districts successfully foster the development of instructional leadership dispositions and capacities on the part of their principals. Beginning to fill this knowledge gap was the central purpose of this dissertation.

Gemberling, Smith, and Vilani (2009) describe a school district as:

A political, organizational, and administrative unit created for the delivery of public education at the local level…[they add that] across North America, generally, the school district is the vehicle by which funds are distributed, teachers [and principals] are hired and assigned, and work rules are established. (p. 13)

In North America, school districts are “mediators of state or provincial policy” (Spillane, 1998), as well as makers of policy themselves. Their actions are labelled as principles (see Resnick & Glennan, 2002), characteristics (see Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001), strategies (see Togneri & Anderson, 2003), and policies (see Elmore, 1998). In this study, I use actions to include all district characteristics, practices, strategies and procedures. While district action will be used throughout, those actions are almost always what district leaders do. The focus is on the actions rather than the people taking those actions. Those District Actions, which are interdependent, identify what effective districts do, according to previous research.
Historically, districts’ contributions to school reform were assumed to be very weak. Fueled by effective schools’ research in the 1980s and restructuring efforts in the 1990s favoring site-based management, with the assumption that schools are the locus of change, districts and their leaders were largely missing from the discourse around school reform. Some researchers, however, continued to provide evidence that school districts matter in efforts to reform schools based on their role in supporting the implementation of new government and district programs, policies and practices (Fullan, Anderson, & Newton, 1986; Louis, Rosenblum, & Molitor, 1981). However, most of the empirical evidence at the time concerned classroom implementation of new programs, policies and practices but paid little or no attention to the impact of districts on student performance.

Acknowledging the still-significant amount of unexplained variation in reform success by the focus on school-level variables alone, some researchers shifted or expanded their attention to district effects on student learning and teachers’ classroom practices (e.g., Floden et al., 1988; LaRoque & Coleman, 1990; Maguire, 2004; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Rosenholtz, 1989). Evidence from this line of research indicated very weak effects of districts on student learning. Nevertheless, efforts to improve schools on a large scale over the past 15 years have sustained this interest in district contributions and the widespread accountability movement in education has led to an unprecedented tightening of the “coupling” between schools and districts (Hamilton, Schwartz, Stecher, & Steele, 2013).

New evidence reinforces this continuing interest in district contributions. One of the most rigorous of its kind to date, a study (Chingos, Whitehurst, & Gallaher, 2013) using 10 years of student achievement data from districts in both North Carolina (115 districts) and Florida (67 districts) examined the relative amounts of variation in student achievement accounted for by districts, schools and individual teachers. Ignoring the variation explained by factors over which
education systems have little influence (such as student age, race/ethnicity, cognitive disability status, free and reduced lunch, and limited English proficiency status), results from the relatively small districts of North Carolina found that about 54% of the variation in achievement was explained at the teacher level with schools and districts each explaining in the 20% to 25% range. Results from the much larger Florida districts demonstrated much more exaggerated differences between organizational levels. Individual teachers explained from 75% to 85% of the variation in student achievement, schools about 12% to 15% and districts only 4% to 6%.

About the substantial differences in district effects between the two states, the authors speculate that:

Superintendents of smaller districts may more easily be able to change education policies and practices than their counterparts in larger districts. There may also be more idiosyncratic variability in smaller districts, such as the departure of a highly effective principal of a school that accounts for a significant share of enrollment in the district. (Chingos et al., 2013, p. 14)

Put differently, the work of superintendents in smaller districts is much more likely to influence the direct experiences of students than is the work of large-district superintendents. Size aside, however, this study indicates small to moderate and significant effects of districts on student learning. What districts do clearly matters. The most important question raised by these results is how districts have those effects. My study aims to provide part of the answer to that question.

The resurfacing of districts and their leaders in the educational discourse on school reform has been influenced, in part, by an emerging accountability policy context, as early as the mid-1990s, including national, state or provincial standards and tests, expectations of success for all students, and transparent accountability of teachers, schools, and districts for student performance. *No Child Left Behind* became the central policy mechanism driving such accountability in the United States with approximately similar policies evident in many other educational jurisdictions around the world (Leithwood, 2011).
Given our awareness of the importance of principals’ efficacy and sensemaking in improving student achievement, districts’ efforts in implementing school reform need to focus on how to enhance principals’ efficacy and how to make sense of their responsibility to provide instructional leadership to their schools. The next section of this dissertation focuses on the Ontario context in relation to province-wide policies implemented during this reform era. It also highlights ministry intervention strategies and initiatives that district and school leaders talk about later in the case studies.

The Ontario Context

During the reform period, the province of Ontario (the context for this dissertation) experienced two distinct approaches to accountability. Launched by a right-leaning conservative government in the mid 1990s, the first approach included the establishment of a central testing agency (Educational Quality and Accountability Office) with a mandate to annually measure and report student achievement, along with almost two dozen other specific measures aimed at making schools more publicly accountable and less costly. With the election of a liberal government in the early 2000s, a second approach emerged, one which retained demands for transparent accountability but provided much more central support for districts and schools in their efforts to achieve a centrally determined set of student achievement targets.

These accountability policies have significant implications for the work that educators do at multiple levels (classroom, school, district, and government levels) across the education system. At the level of the government, for example, these policies included the establishment of three core goals for the system as a whole:

1. Increasing student achievement.
2. Reducing the achievement gap.
3. Increasing confidence in the public education system.

In order to achieve these priorities, the ministry extended its tentacles and dug deeper in the implementation of literacy and numeracy practices in all schools and school boards across the province. Districts as policy mediators with more direct contact to policy makers than schools and their leaders were asked to align those priorities with their board improvement plans (BIPs) / strategic plans. Districts, in turn, demanded that school leaders align their school improvement plans (SIP) with their districts’ improvement plans in order to improve student achievement.

With such high expectation for student success, it was considered imperative to prepare principals and district leaders towards a focus on instruction if the culture within schools is to be changed. Additionally, districts are charged with the responsibility to help principals implement effective practices in efforts to improve student achievement. The government of Ontario has stayed front and centre in this reform era, making considerable effort to support both school and district leaders in their efforts to improve schools.

At the time of this study, the Ontario Ministry of Education (Ministry) had introduced the following intervention techniques, initiatives, projects and structures to support low-performing schools in particular with their instructional improvement efforts:

- **The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS)** of the Ministry. Established in 2004, the Secretariat's goal is to help improve student achievement across the province. The government assigns skillful and experienced educators known as student achievement officers (SAO) to collaborate directly with school districts and their respective schools in their student achievement efforts. As at the time of this study, over 80 SAOs were working with schools and their districts to build capacity and implement strategies to improve reading, writing and math skills. (Ministry of Education, n.d.)
- **Leading Student Achievement (LSA): Networks for Learning project.** A province-wide project with a primary goal to boost student achievement by improving the quality of school leadership (for example, through conferences). The project is sponsored by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and led by three provincial principal associations: Ontario Principals’ Council (OPC), the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario (CPCO) and l’Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles Franco-Ontariennes (ADFO). (Ministry of Education, n.d)

- **Managing Information for Student Achievement (MISA) project.** A province-wide initiative through which the Ministry provides funds to continue to build provincial, district, and school capacities to collect, analyze, and use data/information for informed decision making to support improved student achievement. Through this project, a MISA leader (a teacher with numeracy portfolio) is hired for each school board with responsibility to oversee the activities and expenditure of the funds allocated for MISA activities. The MISA leader becomes the key contact with the ministry for the Project. (Ministry of Education, n.d.)

- **Schools-in-the-Middle.** An Ontario initiative that networks schools across a school board in order to improve teaching, assessment, and instructional leadership, and informal sharing amongst principals across the board. With student achievement as the Ministry’s agenda, districts are awarded money to support improvements through the Ministry’s *Schools in the Middle* initiative. (Ministry of Education, n.d.)

- **The Province’s Turnaround project.** The Turnaround project involved a government intervention strategy which aimed to support schools through: the allocation of new resources, provision of focused quality professional development,
and emphasis on principals to spend more time observing classrooms and supporting staff with instructional improvement. (Ministry of Education, n.d.)

These initiatives provided schools with supports for improving instruction but also pressured schools and their leaders to clearly “link their instructional improvement efforts to ‘higher level’ or ‘more complex goals or big ideas’ included in the provincial curriculum” (Leithwood, 2011, p. 25). Furthermore, districts across the province have been encouraged to participate in Teaching – Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP), through which major curriculum goals or “big ideas” are identified for school improvement purposes.

Complementing these government intervention techniques and initiatives is a leadership strategy encompassing the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) to support the development of successful school and system leaders in the province of Ontario. The framework reflects most relevant research on effective school leadership and provides guidelines for improving leadership in the province. It identifies five broad dimensions or categories of successful leadership practices shown through research to have a positive effect on student achievement: setting directions, developing people, designing the organization, improving the instructional program, and securing accountability. OLF also identifies three sets of “personal leadership resources” believed to underly effective practice including cognitive, social and psychological resources (Leithwood, 2011).

During the course of this study the province also introduced new provisions through Bill 177 focusing trustees on student achievement and governance (Education Act, 2009). Though the

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2 “TLCP is a process for instructional improvement by school teams that begins with the identification of a major curriculum goal or “big ideas”, examining student work related to that goal or idea, working out common understanding about judging that work (moderated marking), providing feedback to student, refining instruction and tracking student progress.” (Leithwood, 2011, p. 62)

3 The framework provides the foundation for educational leadership development in Ontario as it reflects leadership practices known through research to have the greatest influence on student achievement and well-being.
Bill falls short of a clear distinction between governance and operations, it is assumed that the provisions on governance will likely help to reduce conflicts between trustees and senior district officials. This would give the superintendents and directors of education the time to focus on school leaders’ continuous development and the daily operations of the board.

In sum, over the past decades, the province has been committed to improving education by supporting, in part, principals and school districts’ efforts to enhance student success across Ontario. With a high expectation for alignment across the school system, districts are responsible for helping principals become successful in meeting the province’s accountability demands for school improvement. How districts influence principals’ efficacy and sensemaking for such improvement is the interest of this study.

The Problem for This Study

It seems clear from earlier evidence that (a) instructional leadership practices make a significant contribution to school improvement and student learning and (b) school districts loom large as a context for school leaders’ work. Evidence collected in both school and non-school contexts also indicates that (c) perhaps the “disposition” most critical to leaders’ success is their sense of efficacy in being able to accomplish organizational goals (e.g., Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). This study, therefore, pursued the following general research question and sub-questions:

How do districts improve the instructional leadership capacities of their principals?

- What actions do districts employ to help principals improve schools?
- Which district actions influence principals’ sense of efficacy for school improvement?
- Which district actions help principals make sense of their instructional leadership responsibilities?
It is important to state that the research questions call for an examination of principals’ perceptions of changes in their sense of efficacy and sensemaking about their instructional leadership capacities for school improvement. The study does not examine any other measure of efficacy or sensemaking.

**Significance of the Study**

With increased emphasis on school improvement, the role of the principal evolved from managerial to a focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning (leading learning / instructional leadership). Concurrently, district expectations changed from managerial effectiveness of their principals to expectations for leading learning but without proper support to principals to meet the demands of their evolving role. Tucker (2002) cites findings of Hallinger’s study on trends in the evolution of school principalship in the US indicating that “principals were not provided with technical assistance, adjustments of role expectations, or policies designed to support new knowledge about instructional leadership” (p. 46). This evidence shows the need for district intervention to support principals with their school improvement efforts.

Also, policy makers are constantly developing new policies to improve schools. To be useful, these new policies need to be implemented in a coherent and consistent way by schools. The interpretation of these policies is crucial for implementation and requires collective sensemaking between district and school leaders. How district leaders as “mediators of policy interpretation” (Spillane, 1998) interact with principals for example, becomes as important as how they shape principals’ sense of efficacy in their ability to implement those policies coherently in efforts to improve schools.
The conceptual framework of this study describes how district actions interact with principals’ internal processes to influence principals’ efficacy and sensemaking about their leadership. It suggests that, when principals’ efficacy and sensemaking occur in a meaningful way, it prompts instructional leadership practices, which they enact in efforts to create conditions in their schools and classrooms that account for instructional improvement.

This dissertation focuses on the following three concepts: district improvement actions, principals’ efficacy, and principals’ sensemaking and shows the relationship between them in the context of Ontario.

Chapter 2 presents the framework that guides the study, defines the concepts of district actions, principals’ efficacy and sensemaking, and suggests possible relationships between them. The remainder of the chapter describes a review of current literature on the three concepts. It provides four core categories of district actions associated with improved student achievement; a five-dimensional sensemaking model for explaining how people make sense of new information; and Bandura’s four sources of leader efficacy describing techniques through which districts can develop leader efficacy for successful leadership in schools.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology. The research employed a mixed-method multistage study design. Qualitative data (stage one) were provided through interviews with school \((N = 23)\) and district \((N = 15)\) leaders from two high-performing districts in Ontario, along with some documents. Quantitative data (stage two) were provided through online surveys of schools \((N = 1563)\) and senior district leaders \((N = 250)\) across Ontario school districts \((N = 50)\).

Chapter 4 reports analysis of survey data, showing scale reliabilities and results for the three sub-questions that guided the study.

Chapter 5 reports analysis of interview data for Greenbridge district school board case study. Using the four core categories of effective leadership, it describes Greenbridge district
actions for school improvement along with their influences on principals’ efficacy and sensemaking.

Chapter 6 reports analysis of interview data for Marinee district school board case study. Using the four core categories of effective leadership, it describes Marinee district actions for school improvement along with their influences on principals’ efficacy and sensemaking.

Using the frameworks for sensemaking and efficacy that guided this study, Chapter 7 presents a cross-case analysis of the two high-performing districts (Greenbridge and Marinee).

Chapter 8 summarizes and discusses the findings in relation to other similar research on effective district characteristics, sensemaking, and efficacy.

Chapter 9, the last chapter of this dissertation outlines the conclusions drawn from the research with significant implications for district actions and those organizations serving principals outside the district. It also provides one major recommendation for future research.
CHAPTER 2
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with a brief description of the framework used to guide the study’s data collection and analysis. Intended also to locate this study within a larger research agenda, this framework includes not only variables and relationships involved in the study but others as well. Remaining sections of the chapter review previous research about each of the variables and relationships in the framework relevant to the research questions described in Chapter 1.

Figure 1 begins on the left with District Actions (a subset of external influences) as the independent variable for the study and ends (on the right) with student learning. Principals’ efficacy and sensemaking, a subset of internal influences on principals’ practices are located as mediating variables in the figure although they serve as dependent variables for this study. Principals’ efficacy and sensemaking are the basis for principals’ instructional leadership practices. These practices have indirect effects on student learning when they improve conditions in the school and classroom with direct effects on such learning. Only district actions, principals’ efficacy, and principals’ sensemaking, along with the relationships among them, were a direct part of this study. In this study I use “actions” to include all district characteristics, practices, strategies and procedures. While district action is used throughout, those actions are almost always what district leaders do. Focus is therefore on the actions rather than the people taking them. District Actions, which are interdependent, identify what effective districts do according to previous research.

District actions, according to this framework, interact with principals’ internal processes to influence principals’ efficacy and sensemaking about their leadership. Principals’ efficacy and sensemaking, together, shape the nature of the instructional leadership practices which they enact.
in their efforts to improve those conditions in their schools and classroom accounting for the school’s contribution to student achievement.

**Figure 1. District influence on principals’ sense of efficacy and sensemaking.**

**District Actions**

Recent reviews of the largely qualitative research about district contributions to school reform have begun to codify how districts make a difference in the achievement of their students, resulting in their categorization as high and low performing districts (influenced in part by variations in their contextual and physical conditions). Urban districts for example are known to experience significant challenges encompassing poverty, high student mobility, and low levels of parent involvement. These challenges act as roadblocks to accomplishing district and state goals/standards resulting in lower student achievement outcomes as with more affluent suburban and rural districts (Patterson et al., 2010; Spillane, 2000). Some studies have shown variability in
district-level support for school level interpretation of district policies thereby increasing the likelihood that some principals will gain more attention than others in the interpretation of district policies (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, Diamond, & Burch, 2002). These differences in levels of support have repercussions on principals’ understanding of new policies and their overall leadership for school improvement. Other studies have shown differences in districts’ (mediators of policy interpretations) understanding of state policies (Spillane, 2000; Spillane & Callahan, 2000; Sipple & Killeen, 2004) which again, have varied effects on principals’ sensemaking processes about these policies and their leadership for school improvement.

Despite this growing body of research on sensemaking in school systems, there is no available research that I am aware of that describes how districts influence principals’ sensemaking about their leadership for school improvement. Also, most organizational research has focused on the outcomes of efficacy beliefs, with very little effort toward understanding district influences on principals’ efficacy (Chen & Bliese, 2002). This study was undertaken in districts (irrespective of their context) that had made significant improvements in student achievement as a result of district interventions. The study in these districts was about the influences of district actions on principals’ perceptions of changes in their understandings of their instructional leadership role, and efficacy in their capacities to enact instructional leadership practices.

The conception of District Actions used in this study was based on a model developed in the larger study of which it was a part. This model reflects the results of a comprehensive synthesis of existing research (Leithwood, 2010) along with evidence collected as part of the larger study. It also acknowledged the results of two additional comprehensive reviews of relevant evidence (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Evidence from
this earlier research inquiring about district actions associated with improved student achievement identified four categories of such actions including, in sum:

1. Core Processes
   - Creating widely shared system directions (mission, vision, beliefs and goals for students);
   - Building curricula and instruction capable of achieving system directions;
   - Ensuring the use of systematically-collected evidence to inform decisions and help solve problems throughout the system.

2. Leadership
   - Professional leadership, especially the leadership of superintendents and directors;
   - Elected leaders; which is the leadership of trustees.

3. Supporting Conditions;
   - Organizational improvement processes;
   - Professional development [and Networking] for all staff in relation to the capacities they need to help accomplish the system’s directions;
   - Alignment of resources, personnel, policies and procedures and organizational structures.

4. Relationships
   - Establishing collaborative working relations between central office and schools;
   - Building good relationships between the system, schools and parents;
   - Building good relationships between the system, schools and local community groups;
   - Building good working relationships between the system and the Ministry.
Using a social interaction lens, my study tested the extent to which those categories of district actions and the more specific practices encompassed by them influenced principals’ efficacy and sensemaking about their instructional leadership and whether some of these characteristics were more influential than others. Since sensemaking manifests itself through the words, actions and behaviors of sensemakers, it was assumed that the District Actions would influence principals’ sensemaking, thus shaping what principals prioritize, which aspects of policy initiatives get communicated to the rest of the school and what the school focuses on. The four categories of District Actions are as follows:

**Core Processes**

This category of district actions, including the following three specific sub categories is likely to have the most direct impact on the quality of instruction:

**Creating widely shared system directions**

Vision is not about what we are, but about what we want to be. Vision captures a critical dimension of dynamic systems. For school boards, it is about where we are going and what kind of school systems we are trying to create. A positive vision is future-focused and seeks to shape events rather than simply let them happen…Positive and inspiring visions require the widespread involvement of those whose lives will be influenced and shaped by the vision. (Gemberling et al., 2009, p. 3)

Extensive evidence points to the importance of a positive and inspiring vision, widely accepted, shared and focused on raising the achievement of all students and closing the achievement gap between successful and underachieving students (Cawelti, 2001; Leithwood, 2010; Snipes et al., 2002). Setting a clear vision for the board often manifests itself through a district improvement plan, for example, and sets the stage for the development of *school improvement plans* (SIPs). Districts make or mar the planning process depending on the conditions for school leaders’ participation in board decision making, understanding of the
board’s vision as well as the conditions created for understanding, interpreting and implementing Ministry and district level policies, programs, initiatives and standards. As Patterson et al. (2010) explain:

The potential for student success increases when a district and school share in the responsibility for developing and guiding program implementation. Districts that implement change successfully are those where district staff collaborates with building leadership and teachers, instead of employing a top-down policy…If educators are involved in selecting programs as well as the change process, they are more interested in its effectiveness. (p. 230)

Research suggests that high-performing districts create widely shared system directions (Anderson & Togneri, 2003; Elmore & Burney, 1998; Iatarola & Fruchter, 2004; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Maguire, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Snipes et al., 2002; Spillane, 2000). In Anderson and Togneri’s (2003) study of five high performing districts in the US for example, 80% of the districts reported engagement in school reform efforts with an initial focus on making necessary revisions and modifications to district visions, missions and goals which then served as the basis for strategic planning. Of paramount importance in the aforementioned cases was the emphasis on not simply developing a clear sense of direction for the district, but also engaging staff at school and district levels in a shared understanding of the vision, mission and goals. One of the few Canadian studies identifying characteristics of high performing districts, Maguire (2003), reports evidence from four “improving” Alberta districts of “widespread, top-to-bottom understanding of the district’s mission and goals” (p. 11). These districts also had engaged in strong district actions for improving student achievement with at least one senior leader championing the vision through a deeper passion for increasing student achievement. Besides developing a widely shared vision, sustaining the mission of districts through continuous development and revision of shared belief statements is also imperative. In developing these belief statements, high performing districts engage school administrators, their
staff, parents and other stakeholders in the planning process thereby ensuring a greater understanding and sharing of the belief statements.

**Building curricula and instruction capable of achieving system direction**

Most studies of high-performing districts highlight district efforts in developing a district-wide curriculum, with greater coherence across the system in terms of content, materials and instructional approaches for student learning. These districts value a high level of involvement of stakeholders in decision making processes at the central level, in order to develop meaningful and engaging instruction for all students (Snipes et al., 2002). Evidence about high performing districts shows that some districts have established standards for student performance (Skrla et al., 2000) while others focus on either the development or adoption of district curricula and instructional approaches aligned to district goals and state standards (Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005; Snipes et al, 2002). Yet other districts have developed assessment standards and tools for measuring system outcome and informing planning processes (Cawelti, 2001; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). In Ontario some districts participate in *Teaching Learning Critical Pathways* (TLCP⁴), through which major curriculum goals or “big ideas” are identified for school improvement purposes.

When district standards are aligned with tests and district curricula, assessment results inform the development and modification of the curricula and instructional approaches as well as supporting continuous improvement within the district (Louis et al., 2005). Once developed, the curriculum guides the direction of professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators, as well as the development of school improvement plans which is, in turn, directed by PD, and school plans. An example of this was New York City’s (NYC’s) District

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⁴ “TLCP is a process for instructional improvement by school teams that begins with the identification of a major curriculum goal or “big ideas”, examining student work related to that goal or idea, working out common understanding about judging that work (moderated marking), providing feedback to student, refining instruction and tracking student progress.” (Leithwood, 2011, p. 62)
#2’s alignment of curriculum, instruction and professional development (Elmore & Burney, 1998). In this district, intensive, focused and continuous professional development for both teachers and administrators prompted the development of district-wide curriculum and instruction and the alignment with all other features of its technical core\(^5\). This means that the curriculum taught in classrooms was aligned with the district’s curriculum intentions, and the assessment of student learning was well aligned with expected content and standards. NYC District #2 did not simply focus on professional development for teachers, as most reform efforts have done in the past, but engaged in continuous training for principals, as well. A sense of understanding of principals’ past experiences and prior knowledge informed orientation experiences and other training programs geared towards boosting principals’ sensemaking about their role for school improvement.

High-performing districts, then, influence decisions about curriculum standards, curriculum guides, curriculum material (e.g., textbooks), student evaluation, teacher supervision and appraisal. However, little is known about how districts shape principals’ understanding of these instructional and curricular standards and approaches.

Spillane’s (2000) study of district leaders’ responses to a mathematics reform, revealed that 79% of the district leaders’ understandings of the mathematics reform focused on the general procedures and approaches to teaching mathematics across different subject areas (‘forms\(^6\)) but neglected the content-specific intentions of the reform - ‘functions’\(^7\) (pp. 154, 162). This variation was explained by the prior knowledge and past experiences and beliefs of district leaders about how best to motivate and engage students in mathematics classrooms. Spillane’s study reported gains in implementation of the mathematics education reform by district leaders.

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\(^5\) Technical core is defined in terms of the curriculum, instruction, instructional materials, programs and assessment procedures and standards.

\(^6\) Involving tools such as instructional, motivational, and classroom management tools.

\(^7\) Involving a coherent pedagogy designed to support more integrated changes in math education.
with function-focused understandings of the reform who emphasized the use of appropriate pedagogy and instructional philosophies to guide the incorporation of necessary changes to mathematics instruction. Spillane’s study demonstrated that lack of consistency in understanding and delivering curriculum by district leaders hampers stakeholders’ ability to share their experiences between classrooms and schools and complicates district-wide professional development opportunities.

In another study conducted by Louis and colleagues (2005) of three school districts in the US, findings demonstrate the collective efforts of district leaders and school teachers in two of the three districts in making sense of state standards. There was however exhibit variation in the implementation of the state policy. Interestingly, school principals within these districts were not involved in making sense of the state policy despite the prevalence of literature that broadcasts the central role played by principals in policy change. This could account for the implementation variations across schools. A look at how districts influence principals’ sensemaking is imperative for policy implementation, sustainability of reform and policy coherence. In sum, available evidence indicates that district-wide curriculum, shared, accepted and understood by all stakeholders, increases the likelihood of implementation consistency and coherence across schools within a district. My study takes the work of Spillane, and Louis and colleagues a step further to investigate in part, principals’ sensemaking and district mediation.

*Ensuring the use of systematically collected evidence to inform decisions and help solve problems throughout the system*

Leaders in all three districts [in a study examining the roles of central office in shaping and supporting instructional reforms], claimed that they wanted staff members to base their decisions on evidence whenever possible and that they wanted to support and spread programs and practices that produced results. In all three instances, there were serious efforts to build evidence-based cultures in the central office and to encourage schools to pay attention to research evidence. However, these efforts were hampered by the inadequacy of the research evidence
Evidence indicates that high-performing districts develop effective information management systems and encourage the use of systematically collected evidence in planning both centrally and locally (Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007; Iatarola & Fruchter, 2004; Cawelti, 2001). However, just as indicated in Corcoran et al.’s (2001) findings, it is not sufficient to provide schools with the evidence for decision making. Mechanisms need to be put in place to overcome structural and contextual barriers in order to ensure that school administrators and teaching staff can interpret and use the evidence for decision making.

Togneri and Anderson’s (2003) study of high performing districts, describes how districts support principals and other staff in making sense of their school data for continuous improvement of their practices. District leaders provided school staff and leaders with the time, resources and PD opportunities they needed to make sense of data geared towards the enforcement of informed evidence based decisions. Togneri & Anderson describe efforts of high performing districts in encouraging data use in schools to include three approaches:

- **Making the data safe** by encouraging a climate of openness and acceptance of data-positive or negative and the readiness to learn from the data. Based on a voluntary external review of Kent County, reporting both plus and minus areas requiring improvement, the district accepted the review outcome and proactively engaged its teaching staff in professional development activities.

- **Making the data usable** by providing schools access to simplified and easily understood assessment tools and data as well as assisting them with data interpretation. They cited the case of the state of Maryland which provided a website to assist schools in interpreting their specific school data.
• *Making use of the data* by providing teachers and school administrators with the time and training needed to make sense of data for purposes of decision making in their own schools.

The authors cite an example of rigorous data use in Kent County where most of the professional development days were set aside for workshops on assessment. They earmarked that “in addition to workshops, the assistant superintendent and superintendent regularly visited with principals and school leadership teams to discuss the implications of student performance data.” (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 21)

Reiterating the prominence of data use in schools, Louis et al. (2005) illustrate the collaborative and continuous improvement culture within a high performing school - Angier High School and the district in which it is located - Iowa district school board. Though limited by the lack of involvement of principals, the district ensured that teachers were trained in compiling and making sense of data together for continuous improvement of the school.

Besides the training for teachers and principals in analyzing, interpreting and using student data, principals in high performing districts have been shown to be supported by other central support systems such as the assignment of internal and external experts (district curriculum specialists and research and development officers) to assist schools with the comprehension and use of their students’ data (Iatarola & Fruchter, 2004). These forms of support from central office increase principals’ sense of efficacy in handling data and improve their potential as instructional leaders hence, a positive influence on their understanding of evidence-based decision making as instructional leaders.
Leadership

This category, including both professional and elected leaders with an express focus on professional leadership in this study, encompasses the procedures involved in identifying, recruiting, selecting and appraising both school and district level leaders as well as a robust emphasis on building principals’ instructional leadership capacities.

Professional leadership

There is a dire need for instructionally focused leadership both at the central level and locally in schools to serve students from diverse backgrounds, especially the growing number of minority students in challenging circumstances. Evidence points to a strong relationship between the quality of classroom instruction and student performance, hence the need to invest in instructional leadership for both principals and senior district leaders (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). The overall goal is to develop instructional leaders who are capable of helping teachers develop instructional strategies geared towards the improvement of average levels of student achievement (raising the bar) as well as improving the learning of underachieving students (closing the gap). The focus of my study is what districts do to help principals make sense of their work, acquire the leadership capacities to do that work, and nurture their efficacy about carrying out that work successfully. High performing districts focus on improving instructional leadership in different ways but the common thread within these districts is the changing conception of leadership expectations within the district, providing leaders with the support they require to perform the new role, as well as holding leaders accountable for student performance. The following two areas describe how high-performing districts focus their leadership on instructional improvement.
Changing the role of school and district leaders towards a focus on instruction

To hold principals and district leaders accountable for student performance, role clarifications and changes must be aligned with the new role expectations consistent with standards for student performance. Three out of the five districts in Togneri and Anderson’s study provided policy governance orientations for school boards as a key part of their reform efforts.

In Skrla et al.’s (2000) study of four Texas districts that significantly improved the achievement results of its disadvantaged and minority students, superintendents were seen to have changed their role from managers to instructional leaders. The districts championed a culture that believed in success for all students, entwined in their practices and trickled down to role changes for other educators within the district (principals included). The superintendents within these districts took up responsibilities including but not limited to: encouraging buy-in on the focus of the district regarding student learning to schools, district staff and the community at large, working with principals and teachers and providing schools with necessary resources to enable the accomplishment of the task of raising results for all students.

Enhancing principals’ leadership capacities

According to Togneri and Anderson (2003), most high performing districts focus considerable amount of their time and efforts on providing targeted and ongoing opportunities for principals and senior district leaders to continuously develop their potentials as instructional leaders. These opportunities encompass both internal and external leadership programs to improve principals’ leadership. However, research by Togneri and Anderson as well as other researchers illustrate that high performing districts favor internal over external leadership development programs for principals. As high performing districts rely more on internally designed programs to improve on the leadership capacity of school leaders, it increases the
likelihood of meeting the specific needs of its leaders and aspiring leaders than the externally
developed programs which are more generic in nature (for example the principal training
programs offered by universities). Other internal leadership opportunities include, mentorship,
coaching, facilitated school PD which facilitates the development of a good working relationship
between superintendents and principals (see Eilers & Camacho, 2007). This form of teamwork is
further demonstrated in studies of District #2 portraying the superintendents collaborating with
principals to provide teachers with meaningful instructional leadership opportunities.

In addition to these internal opportunities, most high performing districts are
supplementing their in-house leadership programs with sources of expertise external to district as
a whole, in an attempt to enhance instructional leadership capacities within schools. Other
approaches to building principals’ capacity within NYC’s District #2 for example, include; an
initial preparation program for principals affiliated with a university as partner, mentoring
through pairings with experienced principals as well as constant interaction with other principals
through informal networks (Elmore & Burney, 1998). These support systems exhibit varied
levels of influence on principals’ sensemaking about their instructional leadership for school
improvement.

High performing districts use systematic approaches for selecting and retaining the best
candidates for school leadership. Through their in-house principal professional leadership
programs, talented aspiring principals within the teaching corps are provided with targeted and
focused PD opportunities locally developed to meet the needs of the aspirants.

As far as I could determine, there is no evidence about those district actions that foster
changes in the sense principals make about the nature of their leadership and their sense of
efficacy about leading improvement initiatives in their schools.
Supporting Conditions

This category included; organizational improvement processes; professional development (and Networking) for all staff (principals and teachers); and alignment of resources, personnel, policies and organizational structures. This review places greatest emphasis on district’s approaches to professional development for principals. PD is at the core of this research as it is assumed that district-provided PD opportunities are intended to equip principals with the capacities they need to help accomplish the district directions. Efforts to enhance professional learning in school districts however entail significant financial commitments, which in most school districts, is a limiting factor for instructional improvement. The following two areas describe such PD and associated networking opportunities.

Professional development for all staff in relation to the capacities they need to help accomplish the district’s directions

Principals’ knowledge about instructional leadership is influenced by the nature and focus of PD offered. High-performing districts provide resources for continuous capacity building of its staff and focus a considerable amount of the time spent on administrative routines in lower performing districts (for example during principal meetings) on the provision of targeted PD opportunities. Stein and Nelson (2003) assert that:

administrators who profess to be instructional leaders…must have some degree of understanding of the various subject areas under their purview… administrators must be able to know strong instruction when they see it, to encourage it when they don’t, and to set the conditions for continuous academic learning among their professional staffs. (p. 242)

Several decades ago, Rozenholtz (1989) conducted a study of 78 US Elementary schools in which she identified and associated “stuck” and “moving” schools with specific districts. These distinctions were associated with principals’ ability to lead as “instructional advisors or maladroit
managers of their school” indicating that the power to develop principals’ capacity rests with districts. Rozenholtz (1989) concluded that:

If districts take no responsibility for the in-service needs of principals, of course, principals become less able colleagues, less effective problem solvers, more reluctant to refer school problems to the central office for outside assistance, more threatened by their lack of technical knowledge, and most essential, of substantially less help to teachers. (p. 189)

Additional evidence about districts’ influence on principals’ capacity through the provision of professional development can be found in a study conducted by Coburn (2005a) of two urban elementary schools in California and McLaughlin & Talbert’s (2003) report on New York City’s District #2 approaches to PD. Coburn’s study revealed that principals are often relegated to the background in plans for professional development relating to changes in instructional policy. When they are considered the PD they receive often lacks the depth required for effective change in principals’ practice. Coburn argued that the absence of this in-depth, content-focused professional development may have significant effects on school principal interactions with teachers around instructional policy implementation and improvement.

Reports about New York City’s District #2 show signs of acknowledging Coburn’s critique. This district implemented robust approaches to principal capacity building through focused PD opportunities. District #2, continuously implemented long-term and ongoing professional development for all its teachers and principals with a focus on developing the internal capacity of schools within the district (Elmore & Burney, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). This district prioritized and made instructional improvement front and center to its school reform efforts. The senior administrators worked closely with school leaders to deliver relevant and meaningful instructional leadership to teachers. This resulted in the collaborative development of the curriculum for literacy and numeracy.
The PD programs developed and implemented for literacy and numeracy in NYC’s District #2 have often been presented as suitable for all districts, irrespective of resource levels (D’Amico, Harwell, Stein, & van den Heuvel, 2001). However, this claim is based on a limited sample and requires further testing. My study will provide a modest further examination of district PD for principals and its effects on their sensemaking.

**Networking opportunities to supplement PD opportunities**

Principals network under the assumption that collegial support will impact positively on leadership longevity and productivity (Owen, 2000). Social interactions do influence sensemaking processes. As principals interact with colleagues from other schools and districts, they expand their knowledge of instructional practices. These learning opportunities have a bearing on principals’ cognitive schemata as they are forced to alter previous cognitive frameworks in order to change their practices. School districts that make it a priority to provide principals with the opportunity and time to meet with other principal and teacher colleagues in both formal and informal settings increase principals’ potential for understanding and interpreting new policies, programs and district initiatives vis a vis their ability to draw implications for their leadership practices (Spillane et al., 2002).

Networking is claimed to have important benefits for school and other staff members’ sensemaking as they work together under shared values, beliefs and norms. As Fullan (2001) claims, “the real value for student learning is when shared meaning is achieved across a group of people working in concert” (p. 46) within formal and informal networks. A typical example of a formal network could be seen in the Principals’ Leadership Network (PLN) - a regional program of the Education Alliance at Brown University in partnership with the National Association of Elementary School Principals for principals in the United States, Canada and overseas. This network opens spaces where k-12 principals can have “an ongoing meeting of minds; a place
where they might pool their experiences, knowledge, wisdom, and especially their strong motivation to better the lives of the children in their charge” (The Education Alliance & Brown University, 2004). Through this network, principals are given the opportunity to explore the challenges that accompany their multifaceted role and to improve on their instructional leadership skills by way of mutual mentoring.

Improved technology allows principals to explore different networking avenues. They can meet physically, by phone, email and through social networking sites to share experiences on best practices and their struggles as well as motivational stories that could reinforce their sense of efficacy. Such networking experiences have the potential to release the kind of positive energy required to steer schools forward.

In a recent study of 51 elementary schools in the Netherlands, Moolenaar, Daly, and Sleegers (2010), examined the relationship between three variables; principals’ social network positions within their respective schools, transformational leadership behaviors of the principal and their schools’ innovative climate. They make a case for the importance of measures of centrality defined in terms of:

- the number of teachers who seek a tie with the principal [degree];
- closeness, conceptualized as the extent to which a principal has a direct tie to all teachers in the school;
- and betweeness, operationalized by the degree to which a principal occupies a position between disconnected teachers...

[They] argue that the social network position of a principal as measured by the three aforementioned measures of centrality may support or constrain the flow of resources in the school’s social network, thereby affecting the climate in which the generation of new knowledge and practices may arise from interaction among educators. (p. 625)

Based on these findings the authors reported a significant relationship between certain transformational leadership behaviors and innovative climates which are influenced, in turn, by the social positions of the principal.
This research suggests that teachers who identify their school’s climate as innovative, in most cases will have leaders who exhibit closeness to teachers using specific leadership behaviors. The findings of this research, though limited to social networks within schools, could be extended to relationships with other schools within a district and include principal colleagues and teaching staff in order to facilitate principals’ understanding of the intricacies of their leadership, district policies/programs and their implementation for school improvement and the success of every child.

While networking may be a useful strategy for capacity building, it requires a goal-oriented and focused agenda (determined by principals themselves) targeted towards school improvement. My study provided some evidence about districts’ provision of this resource in support of principals’ sensemaking and efficacy building.

**Relationships**

This category of district characteristics is limited to relationships between the central office and schools, and relationships with parents and local community groups. It doesn’t explicitly focus on relationships between district and ministry personnel since principals are not often in direct contact with ministry staff. However, the study recognizes the implicit effects of district relationships with ministry on schools and hence aims to examine such impact where evident.

*Establishing collaborative working relations between central office and schools*

As districts lead change, they are responsible for sharing goals and plans with school leaders and staff and for providing funds, support, and adequate training to all involved in implementation…If educators are involved in selecting programs as well as the change process, they are more interested in its effectiveness. (Kruse, 2008; Patterson et al., 2010, p. 230, citing Corcoran, et al. 2001)
Bi-directional information flow characterizes high performing districts. This form of communication, influenced by a high degree of trust, is positively related to high retention rates of staff within districts. A trusting environment, characterized by shared beliefs and values, enhances the flow of information between local schools and the central office thereby, increasing sensemaking possibilities. Togneri and Anderson (2003) explain:

Collaboration and trust did not simply happen in the districts; rather, they were the result of deliberate and involved processes. Led by their boards and superintendents, the most collaborative districts in the study worked on working together. They engaged in ongoing dialogue, created cross-role leadership structures to facilitate communication among stakeholders, and intentionally sought tools to facilitate collaboration. (p. 32)

Once trust was created, high performing districts in Togneri & Anderson’s study exhibited tremendous efforts in strengthening those trusting relationships, the outcome of which was the alignment of all stakeholders’ efforts towards student, school and district improvement; hence, making it more likely for principals to make sense of their leadership.

Building good relationships between schools, parents and local community groups

Creating productive relationships with parents enhances opportunities for schools to meet the needs of diversified student bodies within communities (Burke, 2001; Dryfoos, 1994). Productive relationships with families and communities have also been identified as a positive factor in assisting at-risk students and improving overall school discipline (Sanders et al., 2002).

A recent OISE study on public confidence in education by Hart (2012) reveal that over 50% of parents are interested in participating in the education of their children. Considerable additional evidence suggests that some forms of parent engagement has very significant effects on student learning (e.g., Hattie, 2010). Not much is known about what districts might do to encourage such participation. A study conducted by Devlin-Scherer and Devlin-Scherer (1994) of a 10 school board supervisory union in rural Vermont revealed that less than 2% of the 5,779
administrator tasks assigned by the board focused on parent involvement. Of those tasks identified using Epstein’s (1989) typologies of parent involvement, type-four seemed to be absent: “no tasks appeared to be directly related to parent assisted learning at home” (p. 2). As a result, the authors made the following recommendations for the establishment of systematic approaches to parental engagement:

- direct administrators to establish action plans for parent involvement which will be periodically reviewed
- establish a board self-evaluation which includes the extent to which the board encourages administrators’ to complete tasks in parent involvement
- seek parent involvement in the evaluation of educational programs
- recommend community forums on topics of current interest (e.g., AIDS)
- review teacher and administrative position descriptions for inclusion of criteria of experiences with parent involvement
- set guidelines for volunteerism and advocacy groups
- establish a school-community newsletter which highlights parent involvement activities
- invite students and their parents to demonstrate jointly developed exceptional projects to the school board. (p. 3)

The above recommendations illustrate what districts might do to foster greater school-parent engagement. High performing districts encourage parental involvement in schools. My

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8 Epstein (1989) typologies of parental involvement described in terms of: Type 1-responsibilities of family to ensure children’s health and safety; Type 2-communication from school to home; Type 3-parents serving as volunteers at school; Type 4- parents participating in learning activities at home; Type 5- involvement of parents in leadership roles.
study investigated, in part, how districts helped principals make sense of their responsibilities to engage parents/community in school-related activities.

The four categories of district characteristics described above have been shown to be positively related to improved student achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). As yet, however, very little is known about the mechanisms through which district actions influence the leadership of principals, eventually finding their way to the learning of students. The next section reviews literature related to principals’ efficacy in association with ways in which districts shape principals’ efficacy.

**Principals’ Efficacy**

Given appropriate skills and adequate incentives…efficacy expectations are a major determinant of people’s choice of activities, how much effort they will expend and how long they will sustain effort in dealing with stressful situations. (Bandura, 1997, p. 77)

Consistent with Hannah and colleagues, this study used the terms confidence and self-efficacy interchangeably – principals’ belief in their ability to exercise their leadership for school improvement. While research suggests that the two terms have similar meanings, ‘confidence’ was used in the survey and interview questions asked to all participants and the rest of the dissertation focused more on the use of the terminology ‘efficacy’. Research suggests that among other attributes of leaders, self-efficacy is a critical explanation for their effectiveness in accomplishing organizational goals (Howell & Shamir, 2005; McCormick, 2001). It is, according to McCormick, a core factor shaping the operations of a leader in a changing environment. An individual can have a belief about their ability to accomplish a task or their collective ability (if working with colleagues) to meet work expectations. The former has been identified in past research as self-efficacy and the latter as collective efficacy (Leithwood &
Irrespective of the type of efficacy, Leithwood and Jantzi argued that “it is a belief about ability, not actual ability” (p. 497). Hannah and colleagues (2008, p. 1) go further to define leadership efficacy as “a specific form of efficacy associated with the level of confidence in the knowledge, skills and abilities associated with leading others.”

There is considerable evidence about the significance of positive efficacy beliefs of different actors on personal and organizational outcomes. Murphy and Johnson (2011, p. 460) suggested that “as one gains greater leadership efficacy, or confidence in one’s ability to lead a group, that individual is more likely to engage in leadership experiences which will serve to increase the individual’s leadership efficacy.” In addition, under circumstances of stress, which are unavoidable in a principal’s world, efficacy together with other positive internal states, help individuals to build “personal resources (PRs)” and PRs in turn, help them to be resilient in the face of complex challenges (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003).

Despite evidence about the significance of leader efficacy beliefs, there are only a limited number of empirical studies to date on leader efficacy (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000; Gareis & Tschannen-Moran, 2005; Hannah, Aviolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008) and much less research work on developing efficacy beliefs in leaders (Chen & Bliese, 2002; Hannah, Aviolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008). In an attempt to fill this gap in research, Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2008) study of leader efficacy concluded that district leadership practices and organizational conditions made a significant contribution to collective rather than individual efficacy. It is the interest of this study to examine how districts contribute to the sense of efficacy that principals have about being able to accomplish district expectations for school improvement.
Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) in reviewing empirical evidence of characteristics of effective districts known to influence improvement in student learning found the following organizational conditions:

- A district-wide focus on student achievement and the quality of instruction (e.g., goals focused on student learning, programs aligned with state standards, support for the use of particular forms of instruction).
- District-wide use of data (e.g., capacity for reliably assessing student learning, use of such data in district decision making).
- Targeted and phased focuses for improvement (e.g., improvement efforts focused on clear goals, targeting specific areas of the curriculum and lower performing schools and classrooms).
- Investment in instructional leadership at the school and district levels (e.g., training for principals in school improvement processes, systematic and written appraisals of principals’ performance).
- An emphasis on team work and professional community (e.g., foster flow of ideas through district, chances for principals to share knowledge with peers, support for teacher collaboration in schools).
- New approaches to board-district and district-school relations (e.g., find appropriate balance between local autonomy and central control).
- District culture (e.g., widespread understanding of district goals, values community partners, recognition of contributions).
- District-sponsored teacher professional development (e.g., focus on district priorities, intensive teacher development opportunities). (p. 505)
These characteristics were also identified to have effects on leader efficacy. However, a more direct effect of district characteristics can be described using Bandura’s (1977) sources of leader efficacy—mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal processes.

Firstly, mastery experiences are based on past performance accomplishments which positively influence an individual’s sense of efficacy and enhance their feeling that they can successfully accomplish a future task that matches a prior experience they had with a similar task. This can be developed from district-provided opportunities for principal learning; professional development, mentoring, coaching and one-on-one support. Bandura (1997, p. 53) stated that, “mastery experiences that provide striking testimony to one’s capacity to effect personal changes can also produce a transformational restructuring of efficacy beliefs that is manifested across diverse realms of functioning. Such personal triumphs serve as transforming experiences. As such, the more diverse the areas in which leaders build efficacy beliefs, the more likely they will be able to stimulate their efficacy, and be more effective in executing their role for school improvement.

Secondly, vicarious experiences can emerge from simply observing a competent individual (a model) successfully completing similar tasks. Again, district-provided mentoring and coaching are activities through which principals could observe a skillful colleague demonstrate successful leadership in dealing with crisis, for example. We do however need to take into consideration the abilities, needs and interests of a new principal (mentee) and an experienced principal (mentor) when matching them for mentoring. Hannah and colleagues (2008) suggested that:

The amount of influence of vicarious observations is based on the level of similarity between the model and the observer on characteristics that are relevant to the task, and the similarity of the observed task and the task presently faced by the individual. (p. 18)
Thirdly, verbal persuasion may result from such things as encouragement, appreciation, and positive feedback from a trust worthy and respected individual within the organization. In the principals’ world, this could be a colleague, or a senior district officer. Mellor, Barclay, Bulger, and Kath (2006) found that persuasion raised leader self-efficacy to pursue leadership and take on leadership roles. But Bandura’s (1997) work has shown that factors such as credibility, expertness, and consensus contribute to variations on the impact of persuasive information in organizations.

Finally, emotional arousal according to Leithwood and Jantzi (2008):

May occur in response to an inspirational other (e.g., a charismatic district leader) who helps elevate leaders’ standards and aspirations and helps them see the relationship between the district’s goals and larger social and moral purposes. (p. 506)

This implies that emotional arousal can have negative or positive implications to a leader. While certain leaders may find some signs of arousal to be invigorating in nature, others may view them as indicators of stress, which could be linked to a lack of efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Furthermore, Wood and Bandura (1989) found that organizational managers who possessed higher self-efficacy beliefs experienced less depression when faced with adversities.

These sources of efficacy identified by Bandura are techniques through which districts can develop leader efficacy for successful leadership in schools. However, Bandura (1977) warns that an “objective” indication of success alone does not influence leader efficacy, rather it is how a leader interprets or makes sense of success.

In their review of successful school principalship, Mulford and colleagues (2007) observed that successful principals tended to have higher levels of awareness and efficacy and greater sense of purpose than their less successful counterparts (Mulford et al., 2007). Further to
their observation, I argue that districts can play a pivotal role in developing leadership efficacy in those less successful principals and enhancing the efficacy of the successful principals “to the extent that they influence one or more of the four immediate sources of efficacy identified by Bandura” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008, p. 506).

Past research has suggested that efficacious organizations will place trust in school leaders and provide them with resources; support in building skills and competencies and the autonomy to lead (Ryan & Deci, 2003). This builds on principals’ collective sense of efficacy in leading schools effectively. According to the framework of this study these district characteristics and other actions also contribute to principals’ sensemaking with ensuing effects on principals’ enactment of instructional leadership practices.

The survey questions for this study were carefully designed to elicit responses that will garner an understanding of how Ontario districts use the four identified techniques in addition to the organizational conditions of successful and efficacious district characteristics described in the literature, to support principals’ sense of efficacy for school improvement. See Chapter 3 for detailed description of survey questions pertaining to principal efficacy categorized under each of the techniques described. The next section reviews literature related to principals’ sensemaking in association with ways in which district shape principals’ sensemaking.

Principals’ Sensemaking

Several authors have attempted to craft definitions of sensemaking using different lenses, resulting in various interpretations but with somewhat similar connotations. Louis et al. (2005) using the lens of interpretation and action described sensemaking as:

A process by which teachers’ and administrators’ interpretations of external demands culminate in formal or informal decisions about how they collectively respond to externally initiated policies. (p. 179)
Weick (1995), a theorist whose work on organizations other than education strongly informs this study, said “literally, it means the making of sense.” He went further to distinguish between sensemaking and interpretation:

Sensemaking is about such things as placement of items into frameworks, comprehensible, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning…what sensemaking is not…interpretation because interpretation is often used as a synonym for sensemaking…interpretation is a component [of sensemaking]... Most descriptions of interpretation focus on some kind of text. What sensemaking does is address how the text is constructed as well as how it is read. Sensemaking is about authoring as well as reading. (pp. 4–7)

Similar to Weick’s depiction of sensemaking as a cognitive process for understanding the environment, Evans (2007) described it as “the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meaning for individuals (p. 161). Finally, Thompson and Hall (2011), crediting Weick’s pioneer work on sensemaking, clearly defined the term as “the social practice of people constructing meaning out of what they do in order to reduce and redress surprise” (p. 387).

Based on these four authors, this study conceived of sensemaking as focusing on the internal cognitions of people and how they socialize with others in an organization. Hence, the focus of this study on social practice approaches which seek to identify and explain relationships between people, their actions, contexts, environments and cultures. More precisely, the study aims to explain district interactions with school leaders and the impact of district actions (see Figure 1) on principals’ sensemaking, investigated in time and context.

Examining leadership through a sensemaking lens offers opportunities for understanding and interpreting the social influences on crucial details of a school leader’s daily life in a school district. This study relies heavily on Weick’s (1995) theory of sensemaking along with Bell’s (2005) depiction of moments of environmental sensemaking. Table 1 presents dimensions of
sensemaking adapted from Weick’s properties of sensemaking (1995, pp. 61-62) and Bell’s moments of environmental sensemaking (2005, p. 55). Illustrative empirical studies are cited to clarify the nature of sensemaking in school evidence (with their results described in the ensuing discussion on sensemaking).

**Table 1**

**Dimensions of the Sensemaking Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensemaking Dimensions</th>
<th>Moments of Sensemaking by Bell</th>
<th>Properties of Sensemaking by Weick</th>
<th>Links to framework of this study</th>
<th>Related research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Schematic Framing</td>
<td>Conceptualizing (If environmental learning is to occur at this first moment, it must be possible to move from a concept or conceptual scheme that makes less sense to one that makes more sense...there must be scope for conceptual progress)</td>
<td>Grounded in Identity construction (The recipe is a question about who I am as indicated by discovery of how and what I think). People within an organization try to understand who they are as individuals first before being part of the organization. They construct their identity in relation to what they do, why they do it, and how they do it.</td>
<td>Internal Influences; beliefs, values and attitudes, prior knowledge, past experiences</td>
<td>Spillane (2000) Patterson et al., (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Knowledge Acquisition</td>
<td>Knowing about (Environmental sensemaking in this second moment might be understood as the acquisition of new knowledge)</td>
<td>-Retrospect (&quot;To learn what I think, I look back over what I said earlier&quot;) -Focused on and by extracted Cues (&quot;The &quot;what&quot; that I single out and embellish as the content of the thought is only a small portion of the utterance that becomes salient because of context and personal dispositions&quot;)</td>
<td>Internal Influences and External influences; Sensemaking influenced by prior knowledge, experiences and dispositions</td>
<td>Coburn, 2005a; Coburn &amp; Stein, 2006; Hill, 2006; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane et al., 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Continuous Deliberation</td>
<td>Knowing how to respond (this kind of practical knowledge includes ethical or moral knowledge of how we should)</td>
<td>Ongoing (&quot;My talking is spread across time, competes for attention with other ongoing projects, and is reflected on after it is</td>
<td>External Influences; *District Actions-Capacity Building on principals’ sensemaking about their role</td>
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*Note: *District Actions-Capacity Building on principals’ sensemaking about their role
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4: Motivation-oriented Action</td>
<td>respond to environmental issues as well as the ability to assess the relative merits of different means-ends strategies) Responding (having the appropriate values and motives but not to include acting in an appropriate way)</td>
<td>finished, which means my interests may already have changed”). Sensemaking is never finished because of unanticipated changes. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (“I need to know enough about what I think to get on with my projects, but no more, which means sufficiency and plausibility take precedence over accuracy”)</td>
<td>External Influences; *District Actions- Setting Direction (Evidence based decision making which is informed by current and ongoing research)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Social Interaction</td>
<td>-Social (“what I say and single out and conclude are determined by who socialized me and how I was socialized, as well as by the audience I anticipate will audit the conclusions I reach”). People make meanings based on their interactions with others. -Enactment of Sensible Environments (“I create the object to be seen and inspected when I say or do something”)</td>
<td></td>
<td>External Influences; *District Actions- Capacity Building; -Training -Professional development -Networking -Beliefs, knowledge and experiences</td>
<td>Coburn, 2001; Coburn, 2005b; Coburn &amp; Stein, 2006 Patterson et al., 2010; Burch, 2007; McGough, 2003; Spillane et al., 2002b; Nelson &amp; Sassi, 2005</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 1 shows dimensions of sensemaking aligned with the conceptual framework of the study and related empirical research. The processes involved in sensemaking described in Table 1 are nonlinear but specify the different ways in which people come to understand the cues they get from the environment. In order to understand the sensemaking process, Weick’s (1995) seven
properties of sensemaking together with Bell’s (2005) five moments of environmental sensemaking are merged into the following five dimensions of sensemaking; explaining how people make sense of the unknown (new issues), or better still how people come to know what they know.

**Dimension 1: Schematic Framing**

This dimension explains how people use their personal values, beliefs and aspirations to build on their schemas⁹ for better understanding a concept or a new environmental stimulus. Within school districts each stakeholder attempts to secure and build on their identity as humans with individual differences as well as professional beings with specific qualifications and skill sets. Principals would use their preexisting cognitive maps to understand their individual values and beliefs thereby creating a lens through which sensemaking processes could occur. As such, sensemaking is influenced by individual self-concept and person identity.

**Dimension 2: Knowledge Acquisition**

Within this dimension, people notice specific cues from the environment and then use their previous knowledge, past experiences and dispositions to acquire and interpret new knowledge. Information about principals’ prior knowledge and past experiences is important in constructing and executing district actions in order to support principals through the process of understanding and interpreting different policy initiatives and adopting a plan or goals for school improvement.

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⁹ Schema is defined as “the organization of experience in the mind or brain that includes a particular organized way of perceiving cognitively and responding to a complex situation or set of stimuli” (Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary, © 2007 Merriam-Webster, Inc.)
**Dimension 3: Continuous Deliberation**

This includes a judgmental dimension of determining how people should respond to new problems/issues on a daily basis. In the case of this study, this would include effective district actions/characteristics and best practices for principals. It is possible to have positive judgments about an issue and not act accordingly if there is no motivation or impetus for that action (Bell, 2005). District leaders must therefore continuously build principals’ capacity for improvement.

**Dimension 4: Motivation-Oriented Action**

Responding to environmental stimuli using the most “appropriate values and motives but not to include acting in an appropriate way” (Bell, 2005, p. 55) or in other words, acting based on available information that is sufficient to pursue ‘possible actions’ as against ‘accurate’ actions. This process makes clear that it is not the universal truth that matters but the need for a workable level of understanding for sensemaking to occur. The process of responding is influenced in part by how motivated people [principals] are and whom in turn are influenced according to theories of human motivation “by goals which they find personally compelling, as well as challenging and achievable” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 24). District actions must therefore target such goals if they intend to support principals in their understanding and interpretation of policies and programs for school improvement.

**Dimension 5: Social Interaction**

This is the nature of socialization of an individual or groups of individuals and involves the creation of shared meaning to guide decision making processes within an organization. These social negotiations could result in the acquisition of new behavior patterns or changing old practices as manifested in words and/ actions. However, the focus of this dimension is on the
social interactions that occur between organizational members. In the case of this study, district actions influence principals’ understandings of their leadership which in turn has ensuing effects on their choice of leadership practices.

These five dimensions could be further categorized into two groups; internal (Dimensions 1, 2, 3, and 4) and external processes (Dimension 5: Social Interaction). Though these different dimensions cannot be easily separated during the sensemaking process, they can be examined separately because “they are analytically distinct” (Bell, 2005, p. 55). This study looks at all five dimensions of sensemaking but Dimension 5 describing sensemaking on the basis of social interaction is of primary interest to the research. The Social Interaction dimension represents Weick’s ‘social properties’ of sensemaking - one of the most under researched areas of sensemaking requiring investigation (see Louis et al., 2005). The study attempts to examine how this underdeveloped aspect [i.e. district mediation through interaction with principals] of sensemaking could be used to explain changes in principals’ behaviors and practices.

Underpinning this Social Interaction dimension is social practice theory which “seeks to explicate the relationships between persons, actions, contexts, histories, environments and cultures” (Thomson & Hall, 2011, p. 387). This study espousing the concept of leadership as a social practice of sensemaking focuses then on activities and actions of district leaders and how those district actions shape what school leaders do and say on a daily basis.

A more recent work by Weick (2001) identified the properties of sensemaking as “resources of sensemaking.” In this work, Weick associated specific questions to these resources in an attempt to invigorate issues associated with the coordination of activities on organizational change. With respect to this study, the social context resource sought to know if the form of principal sensemaking in Ontario encourages conversations and interactions between senior district leaders and school leaders. Analysis of the study focused on exploring issues that may
arise if the social context resource is strengthened or undermined. It is reasonable to ask, then, what we know to date about antecedents to sensemaking.

**Internal Influences on Principals’ Sensemaking**

Many adult education practitioners engaged in the daily tasks of program planning, administration, or teaching, have little time to reflect upon the meaning and direction of their activity. The educator is generally more concerned with skills than with principles, with means than with ends, with details than with the whole picture. Yet, all practitioners make decisions and act in ways that presuppose certain values and beliefs. Whether or not it is articulated, a philosophical orientation underlies most individual and institutional practices in adult education. (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, p. 37)

Until recently, research on sensemaking has focused on organizations other than the educational system. Educational researchers have started incorporating concepts of sensemaking into an analysis of how teachers and leaders (schools) make sense of and frame the different messages they get from the school environment in an attempt to determine behavior and practices (Coburn, 2001; Hallinger, Leithwood, & Murphy, 1993; Krumm & Holstrom, 2011; Louis et al.; 2005; Spillane et al., 2001; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane et al., 2006). This body of research is however largely limited to issues of policy implementation (see Hill, 2001). Even with this restriction on policy implementation, a few illustrative examples of past research show the enormous focus on internal antecedents to sensemaking (Coburn, 2001; Krumm & Holstrom, 2011; Spillane et al., 2002) describing how different educational stakeholders make sense of policies and programs (see table 1). Using the internal influences of the sensemaking framework described in this study, some studies have examined how the beliefs, values, previous knowledge and past experiences of school actors shape their activities and practices (Choo, 2001; Coburn, 2001; Coburn, 2005a). Others have investigated how principals’ worldview and the context of
their schools shape their understanding of policies (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002b).

In this section, we examined literature describing how those internal antecedents of sensemaking impact on how individuals make sense of their roles, new policies and programs and how they translate those understandings into action.

**Beliefs-driven processes**

According to Coburn (2006) institutional theorists claim that the beliefs and actions of individuals are directed by “notions of appropriate, natural, or legitimate behavior that are constructed and reconstructed in a given profession or institutional sector” (p. 472). This means that the individual or group within an organization holds a position to be true, for example, the belief that every student can learn. In beliefs-driven processes, individuals start making sense from an initial set of beliefs that are “sufficiently clear and plausible” and use them as tentacles to link more cues into larger structures of meaning (Choo, 2001). This sensemaking is then manifested in the choice of actions or words of the individuals. Choo (2001) further suggested that “people may use beliefs as expectations to guide the choice of plausible interpretations, or they may argue about beliefs and their relevance to current experience, especially when beliefs and cues are contradictory” (p. 198). This implies that school leaders can be constrained by their beliefs about what is possible and preferences on the practices to be enacted but are also endowed with those drives that guide their actions in times of crisis (Castle & Mitchell, 2001).

Writing about how teachers’ sensemaking influenced their actions on policy implementation, Spillane and colleagues (2002) reiterated that “teachers’ prior beliefs and practices can pose challenges not only because teachers are unwilling to change in the direction of the policy but also because their extant understandings may interfere with their ability to interpret and implement the reform in ways consistent with the designers’ intent” (p. 393).
As such, in order to foster coherence and consistency in policy implementation through the sensemaking process, individuals within an organization need to negotiate beliefs and interpretations to develop shared meanings and purpose – sensemaking outcomes. According to Choo (2001), these sensemaking outcomes “help to specify a shared organizational agenda, a set of issues that people in the organization agree on as being important to the well-being of the organization…. [and] define a collective organizational identity” (p. 200). Notwithstanding, research has shown that in complex organizations such as school districts, contrasting sets of shared understanding could be developed by individuals working in different parts of the district (Coburn, 2001; Spillane 1998). In his research of responses to state reading standards in two US districts, Spillane indicated how individuals in different units within one of the districts interpreted the state policy on standards in completely different ways based in part on differences in their professional affiliations, which in turn shaped the development of shared norms within each of the subunits. Firstly, individuals in the professional development subunit promoted direct instruction, then those in Chapter I subunit promoted literature-based approaches to instruction, and finally, those in the assessment subunit promoted assessments that measured outcomes consistent with a skills-based approach. It seems reasonable then to argue that principals’ beliefs always surface as they perceive, interpret, and understand issues/new information and enact their leadership practices in the manner in which they do.

Consistent with that assertion, Nelson and Sassi (2005) noted that school leaders’ instructional decisions are shaped by the different beliefs they uphold about pedagogy which in turn shapes the decisions they make on policies, programs and initiatives and the kinds of instructional supports they provide to their teachers. Based on reviews of empirical research on internal antecedents to sensemaking, we now know that preexisting beliefs drive district and school staff’s understandings of new policy, which in turn determine their action or behavior,
precisely what they prioritize and focus on (Coburn, 2001; Spillane et al. 2002). What is less well known is how districts’ interactions with school leaders influence principals’ understandings and the ensuing interactions of those understandings with principals’ beliefs to determine their course of action.

Value-driven processes

Education researchers have identified that organizational values and traditions shape how people make sense of new information (Lin, 200; Porac et al., 1989). While the values and beliefs of school administrators go hand in hand, values specifically address the principles considered to be relevant for success; high expectations, inclusivity, collaboration / teamwork. Researchers argue that many reform initiatives in education are “value-laden” and target core behaviors that are crucial for an individuals’ self-image (Spillane et al., 2002), hence successful leadership must encompass “value-driven practices” (NCSL, 2001, p. 5). It is necessary to note that those values rely heavily on the individual’s sensemaking as Evans (2007) identified sensemaking to be “context specific and value-laden” (p. 161).

In complex organizations such as schools, members are always faced with conflicting demands, and so to determine what is important and which tasks need to be prioritized, school leaders for example, need “values, priorities and clarity about preferences” (Thomson & Hall, 2011, p. 388). In accordance, Gold and colleagues (2003: p. 135) observed that “successful school leaders are driven by personal, moral and education values and are able to articulate these with total conviction, creating a clear sense of institutional purpose and direction.”

Furthermore, Spillane’s (2000) investigation of a fifth-grade teacher’s enactment of state and district reform initiatives in mathematics and literacy showed variations in how she constructed different learning opportunities for the two subject areas based on her personal values. As opposed to mathematics, reading and writing were activities that the teacher valued
and personally enjoyed and she particularly perceived language arts as closely related to the moral purpose for which she became an educator in the first place. This value became a critical factor in her interpretation of the reform as she made efforts to transform her teaching in mathematics and language arts classes, indicating a significant influence of values on staff choices or actions.

Conventionally, principals, who value ‘collaboration’ between staff members are more likely to provide opportunities for staff to effectively collaborate in order to improve their practices for better instruction than their counterparts. It is the value of ‘collaboration’ that shapes the principals’ actions to provide opportunities for teachers to meet as a group. Those opportunities could be in terms of providing release time for teachers, or creating a culture of trust where staff members feel comfortable to take risk and try new teaching strategies for the overall purpose of improving instruction. Interestingly, research by Oakes and colleagues found that teacher collaboration that focused on instructional improvement but did not clearly delineate a shared moral commitment to “growth, empathy, and shared responsibility” had a likelihood of resulting in desired changes or maintaining the status quo (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000). In efforts to encourage principals to use their values to drive their actions in an effective way, Dufour & Eaker (1987, p. 82) argued that “principals could use every available opportunity and the most creative metaphors to articulate the values of their schools and still be ineffective communicators unless the positions they take on a day-to-day basis are consistent with those values.”

Previous knowledge / past experience driven processes

On the basis of each individual’s position in the world, people go through a distinctive set of experiences and create certain expectations from which a “world view, or a frame of reference …shapes” how they perceive, interpret, understand, and react to new information (Vaughn,
Research suggests that individuals and groups within an organization make sense through their prior knowledge and preexisting knowledge frameworks (Spillane et al., 2002), indicating that the knowledge base is critically important in sensemaking. This goes the same for policy implementation, where sensemakers use their existing knowledge and experience for interpretation and understanding of new policies (Sipple & Killee, 2004). With different bases of preexisting knowledge, different people will construct different interpretations and understandings of possibly the same policy idea.

District leaders must therefore collaborate with principals in order to get a sense of their previous knowledge which should be taken into consideration when providing directions on how to implement state/district policies as well as supporting them to lead instructional improvement work within their schools. In Coburn’s (2001; 2005b) studies of the implementation of California reading reforms, findings revealed that principals used their content knowledge to interpret and filter policy messages thereby influencing how district policies unfolded in their schools. School leaders who had greater access to policy messages than most teachers, provided their teachers with access to certain policy ideas and not the complete package, based on their understandings of reading instruction and approaches to support teachers’ learning. For consistency and coherence of policy implementation, districts must therefore ensure that shared meanings are created across the system to counteract the negative implications of misinterpretations that can result from individuals having different knowledge bases.

Besides implications of individual’s knowledge base on policy implementation, researchers have also found that principals’ content knowledge shapes the way they observe classroom instruction (Nelson & Sassi, 2000; Nelson, Sassi, & Grant, 2001) structure professional development opportunities for staff (Burch & Spillane, 2003) and provide feedback to teachers after observation (Nelson & Sassi, 2000). This is very critical for instructional
improvement in schools and so districts must identify and build on school leaders’ content knowledge if they are to support principals in enacting effective instructional leadership practices.

Past research by the pioneer of sensemaking theory suggests that direct and indirect experiences also influence sensemaking (Weick, 1979). Weick and other researchers have suggested that individuals and groups within an organization construct understanding and interpretations of new information by placing it into preexisting cognitive frameworks (Porac et al., 1989). An example of this observation, though focusing on teachers and not leaders can be seen in Coburn’s (2001) study examining the processes by which teachers worked together in professional communities to construct different messages about reading instruction in one California elementary school. She observed that as the teachers interacted with each other in different groups, their individual experiences and expectations helped them to construct a shared understanding of goals that can be achieved realistically about what students need “to know and be able to do” (p. 154).

The literature discussed thus far shows that principals’ sensemaking is shaped in part by internal antecedents. Furthermore, it is apparent that within school districts, principals rely on individual as well as collective sensemaking processes to make sense of their role expectations, hence, the identified internal antecedents to sensemaking are intertwined with individual and collective sensemaking processes addressed in the next section of this dissertation.

**Individual and Collective Sensemaking Processes**

Weick (2001) and other researchers (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, Reimer, & Gomez, 2006) claim that sensemaking is both an individual and collective process in organizations. This implies that in education, sensemaking is shaped by individual beliefs/values as well as the collective and organizational context of schools/districts. The five identified dimensions of
sensemaking can be applied to both individual and collective sensemaking processes. Interestingly, most sensemaking studies have focused on individual sensemaking identifying cognitive processes through which individuals interpret new information (see McGough, 2003; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Zembylas, 2003). And others on collective processes mediated through the context and culture of organizations (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005; Spillane, 2000) without necessarily considering an interplay of both individual and collective processes during organizational sensemaking.

At the individual level, sensemaking is the process by which individuals (principals) attempt to understand new information in their environment through cognitive constructions and reconstructions of past events and experiences. It occurs when a new event or situation presents itself and individuals use their past experiences to identify similar patterns that could be used in understanding the new situation. In contrast, collective sensemaking is a process through which a group of people (principals) form a common understanding and interpretation of environmental stimuli “rooted in social interaction and negotiation…deeply situated in… [their] embedded context” (Coburn, 2001, p. 147). Weick (1995) argued further that, collective processes of sensemaking include both social and cognitive processes. In Louis and colleagues’ (2005) study of teachers’ responses to accountability policies in three high schools in North Carolina, Minnesota and Iowa, evidence of collective sensemaking was exhibited through district leaders’ interactions with teachers and how district actions influenced teachers’ sensemaking and their behavior towards implementation of accountability policies.

Evidence from past research indicates that, stakeholders’ identity as well as the way they make sense of environmental stimuli is just as important as the collective sensemaking that occurs within the district during decision making processes (Patterson, Eubank, Rathbun, & Noble, 2010). The way the district integrates individual identity, prior knowledge, past
experiences and beliefs and the collective goal of the organization during goal setting/decision making processes for example, is crucial for principals’ sensemaking. This is summed up by the practical implications within the school district with different stakeholders constructing different identities based on their context and who they socialize with (Patterson et al., 2010). If principals are to make sense of their leadership for school improvement, districts must maintain an ongoing supportive relationship with all school leaders to enhance their understandings of district expectations.

In a 5-year longitudinal study of nine school districts’ responses to a mathematics reform, Spillane (2000) emphasized the importance of internal antecedents to the sensemaking process but also acknowledged the relevance of considering the impact of the social and cultural context of the sensemaker. In consideration of principal involvement in board-wide decision making processes, districts must endeavor to pay attention to the sum total of principals’ internal dispositions, as well as their social and cultural context (those who socialize them and those whom they influence) in order to develop a vision that is accepted and shared board-wide.

Research shows that, collective sensemaking processes are paramount for efforts geared towards policy coherence (see Louis et al., 2005) and for ‘retaliation on a school’s reputation, teachers’ legitimacy and professionalism’ (see Gold, 2002). In the case of this study, an increasing demand on alignment of standards and resources within and across boards in an attempt to meet the complex demands of teaching and learning necessitates a common and shared sense of understanding of board vision and goals and the leadership practices required for the accomplishment of set goals. The goal of this common understanding for all school administrators is to ensure consistent and coherent implementation of policies and programs, hence the focus of this study on both individual and collective sensemaking processes and particularly, the social interaction dimension – involving districts and school leaders.
The opportunities or lack thereof for sensemaking to occur are contingent on varied degrees of one or more of the following factors: the school’s culture, school leadership, available resources and support as well as available time to reflect and execute changes (Gold, 2002; Louis et al., 2005). In particular, past research suggests that the challenges involved in policy or program implementation vary by context of application and most importantly, the individual implementer’s mindset, a product of personal past experiences and prior knowledge (Coburn, 2005a; Coburn & Stein, 2006; Hill, 2006; Spillane et al. 2002; Spillane et al. 2006), hence the importance of examining both internal sensemaking processes and the context of the sensemakers. If principals within a district are presented with a new policy, variations in their understanding and interpretation of the new policy exert an enormous influence on variations in implementation processes across schools within the district. These variations resulting from school staff internal dispositions/aspirations, are also shaped by the degree of support they get from the district for implementation of the new policy, hence an impact on collective sensemaking processes. As a result, social capital\textsuperscript{10} – an implicit element of learning communities relevant in collective sensemaking processes becomes a force to reckon with for effective collaboration and consistency in implementation processes and outcomes. Past research on sensemaking in education clearly lacks evidence on how school leaders’ sensemaking influences their choices in leadership practices (see Coburn, 2005a). After an elaborate literature search, there is no research up till date that I am aware of, which inquires about district activities and their associated effects on principals’ sensemaking about their leadership for school improvement (See Louis et al., 2005) and the ensuing changes in school leadership practices. This study aims to fill that gap in past research. Through an examination of the sensemaking processes described in this study, this work aimed at investigating sensemaking from a

\textsuperscript{10} Social Capital according to Spillane (2004) “involves changing the way people relate with each other in order to facilitate attainment of goals that would not be possible without these relations.” (p. 98)
perspective that goes beyond the popular notion of mere interpretations championed in most education sensemaking research (Spillane et al., 2002) to a robust provision of multiple lenses through which school leaders understand what they do, how they interpret their environments and what shapes their actions. The next section reviews literature about principals’ leadership practices / observable behaviors - one of the contracts of the framework of this study which is not explicitly investigated but included due to evidence in the literature portraying positive correlations between self-efficacy and successful leadership practices.

**Principals’ Leadership Practices**

Principals of today, in order to function effectively they] must deal with significant education reform, political realities, economic restraints … [and] intense demands for accountability for success. Meeting these conflicting demands requires many interactions with all those who have an interest in schools…that require significant abilities to manage and lead. (Future of School Leadership in Connecticut, 2000, p. 1)

There is agreement in education literature that consistent excellent teaching is the single most important predictor of student achievement gains over time and school leadership is second (Gleason, 2010). In order to ensure that teachers are better equipped to continue playing a key role in improving student achievement results, principals as key instructional leaders in schools must be equipped with the skills, knowledge and competencies to distinguish between good and bad teaching and better support teachers on an ongoing basis. However, evidence from past research revealed that, leadership development efforts usually focus on a leader’s character (Grieger & Fralick, 2007), competencies (Bolden & Gosling, 2006) or skills (Mumford et al., 2000) but lack adequate scope and relevance once principals are faced with the reality of the job (Tucker & Codding, 2002; von Frank, 2010). Research also suggests that when school administrators and teaching staff are introduced to a new policy, initiative or program, their
understanding and interpretation becomes a determinant of their reaction; “determining if they will engage in significant change, incremental change, or resistance” (Gold, 2002). This means that the role of the district in providing principals with the necessary supports for understanding and executing their instructional leadership practices is imperative. Interestingly though, there is little evidence about how districts in particular, influence principals’ sense of efficacy and sensemaking and how principals’ sensemaking and sense of efficacy shape their “strategic choices in leadership practice” which in turn, influences teachers’ classroom practices (Coburn, 2005a, p. 480) and ultimately student learning.

If principals are central to student achievement and school improvement efforts as assumed by researchers and educators (Archer, 2004; Cotton; 2003), what is it that they do to effect such changes while working in an ever changing conflicting environment?

There has been enormous research on principals’ leadership effects on student achievement (see for example, Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Marzano, Walters & McNulty, 2005). While these research studies and reviews of literature do not all identify common characteristics for successful principals, many researchers have attempted to classify behaviors of effective principals into core categories. Leithwood and Reil (2005) for example, following their review of school leadership research, classified effective leadership practices into three categories: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF$^{11}$) is one of the most current and comprehensive accounts of what effective principals do. Here, I describe instructional leadership practices of school leaders following Boris-Schacter and Langer’s (2006) work to include, modeling instruction, supervision (including mentoring novice teachers), and providing professional development and doing walk-throughs.

$^{11}$The framework provides the foundation for educational leadership development in Ontario as it reflects leadership practices known through research to have the greatest influence on student achievement and well-being.
Modeling Instruction

Principals lead schools but maintain a professional identity as teachers based on their prior experience leading up to their leadership role, hence their ability to model instruction. A study of head teachers in England revealed that “the most important thing contributing to instructional leadership was the fact that all [principals] continued to teach for an average of 20 percent of the week” (Weindling, 1990, p. 42). This can be very challenging for most principals today given the overwhelming demands from multiple stakeholders. That notwithstanding, most principals see the task of modeling instruction as an essence of their role but are often constrained by conflicting time demands from other tasks primarily managerial in nature requiring urgent responses (see Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2006). Districts can support principals in understanding and accomplishing this instructional leadership task, hence the focus of this research on how districts support principals’ sense of efficacy in enacting this practice.

Supervision

Supervision has been identified as “the glue of a successful school” as it focuses on effective delivery of the core business of school, teaching and learning (Glickman, 1990, p. 4). Glickman went further to describe an instructional leaders’ tasks of supervision to include: direct assistance to teachers, staff development, curriculum development, group development and action research. In Boris-Schacter and Langer’s (2006) research of 200 public elementary, middle and high schools, principals considered teacher supervision as the core task of their role as instructional leaders. The authors also suggested that such delineation “makes it extremely difficult to delegate to others without jeopardizing the principals’ sense of efficacy” (p. 25). It goes to show that principals are always faced with conflicting choices; understanding the positive implications of delegating responsibilities and how to balance that with the level of
efficacy they have in their ability to supervise instruction and effectively support teaching and learning within their buildings. Research however shows that when principals engage in monitoring and providing feedback on the teaching and learning process, it enhances teacher motivation, satisfaction and reflection and student outcome amongst other benefits (Blasé & Blasé, 1998; Sizemore, Brossard, & Harrigan, 1983).

Interestingly, in order to accomplish this task of supervision, principals have to deal with teachers with different professional capacities. Studies have shown differences in principal supervision of teachers with high professional status and those who were inexperienced or had less experience. In Boris-Schacter and Langer’s (2006) study, principals reported having to provide more administrative feedback to newly recruited teachers than those who were experienced. This increased the principals’ workload and as the authors suggested it may result in principal neglect of the task of supervision or mentoring due to time constraints, given that supervision was identified by the principals of that study as the most time consuming task. Principals in Boris-Schacter and Langer’s study reported that they needed time to build trusting relationships with teachers and provide meaningful feedback following in-class supervision. In efforts to overcome this challenge, most of the principals resolved to delegate teacher supervision and evaluation to team leaders within the school; such as department chairs, teacher leaders and assistant principals. This is one strategy to ensure that one of the tasks of instructional leadership is accomplished. It is the interest of this research to find out how Ontario districts support principals in understanding how best to enact this practice.

**Professional Development**

In Boris-Schacter and Langer’s (2006) study, though principals complained of time constraints on their ability to effectively engage in active learning as they support teachers with
resources to enhance their capacity, they made the following changes to accommodate the need for their own professional growth:

Sometimes it was professional reading relegated to Sunday afternoons…other principals made attending grade-level meetings and / or child-study discussions a top priority. Still other principals organized ongoing support groups with like-minded colleagues to share ideas and nurture professional development. (p. 32)

Despite the inability to directly control staff hiring as is the case in most districts in Ontario, principals in Boris-Schacter and Langer’s (2006) study added that they exercised their instructional leadership role by directing the professional development agenda for all staff in their buildings and creating a culture of risk taking. In an era of high accountability, taking risk can be very pricy not just for the school but for the entire district. Lessons learned from the authors’ research, point to the fact that successful principals allow teachers to take risks in order to bring about change that is needed to support effective instruction rather than maintaining the status quo and expecting better results.

Walk-Throughs

Principals who visit classrooms and walk the hallways stand a better chance of identifying teaching and learning needs and providing appropriate resources to enhance classroom instruction. Grubb & Flessa (2006) succinctly describe what walk-throughs are not:

Given the complexity of schools, principals cannot simply order their teachers to teach better. Instead, they are working indirectly, creating a culture of internal accountability, in which teachers improve their teaching in concert with others. (p. 520)

Consistent with the authors’ contention, successful principals schedule the time and commit to walking the hallways with a purpose in mind.

How principals go about executing these instructional leadership responsibilities is influenced by a combination of their understandings of their instructional leadership and sense of
efficacy in their ability to meet district expectations, shaped in part by district actions and
organizational conditions resulting from principals and district interactions.

It is clear from these reviews of research that the three concepts of interest in this study
(district actions, principals’ self efficacy and principals’ sensemaking) are important in school
improvement efforts. The conceptual framework outlined in this chapter describes the
relationship among these variables and identifies questions for the research. The next chapter of
this dissertation focuses on the methodology for that research.
CHAPTER 3
METHODODOLOGY

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative evidence from the larger study (Leithwood, 2011). This chapter starts by describing the purpose of that research and how my study was carved out of the larger study. It continues with a description of the overall research design which consists of a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) multistage approach including a first stage which focuses on the qualitative case studies of high-performing districts, and a second stage which tests a model of high-performing school districts. In each of these stages, the sample, survey methods, and method of analysis of data are examined. The last section of this chapter outlines the limitations of the study.

The purpose of the larger study was to identify those characteristics of high-performing school districts that account for their contributions to student achievement. The conceptualization of my study started during my coursework with a broad focus on investigating principals’ understanding of their instructional leadership expectations. As my involvement in the larger study progressed, I modified and narrowed my research questions.

During the first interviews conducted with the first of four district school boards visited for the larger study (focusing on district characteristics and student-related outcomes), my research quickly shaped out to a focus on district characteristics (actions), principals’ self-efficacy (all included in the larger study), and principals’ sensemaking. Accordingly, I revised my research questions and developed additional interview and survey questions on principals’ sensemaking which were added to the original protocols for school and system leaders of the larger study. The modified interview protocols were then used in subsequent interviews with the rest of the school districts visited for the larger research. And the on-line survey sent out to all
participants in the larger study based, in part, on interview results included questions on principals’ sensemaking and self efficacy.

My analysis focused on all the original items included in the interview protocol and surveys used in the larger study along with the additional questions on sensemaking and self efficacy. The research questions do not call for a measure of level of efficacy or sensemaking. I am only interested in what districts do that influences efficacy and sensemaking. Details of the development, distribution and collection of interview and survey data are explained further in the rest of this chapter.

**Overall Research Design**

This section describes an overview of the research design used for data collection and analysis for the larger research as well as my study.

**Mixed Methods (Surveys and Interviews)**

This is a mixed-method multistage study. Qualitative data (stage one) were provided through interviews with school and district leaders (conducted between early May 2010 and late September 2010) along with some documents. Quantitative data (stage two) were provided through online surveys of school and senior district leaders (opened October 20, 2010 and closed Dec 20, 2010). This combination of methods overcomes the limitations to internal validity common to quantitative studies alone and the limitations to external validity common to qualitative studies alone (Morse, 2003; Newman et al. 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). In other words, mixed method studies assume that the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis is greater than the sum of their parts (Greene & Caracelli, 2003).
In this study, survey questions on sensemaking were developed after stage one of the larger study (interviews) and added to the principal survey. These questions were carefully designed following the interviews with a quest for more information to address the research questions under investigation. Such duplication of data within a single study offers the possibility of viewing the emergence of unknown constructs with potential implications on policy and program modification for improvement as opposed to going through multiple studies at different times.

Using mixed methods is a means of triangulating data from different levels or sources (Morse, 1991), in the case of this study, school and district level data.

These methods also offer an opportunity for findings to benefit not only individuals but multiple audiences (Bernard, 2004) such as principals, districts, policy makers (governments) and other educators in this study. As a research method which is proven to be effective in understanding complex social phenomenon across different contexts, mixed methods facilitate the understanding of social interactions between principals and districts (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989).

**Context**

The setting of the study is Ontario school systems. Although the choice of Ontario was determined by the larger project, the province’s commitment to high levels of student achievement alongside the emphasis on instructional leadership, made it suitable for this study, as did expectations for significant leadership by its school districts. For example, provincial policies include a “leadership framework” as well as a “Board Leadership Development Strategy” (BLDS) advocated for each district (Ministry of Education, 2012; http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/BLDS_QuickFacts.pdf).
In the province, schools are controlled by district school boards. Approximately 4,004 elementary and 909 secondary schools are controlled by 72 English and French publicly funded school systems (31 English Public, 29 English Catholic, 4 French Public, and 8 French Catholic) and 11 school authorities in the province.

Stage One: Qualitative Case Studies of High-Performing Districts

Sample

Stage one of the larger research project focused on identifying “high-performing” districts and qualitatively examining their nature and development over the five year period prior to the study. Of the 72 English and French public school systems in Ontario, four school systems were selected for the larger study based on exceptional five-year gains in their provincial EQAO achievement results (one of the key selection criterion). Based on these EQAO achievement results, each board was selected to satisfy one of three different achievement profiles:

- Moving from “below average to average”: average student achievement across all tested areas began substantially below provincial averages in 2005 and improved to about provincial averages by 2009;
- Moving from “average to good”: average student achievement across all tested areas was at provincial averages in 2005 and rose to substantially above provincial averages by 2009;
- Moving from “good to great”: average student achievement across all tested areas began substantially above provincial averages in 2005 and rose even further by 2009.

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12 “High-performing” districts defined by three different profiles based on the assumption that district leaders in the course of improving their boards inextricably experience challenges which vary based on their students’ average achievement results from 2005-2009 (five years prior to the study) (Leithwood, 2011).
Though achievement in Catholic school districts outpaced achievement in public schools from 2005-2009, districts were also chosen to reflect religious / language divisions in the school district as a whole. Two Catholic English speaking districts, one Public English speaking district and one French speaking district were selected for case study in the larger project. Since questions on sensemaking were only added to the interview protocol after the first set of interviews were conducted with the Public English speaking district, that board was eliminated from my study. Also, the French speaking district was eliminated due to my inability to conduct interviews in French. As a result of these eliminations, two of the four districts, both Catholic, were selected for this substudy. The Catholic English speaking district school boards selected will be identified in this study using the pseudonyms – Greenbridge and Marinee.

EQAO achievement results for these two boards compared with provincial results for Grades 3, 6, and 9 reading, writing and math are reported in Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5. All four tables show changes in achievement results from 2005 to 2009. On the basis of the achievement profiles described earlier, Greenbridge fits the “poor to average” profile while Marinee fits the “good to great” profile. Table 2 reports changes in Grade 3 results in reading, writing and math. As can be seen, Greenbridge began in 2005 with lower scores for the most part compared to Marinee and the province but made higher gains in reading and writing (seen in change results).

Table 2

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Table 3 shows changes in Grade 6 results in reading, writing, and math.

### Table 3

**Changes in Grade 6 Achievement Results from 2005 - 2010**

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<td>33</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 suggests that Greenbridge made significant gains in Grade 6 reading and writing but trailed behind gains in mathematics recorded for all English Speaking Catholic boards in the province. Marinee on the other hand, made little progress over time but began with significantly higher scores compared to provincial and Grenbridge achievement results. Marinee’s gains in Grade 6 math were even lower than math gains for all provincial Catholic English Speaking boards but higher than provincial English speaking districts in general, suggesting a strong performance for provincial Catholic public boards.

Table 4 describes changes in Grade 9 math results.

Table 4

Changes in Grade 9 Achievement Results from 2005 – 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provincial English Districts</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 60)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Districts</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Catholic Districts</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 27)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marinee</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenbridge</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen in Table 4 Marinee and Greenbridge started off in 2005 with stronger academic and applied math scores compared to provincial results. However, Marinee outpaced both provincial and Greenbridge with relatively higher gains over the five year period of interest to this study.

Overall, Table 5 presents results in terms of total change in achievement results from 2005-2009.

Table 5

*Total Achievement Change Over Five Years*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACHIEVEMENT AREA</th>
<th>Marinee</th>
<th>Greenbridge</th>
<th>PROVINCE (English Districts)</th>
<th>PROVINCE (English Catholic Districts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GRADE 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRADE 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRADE 9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Math</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied Math</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL CHANGE</td>
<td>71(66)</td>
<td>109(52)</td>
<td>50(58)</td>
<td>60(58)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As summarized in Table 5, comparing both districts and the province, Greenbridge recorded the most change over the five year period beginning from an achievement profile below provincial averages. The achievement profile of Marinee on the other hand, began above provincial averages with relatively smaller gains compared to Greenbridge.
Demographic characteristics of Greenbridge

At the time of the study, the district served four communities; one urban and three rural distributed over a wide acre of land (11,653 square kilometers). Within these communities, Greenbridge served a total of about 3,500 students in 14 school sites: nine regular English elementary schools, four Early French Immersion schools, a lone secondary school, as well as an alternative and continuing education campus. In addition to the 14 principals of the aforementioned school sites were: 244 teaching staff (166 elementary and 78 secondary) and approximately 90 educational assistants. Senior district leadership team directly involved in instructional improvement included: two superintendents, the director of education, and a student success lead (teacher seconded to the board office).

At the time of the study, Greenbridge was described as a small school district, according to provincial standards. With the relatively small enrolment, its 2009 / 2010 approved budget was estimated at about $43 million. And the richness of the faith of the board, clearly articulated in its vision, represented a unique characteristic of the board.

Demographics of Greenbridge interviewees

In September of 2010, three researchers including the author of this study visited Greenbridge’s central office. Evidence for Greenbridge’s case was derived from interviews and documents handed to us during interviews alongside some basic information from the board website (such as the vision statement). The interviews were conducted with six principals (five elementary and one secondary), four senior district leaders (two superintendents, the director and a teacher seconded to the board as a miscellaneous lead\textsuperscript{13}) and two trustees. The board had a significantly high staff retention rate, as could be seen in Table 6, showing respondents’ years of experiences working with the board.

\textsuperscript{13} The Miscellaneous lead is a teacher with a numeracy portfolio appointed by the district to help schools access, interpret, and use evidence for decision making.
Table 6

Greenbridge Interviewee’s Length of Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background Experiences</th>
<th>Principal (6)</th>
<th>Roles District Leader (4)</th>
<th>Trustee (2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Years in the District</td>
<td>17-41 (m=26.3)</td>
<td>8-22 (m=13.7)</td>
<td>8-32 (m=20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total years in Admin Role</td>
<td>7-16 (m=10.6)</td>
<td>0-4 (m=2.7)</td>
<td>‘N/A’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Years in Current Position</td>
<td>3-10 (m=7.1)</td>
<td>3-10 (m=5.7)</td>
<td>‘N/A’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, principals had been working in the district for 26 years; 10 years as principals and 7 years in their current schools. Of the six principals interviewed, five had been in principal positions for over 20 years.

The director of education on her part, had worked with the board for over 24 years; as a teacher, principal, superintendent, and at the time of the study was serving her 10th year as director of the board. Other than the director, all district leaders had on average, 16 years of experience working with Greenbridge, and 5 years in their current positions. The two trustees interviewed had 32 and 8 years of experiences respectively working with the district. One of them had worked as a principal in the district before retiring. Exceptionally long-term experiences evidenced in most principal, senior leader and trustee portfolios, could be associated with the board’s significant improvement in provincial tests scores over such a short period of time. This is supported by research which stipulates that longer-term leadership experiences offer opportunities for innovations and continuation of new programs and initiatives with possibility of
increased success (Louis et al., 2005). To be more precise, Louis and colleagues suggest at least 5 years as the length of time for an effective leader to effect change within a system.

**Demographic characteristics of Marinee**

At the time of the study, the board was idiosyncratically recognized for its strong Catholic base, and ranked number one in the province in literacy and numeracy achievement and also in Special Education. The district served four communities; two largely urban and two significantly rural. Within these communities, Marinee served over 29,000 students in 48 school sites within 51 learning communities consisting of 40 elementary schools, eight secondary schools and three Continuing Education facilities.

Marinee at the time of the study was identified as a relatively small school district, according to provincial standards. The professional staff of Marinee at the time of the study included: 2,260 teaching staff (1,040 elementary, 673 secondary, 576 occasional/supply), 466 educational assistants, and 51 principals. District leadership team directly involved in instructional improvement comprised of six superintendents, an itinerant (expert teacher seconded to the board) and the director of education.

**Demographics of Marinee interviewees**

Evidence for the Marinee case study was obtained from interviews and other relevant information (for example, board’s history, improvement plans, policies etc.) gathered from a user-friendly board website. The respondents as shown in Table 7 comprised of 17 principals (12 Elementary and five secondary), six senior district leaders (four superintendents, one itinerant and the director of education) and three trustees. With the exception of few individuals, most of the interviewees had at least 3 years experience in their current portfolio. Following recommendations from past research, three years was assumed to be an adequate minimum for
an organization to effectively develop and implement improvement strategies to support principals in improving schools and student achievement (Louis et al., 2005).

**Table 7**

*Marinee Interviewees’ Length of Experiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background Experiences</th>
<th>Principal (17)</th>
<th>District Leader (6)</th>
<th>Trustee (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Years in the District</td>
<td>13-30 (m=21.6)</td>
<td>3-30 (m=16.4)</td>
<td>3-30 (m=14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total years in Admin Role</td>
<td>3-12 (m=7.1)</td>
<td>2-10 (m=6.7)</td>
<td>‘N/A’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Years in Current Position</td>
<td>1-4 (m=3)</td>
<td>2-10 (m=5.4)</td>
<td>‘N/A’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 17 principals interviewed, 11 had been in principal positions for over five years, while the least experienced had three years of tenure. Nonetheless, most principals had long-term experiences working with Marinee (M = 21.6). Other than the Director of Education who had been in the board for three years as director of Education and one SO with only 2 years experience as a senior leader, all senior leaders interviewed had about 16 years of experience working with the board. The three trustees interviewed had experiences ranging from a low of 3 years to a high of 30 years working with the school district.

The long tenure evidenced in most principal, senior leader, and trustee portfolios, hypothetically formed a basis for Marinee’s significant improvement in provincial tests scores over time. It presumably provides a fertile ground on which board-wide initiatives could be continued in the absence of key senior leaders, as well as possibilities to evaluate and revise old strategies for the attainment of board goals. The reverse is true for a district with a high turnover
rate, as new leaders might not understand pre-existing initiatives, or might need more time to fully understand; initiatives underway, the culture of the board, trust each other and develop approaches towards student success. The next section describes the structure of the interview protocol used for data collection.

**Interview Protocols**

The interview protocols were carefully designed with somewhat similar structures aligned with the framework of the study. The principal interview protocol had a total of 32 questions (see Appendix A) while the senior leader had 35 (see Appendix B) and the trustees 29 questions (Appendix C). The protocols were divided into three sections: (a) an introductory paragraph at the beginning described the purpose of the study and addressed anonymity / confidential concerns; (b) the district characteristics represented by five major categories espousing questions associated with principals’ capacity and sensemaking; and (c) background information about the districts and interviewees.

The interview questions inquired about different aspects of how the school district functioned over the 5-year period prior to the study. The policies enacted during this period, while important in understanding the historical context of the districts, were not the primary focus of my investigation. Rather, scenarios of interactions between district and school leaders leading to change of principals’ attitudes, behaviors and practices were of interest to this study. Interviews asked how those different aspects of district functions impacted on principals’ efficacy and sensemaking about their leadership for school improvement. Prompted statements were used to solicit sensemaking scenarios from the interviewees and principals, in particular. We aimed at having a conversational exchange with the participants. Examples of scenario prompts on the influence of district offered PD on principals included, “Describe a typical
principal meeting offered by the school district where PD was the primary focus” “How do these PD sessions help you make sense of your role as manager and instructional leader?” and “Describe an event where the knowledge you gained from district-offered PD shaped the sensemaking around your role and how this was executed in your school.” These questions were designed to elicit responses about how principals’ interpreted their interactions with district leaders and made sense of those interactions, in retrospect.

In order to test the clarity of the questions on the interview protocols, draft copies were reviewed by all members of the research team. Also, in the summer of 2010, the research team piloted the interviews with one superintendent and one principal at OISE / UT campus to assess not only the clarity of the questions but also to estimate the length of time it took to complete each of the interviews.

Letters of invitation to participate in the larger study were sent to the directors of the four selected school districts. Included in the invitation, was a brief background to the study and its purpose. While directors were encouraged to randomly select participants for the interviews, we cannot rule out the possibility of skewed representation. The directors might have nominated only participants who could best articulate the board’s vision for student improvement, as well as school related initiatives to support such vision.

The interviews did not record names of participants but they did request such demographic information as board name and position of the leaders for purposes of cross-case analysis. These confidentiality and anonymity checks were clearly conveyed to participants prior to their participation in the study. Consistent with the University of Toronto’s policy on Research Ethics, participants were advised of their right to not respond to specific questions and/or to withdraw at any point during the interview session.
Site visits with the finalized versions of the interview protocols were conducted between early May and late September of 2010. All interviews were conducted at the districts’ central office.

As illustrated in Tables 18 and 20, there were variations in the total number of interviews conducted for the two boards due to differences in board size. In total, interviews were conducted with:

- 23 principals (six Greenbridge and 17 Marinee); randomly selected from pools of elementary and secondary principals with at least 3 years tenure in the district.
- 10 senior district administrators (four Greenbridge and six Marinee); superintendents and the director of education.
- Five trustees (two Greenbridge and Three Marinee); selected by senior district administrators as having central role to play in the board’s improvement efforts.

Interviews were conducted over a two-day period in each school district and each interview lasted about an hour. Interview probes varied based on the uniqueness of the cases. One of the site visits ended with a tour through a special school and an informal dinner with senior district administrators which provided further opportunities to inquire about the districts’ role on specific school initiatives and a trajectory of student success alongside district interventions.

Interviewees narrated stories of the changes that had occurred over the 5 years of interest to the study. Such individual sensemaking formed the basis of collective sensemaking. Ray and Goppelt (2011) suggest that narrations of the sort provided by the interviewees will contain “a bifurcation point – where a person acted or reacted in a way that was different from the past and created a different result” (p. 62). We endeavored to capture instances where there was a story illustrating a sequence of events with a “before experience,” a “bifurcation point,” and an “after
practice / behavior.” This explains typical interactions between school and District leaders, principals’ reflection and application of new skills to change leadership practices within schools.

Extensive notes were taken during the interviews and all interviews were digitally recorded. These recordings were reviewed and notes completed shortly after each interview. The ‘before’ and ‘after’ stories described different kinds of experiences. The before story focused on principals’ experience and practices prior to the change, the after story contained narratives about the impact of the change and how it helped principals to make sense of their role.

**Analysis of Interview Data**

If accuracy is nice but not necessary in sensemaking, then what is necessary? The answer is, something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but can also be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishments to fit current oddities, something that is fun to construct. In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story. (Weick, 1995, pp. 60-61)

Through the sensemaking process including social activities of different actors, plausible stories are described and shared as people make meaning of their actions through retrospective thinking. These meanings are made after the fact and given the fact that numerous meanings are often ascribed to past events, it was necessary to understand why they happened the way they did (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Organizational life is rationalized through retrospective thinking but what is worth noting is the fact that individuals make meaning differently, hence the need to focus on the different narratives that rationalize the events within an organization in order to make a good story. As earlier mentioned, interviewees in this research were not asked to focus on a particular policy, as is often the case with most education sensemaking research. Rather they were asked to describe scenarios in which districts supported their capacity building
for instructional leadership and how this helped them to make sense of their role for school improvement. Additionally, principals were asked to identify what districts do that most influences the confidence they and their colleagues have about their school improvement work.

My study describes the analysis of the narratives of sources of efficacy and sensemaking processes in two cases of high-performing school districts in Ontario. These narratives are both “individual and shared” (Currie & Brown, 2003, p. 565). In an effort to understand the sensemaking process and implications of the social context resource, the unique stories of both case studies epitomize Weick’s description of the properties embedded in the sensemaking process and the cues principals receive from ongoing interactions with district leaders and other principal colleagues. The stories also demonstrate specific actions encompassing Bandura’s four sources of efficacy.

The framework which guided this study contained four categories of district actions and 12 more specific actions described in Chapter 2. Interviews from principals, senior leaders and trustees were coded in relations to each of those four categories and more specific actions. The Principal interview protocol made further inquiries about principal efficacy and sensemaking about such district actions. Though the three different interview protocols asked somewhat similar questions, guided by the same framework, they did not contain the same number of questions. Within each case study, three charts of results were created for each group of respondents; principals, senior leaders and trustees. On each of those charts, participants’ responses for each question were collated under specific district characteristics. A single chart was created by summarizing the responses to similar questions across all three charts. This final stage involved the compilation of combined data for all three groups of participants on the same or similar questions corresponding to specific district actions. This procedure enhanced the researcher’s ability to triangulate the data and have a better sense of the unique circumstances
surrounding each school district. Based on the assumption that multiple meanings can be made by different stakeholders of the same experience, putting principal, district leader and trustee responses side by side made it easy to identify similarities and differences in interviewee groups’ sensemaking. This approach facilitated the identification of trends about district actions as well as how principals made sense of those changes in district actions through their interactions with districts.

The initial, detailed analysis of interview data involved the identification and interpretation of themes within the categories and sub-categories of district actions. Those themes were recorded on the left hand side of the chart corresponding to its specific action. Notes on the themes were recorded on the right hand side of the chart, corresponding to the new code. In addition to the framework which guided the study, the notes together with the key sub-themes were used to structure the case study write-up. The sub-themes represented more specific actions which could be exercised by leaders within other districts, and the corresponding notes provided supporting data for each newly identified action.

In order to check on the reliability and validity of my data analysis, the final report on each case was shared with the interviewees and other research team members for verification.

**Stage Two: Testing a Model of High-Performing School Districts**

**Sample**

Of the 4,625 elementary and secondary principals and 531 district leaders (459 Superintendents and 72 directors of education) in 72 public school districts in Ontario, 1,563\(^{14}\) principals and 250\(^{15}\) district leaders in 50\(^{16}\) school districts participated in the study. These

\(^{14}\) 1,563 principals denote a response rate of approximately 34% of Ontario principal population.  
\(^{15}\) 250 district leaders denote a response rate of approximately 47% of all superintendents and directors in Ontario.
respondents represent the sample of the study with high potential of offering evidence that could benefit the province as a whole.

**Survey Methods**

Stage two of the research used two online surveys to collect data from school and senior leaders on the extent to which their districts engaged in the four categories of district actions. The principal survey also asked about the effects of a selected set of those actions on principal sensemaking and efficacy. The design of the online survey followed the same structure as the interview protocol but was further refined after completion of the interviews. Sensemaking questions were developed and added to the principal survey after stage one of the larger project. Shortly after the site visitations, invitations for participation in the study were sent to all 72 English and French public school boards in the province. This was facilitated by the support provided by the Leadership Development Branch of the Ministry of Education. A list of all board directors’ contact and/or other key contact persons per school district was provided. As with the interviews, participation in the survey was strongly encouraged through the invitation letter, but the choice to participate was voluntary. The surveys employed four-point Likert type scale items.

The principal survey had a total of 57 questions (see Appendix D) while the senior leader survey had 51 (See Appendix E). Drafts of the online surveys were tested by the research team and some Ontario Ministry of Education personnel. These tests assessed the clarity of the questions, the ease of progressing through the surveys and the estimated time to complete each of the surveys. Results from the test indicated that the duration on completing the survey was approximately 15 minutes on average - information that was included in the introductory section of the survey. Also, procedures on how to navigate through the survey were included in the

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16 50 school districts denote a 69% response rate of school districts participation in the province.
introductory section. Once the necessary modifications were implemented and the team got confirmation from the districts of their willingness to participate in the study, the online surveys were launched on Survey Monkey (October, 2010). An official personalized email was sent to a designated contact in each school board. This contact person then forwarded to all principals and senior district leaders two URLs (web addresses) to the surveys; one for principals and the other for senior leaders.

To enhance completion of the survey, an email link was added to the survey for all inquiries regarding the completion of the survey. The online survey opened October 20, 2010 and was closed December 20, 2010.

**Survey measures**

The survey instruments were developed by Professor Ken Leithwood with input from Directors of Education in southern Ontario along with members of the research team which I was a part. Three different variables were investigated through the two online surveys; district actions, principal efficacy and principal sensemaking.

**District actions**

District actions include all procedures, activities and characteristics of districts. The senior leader survey contained 51 questions with 48 focused specifically on district actions. These were questions 2 to 49 (see Appendix E). Between 8 and 16 questions were asked for each category within the district leader and further distributed unevenly under specific practices pertaining to each core category. These questions were designed using a framework for district action by Leithwood (2011), an approximation to which was outlined in Chapter 2.

**Principals’ self-efficacy**

Three bodies of research included in Chapter two of this dissertation shaped the design of the eleven-item scale (questions 38 - 48) measuring factors that contributed to principals’
leadership efficacy to accomplish instructional leadership tasks relevant for school improvement:

(1) Ryan and Deci’s (2003) research suggesting that efficacious organizations build trust in school leaders and provide them with resources; support in building skills and competencies and the autonomy to lead; (2) Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2008) review of the organizational conditions characteristics of effective districts; (3) Bandura’s (1977) mechanisms for developing leadership efficacy.

Table 8 lists the survey questions used to measure the extent to which selected district actions influenced principals’ sense of efficacy.

Table 8
Survey Questions Concerning Principal Confidence

To what extent do the following contribute to the confidence that you and your principal-colleague(s) have that you will be able to accomplish the expectations for school improvement held by your district:

Mastery experience

1. Professional development provided to me by the system
   Not at all To a slight extent To some extent To a great extent

2. Support that I can count on from my superintendent whenever I need it
   Not at all To a slight extent To some extent To a great extent

Vicarious experiences

3. Examples I see of other principals succeeding at what I also need to do
   Not at all To a slight extent To some extent To a great extent

4. Encouragement I receive from others for the work that I do
   Not at all To a slight extent To some extent To a great extent
5. Expressions of appreciation/celebration of the value of our work.

Not at all  To a slight extent  To some extent  To a great extent

Verbal Persuasion

6. Advice, feedback and knowledge available to me through my network of other principals in this system

Not at all  To a slight extent  To some extent  To a great extent

Emotional arousal

7. The school system’s alignment of its resources with our goals

Not at all  To a slight extent  To some extent  To a great extent

8. The guidance the board’s improvement plan provides for developing my school improvement plan

Not at all  To a slight extent  To some extent  To a great extent

Other district actions and conditions that allow for enhancement of principal self-confidence

9. The system’s assignment of me to a school for which I am well suited

Not at all  To a slight extent  To some extent  To a great extent

10. High levels of mutual trust my colleagues and I have in one another.

Not at all  To a slight extent  To some extent  To a great extent

11. The autonomy I have to do what is in the best interests of my school and students

Not at all  To a slight extent  To some extent  To a great extent

Principal sensemaking

Twelve of the 57 questions in the principal survey measured principal sensemaking (see Table 9). This 12-item scale was developed from literature describing internal and external
antecedents to sensemaking (see Coburn, 2005a; Spillane, 2001) as well as from an analysis of interview results collected during stage one of data collection.

Table 9
Survey Questions Concerning Principal Sensemaking

To what extent do the following aspects of your school system enhance your understanding of how best to exercise your leadership?

1. Professional development opportunities provided by the system about Ministry initiatives and new programs
   - Not at all
   - To a slight extent
   - To some extent
   - To a great extent

2. Resources provided to support school based professional development for me and my staff
   - Not at all
   - To a slight extent
   - To some extent
   - To a great extent

3. Support by the system for networking and sharing of best practices, experiences and challenges with other principal colleagues and schools
   - Not at all
   - To a slight extent
   - To some extent
   - To a great extent

4. Release time for me to create PLCs with staff and develop initiatives towards school improvement
   - Not at all
   - To a slight extent
   - To some extent
   - To a great extent

5. The priority awarded to instructional leadership (vs Management)
   - Not at all
   - To a slight extent
   - To some extent
   - To a great extent

6. Emphasis placed on analyzing, interpreting and using data to inform decision making
   - Not at all
   - To a slight extent
   - To some extent
   - To a great extent
7. Help provided to me by system leaders in developing, monitoring and providing feedback about the school’s improvement plan
   Not at all          To a slight extent          To some extent          To a great extent

8. Snapshots provided by the system indicating the progress being made in my school
   Not at all          To a slight extent          To some extent          To a great extent

9. Advice on how to build productive relations with teachers and contribute to their development
   Not at all          To a slight extent          To some extent          To a great extent

10. Accessibility of system leaders for information or personal assistance
    Not at all          To a slight extent          To some extent          To a great extent

11. Opportunities provided by the system for my school to engage parents and local community groups in our school improvement efforts
    Not at all          To a slight extent          To some extent          To a great extent

12. Two way communication between the central office and my school
    Not at all          To a slight extent          To some extent          To a great extent

The 12 survey questions measured the five dimensions of sensemaking included as part of the framework for this study (Schematic Framing, Knowledge Acquisition, Continuous Deliberation, Motivation – oriented Action, and Social Interaction). However, the questions were not explicitly grouped around each dimension separately because sensemaking properties cannot be easily separated during sensemaking processes (Bell, 2005). That notwithstanding, much of my attention was focused on the observable properties, the social interactions between districts and school leaders.
The survey questions align with the research questions which do not call for a measure of level of efficacy or sensemaking. The analysis of the data collected in this study is only concerned with what districts do that influences efficacy and sensemaking.

**Analysis of Survey Data**

Data collected during the second stage of the study was analysed using SPSS software to calculate means, standard deviations, and scale reliabilities of items on the district leader and principal surveys. These results were compared with the case study data regarding the relationship between district actions and principals’ sense of efficacy as well as principals’ sensemaking about their leadership for school improvement.

**Data analysis strategy**

In order to assess whether the survey items that are supposed to measure the same domain of interest have a close relationship, internal consistency analyses were conducted. Cronbach’s alpha was computed for each set of items measuring the same variable. According to the rule of thumb accepted for instrument development, a Cronbach’s alpha equal to or greater than .7 indicates good internal consistency of the scale and provides evidence for computing reliable total scale scores.

Before proceeding with the analyses, an investigation of the distributional properties of the two outcome variables of interest to this study (principal self efficacy and principal sensemaking) was conducted. The possibility of creating these domains was explored through factor analysis. The following questions were considered for the analysis in order to form the domain of principal self efficacy and principal sensemaking: questions 1 – 11 of Figure 8, and 1 – 12 of Figure 9 respectively.
Limitations of the Study

Mixed method research designs, such as the one used in this study have many advantages. Such designs provide levels of both internal and external validity very difficult to accomplish with single method designs. Nevertheless, mixed methods designs still have weaknesses some of which are reflected in this study. This section of the dissertation describes the limitations of the qualitative data set and limitations of the quantitative data set.

Limitations of the Qualitative Data Set

The qualitative data for the study was limited to evidence from just two high performing school districts in Ontario, both Catholic English-speaking public school districts. We cannot know how representative they are of other high performing districts in Ontario, much less districts in other political jurisdictions.

Within each district, the study relied on interview data from district- and school-level leaders. Teachers and students, the ‘clients’ and intended audiences of most policies and programs would have provided additional valuable feedback to enrich this study. Their feedback on school culture and outcomes could have been used as a basis of triangulating principals’ responses on changes to their practices resulting from an understanding of their roles enhanced through their socialization with district leaders.

The interview questions requested participants to recall sometimes distant events from memories which are often biased, incomplete and/or vague (Fredrickson, 1998). For example, during interviews, when principals were prompted on sensemaking questions, most often, the first response was, “that’s an interesting question, I never thought of it.” Those questions often led to an awkward moment of silence. This is because of the retrospective nature of sensemaking (Patterson et al., 2010). Because some actions are driven by subconscious sensemaking,
meanings (Weick, 1995) can be made of past events, and it can be difficult for interviewees to clearly articulate the intention behind an action. This gives the sensemaker an opportunity to reflect on their practices and make changes to their understandings. In a busy day, principals seldom find time to sit back and reflect on their actions. Prompting them to look back and justify their actions may thus seem challenging for a one-time interview. Nonetheless, the interview technique provided opportunities to revisit such questions once the interviewee had a recollection of evidence to respond.

**Limitations of the Quantitative Data Set**

The study used a newly developed instrument for inquiring about district actions and this reduced the researcher’s ability to know its reliability in advance of collecting the data (see findings section for reliabilities of survey scales).

In sum, this chapter has described the mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) approach used to collect evidence for this study. The qualitative methods included interviews with significant numbers of school and district leaders in two school systems; these methods help reduce the limitations to internal validity common to quantitative studies alone. The quantitative methods entailed the collection of survey data from both district and school-level leaders in a large proportion of school districts in Ontario; such methods help reduce the limitations to external validity common to qualitative studies alone. The following chapter reports results of the analysis of survey data from school and district leaders of the 50 districts that participated in this study.
CHAPTER 4
QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Survey Responses to Individual Items

A total of 250 people completed the district leader survey. These 250 people came from 50 school boards. Between one and 17 district leaders answered the survey for different school boards. A total of 1,563 people completed the principal survey. These 1,563 people came from 50 school boards. Between one and 92 principals answered the survey from each district. As part of these provincial results, two people completed the district leader survey for each of the high-performing districts, Greenbridge and Marinee. Since the two people in each district did not answer all the questions, their responses are not considered for analysis in this study. A total of eight people completed the principal survey in Greenbridge and 30 people in Marinee.

Descriptive statistics for provincial responses on individual items in the senior leader survey are displayed in Appendix F, for principals in Appendix G and for the questions that were asked both senior leaders and principals in Table H. The aggregated provincial responses on key characteristics for both principal and senior leader surveys are displayed in Appendix I. Comparison of principal responses for the province, Greenbridge and Marinee are presented in Appendix J.

Reliability of Scales Measuring District Actions

Table 10 presents the results of internal consistency analyses for each of the variables of interest in this study. The four sub-categories without Cronbach’s alpha coefficients (NA) were single item measures of relationships of central office staff, teaching staff and administrators, district and school staff, and local community groups.
Table 10

**Internal Consistency Analysis for District Action Scales**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Actions</th>
<th>Senior Leader Survey Item #s</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha (α)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core processes</td>
<td>2-17</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs and vision for student learning</td>
<td>2-10</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses of Evidence</td>
<td>11-17</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>18-33</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Leadership</td>
<td>18-26</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected Leadership</td>
<td>27-33</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Conditions</td>
<td>34-41</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational improvement Processes</td>
<td>34-41</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>42-49</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central office Staff</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
<td>43-49</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Actions</th>
<th>Principal Survey Items #s</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core processes</td>
<td>2-14</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and instruction</td>
<td>2-7</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses of Evidence</td>
<td>8-14</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting conditions</td>
<td>15-48</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>15-33</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td>34-48</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>49-55</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers and administration</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District and school staffs</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>51-54</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local community groups</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Na</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A reliability coefficient of .7 is typically considered acceptable. So the evidence reported in Table 10 indicates that total scores can be created for each domain.

In addition, factor analysis was done to verify if the items measuring the outcome variables principals’ self efficacy and principals’ sensemaking could be grouped independently.
Two principal factors with Eigen value equal to 4.72 (Factor 1) and .62 (Factor 2) were extracted and accounted for 43% and 6% (respectively) of the variance for principal efficacy. This means that the indicators can be placed in two groups with the first group consisting of all the indicators as described in the survey. The commonalities for all principal efficacy indicators of factor 1 were greater than .5, indicating strong relationships of the items to the domain of principal efficacy. Principals’ efficacy scale also has a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .89. Therefore, based on the results of this analysis, all the items could be combined into one variable called principals’ efficacy.

One principal component with Eigen value equal to 5.67 was extracted and accounted for 47% of the variance for sensemaking. The commonalities for all principal sensemaking indicators were greater than .5, indicating strong relationships of the items to the domain of sensemaking. Principals’ sensemaking scale also has a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .91. Therefore, based on the results of this analysis, all the items could be combined into one variable called principals’ sensemaking.

Table 11 describes reliabilities of the four categories of district actions for principal and senior leader surveys combined.

Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Actions</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core processes</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs and vision for student learning</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses of Evidence (District Leader)</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses of Evidence (Principal)</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting conditions</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cronbach alpha coefficients fall below the minimum acceptable level for each of the four categories treated as single scales, but all subcategories exceed the minimum requirement.

Subsequent analyses focused only on reliable scales.

**Results for Research Sub-Question 1:**

**What Actions Do Districts Employ to Help Principals Improve Schools?**

Descriptive statistics for responses to individual items (about district characteristics) in the senior leader survey are displayed in Appendix F, for principals in Appendix G and for the questions that were asked both senior leaders and principals in Table H. The aggregated responses on key characteristics for both principal and senior leader surveys are displayed in Appendix I. Evidence of the highest and lowest ratings of district characteristics for school improvement from school and system leader surveys are displayed below. Highest rated actions included:

- System direction; Beliefs and vision for student achievement and well-being \( (m = 3.26) \)
- Alignment \( (m = 3.23) \)
- Central office staff relations \( (m = 3.20) \)
- Curriculum and instruction \( (m = 3.19) \)
- Uses of Evidence \( (m = 3.17) \); combined principal and system leader responses
• Professional Leadership \((m = 3.12)\)

This means that amongst the 12 sub categories of district characteristics, system leaders rated system-wide vision and beliefs for student achievement and well-being (System direction) higher than the other 12 sub categories. This characteristic drives the direction of the system as a whole, sets the tone for improvement and develops specific measureable goals for school improvement. As reported in Appendix H, the only commonly combined response rating for both principal and system leader surveys was the sub-category Uses of Evidence. This sub-category illustrates different but uniformly higher means for system leaders than for principals. It also indicates, relatively low and similar ratings by both principal and system leaders \((SD: .65; .66\) respectively) – an indication of a high degree of agreement that the system was supporting principals in their use of evidence to guide decision making.

The lowest rated district actions were:

• Elected Leadership \((m = 2.86)\)

• Professional Development \((m = 2.81)\)

• Relationship with local community groups \((m = 2.69)\)

• Relationship with parents \((m = 2.66)\)

Relationship with parents had the lowest ratings. This indicates that amongst the characteristics of school systems, districts do not consider parental engagement as important as the other 12 sub categories of district actions in their school improvement efforts. Overall, the results reveal that districts engage in all 12 subcategories of district characteristics variably in their attempts to improve schools.
Results for Research Sub-Question 2: Which District Actions Influence Principals’ Sense of Efficacy for School Improvement?

Table 12 reports the means and standard deviations for items included in the scale measuring district actions influencing principals’ sense of efficacy in their capacities for school improvement.

Table 12
Principals’ Views of District Factors Contributing to Their Sense of Confidence

To what extent do the following contribute to the confidence that you and your principal-colleague(s) have that you will be able to accomplish the expectations for school improvement held by your district:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confidence</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mastery Experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. PD provided to me by the system</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Support that I can count on from my superintendent whenever I need it</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verbal Persuasion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Advice, feedback and knowledge available to me through my network of other principals in this system</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Encouragement I receive from others for the work that I do</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Expressions of appreciation/celebration of the value of our work</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vicarious Experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Examples I see of other principals succeeding at what I also need to do</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional Arousal</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The school system’s alignment of its resources with our goals</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The guidance the board’s improvement plan provides for</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
developing my school improvement plan

**Other district actions and conditions supporting efficacy**

9. The system’s assignment of me to a school for which I am well suited

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10. High levels of mutual trust my colleagues and I have in one another

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. The autonomy I have to do what is in the best interests of my school and students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12 shows a mean score for the efficacy scale of 3.12 and the standard deviation of .79, suggesting moderately high contributions of district actions to principals’ efficacy in their ability to accomplish district expectations for school improvement. Means ranged from 3.46 (level of trust shared with their colleagues across the board) to 2.80 (district expression of appreciation and celebration of the value of principals’ work). Standard deviations for these means were moderate high, ranging from .73 to .91. The table also illustrates that principals felt that districts used the four efficacy techniques described by Bandura to support their sense of efficacy. Among the four techniques, the use of mastery experiences \( (m = 3.21) \) contributed most to their sense of efficacy, followed by emotional arousal \( (m = 3.05) \) and verbal persuasion \( (m = 3.00) \). Vicarious experiences, measured in the survey with a single item describing opportunities for principals to observe other principal colleagues \( (m = 2.93) \), was perceived by principals to have the least influence on their sense of efficacy for school improvement.

Responses to individual questions suggest that principals felt that the level of trust shared with their principal colleagues across the board \( (m = 3.46) \) and the support of readily available superintendents \( (m = 3.38) \) contributed most to their sense of efficacy. The lowest means were reported for district expression of appreciation and celebration of the value of principals’ work.
(2.80), and opportunities to see other principals succeeding in performing tasks similar to what principals are expected to do in their schools (2.93).

In sum, these results suggest that districts contribute most to principals’ sense of efficacy when they provide direct support to principals through the superintendents assigned to schools, carefully align principals’ assignment to schools to their dispositions and capacities, and nurture high levels of trust throughout the district.

**Results for Research Sub-Question 3:**

**Which District Actions Help Principals Make Sense of Their Instruction Leadership Responsibilities?**

Table 13 reports the means and standard deviations for items included in the scale measuring district actions influencing principals’ sensemaking about their leadership for school improvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensemaking</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensemaking</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. PD opportunities provided by the system about Ministry initiatives and new programs</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Resources provided to support school based PD for me and my staff</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Support by the system for networking and sharing of best practices, experiences and challenges with other principals colleagues and schools</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 13 reports a mean score of 2.91 and a standard deviation of .79 for the sensemaking scale, indicating moderately high contributions of district actions to principals’ understanding of their leadership and how to enact their leadership practices. Means ranged from 3.24 (emphasis placed by district on analysing, interpreting and using data to inform decision making) to 2.57 (opportunities provided by the district to engage parents and local communities in school improvement efforts). Standard deviations for these means were moderate, ranging from .70 to .91.
Running simple means with the province-wide data revealed that district emphasis on use of evidence to drive decision making and provision of PD opportunities to support principals’ understandings of ministry designed initiatives and programs were district actions with the greatest influence on principals’ sensemaking. As can be seen on Table 13, responses to individual questions suggest that principals felt that the districts’ support for principals regarding district emphasis on analysing, interpreting and using data to inform decision making ($m = 3.24$), and PD opportunities provided by the district about Ministry initiatives and new programs ($m = 3.07$) contributed the most to enhancing their understanding of their leadership for school improvement. The lowest means were reported for opportunities provided by the district to engage parents and local communities in school improvement efforts (2.57), and advice from district on how to build productive relations with teachers (2.65).

In summary, the quantitative data revealed that districts contribute most to principals’ sensemaking about their school improvement efforts when they emphasise and support principals’ use of data for decision making; provide principals with various content-focused PD opportunities, and create opportunities for two-way open communications between schools and the central office. The next chapter looks at one of the two high-performing case studies for this research.
CHAPTER 5
GREEENBRIDGE DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD CASE STUDY
(From “Below Average to Average”)

At the time of the study, this small Catholic school district served both rural and urban communities with a total of about 3,500 students in 14 school sites. Senior district leadership team directly involved in instructional improvement included: two superintendents, the director of education, and a student success lead (teacher seconded to the board office) to support schools with their school improvement efforts (see Chapter 3 for more details about demographics of Greenbridge).

This chapter presents an analysis of the evidence from Greenbridge district interviews and documents presented to the researchers during site visits. The overall description is guided by the categories and subcategories of district actions providing the framework for the larger study (Leithwood, 2010) of which this is a part (Core Processes, Supporting Conditions, Leadership, and Relationships). Within this overall framework, evidence is reported about the influence of those district actions on principals’ efficacy and sensemaking about their school improvement efforts.

Core Processes

Mission and Vision (System Direction)

This section describes Greenbridge’s mission and vision and a strategic planning process for developing the system’s direction.
Clear vision for faith enhancement

About five to six years prior to this study, the district worked collaboratively with school leaders and developed its vision and mission statements. This included an enhancement of the catholic faith and the “belief that all students can be successful.” As succinctly described by an SO, the vision of the board was, “Rooted in Faith, Alive in Spirit.” All respondents mentioned faith as the basis of their work within Greenbridge. At the time of the study, the vision statement, Rooted in Faith, Alive in Spirit was expanded on the district’s website as follows:

Rooted - indicates that the Catholic faith is the basis around which the Board exists and operates. That is, the faith dimension is its foundation. Like a tree, the Catholic faith represents the roots, anchoring and giving stability to the Board. The roots also represent the point where nourishment enters and gives life. The Catholic faith gives life to our learners and the organization.

Faith - represents the Catholic faith. ... [Greenbridge] District School Board is a Catholic School Board, built on the teachings, practices and values of the Roman Catholic Church, which need to be present in everything the Board undertakes and provides.

Alive - reflects excitement, energy, life, challenge and hope. This word gives a sense of vitality and purpose to the organization, that is, to bring to life the potentials of each learner, the richness of the Catholic faith and the realization of the aspirations of all the individuals who are stakeholders to the Board.

Spirit - outlines the importance of and a focus on both the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity and human spirit, that is, a spirit for both faith and life. It is through one’s spirit as an individual and as a member of the community, that each learner, staff member, parent and stakeholder is energized, moves forward, learns and is motivated to achieve their potential and be a contributing member of their community.

This vision statement, a guiding principle for all decisions within Greenbridge, provided directions for the realization of the board’s mission, which was also explicitly stated on the board’s website:

As a faith community, we provide learning opportunities that inspire, nurture and celebrate each learner’s journey to:

- Reach their full potential
- Be a contributing member of society
- Live the richness of their faith
- Embrace lifelong learning
The strategic planning process

The vision statement was developed through a strategic planning process, involving principals and the leadership team of each school, parents, custodians, staff, trustees and union representatives. The director championed and steered this process with a commitment to improve instruction. Interviewees reported that the wide involvement of stakeholder representatives in this process necessitated the hiring of an external consultant to facilitate the development of the mission and vision statements. A trustee describing a challenge involved in getting all stakeholders together to brainstorm said “everyone had the same vision but wording was difficult.” Nonetheless, through a weekend retreat, the facilitator focused the group on wording the vision. This resulted in a fine-tuned board vision which was posted on the board’s website as reflected in the vision statement described earlier.

Through the strategic planning process, a board logo was also developed aligned with the vision of the board and displayed on the board’s website. One of the superintendents described the connection of the logo with the vision as the sun (light) and a growing tree, representing students and their faith as a foundation of their learning and growth.

The district through the help of the superintendents and the miscellaneous lead ensured that the vision was understood and operationalized to the level of school implementation. School leadership teams across the board were assigned the task of ensuring that the vision was understood and shared amongst all staff. All principals interviewed agreed to the simplicity, uniformity and utility of the vision within schools across the district and echoed “it [the vision] drives our actions.” Both principals and district leaders mentioned that principals’ involvement in the planning process facilitated their understanding of the vision and guaranteed the consistency of the message across the board. The board made a concerted effort to help principals with their understanding of the board’s vision, as well as the development of school
goals aligned with board priorities. The board’s approach to this level of support for principals’ work was described by the director simply as “tell us how we can help.”

Once the vision statement was developed, its review was facilitated through board council meetings, once every year.

Curriculum and Instruction

Approaches to improving curriculum and instruction

Communication between central office and schools was described by principals using such words as ‘phenomenal,’ ‘open,’ and ‘very close.’ Those positive communications were required for the transmission of messages about the need for more instructional focus with much more specific targets for instructional improvement. Also, those communications were relevant for principals’ understandings of their instructional leadership expectations. The change in board focus and expectations for instructional leadership occurred five years prior to the study, influenced in part by the board vision which was developed about the same time.

In order to support principals to meet board targets, the board fostered principals’ understanding of curriculum and instructional strategies through: coaches and superintendents visits, PD offered during principal meetings, informal sharing between principals (interschool visitations), regional training opportunities, and provision of resources and opportunities for principals to be involved in different projects. An Elementary school principal added that the district made concerted efforts to develop achievable goals and aligned its resources to support the accomplishment of targets. This, in another principal’s opinion, shifted the focus and enabled principals to “dig down deep looking at the story of a student not a number.” The following two areas describe ways in which Greenbridge improved curriculum and instruction:
Use of coaches and superintendents to support curriculum leadership in schools

Superintendents visited schools on a weekly basis to go over the schools’ plans and share best practices from other schools. Principals were also encouraged to visit other principals to learn from their experiences. This weekly support and opportunities to visit each other and share best practices were considered by an SO as “very positive in building capacity.”

The idiosyncratic differences between principals with different ability levels were recognized by the board and the board provided individualized support through one-on-one SO and principal interactions. The aim was to prevent any principal from falling through the cracks regardless of their ability level. The district looked at the identity (individual differences) of principals and their experiences and tailored targeted support to ensure that principals obtained the most out of its limited resources. These approaches were key sensemaking resources which helped districts to effectively address the needs of principals. One principal succinctly stated that:

Personally, I come with (some) knowledge. Board fosters it through professional…the board feeds us where we want more and celebrates with us.

The district went far beyond expectations to build the leadership capacity of its low performing principals. One case in point was a struggling principal. A superintendent explained that:

The system didn’t change [or transfer] the principal. He was assigned a senior coach. Educational officials and superintendents worked with him as they monitored, pressuring and providing support. He’s shown remarkable improvement over time.

In addition to individual supports, principals were involved in two major teams centrally and locally, which supported district efforts for instructional improvement: the curriculum team, a central team composed of superintendents, lead teachers and coordinators; and the school leadership team comprised of the principal and three other key staff. The curriculum team
focused on identifying areas of need at school and district levels. Information from the curriculum team meeting was taken back to principal meetings to identify possible solutions. On the other hand, each school leadership team was tasked with reviewing student achievement targets at the beginning and end of each school year. These teams also worked collaboratively with their assigned SO on developing and revising the school improvement plan. They also provided immeasurable support to principals in helping them to better understand their leadership for school improvement.

_Meetings and involvement in projects_

Principals’ capacities and understandings of curriculum and instruction were also enhanced through meetings: principal meetings with a half day focused on PD and the other half on administration, _Schools in the Middle_\textsuperscript{17} meetings, and informal sharing amongst principals across the board. One of the principals mentioned opportunities to be involved in projects like the province’s Turnaround\textsuperscript{18} and Leading Student Achievement\textsuperscript{19} (LSA) projects. As a significant contributing factor to her learning, an elementary principal pointed to the benefits associated with the board’s involvement in such programs as “lots of PD, resources, clear focus on reading. I spent a lot of time visiting classrooms.” A lot of principals who consider themselves to be instructional leaders, complain of time constraints on their ability to supervise and model instruction but the opportunities provided through those projects gave Greenbridge principals a better understanding of the curriculum and created time for classroom visitations.

\textsuperscript{17} _Schools in the Middle_ is an Ontario initiative that networks schools across a school board in order to improve teaching, assessment and instructional leadership.

\textsuperscript{18} The Turnaround project involved a government’s intervention strategy to support schools through: the allocation of new resources, provision of focused quality professional development, and emphasis on principals to spend more time observing classrooms, and support staff with instructional improvement.

\textsuperscript{19} Leading Student Achievement (LSA): Networks for Learning is a province-wide project sponsored by Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat with the main goal to increase student achievement by improving the quality of school leadership.
Those benefits for principals’ instructional repertoires facilitated their enactment of instructional leadership practices, which in turn impacted on teachers’ teaching, students’ learning and overall school improvement. One principal vividly noted changes in their practice as a result of being more curriculum savvy:

We now know the instructional strategies, and can help to direct teachers. I go into classroom and teach for some time in order to release teachers…I take some students above level while their teacher concentrates on low level students.

With tremendous support from the district for instructional improvement in schools and encouragement for principal and schools collaboration, the district worked together to shape its targets and goals. As a result, the focus of the board eventually changed from “simply ensuring that students passed courses to moving students from levels 2 to 3 and levels 3 to 4” said one superintendent.

**Fostering Students’ Deep Understandings about “Big Ideas”**

The concept of big ideas introduced in Chapter One included the setting of ‘higher level’ or ‘more complex’ goals required for school instructional improvement efforts. Greenbridge understood the concept of “big ideas” to entail ‘deep learning’ and considered it to be ‘key to curriculum and learning skills.’ The district prioritized the notion of ‘big ideas’ and the interviewees claimed it was well understood, more so at the elementary than the secondary level. This focus was supported in part by the LSA project through which all elementary principals participated and benefited from its resources. Considerable efforts were also made by the district to foster elementary principals’ understandings of ‘big ideas,’ in order to assist schools in focusing on critical or High Order Thinking (HOT) skills. An elementary principal noted:

The support given to me and my school is phenomenal. There are lots of PD opportunities, inside school, outside school, and buddy system.
The ‘buddy system’ seemed to be a common practice across the district as another principal cited a case in which her school developed a partnership with two other schools to focus on ‘big ideas.’ Through that partnership (involving social interactions), the three schools worked together and shared best practices. The principal added that, “the board encouraged this… [and] always grants requests of this nature when approached” hence, expanding principals’ opportunities for making sense of their leadership.

Principals of elementary schools were inserviced on big ideas during principal meetings, as well as sessions on the School Effectiveness Framework\textsuperscript{20} where books on big ideas were distributed to all principals. Also, interviewees noted that the district provided resources such as textbooks to all principals. The goal was to enhance teachers’ understanding of how to best help students to engage in questions requiring different levels of thinking. Fortifying the support through textbook provisions, the district assigned numeracy coaches to schools to help teachers collaborate on fostering students’ deep understanding of big ideas. The outcome of such board support was evident in changes in mathematics results, as schools learned through critical thinking frames. Principals “liked the specific focus and concrete evidence of success” which became an affirmation of the strides they were making towards improving student achievement.

At the time of the study the notion of ‘big ideas’ was however, just beginning to gain momentum at the secondary level. According to the lone secondary principal in the district, the interest to focus on ‘big ideas’ was driven by the introduction of the School Effectiveness Framework at the secondary school. Even so, secondary level staff members were not familiar with the concept. That notwithstanding, the school had been involved in Professional Learning Community (PLC) monthly meetings and the secondary school principal presumed that on the basis of this involvement, when the concept is eventually introduced, the “staff won’t be

\textsuperscript{20} The School Effectiveness Framework is a Ministry tool used to support schools with their school and board improvement planning.
surprised by TLCPs (Teaching Learning Critical Pathways) and the focus on big ideas as part of PLC discussion.” Also, the secondary school’s ongoing departmental effort to develop long range annual plans was identified as a fertile ground for the development and understanding of big ideas and TLCPs. According to the principal, “these plans will align teaching and assessment to big ideas found in the curriculum.”

The location of the secondary school within the same building as the central office, made it easy for the lone secondary principal to easily access central office support when needed to enhance the principals’ understanding of instructional strategies and assessment tools relevant for school improvement.

**Uses of Evidence**

Asked about how much importance the district placed on the use of systematically collected evidence to drive decisions across the district, respondents echoed the terms ‘huge’ and ‘highly important.’ Evidence was also used for monitoring to evaluate the progress of students, schools, and the district. Such evidence was then used to make informed decisions about best strategies to employ towards instructional improvement. Strongly influenced by a trustee policy-governance model, the district moved to a culture very receptive and dependent on data-driven decision making at all levels. This necessitated the training of principals and their staff in the capacities needed for recognizing, reading, interpreting and using data to make informed decisions. This section describes Greenbridge’s approaches to evidence use and the kinds of evidence used for decision making:

**District approaches to improving principals’ capacity for evidence use**

The following four aspects of district actions are discussed:
Open and frank conversations about evidence

The conversations around Greenbridge data were frank and the district encouraged lots of questioning to foster learning and growth. Principals believed those conversations about the use of systematically collected data had ‘dramatically changed’ over the years. The board incorporated a lot of “precision” into the process which became “much more research based.” To reinforce the new focus, PD opportunities were provided to principals and their staff on the interpretation and use of data within their schools. A principal described the changes in data focus as follows:

It’s huge. It’s the biggest difference maker. It takes the ego out of the room. It becomes about how students learn. It gets down to the core of the matter.

A second principal added:

There’s a difference, they [senior leaders] look at the numbers, we look at the story. Dialogue changes the discourse.

Greenbridge principals engaged in open, frank, conversations through their interaction with other colleagues and district leaders to determine the progress of individual students and to better support them in moving up the achievement ladder.

Literacy coaches, coordinators, and superintendent support

Ten years earlier, the board had collected a wide variety of evidence especially aimed at helping to improve elementary students’ literacy. However, principals did not know how to interpret and use data within their schools. A superintendent said, “the board pressured principals without adequate knowledge of what a good DRA or bad DRA should look like.” Literacy coaches were assigned to support schools to improve literacy results “but without the capacity.” These literacy coaches, though possessing weak capacities for instructional improvement, worked collaboratively with coordinators and principals to improve principals’ understanding of data use. Superintendents valued the in-servicing for principals on the use of data but suggested a
better approach would be to “surround principals with experts with the goal for principals to become instructional leaders.”

*Using data to monitor progress centrally and at schools*

At about the same time principals were struggling with the interpretation and use of data to inform decisions, trustees were at the initial phase of implementing a “policy governance” model for board overview. As one trustee explained, the model “relies entirely on data” to inform trustees of the board’s progress in accomplishing its vision through ‘end statements.’ The emphasis on data for implementation of this model required a high degree of precision in data collection through superintendents’ reports. In turn, superintendents requested that principals present student achievement ‘portfolios’ for reading, writing, and math, during their monitoring process. Those portfolios demonstrated the level of progress within each school hence, much of the data guiding the governance process was deduced from students and schools on the assumption that “the board is as strong as the sum of its schools” as expressed by the miscellaneous lead. Senior leaders then had to ramp up their support for principals, as well as the pressure for success resulting in the same level of precision in data collection as required by the governance monitoring procedures.

*Support from a miscellaneous lead with a numeracy portfolio*

Six years prior to this study, district data indicated progress in literacy and the board shifted its priority to numeracy and a MISA lead was hired in accordance. Five years later, with increased precision on data use and the addition of a miscellaneous lead with a numeracy portfolio, interviewees reported that staff members’ ability to use data had improved significantly. The miscellaneous lead helped schools access, interpret and use evidence for decision making. In the miscellaneous lead’s words, “I have gone into schools to work with principals on: where do I get data? How do I get them? Breaking it down, how does it help?”
According to the principals, this portfolio was very helpful in supporting data interpretation and use in schools.

Principals were also supported through leadership team days, three times a year. Those meetings brought principals together with the literacy coaches, coordinators, and superintendents. The district modeled the team the practices of a successful school with respect to data use as principals and other leadership team members made sense of the learned practices and in turn, led sessions about what they had learned with their respective schools upon their return.

**Kinds of evidence**

A computerized system was developed to compile and store data, which was made readily available to all school staff within the district. Besides EQAO results, Greenbridge employed multiple sources of data as part of its decision making processes. These data included: CASSI, DRA, OWA, demographic information, report cards, classroom data wall, monitoring report-end statements, credit accumulation pass rates, and exit surveys (identifying challenges for the next steps with each student). With availability of multiple sources of data, the district emphasized the identification of the best assessment tools to inform decision making processes. With those sources of evidence, the district used a tracking process to obtain a brief overview of each child’s report card over the year. The tracking approach “provided a basis for plotting programs and visiting classrooms.” The focus was on the individual child and the SO’s role was to support schools and their principals to ensure that each student can meet the end statements. While these data sometimes presented conflicting results, the board encouraged the leadership teams at schools to work together with teachers to identify reasons for discrepancies, work as a team with district support to “align the differences” and help each student to be successful. Most
of the principals interviewed observed that these district efforts helped them to make sense of their leadership for school improvement.

**Supporting Conditions**

**Organizational Improvement Processes**

Everyone in the board “genuinely believes students can be successful.” This was a foundation on which improvement efforts thrived for the accomplishment of the district’s vision and goals. Through the strategic planning process initiated by the director, the district and school leaders worked continuously to develop board and school improvement plans. These processes fed into each other and were informed by robust evidence of student, school and board progress over time.

The following five areas describe how Greenbridge matched SIPs to the BIP

**Collaborative efforts towards revision of the BIP**

Principals’ involvement in the development of the BIP was crucial in their understanding and development of their SIPs. As earlier mentioned, each school had a leadership team of four members, who participated in the development of the BIP. Release time was provided for this team to meet around data analysis, and the review of belief statements and SIPs, which fed into the development of the BIP.

The leadership teams of all schools met with district leaders three times annually, through collaborative data-driven sessions which enforced a sense of accountability within the district. Those meetings were typically scheduled for the early fall, February and end of each academic year. Through an annual cycle of reviewing, monitoring and assessing district/school goals, interviewees reported that the aim of the first meeting was to revise and adopt SIPs for the academic year. The second meeting focused on monitoring progress and modifying plans based
on achievement results from report cards and other school data. The last meeting aimed at evaluating progress in meeting the set goals using such sources as data, including EQAO test scores. During the final meeting, steps were taken to initiate the planning process for the next cycle. Interviewees noted that the annual cyclical processes often resulted in modifications of activities, programs, and strategies used in achieving key priorities, as opposed to changes in actual board and school goals.

With a goal of reviewing and assessing plans, the board’s expectation for SIPS was an emphasis on the ‘rule of 6 priorities’ – limiting plans to not more than six priorities. However, most respondents identified the challenges in adhering to the ‘rule of 6’ as the board “introduced too many things initiated at the Ministry level.” Interviewees reported that the mandatory nature of some of those initiatives hampered the district’s ability to stay the course and focus on its priorities. At the time of the study, however, the district had deliberately decided to “go back to basics” whereby they “look at where gaps are and align to [board] priorities,” explained an SO.

Superintendents supporting principals in developing their SIPS

Instructionally savvy superintendents worked collaboratively with school principals to assist with instructional improvement and the review of their school plans – a social interaction mechanism for sensemaking. On average, superintendents visited schools once every week to support principals and the leadership team with the development and revision of their SIPS. Superintendents identified positive changes to their approaches on improvement and relationships while working with principals during school visits. An SO explained that “before, it was more about complaining about someone who was not doing the right thing. Now it is more about moving them along.” Through those weekly site visitations, superintendents requested that principals present student portfolios for reading, writing and math achievement results which demonstrated the level of progress within each school and formed a basis on which conversations
on instructional improvements were developed with individual principals. Principals spoke of this superintendent support as important in the understanding of their instructional leadership responsibilities.

**Professional Development**

Principals described PD offered to them during the time of the study as ‘ongoing,’ ‘focused on achievement’ and ‘very effective.’ Within the five years prior to this study, respondents pointed to two major shifts in the district’s approaches to professional development: shift in content and delivery. This section describes these shifts in PD, PD at principals’ meetings, and other networking opportunities for principals.

**Shift in content**

The content shift was described as a move from centrally determined and less focused PD sessions to PD content that was directly focused on achievement and aligned to the needs of the board and individual schools. An elementary principal critiqued the previous approach which used a lot of external speakers as “more sugary, less meat and potatoes.” Stimulated by data indicating areas of weaknesses across the district, the board shifted its focus from “ensuring that students pass courses to taking achievement up a notch.” This shift in focus necessitated a shift in principals’ role in order to prepare them for the tasks associated with the board’s expectations for student achievement. The district made considerable efforts to identify individual principals’ needs. Principals mentioned instances of superintendents asking them to identify their areas of need which then acted as the basis for PD opportunities. Principals also approached superintendents on topics of interest and these contacts resulted in the offering of PD specific to that area of need. In addition, superintendents emailed upcoming conferences offered outside the
board to all principals and when those conferences met specific principals’ needs, they were encouraged and supported to attend thereby building their capacity for instructional leadership.

**Shift in delivery**

The shift in delivery was from PD offered outside the school building to PD predominantly offered within the school building – “job-embedded.” At the time of the study, all formally assigned PD days were school based, with the agenda developed between the leadership team and superintendents. Through the new approach, principals and teachers could work together as a team to build their capacities for instructional improvement. Principals visited teachers’ classrooms and after each teaching session, a follow-up session was held for feedback and support towards classroom improvement. Prior to the board’s move to build principals’ capacities and sense of efficacy in enacting instructional leadership practices, principals interviewed said they lacked the skills to effectively monitor classroom instruction. About half a dozen years prior to the study, the board recognized the importance of supporting principals with an understanding of their instructional leadership expectations and assigned coordinators and superintendents the task of visiting schools on a regular basis to support them accordingly. Those visitations were meant to provide ongoing one-one-one support for instructional improvement within the school and according to the principals interviewed, it had direct benefits for their capacity to change their behaviors and enact instructional leadership practices. A principal summed it up by saying “it takes 20 ‘hits’ for behavior to become practice, not one-shot wonders.” She concluded that “the current school embedded PD is the best.” Although the predominant approach for PD was school based, there were other opportunities for principals to build their leadership capacity.
PD at principal meetings

As earlier mentioned, monthly principal meetings were modified with half of the day focused on PD and half on administration. A typical meeting involved a presentation of the agenda and pair/group work discussions around the table. The work time opportunity was clearly beneficial to elementary principals as they shared best practices. It did not seem to help the only secondary principal of the district who “felt a bit frustrated” and isolated. In order to overcome this challenge, in addition to locating the school in the same building as senior district offices, district leaders provided the lone secondary school principal and her staff with one-on-one ongoing support. This was an attempt to ensure that the secondary school had the tools required to address their needs for “raising the [student achievement] bar” as the principal confessed that it took the “…staff a while to understand what elementary schools have understood for years. The system has assisted in moving this forward.” Independently, the secondary school principal noted that she built her capacity and understanding of leadership by reading professional literature with authors such as Ken Leithwood, Wayne Huley and others as “source of my best ideas” with direct links to the evidence.

An elementary principal narrated a sense-making scenario during the board’s latest principal meeting as of the time this study was conducted. The meeting focused on two new items; safe schools and codes of conduct. Through that meeting, principals were handed binders, and provided explanations about changes proposed by the Ministry. Principals shared ideas on codes of conducts from their respective schools. They were then asked to check their individual school plans to see if they complied with the Ministry’s changes. This, according to the principals helped them to have “a better understanding of the changes.” At the time of our visit, one school was in the process of changing their code of conduct on student moral. In the principal’s opinion, the ideas garnered from those shared best practices helped each of them “to
make sense of each other’s role” in leading the Ministry’s changes with respect to safe schools and code of conduct.

Another example cited was a session on the use of assessment to help in planning instruction for individual child growth. Using a step-by-step approach, principals looked at each student by using information on DRA to plan lessons appropriate for their understanding. One principal reported that he went back to his school and shared the learning experience with the rest of the staff during a staff meeting. The approach was tweaked to adapt to the school’s needs and the principal concluded that “every teacher in my school now uses the same template” for assessment.

The board’s deliberate efforts towards building principals’ capacity clearly resulted in a better understanding of their instructional leadership expectations and efficacy to lead school improvement efforts, which in turn shaped changes in their leadership practices.

**Other networking opportunities**

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were often mentioned as significant opportunities for teachers’ PD in particular, as divisions within schools used PLC time to share ideas and plan together. Earlier in the district’s refocusing phase, it relied a lot on external expertise (mostly reputable OISE experts) to support teachers with their professional learning. The PD sessions with the experts focused on aligning capacities with the district’s math and literacy priorities. At the time of the study, however, with the board becoming more focused and moving towards an internal approach, the lone secondary principal suggested that “PLCs should be able to do a lot of this [in-servicing].”

With respect to principals’ learning, the board deliberately prioritized PD and presented principals with opportunities to be involved in projects and initiatives from the Ministry which were identified by principals as significant sources for building their capacities as instructional
leaders. These exposures of principals to a wide variety of targeted and meaningful PD provided them with the tools to meet the district’s expectations for school improvement.

Alignment

This section discusses budget allocations, alignment of personnel, policies and programs to Greenbridge’s improvement agenda, and Greenbridge’s organizational structure.

Budget allocations

Money was clearly not an impediment to instructional improvement efforts within Greenbridge as the district had improvement as its priority and aligned its budget with that priority. Elementary principals in particular, agreed that the district aligned its budget to improvement initiatives and one of the principals summed up the principals’ views by saying that in Greenbridge, “dollars are put where priorities are.” With a shift in district priority to improving student achievement and building principals’ understanding of their instructional leadership expectations, resources were allocated to support the new focus. An elementary principal, thinking retrospectively, explained that:

Years ago, we were looked at as managers, now we are trained as leaders…we’re curriculum instructors, not just managers.

To fully support schools and their leaders in building their understandings for instructional leadership, the board allocated money to pay the cost of supply teachers which allowed teachers and principals to leave their classrooms and schools in order to attend conferences, seminars and workshops.

The board also purchased resources for all schools. One of those resources mentioned was textbooks. In addition to the provision of resources to support school needs, principals were provided with individual school budgets. Each principal, regardless of their years of experience,
had significant discretion over the use of their school budget for improvement. As opposed to the Ministry provided funds which were tied to specific initiatives with no flexibility on spending, the board made efforts to increase each school’s discretionary spending power to enhance the creativity for overall improvement. Autonomy in Greenbridge’s case, begot principal responsibility and accountability. An elementary principal who had the least years’ experience in their current role explained, “we are masters at stretching dollars and accountable for what’s done.”

Clearly, the board’s strategic approach for providing principals with autonomy over their individual school budget was well appreciated by the principals and impacted their efficacy, sensemaking and commitment for improvement. The outcome from the perspective of interviewees seemed to be cumulative improvement of schools within the district.

**Personnel policies and procedures**

If principals had the discretion to hire their staff, they would select the most qualified teachers to meet the needs of each individual classroom. This is exactly what Greenbridge provided to its principals - the ability to be involved in the hiring process. Principals interviewed aspirants for teaching positions and made recommendations to their assigned superintendents. Although this approach indicated that principals did not have complete autonomy over the hiring process, an elementary principal noted that none of such recommendations had been turned down in the past. Principals, therefore, had a huge stake in determining the fate of their teaching corps which has a direct correlation with the quality of instruction – the core business of schooling.

Asked about board relationship with the union, principals described it as ‘good’ with ‘lots of collaboration in work done.’ At the time of the study, one of the most prominent issues between the school district and the teachers’ union was the use of staff meeting time for PD. The district collaborated with unions in sensemaking processes to develop a shared understanding
about school practices. When principals and teachers collaborated in classrooms during time slots originally scheduled for staff meetings the president of the union was invited. According to one elementary principal, the aim of the invitation was to “send a message that it [PD supervision] is not evaluative.” The board used this approach to improve on the collaborative relationship between the union and the district. For example, they both occasionally collaborated in providing funding for teachers to go to conferences.

Greenbridge’s Human Resources Department also supported principals and strengthened their relationships with the union by helping principals better understand union contracts, thereby giving them time to focus on instructional improvement.

**Organizational structures**

The small size of the board helped Greenbridge staff to break the barriers associated with formal hierarchical organizational structures. Principals, district leaders, teachers, union representatives, parents and other stakeholders worked collaboratively towards board improvement. Principals in particular, were included in decision making processes at all levels within the district. At the district level, principals were part of the *curriculum team*, which focused on developing the board improvement plan. At the school level, principals were involved in the *leadership team*, focused on identifying achievable school targets, and developing goals towards the accomplishment of the set targets. In addition to these two structures, there was a support structure offered by superintendents assigned to each school. Those superintendents provided ongoing one-on-one support to principals to help build their capacity for instructional improvement. Also, they worked with principals and the rest of the leadership team on school improvement plans which fed into the BIP.

Those new structures were created by design to encourage ongoing two way communication between the district leaders and all schools across the board. This fortified the
connections between school plans and the board plan as principals made sense of their instructional leadership expectations for school improvement.

**Leadership**

**Professional Leadership**

The district did not have a formal procedure for recruiting and selecting school and senior leaders. While one superintendent would have liked to see a “rigorous recruitment program for future leaders,” most respondents associated the lack of such a program to the small size of the board and the relative stability of leadership positions over the past five years. That notwithstanding, trustees noted that the selection processes for senior and school level leaders were left at the discretion of the director of education. Interestingly, principals observed that “no new principal had been hired within the past five years.” And though district level appointments were evident within this period, respondents described the appointments as “natural” and a given. For example, the latest appointment of an SO was a principal who had a successful instructional leadership reputation within the board. In addition to this natural leadership trajectory, superintendents identified several other opportunities to select leaders within the district. These included: teacher designants who took over schools in the absence of an elementary principal and teachers involved in leadership teams.

Despite the lack of a formal recruitment program for school and district leaders, the district believed that principals were instructional leaders and did a good job at preparing them for their role as instructional leaders. Principals were offered mentorship and professional development opportunities. Much more important was one-on-one support through literacy and numeracy coaches, as well as the two superintendents assigned to support schools with instructional improvement. In addition, the district encouraged leaders to complete formal
studies, for example, Masters Degrees. Aspiring leaders were supported to complete PQP (Principal Qualification Program) and interviewees reported that principals progressed through the qualification at different paces given that the district recognized individual differences and provided their utmost support as aspiring leaders journeyed to the end of the program.

The lack of a formal recruitment procedure did not necessarily mean the board was unclear about the qualities they required of all leaders. Respondents were able to identify some of those critical qualities to include: the ability to communicate the vision, commitment to Catholicity, demonstrated positive relationship with community, ability to handle data effectively, demonstrated instructional leadership potentials etc. These qualities were evident in the leaders of Greenbridge and despite the lack of a formal procedure, the principals felt pretty confident about the board’s informal hiring process which recruited the best candidates for the right positions. An elementary principal said “they place principals at the right school – the right person on the right bus in the right seat.” In addition, all district leaders were considered to be exemplary teachers who became leaders by virtue of their ability to model lessons to other staff within the district. As succinctly put by the Miscellaneous lead:

The board’s best principals are best teachers. The board is looking for instructional leaders, an element of having the ability to work together with others towards accomplishing the mission.

In the absence of a formal recruitment procedure, Greenbridge used an appraisal process that focused on ‘end statements’ for evaluating school and district leaders. Principals reported their end statements to superintendents, who reported to the director, and the director in turn, reported to the board of trustees. This was a robust accountability system through which principals were held accountable for the capacities developed for instructional improvement.
Elected Trustees

Trustees used the policy governance model with its guiding principles to direct the focus of their work. The chair of the board had attended a conference on governance and read the most widely cited book on policy governance by John Carver. With the support of the director, the chair introduced the model to his trustee colleagues. This was about a year following the appointment of the director of education. Trustees questioned the principles and expressed concerns about the challenges of implementing the model, but eventually resolved to adopt this approach to their work. In order to assist the board of trustees with the training on implementation of the model, a consultant was hired based on the recommendation of another board. The consultant held a two-day session to walk the board through the intricacies of the model. Around July of that academic year, the consultant returned to the board to complete the training session. Finally, in December of the same year, “after a lot of wheel spinning,” the board implemented the model. Despite some “backlashing,” the model was successfully implemented as a result of constant support provided through coaching.

The approach generally demands a high degree of commitment from implementers and is known for its directions on policy development and monitoring for expected outcomes (‘end statements’). Based on the fidelity of its implementation within Greenbridge, the model guided and redirected trustees focus on goals/policy development and board oversight as opposed to day-to-day operations. Prior to the implementation of this model, a superintendent said “everything was blurred” but at the time of the study, with the implementation of the model, there were clear distinctions in roles. According to the superintendents, trustees were seen as “the visioning body of the board, but…not involved in the day-to-day running.” A trustee noted:

This is the kind of governance model that keeps trustees away from day-to-day operations. I am deliberately not interested in what is going on in the system. I am interested in results.
A second trustee added, “…trustees are versed with policy governance. It clearly defines everybody’s roles.”

Clearly, the daily operations of the board were delegated to the director and other senior leaders. These involved the implementation of the policies developed by trustees. When asked how trustees responded to contacts made directly from parents, a trustee described the power dynamics in the board’s operation as follows:

I tell them there’s a process…the process flows from the teacher to the principal to the superintendent. The parent can call back if they need me. At the end of the day, there is the director, then the board itself. Once I speak to the parent, then I call the superintendent and let him know the situation – give him a heads up and let them handle it. With staff, our only employee is the director.

Consistent with the provisions of Bill 177 refocusing trustees on student achievement, trustees remained relatively involved in student improvement through their demands on director ‘end statement’ reports. The director was expected to present ‘end statement’ reports on the board’s progress in accomplishing district’s set goals (‘end statements’) twice annually; once between January & February and the other between April & May. Also, once every year following the implementation of the governance model, trustees met with the community to “share end statements and request feedback.” These reports in turn guided the development of subsequent board policies.

Trustees hired the director of education following their mandate as the board overseers and the employer of the director. Their hiring power was limited to directors only. Nonetheless, the director invited trustees to sit in on interviews for hiring other administrators “just for advice.” Trustees noted that in the case of the hiring of the only secondary school principal in the board, they gave their “feedback on interviews and felt …input was taken into consideration.” With a board of trustees that is focused on “results,” their choice of a leader reflected this focus and an instructional leader was hired for the only secondary school in the board. The trustees and
other interviewees believed that hiring the right persons with the best qualities and providing them with ongoing support guarantees the board’s potential to reach every student and ensure the success of all students. These leaders were held accountable for their student results through a framework designed by trustees.

**Relationships and Communication**

Trust was described as the foundation of every relationship within Greenbridge. There was a high degree of trust with staff based on “excellent communication between all.” Everyone felt comfortable to ask questions and to be heard. As a principal noted, when schools made their requests, “the staff trust they will be taken seriously.”

A variety of factors facilitated relationship building and enhanced trust. First, the small size of the board with only a total of 14 principals made it easy to match a name to a face, know each school’s improvement story, and whom to contact for help. This small community enhanced the building of relational trust across the board. Second, the lengthy tenure of most staff within the board acted as fertile ground for the building of trust over time. An elementary principal explained:

> Anna and Joanne [system leaders] were teachers and principals in the board prior to becoming system leaders. Trust is built in since we’ve worked together so long and it’s a small board with easy access to superintendents.

Third, the discretion given to principals to manage their budgets and run their schools using the board’s vision as a blueprint emphasized the board’s trust in principals’ ability to lead their schools. Principals were given opportunities to try different things within their building. A principal commented on the “high degree of trust…appreciation and value of our efforts…really the trust… [is] a critical friend.”
Asked if the district’s support for principals in building relational trust with staff and other community members was helpful, a principal said “can’t do without it. It’s critical, teachers need to trust principals else they won’t buy into vision.”

Trust formed the basis of most relationships within Greenbridge and these district relationships were categorized as follows: internal, with parents, local community groups and the ministry of education.

**Internal Relationships**

Superintendents described their relationship with other senior leaders as “very strong” “positive” and “extremely good.” The district deliberately allocated all district level offices close to each other to ensure regular ongoing communication and to promote a positive working relationship amongst district leaders. Executive and Administrative Councils of the district met often and focused on problem solving. The credibility of the board chair’s leadership with trustees and other district leaders, “made it easy to iron out problems” amongst trustees and between trustees and other district leaders.

Principals described their communication with district leaders as “open” “excellent” “very close” and “phenomenal.” Concurring with principals, all senior leaders described their relationships with principals as collaborative and open. Senior leaders had a high degree of readiness to support board staff through formal meetings as well as on needs basis. Overall, Greenbridge staff all felt like colleagues working together towards common goals - improving student achievement and enhancing catholicity within the board.
**Relationship with Parents**

Respondents acknowledged that the district had always made it a priority to encourage positive relationship between schools and parents. There was a “phenomenal parent engagement group” – a district parent council, comprised of two representatives from each school council within the board. This team met once annually and shared best practices. Greenbridge also had put in place parent-community chairs, who met with principals to support school improvement plans. Through these parent-community chairs meetings, the board encouraged principals to share copies of their SIPs with the rest of the group for parents’ input. Consistent with the board’s deliberate intentions to foster transparency, parents were encouraged to participate in the development and revision of the BIP, vision and “end statements.”

In addition to the establishment of those structures for parental engagement, the board focused some principal PD sessions on how to work productively with parents. An example of one of such topics explored with parents and principals included what parents can do to prevent bullying of students. According to principals these opportunities strengthened principals’ capacity for parental engagement and their understandings of how to work collaboratively with parents to enhance student achievement.

Though the secondary principal identified challenges with parental engagement at the secondary level, overall, most respondents acknowledged positive changes to productive parental engagement over the past five years prior to our visit. One principal summarized the changes on parental engagement as “now much more front and center” and the secondary principal said it had “always been very strong.”
Relationships with Local Community Groups

Anchored by a strong link between the church and school parishes, the district often communicated with principals on how to interact with local community groups. One method for doing this was through principal meetings. Different agencies were invited to deliver presentations to principals to help them identify “the resources to tap from and how to serve parents and students.”

Principals identified a number of those local groups with which their schools interacted and benefited from their relationships. Those community groups included: the local university, which opened its doors to schools in support of research projects; Catholic Women’s League, Police and the DARE program, Health Society etc. The secondary school principal also identified connections with community groups through Coop and OEOP Apprenticeship programs through which the school partnered for student exchange and career development. In addition, the board made it clear to community groups that all schools within the board were ‘community schools’ and could be used for community purposes and activities. These schools provided access to community groups such as: the scouts, square dancing, ladies volleyball, as well as playground for kids.

Asked if there had been any changes in the district’s approaches to encouraging local community groups’ engagement in schools, a split was evident in elementary and secondary principals’ responses. While elementary principals’ thought there was greater emphasis on those relations with a concerted effort to involve local groups in schools, the secondary principal thought it had been consistent over time. The secondary principal added “agencies will change but the method of presenting information is the same.”

Despite the fact that the district did not mandate those relationships with community groups, there was strong evidence of close ties between schools, parents, and local community
groups which provided principals with additional insights about how best to enact instructional leadership in their schools.

**Relationships with Ministry of Education**

District leaders and trustees acknowledged that they had good and respectful relationships with the Ministry. The primary focus of respondents’ comments on Ministry relationship was the regional Ministry offices located within the city. They also identified the student achievement officer assigned to Greenbridge, from the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) of the Ministry as an important resource to the board.

A trustee observed that the Ministry of Education “got its act together” by developing three clear provincial priority goals. In alignment with one of those three goals, trustees attested to their role in “building confidence in public education.” Most district leaders praised the accountability piece associated with the accomplishment of the Ministry’s priority goals. Ministry representatives visited the board periodically and opened honest conversations around; board data, BIP, SMART goals, and how the board intended to achieve its set goals. At the time of the study, the Ministry had increased those visits to three from two the previous year. During those visitations, the Ministry shared what other boards were doing and provided feedback on board plans. The Miscellaneous lead described this relationship as “trusting.” He explained that the benefits of having “an external set of eyes” over board plans were enabled by Greenbridge’s dispositions of having an “open mindedness and the willingness to explore.”

In the mist of those opportunities from the Ministry for board improvement, the board struggled with the extensive nature of initiatives from the Ministry. According to the superintendents interviewed, the deadlines associated with those initiatives in the past caused most board goals, plans, and initiatives to be “pushed aside.” This challenge arose from the small
size of the board and the relatively small number of district leaders available to juggle the needs of the district and demands of the Ministry at the same time. At the time of the study, a conscious effort was underway by district leaders to align Ministry initiatives with board’s needs and plans; this improved the nature of board-Ministry relationships dramatically. Respondents seemed satisfied with the support and learning opportunities that came along with Ministry initiatives. In alignment with the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) of the Ministry goals, teachers and principals of all schools associated with the Schools in the Middle project were given release time to meet and work together on literacy, numeracy, and the board improvement plan (BIP).

Despite these opportunities, district leaders voiced their desire to see changes in the relationship and funding restrictions associated with those initiatives. An SO explained:

I would like to see more flexibility, particularly for small boards. I would like to see more flexibility in funds rather than say this money is allocated for school improvement. I would like it to be called ‘money for student achievement’ and let schools justify how the money is used.

Also, a trustee pointed to disconnects between Ministry requests and the principles of good governance. Her emphasis rested on the fact that the Ministry failed to differentiate between governance and operation: a fine line between trustees and senior leaders’ roles. This role clarification was necessary for the board to continue to implement policy governance with high fidelity. According to another trustee, the perceived limitation seemed to have been exacerbated by the fact that “there was not a lot of contact between trustees and the Ministry.” Trustees shared a desire to see “more talks between Ministry and individual trustees.” Such relationships have overall implications for principals’ practices as principal performance appraisal in Greenbridge followed the “end statements” approach originally designed by trustees for director’s reports.
Summary

This summary highlights how district actions in Greenbridge contributed to principal sensemaking and efficacy, the two central issues of interest in this thesis.

Greenbridge District Influence on Principals’ Sensemaking

Chapter 2 described five dimensions of sense making: Schematic Framing, Knowledge Acquisition, Continuous Deliberation, Motivation-Oriented Action, and Social Interaction. This section summarizes what the district did to foster each of these dimensions of principal sensemaking.

Schematic Framing

This dimension described how principals used their personal values, beliefs and aspirations to build on their schemas\(^\text{21}\) for better understanding a concept or a new environmental stimulus. Greenbridge took into consideration principals’ beliefs, values and aspirations when providing them with professional learning opportunities. In recognition of those individual differences (identity) and experiences, the district tailored targeted support to ensure that principals had a common basic understanding of instructional strategies and curriculum knowledge. From principals’ experiences and pre-existing cognitive maps enhanced through experiences garnered from district-provided training, Greenbridge built on its principals’ schema by providing additional resources (general and individualized) to meet their specific needs for accomplishing district expectations for school improvement.

\(^\text{21}\) Schema is defined as “the organization of experience in the mind or brain that includes a particular organized way of perceiving cognitively and responding to a complex situation or set of stimuli” (Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary, © 2007 Merriam-Webster, Inc.)
Also mentioned in the interviews conducted with senior leaders and principals was the involvement of principals in strategic planning processes through which Greenbridge district leaders ensured that the district vision was understood and operationalized to the level of school implementation. As this approach enhanced consistency of the messaging of the vision across the district, it also created a baseline for principals’ ability to understand and respond to new information and determine their individual school goals aligned with the district vision.

**Knowledge Acquisition**

Principals noticed specific cues from the district environment and then used their previous knowledge, past experiences and dispositions to acquire and interpret new knowledge. Influenced by a strong policy governance culture with emphasis on data driven decision making, the district provided training opportunities which helped to build principals’ sensemaking capacities for acquiring, recognizing, reading, interpreting and using data to make informed decisions. The Miscellaneous lead went into schools to help them locate and interpret data useful for decision making. In the Miscellaneous lead’s words, “I have gone into schools to work with principals on: where do I get data? How do I get them? Breaking it down, how does it help?” According to the principals, this portfolio was very helpful in supporting data interpretation and use in schools.

Principals were teachers before becoming administrators and the knowledge they brought into their leadership was a significant factor in determining how they responded to new information. The evidence also indicates that principals acknowledged the support from multiple district training opportunities about acquiring and interpreting new knowledge about instructional improvement for their schools.
Continuous Deliberation

Sensemaking is a process that is never finished. Greenbridge supported principals with their ongoing deliberation processes (including how to respond to new information) by constantly providing various kinds of professional learning opportunities suitable for their needs. In an attempt to help principals determine what actions to take when responding to the increasingly new demands on the principalship and ongoing changes introduced by Ministry of Education, Greenbridge provided job-embedded PD and regional training opportunities for teachers, principals and district leaders. Examples of sessions provided to principals included: understanding Ministry changes to the code of conduct and using assessment to plan for individualized instruction for each child.

Motivation-Oriented Action

The process of responding to an environmental stimulus is influenced, in part, by the nature of a person’s motivation. Almost all contemporary theories of motivation indicate that people are motivated “by goals which they find personally compelling, as well as challenging and achievable” (Leithwood et al, 2004, p. 24). Greenbridge made concerted efforts to support principals with the development of achievable goals and aligned its resources to support schools’ efforts in accomplishing targets.

Principals were given the BIP and supported in writing their SIPs which had to mirror the district template. The template provided a lot of flexibility as principals were not asked to replicate the BIP but to use the information it provided to develop SIPs reflecting the individual needs of their schools. While superintendents and the Miscellaneous lead were sent to schools to help boost principals’ efforts in writing their school plans, superintendents were also charged with the task of monitoring the extent to which principals were doing what the district expected
them to do. During those monitoring sessions, superintendents requested principals to present student achievement portfolios for reading, writing, and math as the portfolios demonstrated the level of progress within each school and formed a basis on which conversations on instructional improvements were developed with principals.

**Social Interaction Dimension**

Greenbridge district leaders interacted with school leaders as a means of creating shared meanings to guide decision making processes across the district. Those social negotiations resulted in the acquisition of new behavior patterns or changes in old practices manifested in principals’ words and/or actions (see chapter 7). The social interactions between Greenbridge and its principals took at least four forms captured through the following areas:

*Development of new structures to enhance principal participation*

The small size of the board helped Greenbridge staff to break the barriers associated with formal hierarchical organizational structures. Principals, district leaders, teachers, union representatives, parents and other stakeholders worked collaboratively towards board improvement. Principals in particular, were included in decision making processes at all levels across the district. At the district level, principals were part of the *curriculum team*, which focused on developing the board improvement plan. At the school level, principals were involved in the *leadership team*, focused on identifying achievable school targets, and developing goals towards the accomplishment of the set targets. The evidence indicated that those new structures were created by design to encourage ongoing two-way communication between the district leaders and all schools across the district. This fortified the connections between school improvement plans and the board improvement plan as principals made sense of the expectations for their instructional leadership. Principals’ interactions with district and
school-level personnel in these teams, helped them better understand their leadership for school improvement.

In addition to those two structures, there was a support structure offered by superintendents assigned to each school. Superintendents provided ongoing one-on-one support to principals to help build their capacity for instructional improvement; they worked directly with principals and other members of the leadership team on school improvement plans which fed into the BIP. Interschool visitations were encouraged by the district to foster a culture of informal sharing of best practices between principals as they made sense of their leadership expectations.

**Communication and collaboration (internal relationships)**

All senior leaders described their relationships with principals as collaborative and open. Senior leaders had a high degree of readiness to support board staff through formal meetings, as well as on an as-needs basis. Concurring with district leaders, principals described their communication with district leaders as “open” “excellent” “very close” and “phenomenal.” According to the evidence from Greenbridge, a significant contributing factor to those positive relationships between district leaders and schools was the small size of the board, which made it easy to reach for help and to acquire immediate assistance. A second contributing factor was a high degree of relational trust developed over time as most district leaders who had worked with most of the principals as colleagues advanced to their current roles from within the board.

Evidence showed that staff within Greenbridge all felt like colleagues working together towards common goals; improving student achievement and enhancing catholicity within the district. This shared leadership was described by one superintendent as “servant leadership.”

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22 In Campbell-Stephens’ discussion with John Portelli about servant leadership, she claims that “what distinguishes servant leadership from some of the other concepts of leadership is that the notion of service is put before leadership – the notion of service is prioritized (Portelli & Campbell-Stephens, 2009, p. 47).
earlier mentioned, with the end statement reports, accountability about the progress made within each school was also shared across the district, hence, emphasizing pressure on principals to meet district expectations as they collaborated with colleagues and district leaders. In conjunction, the district provided considerable support in building principals’ capacity to understand and enact practices towards the accomplishment of the set expectations.

**Modeling of best practices**

Principals’ sensemaking was further developed through their participation in leadership team days, three times a year. These meetings brought principals together with the literacy coaches, coordinators and superintendents. The district modeled the team practices of a successful school with respect to data use as principals and other leadership team members made sense of the practices and in turn, led sessions based on these experiences with staff in their own schools.

**Professional development opportunities for principals**

To further contribute to principals’ learning, the district deliberately prioritized PD and presented principals with opportunities to be involved in projects and initiatives from the Ministry. These experiences included interactions with other principal colleagues, district staff and ministry personnel. Respondents identified principals’ involvement in the province’s *Turnaround* project, *Schools in the Middle*, Safe schools and the *LSA* initiatives, as significant sources for building their capacities as instructional leaders. Exposing principals to a wide variety of targeted and meaningful PD opportunities where they reportedly interacted with colleagues in small group exercises provided them with the tools to meet the board’s expectations for school improvement.

The next section of the summary uses Bandura’s sources of leader efficacy (mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal processes) as a
framework to describe how Greenbridge supported its principals in building their efficacy to accomplish district expectations for school improvement.

**Greenbridge District Influence on Principals’ Self Efficacy**

Chapter 2 described Bandura’s four sources of efficacy: Mastery Experiences, Vicarious Experiences, Verbal Persuasion, and Emotional Arousal. This section summarizes what the district did to enhance principals’ efficacy through those four sources.

**Mastery Experiences**

In order to enhance principals’ experiences and support them to meet district expectations, the district fostered principals’ understanding of curriculum and instructional strategies through; coaches and superintendents visits, in-servicing at principal meetings and family-of-schools meetings, job-embedded PD and regional training opportunities, informal sharing between principals (interschool visitations), provision of resources and opportunities for principals to be involved in different projects.

Through the family-of-schools meetings where four schools are brought together for professional development, principals communicated regularly, shared skills, and worked together as a team (advantages of a small system). An elementary principal added that the district made concerted efforts to develop achievable goals and aligned its resources to support the accomplishment of targets. This, in another principal’s opinion, shifted the focus and enabled principals to “dig down deep looking at the story of a student, not a number.” These exposures positively influenced principal’s sense of efficacy and enhanced their feeling that they can successfully accomplish a future task that matched prior experiences (garnered from district PD and/or other principal colleagues) they had with a similar task.
Vicarious Experiences

Vicarious experience, as described in chapter 2, entails observing a competent individual (a model) successfully completing similar tasks. In Greenbridge, leadership teams were brought together three times a year to talk to each other and share experiences. This helped principals to build their efficacy as they were supported by other principals in the district. Through these meetings, the district modeled the team the practices of a successful school with respect to data use as principals and other leadership team members made sense of the learned experiences. Upon return to their respective schools, principals led sessions about their learned experiences with their staff.

Informal sharing of experiences and best practices among principal colleagues (interschool visitations) was also encouraged by Greenbridge as the district challenged schools to look for successes and what they can learn from each other. Through these opportunities, principals observed competent colleagues as they accomplished tasks that principals were expected to complete in their respective schools.

Verbal Persuasion

This leadership efficacy source explains that efficacy may result from such things as encouragement, appreciation, and positive feedback from a trust-worthy and respected individual within the organization. Evidence from Greenbridge showed the confidence principals had in highly respected and trustworthy curriculum savvy superintendents who visited schools on a weekly basis to provide principals with one-on-one support in developing their school improvement plans for example. During such visitations, principals were provided with constructive feedback, appreciation and encouragement, thereby influencing their self-efficacy beliefs about their leadership for school improvement. Schools celebrated their successes and the
district ‘recognized job well done.’ A principal noted that, “when a school comes in to look at your school as a school effectiveness model, that is celebration of success.”

Also, with a lack of a formal leadership recruitment process, the district directly persuaded school leaders with demonstrable instructional capacities to apply for superintendent positions. This approach fostered trust in district leaders as most of them had advanced to their positions from within the district. As reported, these district leaders recognized the work that principals were doing to foster student achievement and celebrated their successes thereby contributing to their sense of efficacy to lead schools.

**Emotional Arousal**

This leader efficacy source may include response to an influential or charismatic individual who supports a school leader by raising their hopes that they can accomplish their leadership tasks as well as helping them to cognitively map out connections between district goals, their school goals, and rationale for schooling. As the evidence indicated, Greenbridge leaders worked tirelessly over the past five years prior to this study to ensure that each school functioned as a unique entity but aligned with each other to form the system.

Principals felt that there was a high degree of trust, emotional intelligence of people they worked for, and appreciation and value of their efforts. They “prayed together” and with their faith binding their collective work together, they were given lots of opportunities to take risk and to try different things. These opportunities, gave them confidence and support to share with each other. Overall, though lacking a formal recruitment process, the district made efforts to raise principals’ sense of efficacy; starting from their placement at the right school that fits their dispositions and capacities, to granting them autonomy with system directions to work on what is important (to lead their schools, set their priorities, develop and pursue their SIPs (using the BIP
only as a framework), and control their budget as they see fit). Principals were also involved in strategic planning processes at the district level (building the BIP), which built their efficacy to develop their SIPs and gave them the confidence that their plans were likely to make sense.

**Conclusion**

Each of the district actions tested in this study influenced either principals’ efficacy or principals’ sensemaking or both. As the previous summaries suggest, some of the same district actions appear to have important consequences for both principals’ sensemaking and efficacy. In the case of Greenbridge, eight such actions are apparent in the interviews and documents used for this study.

**Direct Support from Skillful Instructionally-Focused Senior Leaders**

The two instructionally-skilled superintendents who worked directly with principals had advanced to their current roles through the district as skillful teachers and school instructional leaders. Their capacity for good instruction was then passed on to principals, who in turn helped classroom teachers to improve on their practices for overall school improvement. Those superintendents reported formal weekly visits and opportunities to constantly meet principals’ instructional needs through email. Principals acknowledged the significance of such support for their sense of efficacy to enact instructional leadership practices, as well as their understanding of how they could lead instructional improvement in their schools by providing support to teachers on improving classroom instruction.
Data Driven Decision Making at District, School and Classroom Levels

Strongly influenced by the demands for student progress through the policy governance model, evidence drove all decisions within the district. Principals were trained in the capacities needed to read, interpret and use local and provincially-generated student data to inform decision making processes in schools. These district efforts armed principals with sensemaking mechanisms (ability to notice, interpret and understand how to use data) to effectively lead evidence-informed decision making processes within their schools. Respondents described changes to the board’s orientation to data driven decision making as the “biggest difference maker” amongst all board efforts for instructional improvement.

Interconnected Board and School Improvement Planning Processes

The Board Improvement Plan and School Improvement Plans (SIPs) fed off each other. The Board Improvement Plan (BIP) guided the development of SIPs. Leadership teams in each school, headed by the principals and supported by assigned superintendents, worked on their school’s improvement plan. The feedback provided by all those plans, in turn, informed revisions of the BIP. These efforts synchronized improvement efforts towards the accomplishment of board targets at all levels within the district. It helped principals to have a better sense of the board’s vision, how the board planned on accomplishing its goals and how their school fits in the larger picture (overall improvement of the district). Most importantly, the interconnectedness of plans and involvement of principals in both planning processes helped them to figure out how to develop and execute school specific plans for student achievement and well-being. The BIP, in turn, actually reflected what schools believed needed to be done and what they believed could realistically be accomplished, something that built principals’ efficacy and support for the BIP.
Professional Development and Networking Opportunities for Principals

The board provided principals with opportunities to network with other principal colleagues within the district for the sharing of best practices. Principals could visit and call each other to seek advice. Principals’ involvement in Ministry initiatives with lots of resources to build capacity and avenues for sharing, significantly increased their opportunities for knowledge construction and expansion (their mastery experiences), hence, their ability to make sense of their leadership for school improvement.

Stable Senior and School Leadership with Relational Trust

With a deliberate attempt to not let any principal fall through the cracks, at least suggested by the lack of principal appointments over the five-year period preceding the study, the board ensured continuity and accomplishment of its vision. A lot of the district leaders for example, moved to their current roles from within the district. These internal appointments ensured high levels of familiarity and relational trust with their one-time principal colleagues. This trusting relationship was enhanced by an open, collaborative district culture, one in which principals felt comfortable to ask questions, request help and contribute creative ideas; the district valued everyone’s input. The resources for sensemaking were provided through open communication and a trusting relationship between the district and school leaders.

Restructuring the District to Facilitate Improvement

The district was restructured to include three new and interconnected teams aimed at fostering collaboration in support of school and board improvement. These teams included; school leadership teams, board curriculum teams, and superintendents assigned to schools for purposes of supporting principals to improve instruction. Their establishment enhanced
distributed leadership across the board. These new structures helped principals better understand their instructional leadership role and ensured that principals were not working in isolation.

**Fidelity in Implementing the Policy Governance Model**

All interviewees pointed to implementation of the policy governance model as an influence on changes in board’s culture with respect to data collection and use, monitoring and planning for improvement. Respondents described the move as a “game changer.” The board’s commitment to the principles of policy governance helped emphasize accountability at all levels within the district. Through the presentation of ‘end statement’ reports the director was accountable to the board of trustees, superintendents to the director, and principals to the superintendents. These in turn placed a high priority on principals’ support for data driven decision making processes. It also clarified the supposed blurred lines of distinction between trustees and senior leaders’ roles, and focused the board on supporting school leaders to ensure that each student became successful. Clarity of purpose provided by the governance model was an efficacy builder and a powerful sensemaking tool for school leaders.

**Discretion to Hire Teachers**

Principals were given some discretion to select their teaching staff. Though these selections could be overturned by the superintendents, principals’ selections had been accepted without exception. This built principals’ efficacy in their own judgments and their ability to make sense of their schools’ needs. According to the principals, this level of principal discretion offered by the board earned their trust and resulted in high levels of responsibility and accountability for student improvement.
Accounts about Greenbridge’s contributions to its principals’ sense of efficacy and in their ability to make sense of their instructional leadership responsibilities for school improvement were consistent with their survey results from 57% of the principal population in Greenbridge and very similar to responses from over 15,000 principals in the province (see Tables 14 and 15).

Table 14

Comparison of Provincial and Greenbridge Principals’ Views of District Factors Contributing to Their Sense of Confidence

To what extent do the following contribute to the confidence that you and your principal-colleague(s) have that you will be able to accomplish the expectations for school improvement held by your district:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Province Mean</th>
<th>Province SD</th>
<th>Greenbridge Mean</th>
<th>Greenbridge SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery Experiences (Question 38, 42)</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Persuasion (Question 39, 45, 46)</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicarious Experiences (Question 40)</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Arousal (Question 41, 47)</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other district actions and conditions supporting efficacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. The system’s assignment of me to a school for which I am well suited</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. High levels of mutual trust my colleagues and I have in one another</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. The autonomy I have to do what is in the best interests</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As portrayed in Table 14, compared to the province, Greenbridge principals reported higher means with relatively lower variations of ratings of principal responses to all district actions that contributed to principals’ sense of efficacy. Following Bandura’s sources of efficacy, Greenbridge rated emotional arousal (m = 3.64) higher than mastery experience which indicated the greatest influence on principals’ sense of efficacy in the province (m = 3.21). In sum, consistent with the provincial survey data, Greenbridge’s principals felt that districts contributed the most to their sense of efficacy when they nurtured high levels of trust between principals and their colleagues (m = 4.00) and carefully aligned principals’ assignments to schools to their dispositions and capacities (m = 4.00). Table 15 presents comparison of principal survey responses between Greenbridge and the province.

### Table 15

**Comparison of Provincial and Greenbridge Principals’ Views about District Influence on Their Sensemaking**

To what extent do the following aspects of your school system enhance your understanding of how best to exercise your leadership?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Province</th>
<th></th>
<th>Greenbridge</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensemaking</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD opportunities provided by the system about Ministry initiatives and new programs</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Province</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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<td>----------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Resources provided to support school based PD for me and my staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Support by the system for networking and sharing of best practices, experiences and challenges with other principals colleagues and schools</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Release time for me to create PLCs with staff and develop initiatives towards school improvement</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The priority awarded to instructional leadership (vs Management)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Emphasis placed on analysing, interpreting and using data to inform decision making</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Help provided to me by system leaders in developing, monitoring and providing feedback about the SIP</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Snapshots provided by the system indicating the progress being made in my school</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Advice on how to build productive relations with teachers and contribute to their development</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Accessibility of system leaders for information or personal assistance</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Opportunities provided by the system for my school to engage parents and local community groups in our school improvement efforts</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Two way communication between the central office and my school</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As displayed on Table 15, compared to the province, Greenbridge principals reported higher means with relatively lower variations of ratings of principal responses to all district actions that contributed to principals’ sensemaking. Though not at the same rankings, the five district actions that contributed the most to principals’ sensemaking in the province were consistent with Greebridge principal responses. However, the data from Greenbridge indicated that opportunities created for two-way communication (m = 3.63) between schools and the central office contributed the most to principal’s sensemaking as opposed to district emphasis and support on use of evidence for decision making in the provincial data (m = 3.24). The following chapter provides a report on interview results of the other case study district for this research.
CHAPTER 6
MARINEE DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD CASE STUDY
(From “Good to Great”)

At the time of the study, this relatively small school district idiosyncratically recognized for its strong Catholic base was ranked as the province’s number one in literacy and numeracy achievement results and also in Special Education. The district served four communities; two largely urban and two significantly rural. Within these communities, Marinee served over 29,000 students in 48 school sites within 51 learning communities (consisting of 40 elementary schools, eight secondary schools, as well as three Continuing Education facilities). The District Leadership Team directly involved in instructional improvement comprised of six superintendents, an itinerant (expert teacher seconded to the board) and the director of education (see Chapter 3 for more details about demographics of Marinee).

This chapter presents an analysis of the evidence from Marinee district interviews and documents following the same organization as in the previous chapter. The overall description is guided by the categories and subcategories of district actions providing the framework for the larger study (Leithwood, 2010) of which this is a part (Core Processes, Supporting Conditions, Leadership, and Relationships). Within this overall framework, evidence is reported about the influence of those district actions on principals’ efficacy and sensemaking about their school improvement efforts.
Core Processes

Mission and Vision

During the time of the study, Marinee had developed a vision, mission and a set of short-term goals for student achievement. The following three areas describe how the system direction was established and shared across the board.

Clear vision for student achievement

The overall vision of the board as described by the senior leaders was “to promote and protect Catholic education and improve student achievement.” The board had a vision that was distinctively catholic and consistent over a 10-year period, but however, less focused compared to the board’s vision at the time of the study. Two years prior to the study (2007 - 2009), Marinee staff faced intense pressure from the newly appointed director to focus on student improvement. EQAO test scores also indicated a slight decline in student test scores and reports of a system-administered survey revealed that a cross section of the staff did not see the district as a “learning organization.” Based on these realities and the ensuing pressures for improvement, the district saw the need to revise the board’s vision through a strategic planning and renewal process.

Strategic planning and renewal process

The vision served as the basis for directing the development of the board’s strategic planning and renewal processes. The process was initiated and spearheaded by the trustees who thought it was necessary to involve a cross section of the staff and community members for collaboration and cooperation within the board. However, during Phase 1 of the revision which predominantly occurred during the first year of the review process, the trustees started on a small scale, mostly confined to the trustees themselves. Later, they included the senior leaders in “communication and vetting”. According to senior leaders, the challenges involved in revisions
during the first year revolved around conflicts between senior leaders and trustees. Besides these conflicts, there were also tensions between the trustees, with the board experiencing a 5/4 trustee split on major decision making. Nonetheless, the director of education who was newly appointed to the board, claimed “there was a reasonable level of understanding within this first year of revision.” The key element of the vision during the first year was the development of a distinctive learning community with faith base as a fundamental component.

Within the second year - Phase two of the revision process, there was more involvement with a cross section of the staff and community members participating. At that point, the revision process focused on converting the vision into action - ‘strategic planning.’ Through board-wide consultations with a renewal committee (involving; consultants, union, and teachers) that looked at the vision together with principals, trustees and superintendents, senior administrators asserted that “the language around the vision was revised but the same big ideas remained constant.” Within that second year, the district experienced the challenges involved in team work - trying to develop a common language for the vision with committee members approaching it from different perspectives. Trustees reported that the resolution of that issue was powered by the help of an externally hired facilitator. According to the trustees, the facilitator used a simple technique to engage all parties in the development of the vision. Committee members were asked to set priorities from which a common language was developed around the vision. Following this collaborative process, a vision statement was adopted in September of 2009 and posted on the board website as:

[Marinee] is a model learning community, widely recognized as distinctively Catholic, providing exceptional education, while nurturing the call to love and serve as a people of faith, living out God's plan.

The director of education, in an effort to describe the transition from year 1 to year 2 acknowledged that:
A lot had been done but not clearly recognized [within the first year]: [In phase two] money was explicit in our language, it was intentional to create a Staff Development Department, we shifted language from teachers and PD to all staff and learning...we then formalized staff development programs for all professional and support staff, aligned budget and language to importance of learning, and faith formation was an integral part of the learning agenda.

Clearly presented on the board’s website, the adopted mission statement became:

[Marinee], in partnership with home and Church, is dedicated to providing excellence in Catholic education by developing Christ-centred individuals enabled to transform society.

District and school leaders indicated that the involvement of principals in the strategic planning and renewal process, facilitated principals’ shared understanding of the board’s vision and mission.

For the most part, interviewees agreed that the mission statement and the board’s vision were used as a basis for introducing programs into the curriculum and classrooms across the board. According to one trustee “the vision filters to students in terms of programs and the way the curriculum is tweaked- faith based education having academic components to it.” Principals on their part noted that the mission and vision were widely understood and shared. A principal expressing this view said that “every school has its own culture, geography, which impacts on learning. However, our mission/vision is the same – student achievement.”

**District support for principals’ understanding of board vision**

Asked about how the district helped principals to understand the vision and develop goals specific to their school needs, principals praised the support from the senior leadership team. The district provided school leaders and schools with personnel and other resources to help develop their school improvement plans, aligning them with the board improvement plan. Principals who previously found the writing of their SIPs challenging, were trained on writing their plans, ‘how to differentiate between good and bad teaching strategies,’ and how to evaluate lessons.
According to the principals, this helped clarify their role as instructional leaders and how to situate their school’s vision within the board’s plan for student success.

In addition, two years prior to the study, the district moved to a family of schools organizational model, which allowed elementary and secondary school principals to attend meetings together. This provided a suitable arena for the understanding and sharing of the board vision, best practices and what had worked well in their respective schools to further the school improvement agenda within the board – shared meaning making.

**Curriculum and Instruction**

*Approaches to improving curriculum and instruction*

Approaches by Marinee to improve curriculum and instruction had changed significantly over the five-year period of interest to this study. The following four areas describe these changes in approach:

*Changing principals’ role from managers to instructional leaders*

This change involved principals looking at, analyzing, interpreting and using data to guide instructional practices. Over the five years prior to this study, Marinee interviewees reported that there was a push for principals across the district to perform instructional leadership (curriculum) tasks. Most of the principals interviewed interpreted the role change to mean a focus on curriculum and making “children and learning the primary focus” of the district. Also, they associated the role change with paying less attention to management duties consistent with the priorities at the district level. Prior to changing principals’ role 5-6 years before, as concisely put by one superintendent, “principals didn’t know what to tell teachers about the use of data in guiding instruction.” District leaders noted that the district changed principals’ role from managerial to instructional leadership and provided the necessary tools to support principals in
understanding their new role as instructional leaders. Just as most change processes, the district encountered resistance from principals who “want[ed] to be managers as opposed to instructional leaders.” However, superintendents claimed that, with the emphasis placed on building instructional leadership capacities in principals, the new role was much more embraced by principals at the time of the study than in the past five years following the initiation of the role change. A principal affirmed that:”the board is learning the changing role of the principal. I have been given more responsibilities for instructional leadership in schools… [which] wasn’t there 2 years ago.” A second principal added that, “the system does a great job at modelling to principals what is expected at school level” and another concurred that “the shift from managerial to instructional has been great.”

At the time of data collection, district leaders observed that the district was working on different strategies to continue to improve principals’ capacities as instructional leaders. In order to emphasize the concept of ‘pressure and support’ through which principals were held accountable for instructional improvement capacities, the district requested memos of classroom walkthroughs (three times a week for 15 minutes) from all principals. This accountability piece coordinated by the SO of school effectiveness (SEF) reinforced the message around the importance of principals’ focus on curriculum (their new role) and the district’s focus on improving student achievement (the board’s top priority).

Robust channels of communication

Good communication mechanisms were put in place for senior and school leaders’ interactions. The advancement in technology with wifi supported gadgets (such as blackberry) added opportunities for communication between district and school leaders. Described by one principal “the communication is excellent…and with blackberry it’s constant.” Principals were kept in the loop on district activities through the “Director’s Summary Email,” which went out
every Friday. This, according to the principals, helped to keep them organized, informed, and on task. Though principals, on average, commended the communication between senior and school leaders, a few lamented on information overload from central office. However, in one principals’ opinion, this could be curtailed by simply buffering principals from distractions. The principal suggested that a lot of secretarial demands from the district office should be emailed directly to the secretaries of each school. It was assumed that, such an approach would create additional time for principals to walk the hallways and visit classrooms to enact their instructional leadership practices and responsibilities.

**Newly created positions to support curriculum leadership at schools**

The board created a new position (the superintendent of school effectiveness) two years prior to the study and hired a well qualified senior staff. Most of the principals interviewed claimed that the SO for SEF brought a new “flavour” to their role as instructional leaders. The SO for SEF emphasized high levels of focus on instructional leadership for all principals. An elementary principal noted that “I have learned a lot looking back at 2 years of the school success lead arrival.” Another principal from the secondary level had a similar opinion on the impact of the newly created position on principals’ role, “our game has ramped up over the last couple of years; it’s more professional, achievement target oriented, data driven- the way it should be.” With the creation of this new position and intentional focus on supporting principals to enact instructional leadership practices, Marinee principals were considered as the principal agents of change within schools and their professional growth was prioritized. An SO stipulated that:

> Principals are the key; they lead and promote all aspects of the curriculum, build capacity with staff to promote excellence and success in every student regardless of their ability with consultants, itinerants, and special education support.
Use of itinerants and consultants to build principals’ instructional knowledge

At principal meetings, with student success as an agenda item, principals were encouraged to create a culture of collaboration within their schools. District leaders modelled this with principals through the use of itinerants and consultants. The itinerant (IT) position, which had been four years in existence before this study visit, was created due to an identified need for district-wide support for curriculum leadership at schools. Itinerants - teachers who were knowledgeable on classroom practices were seconded to the board to assist teachers on a one-on-one basis with EQAO, item analysis and moderation marking; lesson plans on individual student needs, complimentary evaluation strategies and modeling strategies on how to improve classroom instruction. Within the Marinee district, itinerants started off by visiting schools on a monthly basis, which quickly changed to a weekly basis (providing job-embedded learning opportunities). The support provided to schools was uniform across the district. Regardless of school size, one itinerant and one consultant were assigned per school. A principal explained that “…although this might be disadvantageous for bigger or larger schools, a bonus on larger schools is the large group of teachers working together.” With a deliberate effort to build instructional capacity board-wide, Marinee ensured that itinerants were inserviced on a weekly basis (every Friday), keeping them apprised of their role, and updated on current research about best practices for school improvement. Respondents noted that new teachers were more open to the IT than old teachers. On average, principals said ITs were welcomed in their schools and their input valued. The consultants together with the itinerants and superintendents worked tirelessly with schools towards the development of their SIPS. A principal culminated this by saying “the board is good at sending personnel to work with us” and another principal identified the assignment of a research officer who helped them “on a need to ask basis.” School leaders were also included in leadership teams (comprised of SO, principal, itinerant, and teacher
representatives) at school levels, and participated in workshops facilitated by the school effectiveness superintendent.

With the help of the itinerants, principals alleged that “the school improvement plan (SIP) is more focused,” there’s a “common language in the board,” and “scores have increased with a huge learning curve.” A typical example illustrated by one of the principals interviewed, was the reality in his school’s test scores, which revealed boys failing in reading as opposed to girls. As a quick intervention, the district developed PD facilitated by itinerants for all staff of the school (including the principal) during staff meetings where best practices were discussed. The district engaged the school into a systematic approach whereby, they started off with the identification of SMART\textsuperscript{23} goals based on what their school data indicated and worked together as a team involving: the special education teacher, all divisions and their leaders. The team worked with the awareness that “the same lesson plan does not work for everyone.” With district-wide support, and especially, the involvement of the special education teacher, the school principal noted that, the school experienced a “significant change in the achievement curve.” At the time of our visit, standard test scores revealed that the boys were outscoring the girls in reading. The turnaround in the school achievement results resulted in the recognition of the school and its placement in the spotlight. The principal added, “one principal called me to ask for help,” indicating the success of the school and the impact of district action on principals’ efficacy and sensemaking about their instructional leadership for school improvement.

\textit{Fostering student’s deep understandings about “Big Ideas”}

This section describes Marinee’s perspective on the concept of \textit{big ideas}.

\textsuperscript{23} SMART goals represent; Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely goals.
The interviewees did not seem to have a consistent interpretation of the notion of *big ideas*. From a general point of view, the district in the previous couple of years prior to the study had just started focusing on big ideas. And there was still a lot of work required on how to translate big ideas into the classroom. The identified challenge, presumably explained the reason why varied meanings were ascribed to the interpretation of *big ideas*. While some principals defined it in terms of “not so much… about covering every detail of curriculum” one principal who interestingly thought the district had always had *big ideas* integrated in the curriculum, interpreted it in terms of “catholic values infused into the curriculum all the time.” Yet another principal shyly remarked “I do not think this [*big ideas*] has been addressed.” Interestingly, some principals claimed not to be involved, and others struggled to understand the question. This was an indication that the overall understanding around the district’s capacity to foster students’ deep understanding was shallow and limited by the actual transformation of *big ideas* into practice in classrooms.

That notwithstanding, it appeared the initiative originated from the ministry, introduced to the district through *Teaching –Learning Critical Pathways* (TLCP), which was associated with schools participating in a province–wide project – explaining why some principals struggled with the terminology. Interestingly, the principal who identified this source, also observed that the district was not originally supportive of TLCP, but however, had instructional pathways, which focused on identifying different data sources, analyzing data and making decisions based on curriculum expectations. It was assumed that the “board’s instructional pathways could lead to a big idea”, says the principal. A second source, identified by another principal was a group principals attended in developing guiding principles for curriculum review. The group of a few principals (as opposed to all), according to the principal, “shaped their
understanding around big ideas,” hence, the lack of consistency across the district in the understanding of the concept.

**Uses of Evidence**

Asked about the district’s use of evidence to guide decision making, all principals interviewed attested to an extensive use of data. They also agreed on the huge positive difference over the years, associated with the use of systematically collected evidence to drive decision making processes within the district. Over 10 years prior to the study, it was reported that the district had a structure with little direction on data interpretation and use. Five years prior to the study, the structure dramatically changed to one completely focused on facilitating staff understanding about data use for all decision making processes. An elementary principal noted that “there is a shift from teaching the curriculum to teaching students.”

During Marinee’s ‘dark ages’ of data collection, analysis and use, there were no benchmark assessments. Rather, the district focused on using data from report cards and anecdotal evidence without an analysis of EQAO scores. The hindrance was enhanced by principals’ limited understanding of what to do with EQAO data. At the time of the study however, with a directional focus on EQAO data analysis and item analysis (supported by itinerants, superintendent for school effectiveness, and consultants), the board added a third dimension for analysis - a focus on analysing individual student data. It emphasized on the use of SMART goals and instructional pathways to change the phase of instruction in classrooms. With the new approach in place, data seemed to be the impetus for every decision made across the district. For example, principals noted that the implementation of programs within schools and classrooms was driven by data. In the words of one superintendent, “it has taken the board 4 years to get to where we are - number one in the province.” With increased emphasis on
precision and board’s support, principals concurred, “we know numerically where we are and where we are heading to.”

On average, elementary more than secondary principals reported increased efficacy in interpreting and using data. A superintendent reiterated that “there’s huge importance on data…more at the elementary and beginning at the secondary.” The abundance of data and increased support for principals’ analysis and interpretation of data at the elementary level was due to the district’s goal to improve reading and writing scores in elementary schools, as explained by the interviewees. The following areas describe Marinee’s approaches to data use:

**District’s approaches to improving principals’ capacity and efficacy in handling data**

Through the provision of expert one-on-one support, professional development and networking opportunities, respondents claimed that Marinee assiduously ensured that principals were schooled on the development of instructional leadership potentials.

One of the means of board support involved the numerous opportunities for professional development both at schools and external to the district. Principals noted that in the past, administrators were pulled out strictly on administrative matters and not instructional. However, within 3 to 4 years prior to the study, principals claimed progress had been made to increase their efficacy to lead instructional improvement within their building and ensure that staff were speaking the same language around data use. A typical example cited of district influence on principals’ sensemaking, was a presentation by Stephen Katz in Toronto, where principals, sponsored by the district to participate, sat down in small groups, listened, and practiced how to interpret and use data in schools. Principals were also inserviced on district data and how to use it to create SMART goals. This emphasis was a fairly new approach for the board, illustrated in the abundance of board-offered PD sessions, which focused on data analysis, interpretation and use for all administrators. The goal according to the superintendents was to convert principals
into instructional leaders and acquaint them with the capacity to improve the quality of instruction within their respective schools.

Principals were released out of school for one half-day to look at their local data. This endeavour was strongly supported by experts from OISE, whom the district had contracted for 2 years to work with principals and the research department. Principals took the knowledge garnered from the sessions with those experts, back to their respective schools, where they acted as facilitators of the knowledge acquired. One SO described it as, “a train the trainer” approach. The outcome of such changes was observed gains in principals’ self efficacy in their ability to handle data within their schools. An elementary principal earmarked, “everyone has ownership and is aware of student achievement.” And a secondary principal commented on district influence on their ability to make sense of data as follows:

More in-servicing has made it comfortable for principals and teachers to easily understand the components they have to look at; for example we looked at applied students and students failing geometry.

Overall, the district’s continuous efforts in providing “content focused” PD sessions, tailored towards data interpretation and use proved to be very beneficial to principals’ understandings and enactment of their instructional leadership practices. A superintendent noted that:

Principals were trained on how to write their SIPs, which was very challenging to principals [prior to the training], how to differentiate between good and bad teaching strategies and how to evaluate a lesson. We are constantly working with principals. There’s been tremendous progress working with principals… they do not need a lot of support now…differentiated instruction is not fully realized but it’s a working progress.

A second source of support for principals on data use came from the networking opportunities offered by the board. The board networked large and small schools together, and according to one SO “based on their data, they are matched with schools that are performing highly in order to model evidenced-based decision making with selected principals.” That
provided an opportunity for sharing of best practices and served as a motivational piece for school leaders.

A third source of support came from the curriculum department. Principals were given supply days within the year to go to conferences of their choice, and were also assigned mentors for one-on-one personal support. As explained by an SO:

I give each school 10 days…principals have the flexibility on how to use the ten days for instructional improvement; it could be release days for teachers to visit other schools etc. The board gives extra 6 days if a school makes additional request.

In an attempt to support instruction in schools, the curriculum department provided resources, such as text books to all schools within the district. They enforced accountability measures on all school resources purchased by the boards. That was a remarkable change from about 3 years prior to the study when the board purchased resources, handed them down to the schools but never ensured that the resources were effectively used at the local schools. The district used data to focus instruction on meeting specific needs of students. Through the purchase of two student achievement software programs that enabled teachers to input classroom based data on regular basis, the district made data collection and accessibility readily available to all schools. Teachers input the data, and through those programs, data for each student was organized, analyzed and made available momentarily, following analysis. It helped teachers to streamline teaching.

Also, principals’ leadership skills were built through Marinee’s Principals and Vice Principals Mentorship program. The program helped to enhance principals’ interpretation of data and the identification of trends. As a result of district’s support, principals on average reported enormous gains in staff understanding of data, its interpretation and use. In the words of one principal, “there has been a huge improvement in understanding [data]…staff are now more accountable.” Another principal asserted “I have never felt anything but support –great.” That was a remarkable change compared to the past five years prior to the study, when principals did
not know what to do with EQAO data and neglected their own EQAO data and benchmarks. Also, still within the era of change, a principal added that “the board mandated the use of electronic data wall; looking at school profile for each grade level. All principals had to do it as opposed to a third of principals 5 years ago.” Despite these remarkable changes, there was a need to tighten the strategies for improvement in order to continue propelling the district forward as described in the director’s words:

We need to make people more aware of what the system is doing (versus getting the stuff done), the system needs to be clearer about the foundation of the district’s success,…continue to refine what we’re doing.

**Approaches to data use at school level**

At the level of schools, data analysis started off with school improvement teams working together. At the time of the study, however, through district support for staff job embedded PD, data analysis had expanded to involve all staff within each school in reading data.

Staff meetings, family of school and lead team meetings were dedicated to PD sessions on data analysis, the development of pathways and moderated marking. This was made possible by the amount of money the district had allocated towards supply teachers, to free teachers to participate in full day PD sessions. The district also provided supply teacher days so that the leadership team within the school could meet with teachers to reflect on data, and what it meant for their school. A lot of collaboration was done at the school level with different teams working together and sharing analysis. For example, one elementary principal stated, “I have five instructional pathway teams in my school; IP 1, 2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-9. Team leader, principal, itinerant, and teachers within each division and special education work together.” A secondary principal concurred, “all teams review the data as a team departmentally and share at department head meetings. Teachers bring it to class and make a difference.” The district gave principals the time
to work together with other staff to identify and develop strategies to improve student achievement.

It is interesting to examine the dilemma’s involved in data use, with respect to the needs of a large versus small school and an old versus new school within Marinee. Though a cross section of the district’s principals (both elementary and secondary) alluded to the importance of EQAO achievement results in driving board and school-wide decisions, one elementary principal of a fairly new school differed with this notion. The principal saw the lack of EQAO results for the new school as an advantage to the school, because it gave them the opportunity to look into other valuable student data that could inform individual instruction for special needs kids in particular. The principal added “it [the lack of EQAO data] helped, because we dug into student historical data.”

Besides EQAO results (which were centrally used to develop the BIP and locally used for SIPs) and the historical data of the newly created school, other measures of student achievement included: QCA (Quick comprehensive assessment), Classroom data organizers, DRA (Diagnostic Reading Assessment), OWA, ORR, Benchmarks, Report cards, Anecdotal information, Ministry survey used in bullying prevention, Internal surveys, Special education assessment in reading, writing and numeracy, credit accumulation etc.

Marinee did not limit its emphasis on the use of systematically collected evidence to drive decision making processes but honed into different internal, as well as external support systems to help its principals and their teaching staff in understanding how to interpret and use data effectively for school improvement.
Supporting Conditions

Organizational Improvement Processes

Taking advantage of the relatively small size of the board, interviewees explained that initiatives were easily welcomed in schools across the board and implementation was easy. The board focused on improving literacy and numeracy with the notion that “if you can read and write, then you will flow.” With this student improvement agenda, an overhaul of the BIP resulted in a more refined, focused, and comprehensive district plan. Figure 2 presents Marinee’s BIP at the time of our data collection, showing priority areas of focus for student achievement (as depicted on the board’s website).

As can be seen in Figure 2, the BIP was aligned with the Ministry of Education’s three priorities; to increase student achievement, reduce the gap between underachieving and high achieving students, and increase public confidence in the province’s public education system. The plan showcased conscious efforts put into the renewal process to ensure alignment across different levels of the education system. Interviewees agreed that through the revision process, senior leaders worked collaboratively with school leaders to support the development of their SIPs and alignment with the BIP.

Figure 2. Marinee’s 2010 BIP for student achievement.
The following five areas describe how Marinee matched SIPs to the BIP:

**Role changes and revisions to the BIP**

Five years prior to the study, the district sensed urgency in the need to improve instruction and quickly made some drastic role changes:

- The superintendents were expected to be curriculum leaders and had to focus more on working with schools on developing and revising SIPs.
- Principals had to be instructional leaders, focusing on improving instruction within their schools.
- Consultants had to move way beyond their subject areas to focus on the bigger picture, hence, doing such things as item analysis across subject areas.

These role changes, as earlier mentioned were accompanied by resistance from the different stakeholders involved. Principals for example, did not see themselves as ‘number crunchers’ and thought focusing on data was a mere distraction from their real job. Consultants as opposed to the itinerants struggled with the comprehension of the new school improvement approaches associated with their new role. The itinerants on their part quickly embraced these approaches within the first year of the changes, while the consultants fully joined the trail within the second year. At the time of the study, respondents claimed that principals across Marinee were curriculum leaders and superintendents were much more accountable. The accountability of principals was reinforced through the one-on-one assistance superintendents rendered to schools by leading the development and revision of school improvement plans which ultimately fed into the BIP.
Collaborative efforts towards revision of the BIP

In retrospect, interviewees reported that alignment of SIPS to the BIP started about a decade prior to this study. With the effects of the role changes, and deliberate efforts of the curriculum department to support school leaders in the development of their SIPS, the BIP was drastically changed. It evolved from a very basic plan, with little or no effectiveness in its implementation to a more sophisticated one with clear directions. Respondents claimed that prior to this BIP evolution, targets were set with little or no mechanisms put in place for their achievement. One principal lamented during the site visits that “six years ago, we had a board improvement plan but no strict adherence for elementary schools to follow. There were 16 pages and it was hard to pinpoint needs and priorities.” Another principal added that, “the SIP looked like an audit rather than a plan.” And describing the drastic changes to the BIP, an elementary principal noted, “earlier we’d set targets but didn’t know how to achieve; now we use SMART goals.” The board used various student achievement data and provincial priorities to develop a more refined and comprehensive BIP, encompassing SMART goals and essential items to be included in SIPS. The goals directed school leaders and their staff on how to develop their school improvement plans and how to move their students forward. A more user-friendly SIP template which mirrored the BIP was developed to further assist schools with planning. Nonetheless, schools were given the flexibility to adapt the template to their specific needs. SIPS with specific targets reflected the specific needs of individual schools based on their student achievement data but fine-tuned to the board-provided template.

There was considerable involvement of stakeholders across the district in the planning process, which was informed, and shaped in turn, by SIPS. Principals identified their involvement in the development of the BIP as a critical step in curbing the hierarchical top down plan which had been in existence ten years prior to the study. As early as September, when the
interviews were conducted and, despite the numerous managerial demands associated with school resumption, the district made efforts to keep principals focused on their instructional tasks, precisely aligning SIPs with the BIP. One principal explained:

We’ve already met twice on board improvement plan in relation to school improvement plan and in relation to non-negotiable strategies. We’ve looked at board priorities as they relate to school priorities. There is a direct link between BIP and SIP.

**Superintendents supporting principals in developing their SIPs**

In an attempt to help principals with the development of their SIPs, numerous PD sessions were offered on the assessment and refinement of the SIP. These sessions were attended by both school and senior leaders. Also, principals’ meetings held every 6-8 weeks, made student success a primary agenda for all meetings. The district provided support in the form of resources and time to assist principals in improving their schools. Worth mentioning was the new approach for superintendents’ leadership on the development and revision of SIPs. Superintendents were assigned to schools with a primary responsibility to visit schools and help principals with the development of their SIP. Principals, teachers, and superintendents reflected on data to determine SMART goals. Those superintendents also worked collaboratively with principals, by facilitating PD sessions on school improvement plans. At the time of the study, principals had just attended a half-day session on understanding BIP and aligning with SIP. Principals spoke of this superintendent support piece with considerable importance as they in turn modelled lessons from the session in their schools, creating collaborative cultures within schools.

In 8 out of 10 cases, principals developed their SIP. The system gave principals the support to release teachers to be involved and give meaningful input to the process. (Superintendent of education)

One of the superintendents identified the schools under his supervision as challenging and resistant to change. This, according to the superintendents, was partly due to differences in
principals’ and superintendents beliefs (schematic framing) about standardized tests, indicating the impact of sensemaking processes on change efforts in Marinee. Most principals did not agree with standardized tests and the way students were treated as subjects. Most superintendents on the other hand, believed in some standards to effectively evaluate and set the stage for improvement. The argument, was about whose standards and whose interests are taken into consideration in developing standards for achievement? In order to boost principals’ interests, and buy-in to school improvement initiatives, the superintendent dialogued with principals about the importance of standards and created an EQAO cup game. The challenge served as an impetus for improvement bringing all principals and schools under the superintendent’s care on board with the changes to their role, BIP and SIPs and the school with the highest EQAO scores was awarded the EQAO cup yearly.

**District cyclical review of improvement plans**

BIPs were developed in June of each year and district leaders made it a priority to walk principals through the board’s vision and goals. Principals of schools within the district were informed, and encouraged to look at the results of EQAO scores and benchmarks at the end of August each year. The board viewed school improvement as a dynamic process, which was not limited to the development of plans but involved rigorous cyclical processes of planning, following-up, monitoring, revisiting and changing of plans based on feedback. One SO clearly mapped out the process of developing the BIP and SIP as follows:

We go through a cycle [district cyclical review]:
- Board improvement plan- look at where improvements are necessary.
- School improvement plan- look at EQAO scores etc.
- Then item analysis that updates school improvement plan.
- Look at school effectiveness program; if weak, ask why; if strong, ask why.
- Then use feedback from schools for board plan.
- Then change board plan.
The cyclical review process was highly supported by senior leaders through school improvement efforts at all levels of need; the district listened to school leaders’ and staff’s needs, analyzed individual test scores and provided one-on-one support, especially to *Schools in the Middle*. This was confirmed in the words of an elementary principal who attested to the importance of superintendents’ support in elevating their efficacy levels as instructional leaders:

> The district’s new process is good. They (superintendents) will come into the school and validate what we’re doing. They are very supportive and knowledgeable; they check our SIP and provide feedback. Literacy/numeracy lead teacher can also give a little feedback. All this promotes confidence.

**Principal meetings and the sharing of SIPS**

The once a month PLCs and family of schools’ meetings were also mentioned as important arenas used to revisit and review SIPS. Through these meetings, there was considerable sharing of schools’ improvement plans and best practices which helped to refocus the SIP on what it should actually look like. The “family of schools” model served as support systems for principals and their colleagues; it offered opportunities for sharing and also for principals to get to know each other and develop their leadership efficacy. One principal explained:

> I find it helpful. It helps us to build the confidence of each other. Helps to know each other. I can call a principal to help on instructional leadership.

The challenges for the district and its schools however, came from excessive demands from the Ministry, with too many initiatives downloaded to schools through the board central office. According to one superintendent, this was as a result of the “lack of communication between Ministry branches.” Trying not to focus on the negative implications of Ministry control, the board used its learning teams (School improvement, LSA, and math networks) to help buffer principals from Ministry-driven “initiative overload.” The board succeeded in
reducing that overload through selective alignment of strategies, giving principals time to focus on executing their instructional leadership for school improvement.

**Professional Development**

Principals generally described the PD opportunities provided to them by the board as ‘abundant,’ ‘constant,’ ‘focused’ and ‘beneficial to instructional improvement.’ Respondents in the study identified major shifts in the content, delivery, and involvement of principals in professional development sessions, over the five-year period of interest to the study. This section describes these shifts in PD, networking opportunities for principals, PD and sensemaking occurring at principal’s meetings, and PD provided through leadership programs.

**Shift in PD content**

Content shift was described in terms of changes from centrally identified, generic, PD content to increased determination of specific PD content based on achievement results and the identified needs of school staff. Prior to that change, the board focused on district-wide professional development. These sessions were criticized by principals for their shallowness and lack of interaction opportunities for staff. As one principal noted:

> Whole system PD is not that effective and is expensive. Teachers are pulled out of school and are there as spectators. PD with literacy teacher or itinerant teacher is much better as the discussions are regarding students. I don’t know why there are whole system PD sessions.

The district moved away from the ‘whole system’ approach by offering more specific PD sessions tailored to the needs of Marinee’s staff and fewer generic PD sessions. For example, two years prior to the study, the board began implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) - a ministry initiative focused on meeting the needs of individual students. The initiative and PD sessions on its implementation were limited to the elementary level. At the time of the study, the
district had extended implementation of DI to the secondary level based on data which indicated that DI was an effective teaching method. Also, changes in curriculum (the new Physical Education curriculum) prompted the delivery of content focused professional development. The goal was to facilitate school leaders and teachers’ understanding of the new curriculum.

In most cases, team leaders within schools identified an area of teacher need and that spurred the request for PD tailored towards the identified need. Principals claimed that teachers, as well as principals, could also request content-specific PD based on self-identified needs. One principal claimed:

It’s more effective than the old model and accountability is better. There’s co-planning of lessons…and specific to instructional practice.

Marinee used a generic approach in getting data on staff areas of needs, but structured PD sessions to benefit principals with common needs. Specifically, the district sent out a questionnaire, asking administrators what they needed. This led to PD specific to the identified needs of the principals. Although these sessions were intended to meet a cross section of principals’ needs, they did not apply to all principals’ needs within the board. Most importantly, principals were given the opportunity to choose which of the sessions to attend based on how they saw fit and benefit of the session to their educational experience and in fostering their ongoing understandings of their leadership role.

**Shift in PD delivery**

The shift in PD delivery was from PD provided mainly outside the school, to a greater portion of PD sessions offered within the school – “job-embedded PD.” All PD days were on site, school based and offered during regular school hours. Through the Staff Development framework, all staff meetings were used for PD. All staff were expected to do a staff reflection journal and teacher moderation. The district provided a lump sum of money for each school,
using a funding formula based on school enrolment. The money went towards the provision of release days, so teachers could attend PD sessions and PLC meetings with their heads of department. This was a change from the previous four years when there was no release time for teachers. With the availability of those funds, teachers attended two to three official PD days during a year. Those sessions included; literacy/numeracy/student success; NTIP for new teachers, PD on DI, class management and lesson planning. In some cases, the school leaders covered teachers’ classes, reducing the stress associated with teachers “abandoning” their classrooms and leaving their students idle while they attended PD sessions. Professional learning communities (PLC) within each school were often cited as sources for teacher PD as well.

The creation of the itinerant position about four years prior to the study paved the way for the shift towards job-embedded PD for principals and teachers. Itinerants and consultants visited schools and worked with the principals and division heads. Their presence in the school brought a new flavour to principals’ professional learning. Through this site-based ‘train the trainer model,’ principals and division heads’ capacities on instructional improvement were developed. In turn, principals facilitated PD sessions for the rest of their staff. On average, principals reported enormous benefits in the quality of instruction and staff empowerment, which resulted from discussions between the staff and itinerants around student success.

Also worth noting were opportunities for co-planning of lessons during job-embedded PD sessions. The benefits were compared with district-wide PD sessions offered out of school with limited time for group discussions. Those external sessions were, however, few compared to a high proportion of job-embedded PD sessions highly valued by teaching and administrative staff. To be more precise, an elementary principal noted that “95% of the PD is job embedded during the day.” In the case of combined school and district-wide PDs, half day sessions were
dedicated to district-wide PD (some directed by teachers with volunteer presentations), and the rest of the day to school-based PD.

**Shift in involvement in PD**

Finally, the shift in involvement was from a centrally determined PD, most often designed solely for teachers, to PD sessions that integrated both the teaching and administrative staff and based on staff needs. The constitution of PLCs within Marinee at the time of this study clearly explained this shift. PLCs involved teachers, as well as school and senior leaders; principals, VPs, division heads and superintendents. The board also encouraged principals’ participation in all teacher-focused PD sessions. Principal involvement in those sessions was a unique opportunity to improve their knowledge on instruction, to be able to differentiate good from bad teaching when they walked into classrooms.

**Networking opportunities for principals**

Within Marinee, peer learning was seen as an integral part of principals’ growth. In addition to the predominant job-embedded PD offered within schools across the board, teachers and principals were also exposed to other development opportunities outside their school buildings. Those opportunities included networks of family of schools and schools-in-the-middle meetings (which focused on increasing the achievement level of underachieving schools). The board had a ‘phenomenal network of family of schools’ based on the alignment of secondary schools with feeder schools. The new structure of the family of schools network was in stark contrast to the former structure made up of designated areas. The structure constituted a team of approximately 5 to 6 principals. Through that structure, the board focused training opportunities on instructional improvement and planning. A lot of emphasis was placed on collaborative learning and sharing between schools for student success. According to the principals, those sessions were ‘pretty interactive with lots of brainstorming opportunities and ‘well received.’"
The board also pushed for continuous inservice training for all staff, which were either generic or specific to certain board needs.

Through the family of schools meetings, facilitated by superintendents, principals networked with other schools and shared information on practices that had worked in their schools. The networking sessions for principals were organized three times a year and each of these sessions extended for a period of about 2 days. Two teacher representatives from each school accompanied principals to those sessions and the teachers shared a lesson with the group for feedback. The feedback became the basis for revision of school plans. Though a cross section of the principals valued these sharing opportunities as reinforcements to their role, most of them identified time constraints as the main hindrance to its success. Noted one principal:

it [networking] is extremely helpful as we are learning from our peers. These are very valuable opportunities, but there are time constraints that interfere too too much.

*Professional development and sensemaking at principals’ meetings*

PD was incorporated into all principal meetings, held three times yearly. The PD component of principal meetings focused on principals’ instructional knowledge and acted as a significant source of job-embedded PD for school leaders. District and school team leaders attended those sessions. Most of the principals interviewed cited a common example involving the last principal meeting which focused on the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF). The session included a short lecture and PowerPoint presentation on the new SEF, questioning, small group discussions, a reading component, and sharing. A year before our visit, “one of the meetings focused on the SIP” explained an elementary principal. A secondary principal described the SIP session as involving:

Leithwood’s presentation on ‘good to great.’ ‘Mediocre to good’ is easy but moving from Good to Great is more challenging. We looked at different components of SIP- what makes a SMART goal? Student achievement goals to
consider. There were lectures- power point presentations on research findings and opportunities to share what could be done in schools.

Principals were at different developmental stages with different skill sets, but all identified the benefits of those sharing opportunities to their repertoire of knowledge and their sense of self efficacy. In one secondary principals’ [with four-year leadership experience] opinion, these opportunities to learn, share and grow, “reaffirm the thought processes. Provides, extra confidence that the way I’m thinking is correct and different ideas on disseminating information to staff.” In addition, an elementary principal with the least leadership experience [3 years as principal] of all principals interviewed, concurred with the secondary principal by saying “collaboration with other administrators, and hearing about their success provides me with opportunity to reinforce my ideas.” An elementary principal went further to describe the benefits of refocusing principal meetings on instructional development and how he made sense of the knowledge gained from the meetings:

I went back to school and reorganised dates around item analysis. Consulted with itinerants, consultants and team leaders. I took the information that was given to principals at the meeting, summarised and did a presentation in my school. I used the information to do item analysis with EQAO, OWA and DRA, set goals around SEF. Focusing on assessment- I like the instructional piece.

Another elementary principal described how the district helped principals to make sense of their role as curriculum leaders. According to that principal, as a result of district’s support for building principals’ capacity, ‘principals are driving instruction in schools.’ A secondary principal concurred “I am the curriculum leader of the building” while an elementary principal recounted his past experience and frustration with DRA. In his opinion, prior to district support for principals’ instructional capacity, teachers seemed to be more knowledgeable about DRA than principals. With district-offered sessions on assessment, data interpretation and
distinguishing good from bad strategies, the principal felt “more knowledgeable” and self-identified as ‘a positive personnel resource to the teachers.’

Most of the principals agreed that through these focused PD sessions, the district exposed principals to concepts, policies and approaches in support of their leadership for instructional improvement in schools. Those opportunities in turn, helped them make sense of their leadership, and specifically how to best support teachers in order to improve classroom instruction and the school conditions, as a whole.

Explicating the intricacies of district support about how principals made sense of evidence use within their schools, another elementary principal noted that:

Initially when we got our EQAO results, we did not analyze. Then they [system] brought us together (one-third of the principals at a time). The research development department walked us through how to understand data. They provided us with binders. They modeled for us how to do this with staff. When I was back at school I felt pretty confident with the teachers. Now it is common knowledge how to do it.

Furthermore, an elementary principal, who had the longest tenure (28 years) of all elementary principals interviewed and had only been in her current school for 2 years, alluded to the same district support on their ability to make sense of their leadership for instructional improvement:

The session helped me to make sense of my role as an instructional leader a lot. I think the managerial role is natural. The sessions tell me where to focus on SIP, item analysis etc, tell staff where they are heading and helps to align the areas of success with goals of school and BIP.

Principals were also given opportunities to present to their peers during information sessions, thereby improving on their knowledge as instructional leaders. A secondary principal cited an example of a session on Differentiated Instruction, where he participated as a presenter:

I and two colleagues ran a session for principals…by being asked to run school effectiveness session taught myself a lot about it, and provides me with a strong foundation.
Finally, there were also opportunities related to the Ministry of Education initiatives for school improvement, such as the board’s participation in LSA-sponsored conferences. Many principals attested to those conferences for their knowledge on creating instructional pathways.

Leadership programs

Leadership programs were also considered an important form of PD for both principals and teachers aspiring for leadership positions. Among the cited programs was the Theological Education Leadership program. Through this program, the board reinforced its catholicity fundamentals of faith development for all administrators. As a catholic board, it was exerting a lot of pressure towards adult faith development and the development of teachers as catholic leaders. The board paid for parts 1, 2, and 3 of teacher training courses offered within the board, with the expectation that teachers would complete part 3 within 5 years of commencement of the training.

Another example was the leadership program for principals which offered some optional and some mandatory sessions. Principals had to attend at least 2 of those sessions per year based on their needs. Though a huge part of PD sessions for the board were dedicated to instructional development, this leadership program provided principals with a wide spectrum of sessions varying from instructional to managerial (financial sessions). There was also a mentorship program which offered opportunities for new principals to team up with experienced principals in order to walk through a PD journey framed around curriculum and management.

The downside to lots of PD, as explained by the interviewees, was the regularity with which principals and teachers were pulled out of their classes and schools. This left principals feeling challenged to find the time to carry out other tasks for which they were responsible. The district leaders interviewed recognized the need to find a way to balance the time required for
job-embedded PD and the other substantial demands on the time of principals and teachers. One principal suggested the need to space out the PD sessions to allow teachers to spend consistent time with their students.

An interesting improvement over the years, as noted by most of the principals, was the implementation of PD sessions within their buildings. In addition, twelve years prior to the study, principals were less knowledgeable about instructional improvement, and how to work collaboratively with staff to write and execute a focused SIP. With the deliberate focus of the board on assisting schools with the development of their SIPS and monitoring for accountability, most principals identified board’s investment in job-embedded PDs as a source of their instructional leadership strengths.

**Alignment**

This section discusses budget allocations and alignment of personnel, policies, and programs to Marinee’s school improvement agenda, and Marinee’s organizational structure.

**Budget allocations**

Marinee made student improvement a priority and aligned its budget to that priority. A principal nicely put it as “show me your money and I’ll show you your priority,” and another principal concurred, ‘the board is putting money where the goals are.” At the time of the study, the board was doing a great deal to align its budget with curriculum. It made readily available to principals and their schools updated curriculum resources and resources for after school programs, put money into supply days for teachers in need of professional support; facilitated item analysis and supported the development of SIPS. In an attempt to further develop teachers’
knowledge of different instructional approaches, retired teachers were hired to assist teachers with diagnostic testing, such as DRA.

With the creation of two newly paid positions; the itinerant and the superintendent for school effectiveness, the board demonstrated that its’ first priority was student achievement. Through the hiring of those experts, the board made a concerted effort to ensure that they were putting the dollars where it was most needed- student achievement and SCF (the Catholic faith).

All the principals interviewed believed that the budget was not an impediment to student improvement as the board adequately allocated funds to its priorities and as requested. An elementary principal summed it up this way: “I have never gone to the board for something worthwhile and [been] denied” and a secondary principal concurred that “If needed, more supply days are given, not limitless, but given readily.” This alignment was exemplified in a case in which the board unanimously agreed to convert funds assigned for the rebuilding of the board office to students’ needs. That was a typical example of how the board prioritized student achievement above every other board need - a priority that paid off in Marinee student achievement results over the past half a dozen years.

**Personnel, policies and procedures**

Most principals interviewed made references to the hiring of the itinerant literacy and numeracy teachers, the superintendent for school effectiveness, and increased computer technology resources as significant support systems within the district. Asked about the relationship with the union, all principals claimed that there was a good relationship between labour groups and management (with monthly labour/management meetings), enhanced by the assistance of the Human Resources (HR) department. HR, in their opinion, was always ready to provide school leaders with support. The board offered collaborative working PD sessions with the union and established a committee including senior administrators, principals and union
leaders to cater for any challenges in the relationship. More PD during the day and more release days for teachers were identified as factors strengthening the relationship with unions. An elementary principal noted “union is very supportive because schools give teachers more time during the day and no work outside school day, unless it’s a staff or divisional meeting which must be one per month.” A secondary principal added, “over the hump from conservative days; there’s open communication, easy communication… recognizing that there are roles to play.” According to the interviewees, these roles were clearly stipulated in the collective agreement, on which principals were inserviced for updates on changes and the reasons why the changes were effected.

Policies from the Ministry went through boards to schools. Those policies were well documented and shared on the board’s website for easy access by all staff, facilitating consistency and coherence within the board. Principals and their schools were kept apprised of any policy changes through excellent communication channels between the board and schools. The Equity and Diversity Policy was added to the board’s policy in coherence with the Ministry’s goal to provide education for all children (irrespective of their age, sex, gender, race, etc.).

Trustees and principals noted that Marinee’s priority and intentional focus on student achievement and staff development resulted in the recognition of some of its teachers as outstanding teachers in the province. Those teachers were eventually seconded to the Ministry during the time of the study. Interviewees suggested that their secondment will provide them with experiences, which would be shared with the rest of the district upon their return.

**Organizational structure**

Asked about the alignment of the organizational structure of the board to board’s priority, most of the principals interviewed were not knowledgeable about the organizational structure.
They however, focused their response to the structure of the family of schools model - an initiative that was championed by the director of education. Before the director’s arrival to the board three years prior to the study, the board separated elementary and secondary family of schools. But this was reorganized under the leadership of the new director to include both elementary and secondary principals together in a well-structured family of schools model. These networks, according to interviewees, served as great opportunities for principals to brainstorm and to share best practices on what worked within their respective buildings.

Other than the identification of the family of schools model, one secondary school principal identified the availability of resource persons within the board to support classroom teachers and school leaders. The curriculum leaders for example and the superintendents had been very influential in supporting principals with the development and monitoring of their SIPs. The hierarchical structure commonly seen in most organizational charts was not viewed as problematic as respondents claimed information flowed in both directions. Senior administrators included all other stakeholder representatives in decision-making processes at board level. For example, the newly revised strategic planning process of the board involved all stakeholders, with a renewal committee comprised of teachers, parents, consultants and the union.

Leadership

Professional Leadership

Marinee made a concerted effort to identify and recruit the right leaders. Two years prior to the study, the board developed a leadership strategy for identifying and recruiting leaders. The strategy was tied to the board’s vision – improving student achievement and enhancing catholicity. The following three areas discuss Marinee’s leadership positions and programs, selection criteria for leadership, and learning opportunities to prepare and develop leaders.
Leadership positions and programs

Team leader positions were paid positions through which the district assessed the potential strengths of prospective formal leaders. Also, there was a leadership program that included specific modules designed to help teachers identify potential leadership roles of interest. The program also gave applicants opportunities to self-identify through nominations. Finally, the board had a well–designed mentorship program for existing and new leaders with self-reflective tools for aspirants.

Selection criteria for leadership

Combining instructional leadership and faith development (catholicity) leadership programs, the district ensured that its principal and VP aspirants were ready for their new role as instructional leaders. Selection for both school and senior leaders was based, in part, on portfolios which documented the courses completed by the aspirants and a letter from the clergy confirming the applicants’ faith practices. Looking back 15 years prior to the study, superintendents explained that principals were hired based on their possession of conflict resolution skills and ability to engage the community. This had shifted over the past 5 years to a focus on their ability to improve student achievement and to engage teachers in student assessment, and active practice of the catholic faith.

A superintendent described the board’s new approaches to identifying and developing both school and district leaders as “a shift from managerial with emphasis on conflict resolution, to instructional leaders.” Consequently, as explained by a trustee, the district used the portfolios to help identify:

- principals who are recognized as instructional leaders in schools-expert knowledge of curriculum, ability to lead and guide, practicing Catholics who support the faith; leaders in all respects.
In addition, the board shifted the balance of its selection criteria from a heavy focus on academic qualification, such as the possession of a Master’s degree to the actual capacities needed to provide instructional leadership in schools.

According to one superintendent, selection of superintendents was also tied to the contributions they made to improving EQAO test scores. Considering the difficulty involved in improving achievement in the already high-achieving board, trustees selection criteria for the director, in particular, emphasized visionary leader with strong academic knowledge and ability to “take the board to another level.”

The selection committee for the board traditionally involved the chair of the board, the director, senior staff, and one other trustee. However, a couple of years prior to the study, there was a case of about 12 trustees involved in the hiring process (all in the interview room at the same time asking questions to the applicants). According to one trustee and a superintendent, that was due to a lack of trust between trustees and it made the process cumbersome. This once cumbersome selection process was simplified to include only one trustee representative.

The selection criteria for both school and senior leaders were basically similar. In summary, this process included: the review of; an application package, faith formation questions, interview, overall ranking advantages/disadvantages and strengths/weaknesses of candidates.

**Learning opportunities to prepare and develop leaders**

Learning and growth opportunities were provided in the form of workshops, informal and formal principal/or superintendent networkings. As the director described it:

We’re trying to be more intentional and disciplined about our learning (superintendent and director). Learning is part of each week’s meeting. Once a month we use one-half day for our learning e.g. a book study on team functioning.
Workshops (on topics such as classroom/school management, safe schools, data interpretation, and enhancing catholicity) facilitated by the superintendents were focused on developing leaders’ potential within the board. Through formal province-wide pairings of experienced and new superintendents, and informal board-wide mentorship programs, more experienced superintendents mentored new senior leaders and helped them to learn what they needed to know to help support the principals assigned to each new superintendent.

At the time of the study, the board of trustees had just completed a performance review for the director. Trustees described the review template as “user friendly.” While the director reported to the trustees with targets, timelines and outcomes, the superintendents reported to director with somewhat similar targets. Principals, on their part, reported to superintendents through a performance appraisal system.

**Elected Trustees**

The board mandated policy development as a primary focus for the board of trustees and the board’s daily operations were to be run by senior level staff. From the superintendents’ perspective, there was a role misconception on the part of some trustees who allegedly focused more on the day-to-today operations rather than setting policy. Also, superintendents alleged that, trustees used the promotion of catholicity to shield their hidden agendas and claimed to consider the use of data as the basis for decision making. In the Director’s view, over the past 6 years the trustees were beginning to make some progress in understanding their roles in improving instruction and student achievement. In order to effectively focus on student achievement, the board as a whole had spent the last two years prior to the study updating board policies and procedures under the leadership of the trustees.
The Policy governance model\textsuperscript{24} was not well understood within Marinee. In one trustee’s opinion, the policy governance model, “lacked a true accountability structure,” hence trustees did not only struggle with the understanding of their governance role but were also not fully (indirectly) committed to its execution. Despite this limitation, Marinee trustees had other standards on which the director and superintendents were held accountable for student results. Those standards, as earlier explained, were based on targets, timelines and outcomes. Interestingly, some superintendents found it particularly disturbing that the board of trustees, unlike their predecessors, “wanted good results but had no knowledge of how this could be achieved.” Yet the less knowledgeable trustees questioned reports from superintendents who were more knowledgeable. Apparently, tensions existed between trustees (described by the superintendents and one trustee as the “five against four votes between trustees”) and between trustees and superintendents. A superintendent described his relationship with trustees as follows:

I don’t communicate with trustees. The relationship is one of trepidation and fear. I have to submit reports to trustees and that’s about it for the relationship. Because of the hidden agenda of the trustees, this system is the only board in the province that doesn’t allow kids to get HPV vaccine. Trustees say it will lead to promiscuity.

Finally superintendents echoed disgust of their experiences with the trustees’ implementation of the business model (‘big brother is watching’ ideology). Through this model, trustees could hire and fire any principal or staff based on performance. Concurring with the superintendents, a trustee expressed dislike of the board of trustees’ emphasis on the business model. She lamented:

\textsuperscript{24} Policy governance model involves a commitment by trustees to; develop goals and expectations for accountability of the system, develop policies to guide the accomplishment of set goals, and monitor the system’s progress, with the accomplishment of the set goals.
Dismissing people with no just cause is not good. Trustees undermined the director’s recommendations and a good staff [principal] was fired [last year] where he could be reprimanded.

Respondents noted that, unlike the group of trustees at the time of the study, the previous group “was very supportive, knowledgeable about student achievement, focused on kids, believed in the kids and listened to recommendations from senior staff.” With trustees’ limited knowledge on data use, indirect engagement with the policy governance model and the lack of trust between them, the director and senior staff recognized the enormity of work to be done on bringing trustees up to standard with knowledge on student achievement. However, an alternative solution as expressed by one SO would be replacement of the board of trustees in the next trustees’ election to reflect the previous group with a focus on student achievement.

**Relationships and Communication**

Relationships within Marinee were seen as sources of trust or lack thereof. The board put pressure on schools and school leaders to produce results. They also provided resources and targeted opportunities to build principals’ skills in support of the board’s messages for school improvement. A principal noted that:

> When developing principals, the board realized that not all principals are at the same stage. Principals are reminded it’s okay to be at any stage. With lots of support from superintendents, principals trust superintendents will help them and not be judgemental.

A second principal added that the “board models trust” and a third concluded that:

> the system has modeled exactly what principals should be doing with teachers and what teachers should be doing to help student…with trust you’re willing to take chances.

With this robust support system from the central office, one would imagine a direct correlation with staff satisfaction, efficacy and trust. Though most respondents agreed on the trusting
relationship between superintendents and principals resulting partly from their years of working together, the results of a board administered survey provided contrasting evidence. Results of the district survey, though positive about the amount of district support provided for principals and teachers’ work, reported low scores for indicators of efficacy and trust in senior staff. In an effort to increase principals’ efficacy and trust levels in senior leaders, the director noted the need to:

Create a culture where principals can identify what they don’t know. This requires trust which has been a challenge for the system...we’re aware of this and our work on it will improve- we want to build principals’ understanding that the system supports their learning and success. Self-awareness is not as strong as we want it to be, principals feel heavy weight of expectations.

District relationships explored include; internal, with parents, local community groups, and the Ministry.

**Internal Relationships**

There was “not a whole lot of trust” between trustees, but one trustee said the board of trustees was focusing on the vision statement to stay connected. The following three areas describe the nature of internal relationships within Marinee district.

**Communication between trustees, and between trustees and superintendents**

District leaders also expressed the same tensions with trustees due to lack of trust. While trustees complained that the “central office is not doing enough,” superintendents complained about the tremendous amount of work generated by individual trustees through requests for monitoring reports. Superintendents reported that those reports ended up distracting them from the focus on priorities. An attempt was made by the board to curtail individual trustee demands on superintendents by introducing a new system of communication between trustees and senior leaders. Through the new system, the director and chair of the board were copied on correspondence between senior staff and trustees. That quickly moved to a more formal
communication approach whereby all correspondence from trustees were conveyed to superintendents through the director of education.

In the past, barriers and tensions between trustees and central office staff were overcome through social events, which happened twice a month at the end of every board meeting. The situation at the time of the study, however, was focused on business and no social events were held. Trustees believed that they could only break down those tensions and build trust and efficacy by re-creating opportunities to socialize with central office staff.

**Relationship between senior leaders**

The relationship between senior leaders was described using the following key words; ‘good’ ‘connected’ and ‘trust.’ Superintendents noted the collaborative working spirit between them as they worked in teams to problem solve. Those positive working relationships trickled down to schools, influencing positive relationships between superintendents and principals as they collaborated on developing SIPs. Despite such collaboration, there remained conflicts between academic and non-academic superintendents. Recognizing the conflicts between the two groups, the director who was very knowledgeable on instructional strategies, focused his maiden years with the board on team building. That approach, in one superintendent’s opinion, was not as helpful as the collectively agreed-upon communication protocols established by both academic and non-academic superintendents. The protocols served as common ground on which superintendents could communicate with each other, even when they ‘didn’t see eye to eye’ on major issues. Superintendents met once a week to do business and the director of education met with superintendents every other week, one-to-one, to review superintendents’ portfolios. The review process was a very strong accountability tool that added value to senior leaders’ work on supporting principals’ understandings of their leadership role. It also facilitated the monitoring of the board’s emphasis on student achievement.
Relationship between superintendents and principals

Superintendents described their relationship with principals as ‘trusting.’ The trusting relationship was built over time with the superintendents’ long tenure and consistency within the board. The relationship was enhanced by constant communication often done through emails. Even better, the emails were made instantly accessible to principals through board-provided hand-held devices. In an attempt to monitor the focus on instructional improvement within schools, superintendents together with ITs visited schools four times a year. During each visit, they used a structured form to collect information on student achievement. Through those site visitations, pressure and support for instructional improvement were ensured within the different schools in Marinee.

Relationships with Parents

Asked about what the board does to encourage parental engagement in schools, principals identified it as an important area of focus of the board. The board through its fundamental belief that parents are their partners in catholic education strongly embraced the concept of parental engagement as part of home/school/parish community relationship. In this section, the following three areas describe Marinee’s relationship with parents.

Parental engagement through school councils and councils of school chairs

Ten years prior to the study, under the leadership of the former director of education, the district executed the first systematic audit, the results of which raised concerns with communication to parents and the local community. Five years following the audit, the district instituted a board-wide council of school chairs. The group met three times per year to dialogue, compare, and share practices on parental involvement. It enriched sharing across the board in an
attempt to bridge the communication barriers between the district and parents. The following principal vignette nicely captures the essence of engaging parents in schools:

The more parents are involved the more they appreciate the expertise and talents of the teachers and vice versa.

Also in attendance at these meetings were school and senior administrators and parents. Parents were encouraged to join school councils and the district offered training sessions to those interested. Principals were encouraged by the district to work with their individual school councils to increase parental involvement. The outcome of such individual school council meetings was shared by the school council chair and principal of each school during regional council meetings. Principals were supported, as needed, through a school council fund. Interestingly, while most of the principals saw benefits to parents representation in school councils, one elementary principal with 25 years of experience working with the board differed as he claimed that:

Most school councils see themselves as fundraiser. I am yet to find one that pushes for school improvement.

*Enhancing learning opportunities and communication with parents*

The board revamped its website with newly designated parent links ensuring that parents had access to necessary information. Effective communication was also encouraged through the board’s support for newsletters, posted on school websites and also emailed to parents. Most principals described the board’s commitment to parental engagement as ‘positive.’ That was measured in terms of the board’s ability to be transparent; asking for parental input on the mission statement, school improvement decisions, and board policies.

Marinee valued the input of parents and worked hard to ensure that parents were getting the support they needed to actively participate in schools. Within the past three years prior to the
study, the board had invited the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario on several occasions to do workshops for parents on key areas in order to encourage parental engagement in schools. The director organized parent conferences on Saturdays to increase the likelihood of parents attending. This limited the common excuses from parents working weekdays. A secondary school principal noted that:

The school effectiveness framework, the Ministry’s encouragement of parental engagement in schools and the abundance of research stipulating the relationship between parental engagement and improved student performance helped the board to emphasise on school academic workshops for parents on different topics essential for parental engagement; EQAO, math and language, afterschool activities and training for parents who want to be on the school council.

The board provided the funds to support school related parental engagement sessions run by school staff with a superintendent in attendance. At the time of the study, a council of chairs conference was scheduled to take place in November 2010.

Principals claimed that the Catholic Parent Involvement Committee’s quarterly meetings at the time of the study, had evolved from a less focused committee to one focused on encouraging discussions with parents, valuing and making use of tons of feedback from parents to improve student achievement; that was based on the district’s encouragement and support for parental engagement in schools.

**District support for parental engagement**

Equipping parents for the tasks involved in school participation, required school leaders’ learning about how to facilitate parental engagement in their schools. In addition to allowing for principals’ representation at regional council meetings (where parental involvement strategies were shared), the board provided principals with research materials on parental engagement on an ongoing basis. The goal was to build principals’ capacity and keep them apprised of the latest information regarding parental engagement strategies.
The Ministry offered grants to some successful schools (applicants) to go towards increased parental involvement. Through the All Star Reading Program for at-risk students, two teachers trained parents who spent 10-15 minutes with at-risk kids during the day. Other parent activities included: participation in school decision making processes and afterschool activities; and voluntary work with students in classroom. According to the principals interviewed, the latter activity was not so much efforts of the board, as to a strong influence by the fairly affluent communities in which the schools were located, with parents highly interested and willing to help students succeed – context matters!

When principals were asked if the board’s strategies for encouraging schools and their leaders to foster parental engagement had changed in the last five years, the unanimous response was “yes.” Both elementary and secondary principals agreed engagement had improved drastically with the movement to training sessions for parents (3 years prior to the study), conferences (2 years prior to the study), and the council of chairs (5 years prior to the study). Parents, at the time of the study, were invited to participate in the formulation of the mission statement and board policies.

**Relationships with Local Community Groups**

Asked about local community groups’ involvement, principals acknowledged the board’s efforts to encourage positive relations between schools and local community groups. They identified a variety of groups with different focuses and their benefits to schools and students in particular; fire drills, DARE, Terry Fox, SEAC, and the health and police departments.

The district created partnerships through schools with the health department, connecting nurses and parents, and providing support for newborns going into kindergarten. Relationship with the police and fire department aimed at supporting at risk-kids through afterschool joint
programs. DARE - a grade 8 motivational program with a law enforcement agency was approved by the board. Through that program, a local communications officer went into schools to build bonds and forge positive relations between the school and local groups. A principal perceived the importance of these relationships as follows:

Kids receive a positive image of police. They see police as friendly and helpful and students gain a healthy trusting positive sense regarding these groups.

Because all schools in the district participated in the DARE program, it made a huge difference in board commitment to the program. Also, all schools were partners in a project on building a school in Haiti, a project initiated, strongly encouraged, and sponsored by the board. Schools were also encouraged to go out to the community and request support, especially for raising funds for particular projects. The schools in turn publicized donors, in their newsletter - a process with mutual benefits.

In response to a question on the benefits of school community group relationship on student learning, one elementary principal noted “yes charity helps students to connect with people in the community in need. Students have the opportunity to serve and model.” The connection was claimed to be essential to kids’ sense of belonging, which ultimately improved student learning. Many students had been involved in social justice activities over the years prior to the study. A second principal added:

Students going out into the community results in their faith development. Students packaging food for the needy and seeing how grateful the people getting the food are, results in students’ eyes being really opened and helps them to be thankful and grateful. Some resources with the business community help us buy things.

The breakfast program was also cited for its importance in feeding children from low socio economic backgrounds who would otherwise go hungry (an impediment to learning). The after-school basketball program also provided students with an opportunity to be physically
active and as a secondary school principal claimed, “physical activity is good for brain development and therefore used extensively.”

Also, the district encouraged the use of school buildings by different local community groups for their activities, such as volleyball. A typical example cited, was the use of a school for heritage language - a program that had operated weekends over the past 20 years in one of the schools in Marinee.

According to one elementary principal, the district did not limit its efforts to simply encouraging school relationships with local community groups. The district ensured, through its communication officer, that schools and principals were aware of the availability of these groups, their events and benefits. However, the schools’ levels of involvement with local groups were left at the discretion of the principal. A secondary school principal acknowledged the board’s support by saying, “we were informed about the … [a local] Community Art Poetry Contest and we were able to get students involved.”

Local community groups were encouraged by the district to do presentations at principal meetings which happened three times per year. The first hour of each principal meeting was devoted to community group presentations. This increased principals’ knowledge about each local group and how the school could benefit from them. Despite these opportunities for engagement, both elementary and secondary principals did not see as much support from the board in building these relationships as required.

The director of education who was credited with keeping principals’ apprised of board’s events, initiatives and activities, amongst other things, did not seem to have gained as much recognition in the area of community group engagement. A secondary school principal said “director’s support is not as strong as in other areas, but definitely there.” On average, principals noted a relatively small improvement in the encouragement they got from the district on building
local community engagement. One positive example of efforts to build community relationships was the district’s response to an influx of Hispanics in the community. The board hired interpreters to work with Spanish-speaking parents and teachers in schools and the Hispanic community was made aware of these resources. An elementary principal portrayed the move as a giant step that increased the chances of parents from the community participating in the education of their children at school, as well as at home. That initiative showcased efforts of the board to support positive relationships between schools and local groups. Nonetheless, the principals thought more could be done to facilitate this relationship as “community groups play a pivotal part in school success.”

**Relationships with Ministry of Education**

Asked about the relationship between district leaders and the Ministry of education, the unanimous response from all principals, superintendents, director of education and trustees was “good.” One superintendent claimed, “lots of complacency” with respect to board/Ministry relationship. This section describes the advantages Marinee derived from their relationship with the Ministry and how principals were buffered from overloaded Ministry demands.

**Advantages of Marinee branded as an exemplary board**

Trustees, who did not have direct communication with the Ministry, associated the positive relations with their school improvement data which identified them as one of the highest achieving boards in the province. These data accounted for the frequent requests for Marinee to share their practices province-wide. Also, in trustees’ opinion, these data resulted in the constant secondment of Marinee teachers and principals to the Ministry who, in turn, brought back their experiences to the district. According to the interviewees, those secondments together with the
Ministry’s use of Marinee’s BIP as a sample for the province at the time of the study, were indications that the Ministry acknowledged the district’s work and successes.

**Buffering principals from excessive ministry initiatives**

A general concern echoed, however, by every interviewee was the excessive nature of ministry initiatives (for example; Early childhood, Governance audit, Equity and Inclusion) downloaded to the district. In the director’s opinion, it “impinges on district autonomy.” Attempts were made by the district to curtail these potential distractions by aligning Ministry initiatives with district priorities. Respondents mentioned the creation of a systematic process for handling these ministry initiatives. Two years prior to the study, the director created three contacts (special education, curriculum, and other; money and budget) purposely to handle ministry initiatives. The group met once every month to develop strategies on how to structure and stage implementation of Ministry initiatives in relation to board priorities. In addition to this strategy for responding to Ministry initiatives, one superintendent said there was a need for more “focus and intentionality.” Some of Ministry initiatives were believed to be contradictory to board beliefs as noted by one trustee:

> Equity and inclusion was mandated to be put to policy by October. Boards struggled with its implementation but the Catholic boards used the bishop’s version. For example Homosexuality- Yes people are different and the board wants to be inclusive but can’t allow access to gay activists in school to influence kids who are borderline on their sexuality. Board tweaks initiatives and maintains timeline.

Despite the challenges faced by Marinee with Ministry initiatives, the benefits that accrued from having “good” relationships were indisputable. Still related to the Equity and Inclusion policy and following the longstanding positive relationship between the district and the Ministry, the Ministry assigned a Marinee superintendent together with a Ministry representative
to deliver a workshop on Equity and Inclusion in Los Angeles in November 2011. A trustee noted that “majority [of the relationship] boiled down to money and programs.”

Another complication identified by one superintendent was their cynicism over the Ministry’s monitoring approaches as “they constantly monitor, they are coming in next week to look at BIP. They don’t know what they’re doing” he explained. The superintendent suggested a refocus of the Ministry on providing the money and resources as opposed to overseeing through constant monitoring of BIPs. The superintendent made an argument against the time consumed in participating in the “unsuccessful” monitoring process. Contrary to this superintendent’s view, most superintendents interviewed, appreciated the Ministry’s interaction with the district and noted “we’re happy with it.” The Ministry’s interaction with the board through visitations aimed at monitoring BIPs in another superintendent’s opinion rendered the relationship open and honest. And above all, the feedback was considered very beneficial to the district - relevant for its cyclical review approach for planning.

Summary

Using the frameworks described in Chapter 2, this section summarizes how Marinee district actions influenced principals’ sensemaking and efficacy.

**Marinee District Influence on Principals’ Sensemaking**

Chapter 2 described Bandura’s four sources of efficacy: Mastery Experiences, Vicarious Experiences, Verbal Persuasion, and Emotional Arousal. This section summarizes what the district did to enhance principals’ efficacy through those four sources
**Schematic Framing**

This dimension is about how the district took into consideration principals’ beliefs, values and aspirations when providing them with professional learning opportunities. In recognition of those individual differences (identity) and experiences, the district tailored targeted support to ensure that principals had a common basic understanding of instructional strategies and curriculum knowledge. From principals’ experiences and pre-existing cognitive maps, enhanced through experiences garnered from district-provided trainings, the district built on principals’ schema by providing additional resources (general and individualized) to meet their specific needs for accomplishing their leadership expectations for school improvement.

There was considerable involvement of stakeholders in Marinee’s strategic planning processes, which were informed, and shaped by SIPs. Principals interviewed, identified their involvement in the development of the BIP as a critical step in curbing the hierarchical top down plan which was in existence ten years prior to the study. Their involvement gave them first-hand experience with the district’s vision and better understanding of the district plan which was then used in their schools to frame the direction for school improvement on the basis of unique school needs.

**Knowledge Acquisition**

Principals noticed specific cues from the environment and then used their previous knowledge, past experiences and dispositions to acquire new knowledge. Influenced by a focus on improving student achievement through systematically collected data-driven decision making, the district provided training opportunities which helped to build principals’ sensemaking capacities for acquiring, recognizing, reading, interpreting and using data to make informed decisions. Marinee encouraged the development of “instructional pathways” which focused on
identifying different data sources, analyzing data and making decisions based on curriculum expectations. Also, itinerants assigned by the district, visited schools on a weekly basis (job-embedded learning opportunities) and provided assistance to school leaders and their staff with instructional strategies in numeracy, literacy and item analysis.

A second means of building principals’ knowledge were the numerous opportunities for professional development both at the level of schools and external to the district. Principals claimed progress had been made to increase their sense of efficacy to lead instructional improvement within their building and ensure that staff were speaking the same language around data use. An example cited by principals of district influence on principals’ sensemaking, was a presentation by Stephen Katz in Toronto. Through this presentation, principals sponsored by the district to participate, worked in small groups, listened, and practiced how to acquire, interpret and use data in schools. Principals were also inserviced on district data and how to use it to create SMART goals. This emphasis was a fairly new approach for the district, manifested in the abundance of district-offered PD sessions, which focused on data analysis, interpretation and use for all administrators. The goal, according to the superintendents, was to convert principals into instructional leaders and develop their capacity to improve the quality of instruction in their schools.

**Continuous Deliberation**

Sensemaking has been identified as a process that is never finished. Marinee supported principals with their ongoing deliberation processes (including how to respond to new information) by constantly providing various kinds of professional learning opportunities suitable for their needs. In an attempt to help principals determine what actions to take when responding to the increasing demands on the principalship and ongoing changes from the
Ministry of Education, Marinee provided job-embedded PD and regional training opportunities for teachers, principals and district leaders. Evidence indicates that such learning opportunities kept Marinee principals apprised of ongoing Ministry and district changes, new knowledge in the education field, and best practices which helped them to determine how to respond to new information on a daily basis.

**Motivation-Oriented Action**

The process of responding to an environmental stimulus is influenced, in part, by how motivated people [principals] are, “by goals which they find personally compelling, as well as challenging and achievable” (Leithwood et al, 2004, p. 24). Marinee district leaders made concerted efforts to support principals with the development of achievable goals and aligned its resources to support schools’ efforts in accomplishing targets.

Following the district’s efforts to ‘change the role of school leaders’ to focus on instructional improvement, superintendents encountered resistance from some school leaders who did not see themselves as “number crunchers” but as managers. According to one SO, this was partly due to differences in principal and SO beliefs (schematic framing) about standardized tests, explicating the impact of sensemaking processes on change efforts in Marinee. Most principals did not agree with the use of standardized tests and the way students were “treated as subjects.” Most superintendents on the other hand, believed in the value of some standards to effectively evaluate and set the stage for improvement. In an attempt to boost Marinee principals’ interests, and buy-in to school improvement initiatives, an SO dialogued with principals about the importance of having standards and went on to create an EQAO cup game. The challenge served as an impetus for improvement, bringing all principals and schools under the superintendent’s supervision on board with the changes to their role, board and school plans.
The school with the highest EQAO score was awarded the EQAO cup yearly, placing the school in the spotlight and serving as a strong motivator for principal action in accordance with district expectations.

Marinee used itinerants and consultants to continuously model to principals what is expected at the school level. At the time of data collection, district leaders said that the district was working on different strategies to continue to improve principals’ capacities as instructional leaders. In order to emphasize the concept of ‘pressure and support’ through which principals were held accountable for instructional improvement capacities, the district requested memos of classroom walkthroughs (three times a week for 15 minutes) from all principals. This accountability mechanism, coordinated by the superintendents of school effectiveness (SEF), reinforced the message about the importance of principals’ focus on curriculum (their new role) and the district’s focus on improving student achievement results (the district’s top priority).

The district used various student achievement data and provincial priorities to develop a more refined and comprehensive BIP, encompassing SMART goals and essential items to be included in SIPs. The set goals then informed school leaders and their staff about how to develop their school improvement plans and how to move their students forward. A more user-friendly SIP template which mirrored the BIP was developed to further assist schools with planning. Nonetheless, schools were given the flexibility to adapt the template to their specific needs. SIPs with specific targets reflected the needs of individual schools based on their student achievement data but fine-tuned to the board-provided template.

Superintendents were assigned to schools with a primary responsibility to visit schools and help principals with the development of their SIP. Principals, teachers and superintendents sat together and developed plans on how to get students to the next level. The team reflected on data to determine SMART goals. Those superintendents also worked collaboratively with
principals, by facilitating PD sessions on school improvement plans. At the time of the study, principals had just attended a half-day session on understanding BIP and aligning with their SIPs. Principals in turn modelled this in their schools, creating collaborative cultures within schools.

**Social Interaction Dimension**

Marinee senior leaders interacted with school leaders in order to create shared meanings to guide decision making processes across the district. These social negotiations resulted in the acquisition of new behavior patterns or changes to existing old practices manifested in principals’ words and / or actions (see Chapter 7). The social interactions between Marinee and its principals are explained through the following areas:

*Development of new structures to enhance principal participation*

Principals, district leaders, teachers, union representatives, parents and other stakeholders worked collaboratively towards board improvement. Principals in particular, were included in decision making processes at all levels across the district. At the central level principals were involved in the strategic planning processes for determining the district vision and improvement plan. At the school level, principals were involved in the leadership team, which focused on identifying achievable school targets, and developing goals for the accomplishment of the set targets. The leadership team also worked collaboratively with their assigned superintendents on developing and revising the school improvement plan.

Two years prior to this study, the district created a new position (the superintendent of school effectiveness) and hired a well-qualified senior staff to help principals better understand their new leadership expectations. Most of the principals claimed that the superintendents for SEF brought a new flavour to their role as instructional leaders. The SO for SEF emphasized
high levels of focus on instructional leadership for all principals. The evidence from Marinee revealed that those new structures were created by design to encourage ongoing two-way communication between the district leaders and all schools across the district and to support schools in accomplishing the district vision for school improvement. This fortified the connections between SIPs and the BIP as principals made sense of the expectations of their instructional leadership. Principals’ interactions with district and school-level personnel in the school leadership team and the support they received from superintendents, itinerants and consultants, helped them better understand their leadership for school improvement.

**Modeling by district**

The district did a great job at modeling principals district expectations for school improvement. District leaders used itinerants and consultants to accomplish the modeling task. According to the interviewees, the presence of itinerants in schools (a position, created due to the need for district-wide support with curriculum leadership at schools) brought a new flavour to principals’ professional learning. Through this site based ‘train the trainer model,’ the district intentionally built principals and division heads’ capacities for instructional leadership, which reportedly helped principals to make sense of their instructional leadership, and subsequently, to facilitate PD sessions with staff in their own schools.

**Professional development opportunities for principals**

With a wide variety of targeted and meaningful PD opportunities for principals, the experiences included interactions with other principal colleagues, district staff and externally contracted experts. Through those experiences, principals were encouraged to work together, share stories of successes and challenges and help each other make sense of district expectations for school improvement. Examples of some of those workshops focused on helping principals
understand provincial goals and the BIP, and their alignment with SIPs. Respondents generally identified the job-embedded PDs as beneficial to instructional improvement across the district.

To further contribute to principals’ learning, outside learning opportunities such as the network of family of schools meetings (which focused on increasing the achievement level of underachieving schools) were also explored. Through the network of family of schools model, the district encouraged collaborative learning and sharing between secondary schools and feeder schools to improve student success. Principals reportedly benefited from the brainstorming opportunities which acted as reinforcement to their leadership expectations.

In addition, principals’ involvement in PLC with teachers, other school and district leaders, helped to improve their knowledge on instruction, and to be able to decipher good from bad teaching when they walked into classrooms.

With the board-wide instituted council of school chairs meetings attended by school and senior administrators together with parents, principals shared and received feedback about their SIPs.

The next section of the summary uses Bandura’s sources of leader efficacy (mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and emotional arousal processes) as a framework to describe how Marinee supported its principals in building their efficacy in accomplishing district expectations for school improvement.

**Marinee District Influence on Principals’ Efficacy**

**Mastery Experiences**

In order to enhance principals’ experiences and support them to meet district expectations, Marinee fostered principals’ understanding of curriculum and instructional strategies through; itinerants and superintendents school visitations, in-servicing during principal
meetings and family-of-schools meetings, job-embedded PD and regional training opportunities, informal sharing between principals (interschool visitations), provision of resources and opportunities for principals to be involved in different projects.

Principals felt that the itinerant position was a huge support in building their efficacy especially about data interpretation and use. A principal noted that their inspiration came from student progress – for example, “two little guys in Grade 3 were non-readers but came out at end of year with level 4.” Also, the superintendent for SEF facilitated workshops with principals to show how the SEF program works. As the principals read articles and had small group discussions at their tables, a principal reported that “we now have a clear understanding of school effectiveness.” A second principal added that “we are now familiar and comfortable with the SEF.” Through the family-of-schools model, the district provided time and dollar support for principals to learn from each other and from teachers around the table. They constantly articulated and shared their SIPs, and with the support from the superintendents, it focused a better sense of what the SIP should look like and enhanced their efficacy to lead instructional improvement efforts in their buildings. According to one principal, the abundance of those relevant resources helped to “raise the level of confidence” of principals in the district.

The district made a concerted effort to develop SMART goals and aligned its resources to support the accomplishment of targets as this helped to provide principals with clear directions on how to develop their SIPs. These exposures positively influenced principal’s sense of efficacy and enhanced their feeling that they can successfully accomplish a future task that matched prior experiences they had with a similar task.
**Vicarious Experiences**

Vicarious experience, as described in chapter 2, entails observing a competent individual (a model) successfully completing similar tasks. Informal sharing of experiences and best practices among principal colleagues (interschool visitations) was encouraged by Marinee district through the family of schools model. Through monthly family-of-schools meetings, lots of dialogue was reported amongst principals sharing SIPs, and opportunities to observe competent individuals as they accomplished tasks that principals were expected to complete in their own schools.

Also, principals’ leadership skills were built through Marinee’s Principals and Vice Principals Mentorship program which included pairing new and experienced leaders. Through this program the skills of experienced principals were matched with needs of new principal(s) to help new principals with the interpretation of data and support their overall leadership needs. As the new principals observed and interacted with their ‘models’ they developed effective leadership practices necessary for the accomplishment of district expectations for school improvement. These and other PD opportunities resulted in enormous gains in staff understanding of data, its interpretation and use and overall comfort in handling data.

**Verbal Persuasion**

This leadership efficacy source explains that verbal persuasion may result from such things as encouragement, appreciation, and positive feedback from a trust worthy and respected individual within an organization. The once in a month PLCs and family of schools’ meetings held across Marinee, were cited as important structures through which schools revisited and reviewed their SIPs. The family-of-schools model served as a support system for principals and
their colleagues in times of need as it offered opportunities for sharing and also, for principals to get to know each other and develop their leadership efficacy. One principal explained:

I find it helpful. It helps us to build the confidence of each other. It helps to know each other. I can call a principal to help on instructional leadership.

Most importantly, Marinee had a formal process to identify and recruit the right leaders to enhance student achievement progress. Through the districts’ leadership strategy for identifying, recruiting and preparing leaders, and tied to the district’s vision (improving student achievement and enhancing catholicity), potential leaders with instructional leadership capacities were encouraged and persuaded to apply for leadership positions locally and centrally. And both new and experienced principals received ongoing training to keep them apprised of board expectations and current research.

**Emotional Arousal**

This leader efficacy source may include response to an influential or charismatic individual who supports a school leader by raising their hopes that they can accomplish their leadership tasks as well as helping them to cognitively map out connections between district goals, their school goals and rationale for schooling. As the evidence indicated, Marinee leaders worked tirelessly over five years prior to this study to ensure that the SIP of each school was aligned to the BIP and the government’s priorities for student achievement and well-being.

Through the robust leadership strategy, the district made efforts to raise principals’ sense of efficacy starting from the identification of instructional leadership skills in principal candidates, through their placement at the right school that fits their dispositions and capacities, to helping to enhance their aspirations to lead their schools, set their priorities, develop their SIPS and control their school budget. Principals also felt their efficacy was built by the district’s
intentional focus on involving as many of them as possible, at many levels of strategic-planning and decision making (BIP) which built their sense of efficacy in developing their SIPs.

**Conclusion**

Each of the district actions tested in this study influenced principals’ efficacy and/or principals’ sensemaking. As the summaries above suggests, ten sets of district actions emerged from the case study evidence as influences on both principals’ efficacy and sensemaking about their leadership for school improvement.

**Creation of New Positions to Focus on Instructional Improvement**

Both school and district leaders considered the creation of the superintendent for school effectiveness and the itinerant positions as a symbol of the board’s commitment to assist schools in accomplishing the district’s mission, vision, goals and developing principals’ instructional leadership capacities. Principals interviewed attributed success on provincial test scores to the creation of the SEF portfolio and emphasized that they “wouldn’t have got here without this portfolio.” The ITs who worked with principals and teachers on SIP, benchmarks, analysis of EQAO and facilitated PD sessions within school buildings were considered to be “a very valuable resource.” A principal concluded, “I’ve grown professionally as part of LC meetings with itinerants.”

**Role Changes for Superintendents and Principals as Instructional Leaders**

Academic superintendents who were more knowledgeable about instruction, best practices, the analysis, interpretation and use of data were assigned to schools. Their tasks were to: engage in a new board’s approach for assisting principals and schools with the development
of their SIP; monitor and provide feedback to schools; and continuously review the SIP together with the school team. Based on the selection criteria for leaders within Marinee which focused on curriculum leadership portfolios of applicants, the strong instructional leadership capacities of the superintendents paved the way for developing such instructional leadership potentials in principals. There was greater emphasis on principals as instructional leaders as opposed to managers. Principals struggled to embrace the new role as they did not consider themselves as ‘number crunchers’ at the time the role change was initiated. Nonetheless, at the time of the study, with targeted support from the board, principals believed that “we are instructional leaders and get knowledge we need from the system” – showing strong board influence on principals’ sensemaking about their leadership role.

**Networking of Principals Through the Family of Schools Model**

The board moved to a restructured family-of-schools model, networking elementary and secondary schools. The reorganization was initiated by the director of education upon his arrival to the board three years prior to the study. Principals considered the opportunities to brainstorm and share best practices during family of school meetings, with a team of about 5-6 principals, as influential to their growth as instructional leaders amid managerial demands. The most benefit associated with these sharing opportunities according to the principals was that it “promotes [principal] confidence.”

**Use of Different Measures of Student Achievement for Decision Making**

Marinee district provided and supported systematically collected data, which was used to guide decision making processes at all levels within the board. All stakeholders believed that decision making should be guided by data and a research officer was assigned to help principals
with data interpretation on a needs basis. Also, the Research and Development department focused on collecting, analyzing and making data readily accessible to both teaching and administrative staff. Principals confirmed that the district’s use of systematically collected evidence was “… very much student centered…there’s lots of precision now” and principals were ‘getting more comfortable with using data, interpreting, and how it’s used in class.”

**Rigorous Leadership Strategy for Identifying and Recruiting Leaders**

A rigorous leadership strategy for identifying and recruiting the right leaders was developed based on key instructional and faith development leadership potentials. The criteria included selecting applicants who were recognized as instructional leaders in schools with expert knowledge of curriculum, ability to lead and guide, practicing Catholics who supported the faith, and leaders in all respect. Marinee aimed to hire, prepare, and retain the best staff with principals describing their sense of efficacy in leading schools as a result of this district strategy. The board had a high rate of retention of hired school and senior leaders.

**Enforcement of Strategic Planning and Renewal Processes for Revision of Board Vision**

Trustees directed the strategic planning process for reviewing the board’s vision, three years prior to the study. The collective engagement of the board in the reviewing process raised awareness and made things clearer for all stakeholders. Strategic planning and renewal committees worked as a team to review the language around the vision. The involvement of all stakeholders in this review process enhanced the clarity, focus and consistency of the message on the vision and mission statement across the board. The clarity of the board’s agenda for student achievement and well-being influenced by collaborative planning process with principal
involvement, helped to build principals’ efficacy, and served as a key sensemaking resource for school leaders to develop their school plans consistent with the district’s vision.

**Alignment and Mutual Support for the Development of the SIP and BIP**

SIPs were supposed to mirror the BIP with some latitude to adapt to the needs of each school. Principals were involved in the development of the BIP and the superintendents monitored SIPs and provided feedback for revisions. The district encouraged schools to use local school data to inform the development of their SIPs. The interaction level of schools and district leaders in the board’s planning processes fostered mutual support in the development of the BIP. The BIP used well informed evidence from schools as well as the development and continuous renewal of the SIP. Marinee’s cyclical review process made it possible for SIPs to feed into the BIP and vice versa. This process helped to build principals’ efficacy and support for the BIP as the BIP actually reflected what schools believed needed to be done to realistically accomplish the districts’ agenda.

**Increased Ongoing Job-Embedded PD for Both Teaching and Administrative Staff**

Principals were more pleased with the shift from whole-district, externally delivered, PD to more focused PD delivered within their buildings. The opportunity to learn in teams and on a one-on-one basis was valued as well. There was a remarkable shift in the board in principals’ involvement and participation in teacher related PD sessions, formally attended by teachers only. Most principals attributed the new nature of board supported PD to the source of their instructional leadership strengths and the ability to make sense of their role. “I never felt anything but support-great, very effective and beneficial, particularly during school time” says a principal. These job-embedded PD sessions provided principals with unique opportunities to
collaborate with school staff in knowledge construction and expansion (their mastery experiences) and to make sense of their instructional leadership for school improvement.

**Council of Chair Regional Meetings and High Expectations**

The district had not had council of chair meetings before the 5 year period of interest to this study. Principals attested that “there were no training sessions for parents until the last three years.” Websites with parent links were also considered a big change for the board with significant improvements in parent involvement. Parents gave their time to support students’ learning, which according to the principals, was well appreciated by the classroom teachers. Although Marinee had no control over parental SES, the mere presence of a relatively affluent and well-educated parent population enhanced the level of parental engagement in schools. Those parents had high expectations for their children and the district as a whole and gave maximum support to principals in building their capacities to develop their SIPs.

**Longer Tenure Experiences and Trusting Relationship Amongst Superintendents and Principals**

An average 23-year tenure for principals and superintendents was largely responsible for the high degree of trust in the district. Interviews indicated that when principals felt comfortable with, and trusted superintendents, the buy-in on district initiatives was higher; this reinforced the district priority about student achievement and facilitated principal development initiatives.

Ultimately, principal training sessions and opportunities provided by the district for principals to network and share best practices, developed principals’ understanding of their new instructional leadership responsibilities.
Accounts about Marinee’s contributions to its principals’ sense of efficacy and in their ability to make sense of their instructional leadership responsibilities for school improvement were consistent with their survey results from 62% of the principal population in Marinee and very similar to responses from over 15,000 principals in the province (see Tables 16 and 17).

Table 16

Comparison of Provincial and Marinee Principals’ Views of District Factors Contributing to Their Sense of Confidence

To what extent do the following contribute to the confidence that you and your principal-colleague(s) have that you will be able to accomplish the expectations for school improvement held by your district:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Province Mean</th>
<th>Province SD</th>
<th>Marinee Mean</th>
<th>Marinee SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery Experiences (Question 38, 42)</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Persuasion (Question 39, 45, 46)</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicarious Experiences (Question 40)</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Arousal (Question 41, 47)</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other district actions and conditions supporting efficacy</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. The system’s assignment of me to a school for which I am well suited</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. High levels of mutual trust my colleagues and I have in one another</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. The autonomy I have to do what is in the best interests of my school and students</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As portrayed in Table 16, compared to the province, Marinee principals reported relatively low means with similar moderately high variations of ratings of principal responses to all district actions that contributed to principals’ sense of efficacy. Following Bandura’s sources of efficacy, consistent reports between the province and Marinee indicated that mastery experience had the greatest influence on principals’ sense of efficacy while vicarious experience had the least influence. In sum, the two data sets (i.e. the Province and Marinee) indicate that principals felt that districts contributed the most to their sense of efficacy when they nurtured high levels of trust between principals and their colleagues. Table 17 presents comparison of principal survey responses between Marinee and the province.

Table 17

Comparison of Provincial and Marinee Principals’ Views about District Influence on Their Sensemaking

To what extent do the following aspects of your school system enhance your understanding of how best to exercise your leadership?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensemaking</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th></th>
<th>Marinee</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensemaking</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. PD opportunities provided by the system about Ministry initiatives and new programs</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Resources provided to support school based PD for me and my staff</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Support by the system for networking and sharing of best practices, experiences and challenges with other principals colleagues and schools</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Release time for me to create PLCs with staff and develop initiatives towards school</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Province</td>
<td></td>
<td>Marinee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The priority awarded to instructional leadership (vs Management)</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Emphasis placed on analysing, interpreting and using data to inform decision making</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Help provided to me by system leaders in developing, monitoring and providing feedback about the SIP</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Snapshots provided by the system indicating the progress being made in my school</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Advice on how to build productive relations with teachers and contribute to their development</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Accessibility of system leaders for information or personal assistance</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Opportunities provided by the system for my school to engage parents and local community groups in our school improvement efforts</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Two way communication between the central office and my school</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As displayed in Table 17, compared to the province, Marinee principals reported higher means with similarly high variations of ratings of principal responses to all district actions that contributed to principals’ sensemaking. Though not at the same rankings, the five district actions that contributed the most to principals’ sensemaking in the province were consistent with Marinee principal responses. In sum, both data sets flagged district emphasis and support on use
of evidence for decision making as a factor that contributed the most to principals’ ability to make sense of their instructional leadership responsibilities.

There are significant differences in the length of the two case study reports (Chapters 5 and 6). This does not mean that one case was more important for the study than the other. Because Greenbridge was a much smaller district than Marinee, fewer interviews needed to be conducted to arrive at a level of understanding about district actions comparable to the understanding provided by the Marinee interviews. In addition, interview results from Greenbridge pretty much saturated what could be learned about each of the study’s research questions in that context.

Chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation have reported evidence of district improvement actions of two high-performing districts along with their relationship to principals’ efficacy and sensemaking for school improvement. The next chapter provides a cross-case analysis of the two high-performing districts.
CHAPTER 7
CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

Using the frameworks for sensemaking and efficacy that guided this study, this chapter presents a cross-case analysis of the two high-performing districts (Greenbridge and Marinee) included in the study. First, summaries of key constructs (dimensions) of the sensemaking and efficacy concepts for each of the two cases are presented in two sections; one on sensemaking and the other efficacy. Then, within each section, similarities and differences between the cases are outlined and quantitative data added to increase the external validity of the qualitative results.

**Principals’ Sensemaking**

Chapter 2 described five dimensions of sensemaking: Schematic Framing, Knowledge Acquisition, Continuous Deliberation, Motivation-Oriented Action, and Social Interaction. This section summarizes what the two high-performing districts did to foster each of these dimensions of principal sensemaking and identifies similarities and differences between the cases.

**Schematic Framing**

This dimension is about the use of personal values, beliefs and aspirations to build on schemas people use to better understand a concept or a new environmental stimulus. Greenbridge took into consideration principals’ beliefs, values and aspirations when providing them with professional learning opportunities. In recognition of those individual differences (identity) and experiences, the district tailored targeted support to ensure that principals had a common, basic, understanding of instructional strategies and curriculum. From principals’

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25 Schema is defined as “the organization of experience in the mind or brain that includes a particular organized way of perceiving cognitively and responding to a complex situation or set of stimuli” (Merriam-Webster’s Medical Dictionary, © 2007 Merriam-Webster, Inc.)
experiences and pre-existing cognitive maps, enhanced through experiences garnered from
district-provided training, Greenbridge built on its principals’ schema by providing additional
resources (general and individualized) to meet their specific needs for accomplishing district
expectations for school improvement.

Also mentioned in the interviews conducted with senior leaders and principals was the
involvement of principals in strategic planning processes through which Greenbridge district
leaders ensured that the district vision was understood and operationalized to the level of school
implementation. Since this approach enhanced consistency of the messaging of the vision across
the district, it also increased principals’ abilities to understand and respond to new information,
and determine how their individual school goals could be aligned with their district vision.

Marinee school principals reported similar experiences with their district. As in
Greenbridge, there was considerable involvement of principals (and other stakeholders) in
Marinee’s strategic planning processes, which were informed, and shaped by SIPs. Marinee
principals identified their involvement in the development of the BIP as a critical step in
transforming the hierarchical top-down plan which was in existence ten years prior to the study.
Principals’ involvement gave them first-hand experience with the district’s vision and better
understanding of the district plan which was then used in their schools to frame the direction for
school improvement on the basis of unique school needs.

Knowledge Acquisition

Principals noticed specific cues from the district and then used their previous knowledge,
past experiences and dispositions to interpret those cues. Influenced by a strong policy
governance culture with emphasis on data-driven decision making, Greenbridge provided
training opportunities which helped to build principals’ sensemaking capacities for acquiring,
recognizing, reading, interpreting and using data to make informed decisions. The Miscellaneous lead went into schools to help them locate and interpret data useful for decision-making.

According to the principals, this portfolio was very helpful in supporting data interpretation and use in schools.

Principals were teachers before becoming administrators, making the knowledge they brought into their leadership a significant factor in determining how they responded to new information. The evidence also indicates that Greenbridge principals acknowledged the support from multiple district-offered training opportunities about acquiring and interpreting new knowledge about instructional improvement for their schools.

Marinee influenced principals’ knowledge acquisition through its focus on improving student achievement using systematically collected data for decision making, and by providing training opportunities to principals and their school staff. Those training opportunities helped principals acquire, recognize, read, interpret and use data to make informed decisions. The district encouraged the development of “instructional pathways” which entailed identifying different data sources, analyzing data and making decisions based on curriculum expectations.

Also, itinerant teachers assigned by the district visited schools on a weekly basis and provided assistance (job-embedded learning opportunities) to school leaders and their staff with instructional strategies in numeracy, literacy and item analysis.

A second means of building principals’ knowledge were opportunities for professional development both at the level of schools and external to the district. An example cited by principals of district influence on principals’ sensemaking was a presentation by Stephen Katz in Toronto. Through this presentation, principals, sponsored by the district worked in small groups, listened, and practiced how to acquire, interpret and use data in schools. They were also inserviced on district data and how to use it to create SMART goals. This emphasis was a fairly
new approach for Marinee district, manifested in the abundance of district-offered PD sessions which focused on data analysis, interpretation and use for all administrators. The goal, according to the superintendents, was to convert principals into instructional leaders and develop their capacity to improve the quality of instruction in their schools.

As the summaries of the two cases indicate, both districts used similar approaches to help principals acquire knowledge especially about data necessary for decision-making. The overall strategies and approaches for helping principals’ with knowledge acquisition were basically the same in both districts although the names that each district ascribed to the experts supporting schools with data acquisition and interpretation were different. In Greenbridge for example, coaches, coordinators and Miscellaneous lead supported principals with data interpretation and use. In Marinee on the other hand, those who offered the same data interpretation assistance were called itinerants and consultants. In addition, Marinee respondents explicitly stated that they had a research department with very well trained staff to support schools with data acquisition, interpretation and development of skills needed in making evidence-based decisions. Based on these district-assigned supports to schools, principals reportedly became capable of handling and supporting data use in their schools. On average, elementary more than secondary principals in both districts had made significant progress with their understandings and use of data for decision making. This was partly due to the emphasis on improving literacy and numeracy (which was gradually moving to the secondary level at the time of this study) at the elementary level.

However, the key difference between both cases was the culture of the districts which influenced the training of school staff on how to acquire and interpret data. Influenced by a strong policy governance culture in Greenbridge, with emphasis on using data about student progress for decision making, principals were trained in the capacities needed to read, interpret
and use local and provincially-generated student data to inform decision-making processes in schools. These district efforts armed principals with sensemaking mechanisms (ability to notice, interpret and understand how to use data) needed to effectively lead evidence-informed decision making processes within their schools. Respondents described changes to the board’s orientation to data-driven decision making as the “biggest difference maker” amongst all board efforts for instructional improvement.

Marinee on the other hand, increased its use of data as a result of an identified need to focus on analyzing individual student data. This was done in an attempt to meet the Ministry’s priority goals for student achievement. Though Marinee trustees implemented a version of a policy governance model, this version lacked the kind of accountability rigor exhibited in Greenbridge. As such, the district focused on accomplishing district targets for student achievement and provided ongoing support to principals in acquiring information required to improve student achievement.

Responses to individual questions on the provincial principal survey suggest that principals believed that their districts’ emphases on analyzing, interpreting and using data to inform decision making contributed the most to enhancing their understanding of their leadership for school improvement. Data-driven decision making is highly encouraged in most organizations today and the two high-performing districts in this study made it a priority to emphasize data use and to help their principals acquire, interpret and use student data for making informed decisions.

**Continuous Deliberation**

Sensemaking has been identified as a process that is never finished. Greenbridge supported principals’ ongoing deliberation processes (including how to respond to new
information) by constantly providing various kinds of professional learning opportunities. In an attempt to help principals determine what actions to take when responding to the increasingly new demands on the principalship, and ongoing changes introduced by Ministry of Education, Greenbridge constantly provided job-embedded PD and regional training opportunities for teachers, principals and district leaders. Examples of sessions provided to principals included: understanding ministry changes to the code of conduct and use of assessment to plan for individualized instruction for each child.

Evidence from the case studies suggests that both districts employed the same approaches to help principals with their understandings of how to navigate through the unfinished processes of sensemaking. Those job-embedded PD sessions provided principals with unique opportunities to collaborate with school staff in knowledge construction and expansion (their mastery experiences) and to make sense of their instructional leadership for school improvement. Evidence indicates that the same learning opportunities presented to Greenbridge principals helped Marinee principals to stay apprised of ongoing Ministry and district changes, new knowledge in the education field, and best practices which helped them to determine how to respond to new information on a daily basis.

**Motivation-Oriented Action**

The process of responding to an environmental stimulus is influenced, in part, by the nature of a person’s motivation. Almost all contemporary theories of motivation indicate that people are motivated “by goals which they find personally compelling, as well as challenging and achievable” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 24). Greenbridge made a concerted effort to support principals with the development of achievable goals and aligned its resources to support schools’ efforts in accomplishing targets.
Principals were given the BIP and supported in writing their SIPs which had to mirror the district template. The template provided a lot of flexibility as principals were not asked to replicate the BIP but to use the information it provided to develop SIPs reflecting the individual needs of their schools. While superintendents and the Miscellaneous Lead were sent to schools to help boost principals’ efforts in writing their school plans, superintendents were also charged with the task of monitoring the extent to which principals were doing what the district expected them to do. During those monitoring sessions, superintendents requested principals to present student achievement portfolios for reading, writing, and math as they demonstrated the level of progress within each school and formed a basis on which conversations on instructional improvements were developed with principals.

Marinee district leaders also made a concerted effort to support principals with the development of achievable goals and aligned district resources to support schools’ efforts in accomplishing targets. Following the district’s efforts to ‘change the role of school leaders’ to focus on instructional improvement, superintendents encountered resistance from some school leaders who did not see themselves as “number crunchers” but as managers. According to one superintendent, this was partly due to differences in principal and superintendent beliefs (schematic framing) about standardized tests, explicating the impact of sensemaking processes on change efforts in Marinee. Most principals did not agree with the use of standardized tests and the way students were “treated as subjects.” Most superintendents on the other hand, believed in the value of some standards to effectively evaluate and set the stage for improvement. In an attempt to boost Marinee principals’ interests, and buy-in to school improvement initiatives, a superintendent dialogued with principals about the importance of having standards and went on to create an EQAO cup game including all principals under his care.
In order to emphasize the concept of ‘pressure and support’ through which principals were held accountable for instructional improvement capacities, Marinee district on its part, requested memos of classroom walkthroughs (three times a week for 15 minutes) from all principals. This accountability mechanism, coordinated by the superintendents of school effectiveness (SEF) who supports schools’ improvement planning, reinforced the message about the importance of principals’ focus on curriculum (their new role) and the district’s focus on improving student achievement results (the district’s top priority).

Also, Marinee used various student achievement data and provincial priorities to develop a more refined and comprehensive Board Improvement Plan (BIP), encompassing SMART goals and essential items to be included in School Improvement Plans (SIPs). These goals then informed school leaders and their staff about how to develop their school improvement plans and how to move their students forward. A more user-friendly SIP template which mirrored the BIP was developed to further assist schools with planning. Nonetheless, schools were given the flexibility to adapt the template to their specific needs. SIPs with specific targets reflected the needs of individual schools based on their student achievement data but fine-tuned to the board-provided template.

Both districts were similar in their efforts to support the alignment of their BIP to SIPs. In addition to the district-designed templates to support principals with the writing of their SIPs, superintendents were assigned to schools with a primary responsibility to visit schools and help principals with the development of their SIP. Principals, teachers and superintendents sat together and used their BIPs to develop plans on how to get students to the next level by developing SMART goals for student success. This helped principals to make sense of their board’s vision for student success and to understand how their school agenda fits into the larger picture.
While the two high-performing districts used superintendents to further support and monitor principals to ensure that they were enacting leadership capacities required for student improvement, there were differences in the monitoring approaches implemented. In Greenbridge, principals were expected to present to their superintendents their student achievement portfolios for reading, writing and math while Marinee principals were required to provide memos of the results of classroom walk-throughs. These accountability measures served to keep a balance between district expectations for student success and commitment to support principals with the execution of their leadership practices and principals’ day-to-day leadership actions for school improvement.

As the role of the principalship evolved across both districts from managers to instructional leaders, individual responses from the provincial survey providing quantitative data for this study suggest that principals felt that the priority awarded to instructional leadership (m = 2.96) and the help given to principals by senior leaders in developing, monitoring and providing feedback to their SIPs (m = 2.92), contributed moderately to enhancing their understanding of their leadership for school improvement. The practices espoused in this leadership conception and championed in both high-performing districts, was aligned with the province’s expectations for school leadership required to meet the province’s agenda for student achievement and well-being.

Social Interaction

Greenbridge and Marinee district leaders interacted with school leaders as a means of creating shared meanings to guide decision-making processes across their districts. Those social negotiations resulted in the acquisition of new behavior patterns or changes in old practices manifested in principals’ words and/or actions. The following areas describe similarities and
differences between Greenbridge and Marinee as senior district leaders interacted with their school leaders:

**Development of new structures to enhance principal participation**

In both districts, principals, district leaders, teachers, union representatives, parents and other stakeholders worked collaboratively towards board improvement. Principals in particular, were included in decision-making processes at all levels across the district. At the district level, principals in Greenbridge district were part of the *curriculum team*, which focused on developing the board improvement plan and Marinee principals were involved in the strategic planning processes for determining the district vision and improvement plan. At the school level, both Greenbridge and Marinee principals were involved in the *leadership team*, focused on identifying achievable school targets, and developing goals for the accomplishment of the set targets.

In addition to those two structures, there was a robust support structure offered by superintendents assigned to each school in Greenbridge. The relatively small size of the board helped Greenbridge staff to break the barriers associated with formal hierarchical organizational structures and made weekly superintendent school visitations feasible. While Marinee superintendents provided principals with similar one-on-one support as in Greenbridge, the size of the board only allowed for quarterly visitations each year. In Greenbridge, however, superintendents provided ongoing formal weekly one-on-one support to principals to help build their capacity for instructional improvement; they worked directly with principals and other members of the leadership team on school improvement plans, which fed into the BIP. The two instructionally-skilled superintendents who worked directly with principals had advanced to their current roles through the district as skillful teachers and school instructional leaders. Their capacity for good instruction was then passed on to principals, who in turn, helped classroom
Teachers improve on their practices for overall school improvement. Principals acknowledged the significance of such support in building their efficacy for instructional leadership, as well as their understandings of how to lead instructional improvement in their schools.

Two years prior to this study, Marinee had created a new position (the superintendent of school effectiveness) and hired a well-qualified senior staff to help principals better understand their new leadership roles (instructional leadership). Most of the principals claimed that the superintendent responsible for implementing the provinces School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) brought a new understanding of their role as instructional leaders. The superintendent for SEF emphasized high levels of focus on instructional leadership for all principals.

The evidence in both districts indicated that those new structures were created by design to encourage ongoing two-way communication between the district leaders and all schools across the district. Those new structures helped principals better understand their instructional leadership and ensured that principals were not working in isolation. This fortified the connections between school improvement plans and board improvement plans as principals made sense of the expectations for their instructional leadership. Principals’ interactions with district and school-level personnel in the school leadership team and the support they received from superintendents, itinerants/coaches and consultants/coordinators, helped them better understand their leadership for school improvement. Interschool visitations by both districts also fostered a culture of informal sharing of best practices between principals as they made sense of their leadership expectations.

**Communication and collaboration (internal relationships)**

All senior leaders in both districts described their relationships with principals as collaborative and open. Senior leaders had a high degree of readiness to support board staff through formal meetings, as well as on an as-needed basis. Concurring with district leaders,
principals often described their communication with district leaders as “open”, “excellent”, “very close”, and “phenomenal.” According to the evidence from Greenbridge, a significant factor contributing to those positive relationships between district leaders and schools was the small size of the board, which made it easy to reach for help and acquire immediate assistance. A second contributing factor was a high degree of relational trust developed over time as most district leaders who had worked with most of the principals as colleagues advanced to their current roles from within the board.

Evidence showed that Greenbridge staff felt like colleagues working together towards common goals; improving student achievement and enhancing catholicity within the district. This shared leadership was described by one superintendent as “servant leadership.” Through the end statement reports, accountability about the progress made within each school was also shared across the district, hence, emphasizing pressure on principals to meet district expectations as they collaborated with colleagues and district leaders. In conjunction, the district provided considerable support in building principals’ capacity to understand and enact practices towards the accomplishment of the set expectations.

This trusting relationship was enhanced by an open, collaborative district culture in which principals felt comfortable to ask questions, request help and contribute creative ideas. Greenbridge, therefore provided the resources for sensemaking through open communication and a trusting relationship between the district and school leaders.

Though trust was a key factor that contributed to relationship building and communication within the two high-performing districts, there appeared to be some differences in the level of trust between both districts. As opposed to complex trusting relationships that

\[26\] In Campbell-Stephens’ discussion with John Portelli about servant leadership, she claims that “What distinguishes servant leadership from some of the other concepts of leadership is that the notion of service is put before leadership – the notion of service is prioritized.” (Portelli & Campbell-Stephens, 2009)
existed at central office level in Marinee, in Greenbridge, trust was engendered by the organization’s small size of the relative stability of leadership and the internal appointment of most district leaders. The trust in Greenbridge was fostered through opportunities for principals to meet and share their experiences with other principals and senior leaders on an ongoing basis. Examples included principal meetings and provincial projects such as Schools in the Middle, giving principals and their superintendents, opportunities to meet face-to-face regularly. Such structures resulted in excellent communications between all staff, which enhanced the level of trust within different roles across the board, as well as principals’ understandings that they could get instant and constant help in enacting their leadership practices.

Although there was little trust between trustees and superintendents in Marinee, relationships between principals and district leaders were similar to those described in Greenbridge. In cases of conflicts (between trustees and superintendents and between academic and non-academic superintendents), communication protocols were established to restore working relationships at the central level. Those protocols enhanced working relationships but fell short of the development of strong bonds of trust, a factor which seemed to have contributed significantly to Greenbridge principals’ sensemaking.

Responses to individual questions in the provincial principal survey indicated that two-way communication between central office and schools ($m = 3.03$) was one of four factors that contributed the most to principals’ sensemaking about their school improvement efforts. Though this was well established in both districts, more so in Greenbridge than Marinee, Marinee still needed to work on developing trusting relationships between the central office and schools.

**Modeling of best practices**

In Greenbridge, principals’ sensemaking was further developed through their participation in leadership team days, three times a year. Those meetings brought principals
together with the literacy coaches, coordinators, and superintendents. The district modeled the effective team practices with respect to data use as principals and other leadership team members made sense of the practices and in turn, led sessions based on these experiences with staff in their own schools.

Marinee on the other hand, used itinerants and consultants to accomplish their modeling task for improving schools and student achievement. According to the interviewees, the presence of itinerants in schools brought a new approach to principals’ professional learning. Through the site based ‘train the trainer model,’ the district intentionally built principals and division heads’ capacities for instructional leadership, which reportedly helped principals to make sense of their instructional leadership, and subsequently, to facilitate PD sessions with staff in their own schools.

**Professional development opportunities for principals**

To further contribute to principals’ learning, Greenbridge district deliberately prioritized PD and presented principals with opportunities to be involved in projects and initiatives from the Ministry. These experiences included interactions with other principal colleagues, district staff and ministry personnel. Respondents identified principals’ involvement in the province’s *Turnaround* project, *Schools in the Middle*, *Safe schools* and the *LSA* initiatives, as significant sources for building their capacities as instructional leaders. Exposing principals to a wide variety of targeted and meaningful PD opportunities in which they interacted with colleagues in small groups, helped build their capacities for meeting their district’s expectations for school improvement.

Marinee principals interacted with other principal colleagues, district staff and externally contracted experts. Through those experiences, principals were encouraged to work together, share stories of successes and challenges and help each other make sense of district expectations
for school improvement. Examples of some of those workshops focused on helping principals understand provincial goals and the BIP, and their alignment with SIPs. Respondents generally identified job-embedded PD as beneficial to instructional improvement across the district.

Outside learning opportunities, such as the network of family-of-schools meetings (which focused on increasing the achievement level of underachieving schools), were also provided to Marinee principals to further support their professional development. Through these networks the district encouraged collaborative learning and sharing between secondary schools and feeder schools to improve student success. Principals reportedly benefited from the brainstorming opportunities which acted as reinforcement to their leadership expectations. This outcome finds further support in the quantitative evidence collected for the study; principals reported that opportunities for networking and sharing of best practices, experiences and challenges with other principals colleagues and schools \((m = 2.98)\), moderately contributed to their sensemaking about school improvement.

The major similarity between both districts was the provision of job-embedded PD sessions and their involvement in ministry-led initiatives. Such PD provided principals with unique opportunities to collaborate with school staff in knowledge construction and expansion and to be able to decipher good from bad teaching when they walked into classrooms, hence, making sense of their instructional leadership for school improvement. Most of the principals in both districts agreed that the move to more focused approaches to PD had exposed principals to concepts, policies and approaches which effectively built their instructional leadership capacities. Those capacities, in turn, helped them to make sense of their leadership expectations for school improvement.

Nonetheless, there were two major differences between the districts with respect to the nature of PD offered to principals. First, Greenbridge respondents pointed to two major shifts in
district approaches to enhance professional learning in principals; a shift in content and delivery which resulted in focused PD predominantly offered on-site and aligned with school and district needs. Marinee interviewees on the other hand, pointed to a third shift in district approaches to PD – involvement of principals in PD traditionally designed for teachers only. While principals were involved in teacher-offered PD opportunities in Greenbridge, the interviewees did not explicitly mention this as a shift in the district’s PD approach. Marinee respondents in contrast, clearly stated that the district had made a concerted effort to involve principals in PD most often designed for teachers only. The greatest proportion of PD resources devoted to school embedded opportunities was usually provided in some form of “professional learning community (PLC).” The establishment of PLCs in Marinee, as in Greenbridge, demonstrated an integration of teaching and administrative staff in PD specific to school needs. Principals’ participation in PD originally offered for teachers resulted in strong instructional leaders who were capable of distinguishing between good and bad teaching during principal walkthroughs; those opportunities enhanced the abilities of those principals who already had high levels of instructional capacities and developed such capacities for those with low instructional skills. Quantitative evidence suggested that principals felt that the release time awarded for them to create PLCs with staff and develop initiatives towards school improvement \( (m = 2.77) \), moderately enhanced their sensemaking.

Second, principals from both districts agreed that their superintendents were key resources for developing capacities necessary for the execution of their instructional leadership practices, but there were differences in the frequency of visitations manifested between both cases as mentioned above. Greenbridge superintendents seemed to have developed a stronger rapport with their principals with a significant presence in schools on a weekly basis compared to Marinee superintendents, who reportedly visited schools only four times a year to support
principals in building capacities for instructional leadership. In order to meet expectations for one-on-one support on a more regular basis, Marinee assigned special teachers (itinerants) skilled in literacy instruction to every elementary school for one complete day on a weekly basis to support classroom instruction. Most of the principals interviewed reported that these itinerants helped them to build their efficacy in accomplishing district expectations specifically with respect to evidence use. A similar role was played in Greenbridge by an assigned miscellaneous lead with expert knowledge who worked closely with schools to support evidence-based decision making.

In addition to PD \((m = 3.07)\) being ranked the second most important factor that contributed to principals’ sensemaking on the basis of responses to individual provincial survey questions, principals felt that accessibility of system leaders for information or personal assistance \((m = 3.01)\) greatly enhanced their understandings of leadership for school improvement. Those practices as indicated in the evidence of the two-high performing cases, helped to keep their principals apprised of any Ministry changes or new expectations to their leadership. Both districts offered principals with opportunities for job-embedded professional development, meeting senior leaders for support, and networking with other colleagues across the board.

**Principals’ Efficacy**

This section uses Bandura’s sources of leader efficacy (mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and emotional arousal processes) as a framework to describe how Greenbridge and Marinee districts supported their principals in building their efficacy in accomplishing district expectations for school improvement. Because many of the same district
initiatives that contributed to principals’ sensemaking also built their efficacy for instructional leadership, they are described quite briefly here.

**Mastery Experiences**

Both high-performing districts fostered principals’ understanding of curriculum and instructional strategies through: coaches and superintendent visits, job-embedded PD and regional training opportunities, informal sharing between principals (interschool visitations), and provision of resources and opportunities for principals to be involved in different projects. Principals’ involvement in Ministry initiatives with lots of resources to build capacity and avenues for sharing significantly increased their opportunities for knowledge construction and expansion (their mastery experiences).

Greenbridge and Marinee made similar efforts to develop achievable goals and aligned resources to support the accomplishment of targets as this helped to provide principals with clear directions on how to develop their SIPs. This shifted the focus and enabled principals to “dig down deep looking at the story of a student, not a number.” Those exposures positively influenced principal’s sense of efficacy and enhanced the feeling that they can successfully accomplish a future task that matched prior experiences (garnered from district PD and/or other principal colleagues) they had with a similar task.

Of Bandura’s four categories of influences on efficacy, quantitative data for the study indicated that districts’ uses of mastery experiences contributed most to principals’ sense of efficacy ($m = 3.21$).
Vicarious Experiences

Vicarious experience, as described in chapter 2, entails observing a competent individual (a model) successfully completing similar tasks. In Greenbridge, leadership teams were brought together three times a year to share experiences and the district modeled to the team the practices of successful team work with respect to data use. Upon return to their schools, principals led sessions about what they had learned with their staff.

Common to both Greenbridge and Marinee was interschool visitations encouraged by the districts as schools were challenged to look for successes and what they could learn from each other. Through those opportunities, principals were given the chance to observe competent individuals as they accomplished tasks that principals were expected to complete in their own schools.

Unlike Greenbridge respondents, Marinee respondents explicitly identified the Principals and Vice Principals Mentorship program as a means by which their sense of efficacy for instructional leadership was built. Through the pairing of new and experienced leaders, the skills of experienced principals were matched with the needs of new principal(s) to help new principals with the interpretation of data and support their overall leadership needs. As new principals interacted with their ‘models’ they developed efficacy about enacting effective leadership practices. These and other PD opportunities resulted in enormous gains in staff understanding of data, its interpretation and use and principals’ navigation of the challenges encompassing the 21st century principalship.

Vicarious experiences, measured in the survey with a single item describing opportunities for principals to observe their principal colleagues, was perceived by principals across the province to have the least influence (Bandura’s four sources of influence) on their sense of efficacy for school improvement ($m = 2.93$). Evidence from individual survey questions
suggested that principals felt that the level of trust shared with their principal colleagues across their districts \((m = 3.46)\), contributed most to their sense of efficacy. One of the lowest mean ratings on the survey was recorded for opportunities to see other principals succeeding in performing tasks similar to what principals are expected to do in their schools \((m = 2.93)\).

One would expect a higher rating for principals’ efficacy resulting from principals’ observing their colleagues who have demonstrable success at what they do to lead schools. Such modeling or shadowing techniques can be very difficult to implement as past research suggests that the degree of influence of vicarious observations will vary “based on the level of similarity between the model and the observer on characteristics that are relevant to the task, and the similarity of the observed task and the task presently faced by the individual” (Hannah et al., 2008, p. 18). While mentoring programs in Ontario are structured to overcome any difficulties involved in such modeling practices, regular interschool visitations strongly encouraged by the two case study districts in my study might not have been able to accommodate the need for a perfect fit between the observer and the expert. This result does not diminish in any way the positive effect of interschool visitations among principals. Rather, what it shows is that districts should focus more on the other behaviors (associated with the other three sources of efficacy) that have been shown to contribute most to principals’ sense of efficacy.

**Verbal Persuasion**

This source of leadership efficacy includes, for example, encouragement from others, expressions of appreciation from others, and positive feedback from a trustworthy and respected individual in the organization. Evidence from Greenbridge suggested that principals’ efficacy was a function of their work with their curriculum savvy superintendents, who visited schools on a weekly basis to provide principals with one-on-one support in developing their school
improvement plans, for example. During such visitations, principals were provided with
constructive feedback, appreciation and encouragement, thereby influencing their self-efficacy
beliefs about their leadership for school improvement.

Also, with a lack of a formal leadership recruitment process, the district directly
persuaded school leaders with demonstrable instructional capacities to apply for superintendent
positions. This approach fostered trust in district leaders as most of them had advanced to their
positions from within the district. As reported, these district leaders who had worked in
Greenbridge over a long period of time recognized the work that principals were doing to foster
student achievement and celebrated their successes. The data of this study suggested that such
recognition and celebrations boosted principals’ sense of efficacy in their ability to lead schools.

The once a month PLCs and family-of-schools’ meetings held across Marinee, were cited
as important structures through which schools revisited and reviewed their SIPs. The family-of-
schools model served as a support system for principals and their colleagues in times of need as
it offered opportunities for sharing. It also helped principals to get to know each other and
develop their leadership efficacy. One principal explained:

I find it helpful. It helps us to build the confidence of each other. It helps to know
each other. I can call a principal to help on instructional leadership.

Both districts emphasized recruiting leaders with demonstrable instructional leadership
skills. Unlike Greenbridge, Marinee had a formal process to identify and recruit the right leaders
to enhance student achievement. Through the districts’ leadership strategy for identifying,
recruiting and preparing leaders, tied to the district’s vision (improving student achievement and
enhancing catholicity), potential leaders with instructional leadership capacities were
encouraged and persuaded to apply for leadership positions locally and centrally. Also, both new
and experienced principals received ongoing training to keep them apprised of board
expectations and current research. Greenbridge on its part, through its superintendents who had a trusting relationship with school staff, persuaded aspirants from within the district to apply for leadership positions.

Based on the mean score of principal responses from the provincial survey, verbal persuasion ranked third ($m = 3.00$) among Bandura’s four sources of efficacy. Interestingly, one of the highest means recorded for individual questions on the principal survey indicated that readily available superintendents ($m = 3.38$) contributed most to principals’ sense of efficacy.

**Emotional Arousal**

As results of the principal survey indicated, this emotional arousal was the second most highly rated source (after mastery experiences) of principals’ sense of efficacy ($m = 3.05$). Responses to individual survey items indicated substantial influence of high mean scores for districts’ assignment of a principal to a school for which the principal is well suited (3.30) and the autonomy granted to principals to enact leadership practices in the best interests of their school and students. These were practices implemented across both districts, though only one (Marinee) had a formal leadership strategy in place. Principals in both districts reported having been highly motivated to do their job as the districts involved principals in the alignment of BIP to SIPs as well as districts’ alignment of its resources with school goals for student achievement.

In summary, the cross-case analysis shows that both districts engaged in somewhat similar approaches to enhance principals’ sensemaking and efficacy in their ability to lead schools. Overall, while the key approaches used by the two districts were similar, the differences originated from things such as the culture of the district, names ascribed to district leaders supporting principals on a one-on-one basis, and the frequency of district-school visitations. Those district efforts enabled principals of the two districts to use the five sensemaking resources
(schematic framing, knowledge acquisition, continuous deliberation, motivation oriented action and social interaction) to better understand their leadership for school improvement. The districts also engaged in actions consistent with Bandura’s four sources of efficacy (mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and emotional arousal) in order to enhance their principals’ sense of efficacy to lead their schools.

The qualitative results (see Chapters 5, 6, and 7) have provided understanding from the respondents perspectives about district actions that influence their sense of efficacy and sensemaking. The following chapter summarizes and discusses the findings of this study in relation to other research in the field.
CHAPTER 8
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The study was concerned broadly with the actions districts use to improve the instructional capacities of principals. More specifically, it asked:

- Which district actions influence principals’ sense of efficacy for school improvement?
- Which district actions help principals make sense of their instructional leadership responsibilities?

District Actions that Influence Principals’ Sensemaking

Among the district actions tested in the two case study districts (see Chapters 5, 6, and 7), the survey evidence from a much larger sample revealed three of them as the highest rated in their influence on sensemaking by principals. Most principals interviewed in the two high-performing districts also spoke about the same district actions as being important. Principals felt that districts contributed most to enhance their understanding of their leadership for school improvement when they (districts): emphasized and supported principals’ analysis, interpretation, and use of data for decision making; provided principals with various PD opportunities closely aligned with their work; and created opportunities for two-way open communications between schools and the central office with the involvement of principals in setting district directions. District actions making the least contribution to principals’ sensemaking were opportunities from the district to engage parents and local communities in school improvement efforts, and advice from district on how to build productive relations with teachers. The following section discusses the three key district actions with the most influence on principals’ sensemaking in relation to similar research in the field.
Emphasizing and Supporting Principals’ Understanding of Data Use

Supporting principals’ use of evidence was highly rated by district leaders and shown to have contributed most to principals’ sensemaking about how to best lead schools. Districts fostered principals’ sensemaking when they contributed to principals’ understandings of data acquisition, interpretation, and use for decision making. Evidence-informed decision making is increasingly being recognized as a strategy for improving schools. However, there are numerous barriers to the use of evidence-based practices. Reflecting a growing body of research, Coburn and Talbert (2006, p. 471) highlight such obstacles to evidence use as:

- Lack of time (Supovitz & Klein 2003; Wayman & Stringfield, 2006).
- Lack of technological infrastructure (Chen et al., 2005; Lachat & Smith, 2005).
- Lack of access to appropriate data (Kerr et al., 2006).
- A culture of teaching that works against ongoing evidence use (Ingram et al., 2004).

The two high-performing districts in this study made an effort to counteract these obstacles and support principals’ sensemaking about data use by:

- Providing time for principals to meet as a group or attend training sessions needed to make sense of data necessary for decision making in their buildings (see also Togneri & Anderson, 2003).
- Providing technologies to support data use and making data collection and access readily available to all schools (see also Cawelti, 2001).
- Assigning district personnel (itinerants/coaches) to visit schools and provide support with respect to accessing, interpreting, and using data (see also Langer, 2000; Snipes et al, 2002).
- Creating a culture in which principals and staff believe that evidence use is necessary for decision making (see also Togneri & Anderson, 2003).
These district actions illustrate how high-performing districts can overcome commonly identified obstacles to evidence use, and help build principals’ capacities to analyze, interpret, and use data to make decisions (see also Maguire, 2003; Skrla et al., 2000; Snipes et al., 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Previous evidence has suggested that conceptions of evidence use are shaped by the differences embedded in the role and responsibilities of district and school staff (Corcoran et al., 2001; Light et al., 2005). Similarly, school and district leaders in the two high-performing districts in my study believed in the value of data-driven decision making, but had different conceptions of the best evidence to be used. Most principals in these two districts did not agree with the importance being placed on standardized test results but senior leaders favored the need for some standards on which students were assessed. Past research suggests that these differences in views might be shaped by such sensemaking properties as individual beliefs, knowledge from preparation programs, professional associations and the political or educational agenda at the time of the study (Krumm & Holmstrom, 2011). To meet the varied needs of different stakeholders, efforts were made in each of the two districts to ensure that data were collected systematically from a wide variety of provincial and school level tests and the best possible assessment tools were used to inform decision making processes. This is consistent with Coburn and Talbert’s (2006) evidence indicating that since those in different roles have varied needs for data, “moving towards a coherent systematic strategy for evidence based practice may require a system of evidence use that allows for and supports access to different kinds of evidence for different purposes at different levels of the system.” (p. 491)

Also in line with evidence from studies of other high-performing districts, both districts in my study had developed efficient information management systems that made data readily available to schools to inform decision making processes about improving student achievement
(Cawelti, 2001). Choo’s (2001) example of the knowledge cycle of a 1967-1977 World Health Organization Smallpox Eradication Programme concluded that “effective information management was the glue that held together the cycles of interpretation, innovation, action, and feedback which moved the program towards its remarkable achievement” (p. 204). The two high-performing districts in my study were able to diversify data used for decision making and overcome two common challenges to data use; lack of technological infrastructure (see Chen et al., 2005; Lachat & Smith, 2006) and lack of access to appropriate data (see Kerr et al., 2006).

Results of provincially-administered criterion-referenced tests in Ontario are one of the means through which district and school staff are held accountable to parents and the wider community. Consistent with best practices reported in other studies (Iatarola & Fruchter, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003), however, the two high-performing districts in this study encouraged the use of other tests, as well as provincial tests (for example, CASSI, DRA, OWA, classroom data walls, report cards, exit and parent surveys).

Based on findings from a comparative analysis of low and high-performing systems in New York City, Iatarola and Fruchter (2004) concluded that high-performing districts “stressed the importance of integrating parental information and feedback about children’s learning needs and tried to balance test score results with a blend of other information about students’ learning capacities and performances” (p. 504). The use of multiple data sources was encouraged in the two high-performing districts of my study through a governance culture, in one of the districts, that focused on data use and a strong personnel appraisal system; the other district, focused on timelines, strategies, and outcomes for student achievement. These two high-performing districts, in sum, showed intentionality and commitment to improve evidence use by overcoming obstacles often associated with such use (see Ingram et al., 2004).
The approaches of the two high performing districts in this study toward data use fly in the face of claims made much earlier by Weick (1979) that schools and districts are “loosely coupled” systems. Evidence from my study conforms with Rorrer and colleague’s (2008) conception of districts as institutional actors. The two districts in this study were more accurately described as “variably coupled.” Social interactions between these two districts and their schools about accountability measures put in place for reporting on student progress at classroom, school, and district levels are best described as ‘tightly coupled.’ Within these districts, however, school leaders were allowed the flexibility to determine their school’s priorities as long as they were aligned to district priorities, and to control their budgets. So while these high-performing districts tightened accountability measures, they also maintained a balance between accountability and flexibility (Ragland et al., 1999); they were “variably coupled”, a form of coupling also observed in Scanlan’s (2009) study of two Catholic school systems. Scanlan reported that “although many dimensions of the system of schools are inherently loosely coupled, the central office tightens this coupling when it can, with the effect of advancing the reform agenda” (p. 650).

It would be interesting to compare high-performing and low-performing districts to see if schools in low-performing districts fit into the traditional categorization of schools as loosely coupled systems. To the best of my knowledge, most educational systems around the world have emphasized rigorous accountability measures especially for low-performing schools in an effort to turnaround the schools and improve student achievement. The Ontario government for example, at the time of this study had introduced different intervention techniques (see Chapter 1) to support low-performing schools, in particular, including stringent accountability demands.

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27 Mitchell and Cunningham (1986, p. 208) describe this bureaucratic view of schools as a “perspective [that] portrays a school as a series of disconnected parts operated in a shifting context of ambiguous goals, unclear technologies, fluid participation, and uncoordinated activities” and Weick and other researchers describe loosely coupled systems as flexible and adaptive (Meyer & Rowan, 1983; Weick, 1979).
The previous chapter described how the high-performing districts involved in this study, took advantage of the benefits associated with government interventions (e.g. through the LSA and turnaround projects) to support their low-performing schools. Arguably, the implementation of those accountability measures makes it unlikely that many public schools would be completely loosely coupled in Ontario. Does the degree or form of coupling found within a district influence the extent to which school leaders are able to make sense of their instructional leadership functions? Certainly, tight coupling would seem to require adherence to district directives absent authentic sensemaking on the part of school leaders. Loose coupling on the other hand, would seem to introduce high degrees of uncertainty into sense making efforts. Future research might well inquire about the extent of sensemaking under tight, loose, and variable coupling arrangements.

Also strongly supported by evidence from past research, the two districts in this study used both internal and external support systems to build principals’ capacities to understand and use evidence of student achievement in guiding decision making related to student and school improvement (see also Langer, 2000; Maguire, 2003; Skrla et al. 2000; Snipes et al., 2002). Evidence from Coburn and Talbert’s (2006) research suggest that in order to develop coherent conceptions of evidence-based practices across districts, capacity building for district improvement actions is imperative. Similarly, in one of my case study districts, district leaders attended training sessions to build their own capacity for instructional improvement. Itinerants were in-serviced on a weekly basis to keep them apprised of their role and updated on current research about best practices for school improvement. These deliberate efforts at district-wide capacity building created a culture supporting improved leadership practices. The trained central office personnel, in turn, provided principals with one-on-one expert support and opportunities to attend conferences and network with other colleagues. These central office staff also created a
culture of shared responsibility for improving student achievement result as school performances were shared publicly with other schools during network discussions (also see Fink and Resnick, 1990).

With all the support from the districts, principals who once lacked the capacity to interpret their student data were able to make sense of data and better communicate with other stakeholders about both individual student progress and overall school progress (Krumm & Holmstrom, 2011).

**Involving School Leaders in Setting District Directions**

According to the quantitative evidence from this study, district leaders rated highest the extent to which their districts had developed a widely shared sense of purpose among both district and school staff. The importance of such a shared purpose is well supported by past research (Cawelti, 2001; Iatarola & Fruchter, 2004; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Maguire, 2003; Skrla et al., 2000; Snipes et al., 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). For example, Thomson and Hall (2011) found that “a key task of organizations – and specifically their leaders – [is] to ensure that members make sense of organizational purposes and operations and that they do this by focusing on sense-making activities” (p. 388). These researchers went on to explain that “the characteristic ascribed by change scholars – having a vision, a set of shared values and building shared ownership of directions for improvement – are completely reliant on the sense-making of all those involved.”

Results of this study help explain why the development of a shared sense of purpose was such a high priority for district leaders in the Ontario context. As in many other educational jurisdictions, at the time of this study the Ontario education system was characterized by high stakes accountability policies, reflected in standards and assessments at the classroom, school,
district and government levels. Consistent with evidence from past research, the alignment of government priorities with board improvement plans/strategic plans and alignment of school improvement plans with board improvement plans increased the coherence of messaging about goals and visions for student achievement (see Louis et al., 2005) across the districts in my study.

Each of these districts deliberately provided somewhat similar kinds of supports to help principals understand government’s priorities, district vision, and the development of their school plans for improved student achievement (see also Rorrer et al., 2009). Though this study did not inquire about the relationship between principal sensemaking and student achievement, it seems plausible if not likely that the interactions of district and school leaders and their collaborative development and alignment of district and school plans played a crucial role in the performances of the two case study districts. Some previous evidence indicates that a principal’s stated goals and priorities for their school and the manner in which the goals and priorities are communicated, shared and assimilated within the school and local community have significant effects on school performance (Newmann et al., 2002; Spillane, 2000) and student achievement in particular (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Case study results from my study suggest that the two districts had developed well understood and clearly shared visions for student achievement aligned with the province’s core priorities.

Through two-way communication between schools and the central office to enhance principals’ sensemaking, districts included school leaders in major district decisions. The collective engagement of all stakeholders with district leaders working closely with building leaders (see also Patterson et al., 2010) in strategic planning processes at the district level, helped principals to garner a better understanding of the vision and how they could develop and align
their school plans with the board improvement plans. This collective engagement gave principals a sense of ownership and responsibility for accomplishing the vision. In accord with past research, this evidence suggests that sensemaking is an active two-way process through which information is mentally placed in a frame and the frame is built around the information (Klein, Moon, & Hoffman, 2006).

Superintendents of education play a critical role in supporting structures for improvement both at the school and district level (Fink & Resnick, 1999; Ragland et al., 1999; Skrla et al., 2000) and social interactions influence the way principals’ make sense of their role (Patterson et al., 2010). Additionally, Krumm and Holmstrom (2011) concluded that “school leaders can play an important role in shaping a staff’s vision for why things are the way they are because, intentionally or not, this vision can reinforce and shape present work.” Both case study districts “changed the role” of principals from managers to instructional leaders (see also Rorrer et al., 2009; Skrla et al., 2000; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001), provided training opportunities for principals to support the new role and further develop their instructional leadership capacities (see also Maguire, 2003). These districts used curriculum-savvy superintendents to support and monitor principals. Monitoring by superintendents was to ensure that principals had and used the capacities required to improve the quality of instruction in their buildings (see also Cawelti, 2001; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Similar results were obtained from the study’s quantitative evidence which indicated that principals across the province felt that their districts’ emphasis on instructional leadership positively influenced their sensemaking about their leadership for school improvement.
Providing PD to Enhance Principals’ Understanding of Their Leadership

Quantitative evidence from this study indicated that district leaders believed strongly that they were providing meaningful PD opportunities for principals in support of their school improvement initiatives. These data also showed that principals felt that the opportunities for PD provided by the district enhanced their understandings of how best to exercise their leadership. These results are consistent with the results of Stringfield and colleague’s (2005) longitudinal study of achievement trajectories in the Baltimore City Public School system. They concluded that the district’s success was contingent on “the multifaceted PD of current staff and the hiring of increasingly qualified administrators and teachers” (p. 68). Furthermore, evidence from the high-performing districts in this study show that principals’ sensemaking was enhanced when districts provided principals with targeted PD and prioritized instructional leadership. Professional development efforts (for example, job-embedded and regional PD opportunities) in both districts aimed to develop such instructional capacities in leaders. Maguire’s (2003) study also found high-performing districts reflected these priorities.

As with the qualitative evidence from this study, the quantitative evidence demonstrated that districts helped to enhance principals’ sensemaking through a variety of PD mechanisms: the accessibility of senior leaders for personal assistance, provision of resources to support school-based PD, district facilitated networks of principals with other colleagues, and the help provided in writing their school improvement plans and then implementing those plans. These results are similar to the results of Grodzki’s (2011) qualitative study of school and system leaders new to their role; “by establishing and supporting various training and development programs, the District provided opportunities for candidates and new administrators to be acculturated into the expectations and requirements of the administrative role” (p. 15). Also, findings from my study reveal how the two high-performing districts changed the principal’s role from manager to
instructional leader and provided the necessary tools to assist principals in assuming their new instructional leadership responsibilities. In the case study districts, multiple training opportunities were offered to principals that have also been endorsed by earlier research. For example, as opposed to monthly principal meetings consumed by discussions of management issues and presentation of information, the high-performing districts in this study focused monthly principal meetings on continuing professional learning of all school leaders (see also Snipes et al., 2002; Togneri & Anderson). Other opportunities for professional learning included: networking of schools (see also Grodzki, 2011); participation in Ministry-sponsored turnaround projects, the province’s Leading Student Achievement project, and safe schools initiatives (Ministry led), mentorship programs (see also Eilers & Camacho, 2007; Elmore & Burney, 1998), participation in job-embedded professional development (see Eilers & Camacho, 2007) and conferences (see Fink & Resnick, 1999). Interview respondents in my study valued those opportunities because they could “bounce ideas” off each other and stay on top of what was happening in other schools, learn what worked in other schools, engage in knowledge creation (see also Choo, 2001), and develop a peer-support system to call on when significant challenges arose in their schools.

Principals in the two case study districts also described different sensemaking scenarios resulting from their participation in different professional development sessions. Once they were back at their schools, principals reflected on what they had learned, and subsequently, made changes to their leadership practices. According to this evidence, strongly supported by past research, the PD sessions enhanced principals’ job-relevant knowledge which in turn, influenced how they; observed classroom practices (see also Nelson & Sassi, 2000), created learning and sharing opportunities for staff members (also see Burch & Spillane, 2003), used data to inform decision making processes in classrooms and their schools at large (as discussed in Coburn &
Talbert, 2006), and worked collaboratively with staff and parents to create a shared vision for student achievement (also reported in Thomson & Hall, 2011).

Snipes and colleagues (2002) found that high-performing districts aligned professional development with school improvement initiatives to ensure that there was consistent implementation of district programs and mandated forms of instruction. Similarly, districts in this study used PD to develop shared meanings which enhanced consistency in implementation of policies, initiatives, and programs across the boards.

Research suggests the importance of prioritizing the social aspect of sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005; Stensaker, Falkenberg, & Gronhaug, 2008), such as interactions that occur during PD as a means of accomplishing organizational success. This evidence indicates that such social interactions underpin commonly shared meanings and effective practices which in turn, increase the resilience of organizational members (principals) in the face of challenging circumstances.

**District Actions that Influence Principals’ Sense of Efficacy**

Findings of the study about how districts improve principals’ sense of efficacy for school improvement align well with the four sources of efficacy identified by Bandura (mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal). Among these four sources, this study pointed to the provision of mastery experiences as having the greatest influence followed by emotional arousal and verbal persuasion. Vicarious experiences, measured in the survey with a single item describing opportunities for principals to observe other principal colleagues, was perceived by principals to have the least influence on their sense of efficacy for school improvement.

Responses to individual survey questions suggest that principals felt that the level of trust shared with their principal colleagues across the board and the support of readily available
superintendents contributed most to their sense of efficacy. Principals rated as weakest sources of efficacy district expressions of appreciation and celebration of the value of principals’ work, and opportunities to see other principals succeeding in performing tasks similar to what principals were expected to do in their schools. These quantitative results were supported by evidence from the two high-performing districts in the study summarized using Bandura’s sources of efficacy as follows:

**Mastery Experiences**

Both districts worked hard to build principals’ capacities for instructional improvement, as past research supports that “leaders’ efficacy involves their perception both of their capabilities and how those capabilities can be used” (Hannah et al., 2008, p. 19). Furthermore, results from the case study districts suggest that districts influence principals’ instructional leadership capacities and contribute most to principals’ efficacy when they: nurture high levels of trust throughout the district giving principals the autonomy to try different things in their own schools; assign itinerants to visit schools on a weekly basis and support principal and staff data interpretation; facilitate network interactions among their principals with abundant in-service opportunities; support principals with the writing of their SIPS; carefully align principals’ assignment to schools to their dispositions and capacities; involve principals in setting district direction through strategic planning; and provide schools with tools to look for student data. The study’s quantitative data also indicate that mastery experiences contributed most to principals’ efficacy, in particular, support from superintendents and PD. These findings support past research which suggests that districts have important influence on leaders’ mastery experiences (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008) in developing school priorities among other things.
Similar to Bandura’s depiction of mastery experiences as one of the sources of leader
efficacy, other research shows that, “as one gains greater leadership efficacy, or confidence in
one’s ability to lead a group, that individual is more likely to engage in leadership experiences,
which will serve to increase the individual’s leadership efficacy” (Hannah et al., 2008, cited in
Murphy & Johnson, 2011, p. 460). My study suggests that, when principals enacted instructional
leadership practices related to changes emphasized in their districts, data on student progress
became an inspiration to them and gave them a sense of efficacy in their ability to lead
instructional improvement in their buildings. Evidence about the characteristics of effective
district indicates that district-wide use of data is linked with improvements in student learning
(Anderson & Togneri, 2005; Leithwood, Riedlinger, Bauer, & Jantzi, 2003). Some research also
suggests that self-efficacy is associated with leaders’ enactment of effective leadership practices
(Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008) and improvements in student outcome (Hallinger & Heck, 1998).
However, my results – in line with previous evidence (DeMoulin, 1992; Dimmock & Hattie,
1996) indicate that elementary as opposed to secondary principals report increased levels of
understanding of their instructional leadership expectations and efficacy in interpreting and using
data.

Interview data suggests that, at the time of the study, the increased emphasis on
principals’ analysis and interpretation of data at the elementary level was heavily influenced by a
provincial goal to improve reading and writing scores in elementary schools. According to
respondents in the study, this emphasis prompted changes and provided an impetus for much
more precision in data use at the elementary level. Also, this emphasis led to more support for
elementary principals in collecting, interpreting, and using data in accordance with a higher
expectation for improvement at the elementary level than secondary. These results reflect the
results reported by Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) who found that “elementary schools are typically more sensitive than secondary schools to leadership influence.” (p. 523)

As indicated in the two case studies and supported by past research, superintendents with high instructional capacities had a significant influence on principals’ capacities to understand the district’s vision and develop/align their school vision and plans with the district’s (see also Fink & Resnick, 1999), and on principals’ senses of efficacy in their abilities to lead instructional improvement in their buildings. My quantitative data is consistent with such results. Survey results demonstrated high mean scores for support and feedback that principals count on from their superintendents in building their sense of efficacy for instructional improvement

**Emotional Arousal**

Setting directions has been identified as a key leadership practice (or organizational action) for guiding an organization towards the accomplishment of its mission (Leithwood et al. 2004). Thus any district that successfully engages its school leaders in the process (see also Patterson et al., 2010) is likely to contribute to the sense of efficacy of its principals (Earley & Lituchy, 1991; Prussia et al., 1998). Wood and Bandura (1989) found that organizational managers who possessed higher self-efficacy beliefs experienced less depression when faced with adversities. Similarly, in their review of successful school principalship, Mulford and colleagues (2007) observed that successful principals tended to have higher levels of awareness and efficacy and greater sense of purpose than their less successful counterparts. Hannah and colleagues (2008, p. 19) explain that “the efficacy beliefs of highly self-aware leaders will be based on realistic assessments of their actual capabilities, or what Bandura (1997) calls ‘efficacy calibration’, where calibration helps the leader to identify areas for needed skill development.” Further to these observations, my study found that high-performing districts played a pivotal role
in developing both leadership capacity and efficacy even in their less successful principals when they “influence all four immediate sources of efficacy identified by Bandura” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008: p. 506).

My study pointed to emotional arousal as an important contribution of districts to principals’ sense of efficacy. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008: p. 507) argued that “to the extent that visions are inspirational, they [districts] should foster those emotional arousal processes antecedent to the development of efficacy beliefs.” Organizational members must engage in meaning-making processes to decide between competing values, priorities, and goals (Ryan, 2006; Thompson & Hall, 2011), if they are to set clearly shared directions for the organization. This can be accomplished through district mediation (Coburn & Talbert, 2006). As evidence from the case studies suggests, district mediation was done through the in-servicing opportunities for principals, for example. Similar to the approaches used in designing SIPs in the high-performing districts of my study, best practice research on setting directions stipulates that, such priorities should be kept simple, concise and clear, and limited to a small number of achievable goals at a time (Leithwood et al., 2004). This level of emphasis enables leaders “to make the right decisions and set the correct direction for their organizations to succeed” (Murphy & Johnson, 2011, p. 459).

Considerable evidence points to strong contributions of this leader behavior (setting directions) to leader effects (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005) and significant effects of leadership on teacher efficacy and indirect effects on student achievement (Leithwood, 2010). Contrary to this long-standing evidence, a more recent study by Leithwood & Jantzi (2008) shows “relatively weak contributions of setting direction” on leader efficacy (p. 521). The researchers suggest that the efficacy of school leaders “arises less from direction and inspiration and more from the aligned and supportive nature of their working conditions”
(Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008: p. 521). However, my results confirm the bulk of prior research showing district direction setting practices to be a key source of leader sensemaking and efficacy. The study also suggests that the involvement of principals in the process of setting district direction was a key factor contributing to the district’s influence on principals’ sense of efficacy. It is likely that without the involvement of principals in strategic planning processes at the district level, district direction setting would have contributed less to principals’ efficacy, as suggested by Leithwood and Jantzi (2008).

**Verbal Persuasion**

Results from the case study districts indicate that superintendents of education played a critical role in supporting structures for improvement both at the school and district level, a result much in line with previous research (Fink & Resnick, 1999; Ragland et al., 1999; Skrla et al., 2000). As with previous evidence, both districts “changed the role” of principals from managers to instructional leaders (see also Rorrer et al., 2009; Skrla et al., 2000; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001) and used curriculum-savvy superintendents to support and monitor principals. This monitoring entailed superintendents visiting schools and providing feedback to principals to ensure that principals had and used the capacities required to improve the quality of instruction in their buildings. The positive feedback provided by the superintendents enhanced principals’ sense of efficacy in their ability to lead their buildings (see also Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper, 2001; Garland & Adkinson, 1987).

**Vicarious Experiences**

Evidence from this study suggests that vicarious experiences, as they are typically measured, did not contribute much to principals’ sense of efficacy. However, the study did
discover that trust between district leaders and principals was critical to principals’ efficacy. Although the study did not set out to discover just how such trust developed, it seems to have been an outcome of principals and superintendents engaging together in meaningful improvement work. Principals’ experiences of such work, therefore, might be considered the form that vicarious experience took in this study while the trust developed from such experiences served as a mediator in the building of principals’ sense of efficacy.

The two high-performing districts in my study exhibited different levels of trust amongst district leaders, and between district leaders and school leaders. While there were high levels of trust amongst Grenbridge district leaders and between their district leaders and school leaders, Marinee struggled with trust issues mostly at the level of the district (central office) but exhibited trusting relationships between academic superintendents and school leaders. Despite these differences between the two districts, they both had similar results in terms of principals’ perceptions of district actions on their sense of efficacy to lead schools. Two explanations could be advanced as to why the districts ended up with similar results despite the differences in their levels of trust. First, the effects of district actions tested in this study are interdependent. So though Marinee did not do all well as Greenbridge in terms of building trusting relationships among district leaders they ended up with similar results because of the effect of other factors. Second, the nature of school and district relationship that matters the most for principals’ efficacy is the level of trust between school leaders and the academic superintendents whom they are in direct contact with as opposed to other peripheral relationships. In both case studies the relationships between academic superintendents and school leaders were good resulting in similar results despite other differences. This evidence and line of argument suggest that trust is an important factor in building principals’ efficacy but the lack of it does not necessarily
undermine a district’s ability to be effective at supporting its school leaders. This conjecture certainly warrants more direct study.

The next section discusses the high-leverage district actions common to both districts as well as the province at large.

**High-Leverage District Actions**

Both the quantitative and qualitative data from this study confirm what some past research has found (e.g., Burch & Spillane, 2004) - some of the actions of district leaders have significant influence on both principal sensemaking and principal efficacy for school improvement; they are in this sense “high leverage”. Chapter five pointed to eight such actions in Greenbridge and Chapter six identified 10 such actions in Marinee. All 12 district actions tested in this study were identified when results from the two districts are combined, but only four of those actions were common to both districts including:

- networking interactions among principals with lots of opportunities for professional development,
- job-embedded and regional professional development opportunities, involving principals in setting district directions,
- superintendent support for principals with the writing of their school improvement plans,
- emphasis on evidence use alongside support with data interpretation and use for decision making processes.

In addition, the survey data highlighted, as particularly influential, three of these four sets of district actions. Table 18 reports the survey results about these three actions.
Table 18

Provincial Survey Results: District Actions Influencing Both Principals’ Efficacy and Sensemaking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Actions</th>
<th>Principals’ Efficacy Means</th>
<th>Principals’ Sensemaking Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide professional development opportunities</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate network interactions among principals</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of superintendents to support with writing of SIPs</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>2.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These three district actions have been discussed in some depth earlier in this chapter. In addition to these factors, results of the study also found that principal tenure and principal autonomy influenced principals’ sensemaking and sense of efficacy in the two high-performing districts.

Long Tenure Experiences

On average, principals in both districts had worked a total of 24 years in their districts while their senior leaders reported working a total of 14 years. Some research indicates that rapid turnover of school leaders has negative effects on school improvement efforts (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). In the two districts in this study, long tenure was quite common and this long tenure might have influenced sensemaking processes allowing for ongoing social interactions of colleagues over extended periods of time. Research on teacher quality, for example, shows that experience is one of the most consistent predictors of student achievement gains (Rice, 2003; Wilson & Floden, 2003) and the literature on successful leadership identifies experience as a predictor of change, innovation, and continuity of programs/initiatives (Louis et al, 2006). There
is also research substantiating that fidelity and long-term commitment to adopted programs improves student outcomes (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). Thompson and Hall’s (2011) study concludes that “one of the most obvious consequences of having a group of people with long histories in the school is the sense and materiality of continuity and stability” (p. 398). Long term leadership experiences in the two case study districts seems likely to have fostered trusting relationships between school and district leaders, which in turn, contributed to their sensemaking and self efficacy for school improvement.

Principal Autonomy

Long tenure and trust within the two-high performing districts were also associated with the power vested on principals to make recommendations on teacher hiring. Principals of the two case study districts reported that their recommendations were never turned down by their districts. Principals were given a substantial degree of autonomy in hiring - an important voice in the discourse around teacher quality and hiring which has been shown to have the most direct impact on student learning (Rice, 2003; Wilson & Floden, 2003).

The three “high leverage” district actions and the two district conditions (principal tenure and autonomy) common to both case studies, together with other condition characteristics of high-performing districts, have been listed in previous research as significant influences on improving student learning with some contributions to leader efficacy (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). These district actions and the conditions enhance school leaders’ ability to enact effective leadership practices (see also Hannah et al, 2008), which have been shown to have substantial influence on student outcomes (see Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005).

In sum, these research findings validate the framework guiding this study. This framework assumed that districts actions interact with principals’ internal processes to influence
principals’ efficacy and sensemaking about their leadership. When principals’ efficacy and sensemaking occur in a meaningful way, it prompts instructional leadership practices. The next and last chapter of this dissertation outlines the conclusions and implications drawn from the research.
CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to identify district actions that make a significant contribution to the development of those dispositions and capacities school-level leaders need to improve the achievement of students in their schools. Though the study was embedded in a much larger stream of research aimed at determining how to improve the contributions that schools make to student learning, the central focus of this research was district influences on school leadership. School leadership has been identified as a significant explanation for variation in student achievement across schools (see Leithwood et al., 2004) and instructional approaches to such leadership are associated with the largest proportion of this explanation (e.g., Robinson, 2007; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). One of the most important questions arising from evidence about instructional leadership effects on student achievement is how school leaders acquire the capacities and dispositions needed to exercise such leadership in their buildings. Very little research is available, however, about how districts successfully foster the development of instructional leadership dispositions and capacities on the part of their principals. Attempting to fill this knowledge gap was the central purpose of this dissertation.

The study pursued the following general research question and sub-questions: How do districts improve the instructional leadership capacities of their principals?

- What actions do districts employ to help principals improve schools?
- Which district actions influence principals’ sense of efficacy for school improvement?
- Which district actions help principals make sense of their instructional leadership responsibilities?
A “social practice” approach to sensemaking and a mixed-methods multistage research design were used for the study. Qualitative data (stage one) were provided through interviews with school (N = 23) and district (N = 15) leaders from two high-performing districts in Ontario, along with some documents. Quantitative data (stage two) were provided through online surveys of school (N = 1563) and senior district leaders (N = 250) across Ontario school districts (N = 50).

A number of overriding conclusions can be drawn from the results of this study. First, district actions do influence principals’ sensemaking and sense of efficacy for school improvement. Some of these actions influence only sensemaking or efficacy but a small handful influences both; they are in this sense “high leverage”. The high leverage district actions include:

- networking interactions among principals with lots of opportunities for professional development,
- job-embedded and regional professional development opportunities, involving principals in setting district directions,
- superintendent support for principals with the writing of their school improvement plans,
- emphasis on evidence use alongside support with data interpretation and use for decision making processes.

A second conclusion from the study is that the high-performing districts in this study invested considerable amounts of time and resources in building the instructional leadership capacities of their principals; they did this by investing in conferences, inter-school visitations and mentoring (buddying system), and by providing one-on-one support through superintendents, coaches, itinerant staff, and consultants.
The length of tenure of both district and school leaders influenced principals’ efficacy and sensemaking, another conclusion warranted by the evidence. Except in cases of problematic leadership, longer tenure was associated with stronger, trust-based, relationships between central office staff and school leaders resulting in an increased support for leadership work. In addition, although not directly related to the study’s research questions, evidence indicated that there was a difference between district influences on elementary and secondary principals’ sensemaking and efficacy. High-performing districts focused more on building elementary rather than secondary principals’ capacity, in part because of provincial emphases, at the time of this study, on increasing literacy and numeracy among elementary students.

High-performing districts, the study also found, approached interactions with their principals in similar ways to influence their sensemaking. High-performing districts maintained and strengthened the resources for sensemaking, as part of their improvement efforts; this helped principals alter their behaviors and practices and to be resilient in the face of challenging circumstances.

The key district actions highlighted by this study are associated with three of the five broad dimensions of successful leadership practices identified in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF)\(^{28}\). Learning opportunities provided by job-embedded professional development, informal networking of principals and colleagues, and mentoring (matching new and experienced principals) play a critical role in building principals’ efficacy and shaping the understanding of their leadership for school improvement.

In sum, this study demonstrated that district actions do influence principals’ efficacy and sensemaking for instructional improvement. Principals reported significant changes in their practices as a result of opportunities provided to them through professional development and

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\(^{28}\) The framework provides the foundation for educational leadership development in Ontario as it reflects leadership practices known through research to have the greatest influence on student achievement and well-being.
their constant interactions with senior leaders for support. The value of these learning opportunities was evident in schools where principals shared the knowledge gained with other staff for school improvement.

**Implications for School Districts**

Overall, the findings of this study can be used to guide school and district leaders in enacting leadership practices that will support instructional improvement efforts on a daily basis. Results point to the importance of leaders’ social interactions, understanding the importance of enhancing their ability to think retrospectively and reflect on their actions in order to create levers for instructional and overall school improvement.

Cognizant of the unintended consequences of policy design and implementation (Lubienski, 2005), along with the ability of districts to influence principal sensemaking, districts should work intentionally to support principals’ interpretations and approaches to policy implementation. Such district efforts are likely to ensure coherence of such implementation across the district when that is appropriate, and nurture local variation in policy implementation when circumstances require such variation. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence from this study suggest that districts accomplish these goals as district leaders:

- Develop policies and programs that focus on building principals’ instructional capacity to lead schools effectively. Such programs should be inclusive taking into consideration differences in identity (Patterson et al. 2010), beliefs (Coburn, 2001; Ingram et al., 2004; Spillane et al., 2002) and knowledge (Spillane, 2000) as these resources help shape how principals make sense of their leadership for school improvement. Districts are encouraged to use all available resources to support principals’ understanding of their districts’ vision. They are also encouraged to be
strategic and actively involved in Ministry-related initiatives in order to let their principals and schools benefit from the numerous resources and leadership directions associated with such involvements.

- Engage school staff, among others, in strategic planning processes geared towards the development and refinement of district and school directions (the board and school vision, mission, and improvement plans). Principals make better sense of district processes when they are involved in such processes. In cases where all principals cannot be included in this process, a representation of principals would add the principal’s voice to the discourse and the representative(s) can keep the rest of their colleagues apprised. This should help to shape principals’ sensemaking about district expectations and the enactment of leadership practices in their schools.

- Let board and school improvement plans feed off each other through interactions between school and district leaders. This interaction helps to ensure alignment and coherence across the district with school leaders feeding off senior leaders and school plans connected to district plans for student outcomes. Through such processes, principals develop a better understanding of the system as a whole and how their individual schools fit in the bigger picture – a form of social interaction that assists principals’ sensemaking.

- Initiate principal walk-throughs (Hopkins, 2008; Protheroe, 2009) and monitor them to ensure that principals have the tools required to effectively support classroom instruction. Principals should find the time for meaningful walk-throughs on a weekly basis. Principals can only effectively support teachers if they can identify teachers’ needs. An effective way of doing so is by observing teachers’ classroom practices, identifying gaps in the impact of those practices and providing resources to support
teachers in improving their practices. Principals’ days are typically charged with overwhelming numbers of demands that can keep them glued to their chairs. But it is how principals make sense of their instructional leadership and the sense of efficacy they have in their ability to lead instructional improvement in their buildings, which can increase the likelihood that principals will engage in walk-throughs even when time is scarce. Principals in the high-performing districts in this study were able to find time for walk-throughs.

- Build principals’ capacities for data analysis, interpretation, and use. These capacities are among the key “tools” principals can use to support instructional improvement. In most districts there will be considerable variation among principals in these data-related capacities; such capacity building may best be done on at least a partly individualized basis. Encourage principals to network with their colleagues as a means of individualizing the development of data-related capacities. Some principals in this study claimed that they learned more through their networking opportunities than through structured and prescribed professional development opportunities.

While this study was primarily concerned with district influences on principal sensemaking and efficacy, its findings also have implications for extra-district initiatives available to aspiring and incumbent principals. These extra-district initiatives are sponsored by such professional associations in Ontario as the Ontario Principals’ Council (OPC), the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario (CPCO), and the Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO). Much of the professional development available to principals in Ontario is provided by these professional associations. Some universities also offer professional development to principals, notably the Principal Qualification
Program for aspiring principals. Principal efficacy and sensemaking is likely to be improved on a large scale to the extent that the opportunities provided by these organizations:

- are aligned with, or explicitly related to, both district and provincial conceptions of successful leadership as described, for example, in the Ontario Leadership Framework. Such alignment or acknowledgement of an explicit concept of successful leadership will contribute greater certainty (and therefore efficacy) among principals about how to succeed with their improvement efforts; it will also increase opportunities principals have to deepen the sense they make of their work;
- explicitly acknowledge the challenges most principals face in enacting their school improvement initiatives and provide principals with authentic opportunities to develop strategies and capacities for effectively addressing those challenges.

**Implications for Future Research**

Some implications for future research have appeared in the previous chapter. In addition, a replication of this study should be conducted with a larger sample of districts and include data from teachers whose views are notably missing from this study. To the extent possible, such a study would expand the tools for data collection to be included, as well as surveys and interviews, and involve direct observation of district leaders’ interactions with principals. To extend the external validity of the results, the study might usefully include districts in several provincial contexts.
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Appendix A
Principal Interview Questions

Ontario School System Research Project

This interview will provide some of the data being collected for an IEL sponsored study of successful school systems in Ontario. Both system and school – level leaders are being interviewed and each set of interviews asks about somewhat different aspects of how your school system functions. So there may be things you consider quite important that I don’t ask you about. But you should feel free to tell me about things you consider quite important even if I don’t ask about them.
So let’s get started.

Background
1. How long have you worked in this school system…
   • in total =
   • as a principal =
   • as principal in your current school =

Core Processes: Curriculum and Instruction
2. How would you describe your communication with central office staff?
3. How does the school system’s vision shape your understanding and the development of your school mission, goals and plans?
4. What role does the school system play in shaping whatever targets or goals individual schools set for improving student learning?
5. Has this changed over the past half dozen years? If so, in what ways?
6. How much importance has the system placed, to this point on fostering students’ deep understanding about “big ideas”?
7. What does the school system do to improve your knowledge of curriculum, instructional strategies and assessment standards?

Core Processes: Uses of Evidence
8. How much importance does the school system place on using systematically collected evidence for decision making?
9. How does this manifest itself centrally and in schools?
10. How does the school system facilitate your understanding of the use of data in driving decision making in your school?
11. What kinds of evidence are used for decision making?
12. Has this changed over the past dozen years? If so, please describe.

Supporting Conditions: Professional Development
13. What types of professional development does the system provide for school leaders?
14. What types of professional development does the system provide for teachers?
15. Under what conditions or circumstances is professional development provided?
16. How effective is the current approach to professional development, in your view? Why do you think that is the case?
17. Has this changed over the past half dozen years? If so, how and why?
18. Please describe a typical principal meeting offered by the school system where PD was the primary focus.
19. How do these PD opportunities help you to make sense of your role as a manager and an instructional leader?
20. Please describe an event where the knowledge you gained from system-offered PD shaped the sensemaking around your role and how this was executed in your school.

**Supporting Conditions: Alignment**

21. Think about the board’s priorities now. How well aligned is the board’s:
   - Budget
   - Personnel policies and procedures
   **Probe:** Does the district do anything that makes you work with the union effectively?
   - Organizational structures

22. What does the district do that most influences the confidence you and your colleagues have about your school improvement work?

**Relationships: Parents**

23. How does the school system shape your understanding of school community/parental engagement and its benefits?
24. What does the school system do to encourage productive relationships between schools and parents? Is this helpful?
25. Has this changed over the past half dozen years? If so how and why?

**Relationships: Local Community Groups**

26. What does the school system do to encourage productive relationships with local community groups? Is this helpful?
27. Has this changed over the past dozen years? If so how and why?
28. What features of your relationship with these groups do you think will be the most likely to impact student learning?
29. What does the school system do to help you in building trust within the school, between the school and the board and between the school and the community?
30. Do you find this helpful in the execution of your role?
31. Anything else?
32. Can you identify a few important events that occurred within this school system over the past 4-5 year period?
33. Do these events account in any way for the current board wide trends on EQAO reading, writing and math scores? If yes, how?
Appendix B
Senior Leader Interview Questions

Ontario School System Research Project

This interview will provide some of the data being collected for an IEL sponsored study of successful school systems in Ontario. Both system and school – level leaders are being interviewed and each set of interviews asks about somewhat different aspects of how your school system functions. So there may be things you consider quite important that I don’t ask you about. But you should feel free to tell me about things you consider quite important even if I don’t ask about them.

So let’s get started.

Background

1. How long have you worked in this school system…
   - in total =
   - as a principal/vice principal =
   - as a system leader =

Core Processes: Beliefs and Vision for Students

1. Tell me about the overall vision or mission that has been established for the system.
   - What is it?
   - What specifically does the system do to influence principals’ understanding of this vision
   - How widely do you think it is understood and shared?
   - How is it used?

2. How was it developed?
   - Over what period of time was it developed
   - Who was involved?
   - What were the main challenges faced in developing it and how were they resolved?

Core Processes: Uses of Evidence

3. How much importance does the school system place on using systematically collected evidence for decision making?
4. How does this manifest itself centrally and in schools?
5. How does the system facilitate principals’ understanding of the use of data in driving decision making within their respective schools?
6. What kinds of evidence are used for decision making?
7. Has the school system’s orientation to the uses of evidence changed over the past five to six years?
Supporting Conditions: Organizational Improvement Processes

8. Please describe the school system’s approach to improving student performance.
9. What does the system do that influences (either positively or negatively) approaches to improvement in individual schools?
10. What does the system do to improve principals’ knowledge of curricular, instructional strategies and assessment standards?
11. How have these approaches to improvement by the system and individual schools changed over the past five to six years?
12. Whether intentional or not, what does the district do that influences principal’s confidence in being able to carry out their school improvement work?

Leadership: Professional Leadership

13. (Big questions here) Please describe the procedures used by the board to identify, recruit, select, prepare and appraise school-level leaders.
14. What is the board looking for in its selection of principals?
15. How have these procedures and criteria changed over the past five to six years?
16. What procedures are used by the board to identify, recruit, select, prepare and appraise senior school system leaders?
17. What kinds of senior system leaders is the board looking for?
18. How have these procedures and criteria changed over the past five to six years?
19. How does the system build principals’ capacity board-wide?
20. Please describe a professional development scenario offered by the system to principals in a typical principal meeting.
21. Do you think this professional development had an influence on principals’ understanding of their role?
22. If yes, how did this particular professional development translate in schools?

Leadership: Elected Trustees

23. Do the trustees have a primary focus? If so, what is it?
24. How directly are trustees concerned with improving student performance?
25. How has this focus changed over the past five to six years? What prompted the change?
26. How would you describe relationships between the trustees and other members of the school system (staff, parents)?
27. How engaged are the trustees in the system’s day to day work versus setting policy and monitoring its implementation?
28. How has this focus changed over the past five to six years? What prompted the change?

Relationships: Internal

29. How would you describe the working relationships and problem solving processes between central office and school staffs?
30. How does communication and problem solving occur among central office staff (e.g., networks, communities)?
31. What does the system do to help principals in building trust within the school, between the school and the board and between the school and the community?

Relationships: Ministry of Education
32. Please describe the nature of your school system’s relationships with the Ministry of Education.
33. Can you describe one or two examples to illustrate the nature of this relationship?
34. How does your school system typically respond to Ministry initiatives? Can you illustrate this response with a recent example?
35. How has this relationship changed over the past five to six years?
36. What should this relationship be like in the future? Please explain.
37. Can you identify a few important events that occurred within your system over the past 4-5 year period?
38. Do these events account in any way for the current board wide trends on EQAO reading, writing and math scores? If yes how?
Appendix C

Trustee Interview Questions

Ontario School System Research Project

This interview will provide some of the data being collected for an IEL sponsored study of successful school systems in Ontario. Both system and school – level leaders are being interviewed and each set of interviews asks about somewhat different aspects of how your school system functions. So there may be things you consider quite important that I don’t ask you about. But you should feel free to tell me about things you consider quite important even if I don’t ask about them. So let’s get started.

Background
1. How long have you been a trustee?

Core Processes: Beliefs and Vision for Students
2. Tell me about the overall vision or mission that has been established for the system.
   • What is it?
   • How widely do you think it is understood and shared?
   • How is it used?
3. How was it developed?
   • Over what period of time was it developed
   • Who was involved?
   • What were the main challenges faced in developing it and how were they resolved?
4. How have the trustees been involved in shaping the system’s vision for students?

Core Processes: Uses of Evidence
5. How much importance does the school system place on using systematically collected evidence for decision making?
6. What kinds of evidence are used by trustees for decision making?
7. How has the trustees’ orientation to the uses of evidence changed over the past five to six years?

Supporting Conditions: Organizational Improvement Processes
8. Please describe the school system’s approach to improving student performance.
9. What does the system do that influences (either positively or negatively) approaches to improvement in individual schools?
10. How have these approaches to improvement by the system and individual schools changed over the past five to six years?
11. Has trustee involvement in these approaches changed? How?
Leadership: Professional Leadership
12. (Big questions here) Please describe the procedures used by the board to identify, recruit, select, prepare and appraise school-level leaders.
13. What is the board looking for in its selection of principals?
14. How have these procedures and criteria changed over the past five to six years?
15. What procedures are used by the board to identify, recruit, select, prepare and appraise senior school system leaders?
16. What kinds of senior system leaders is the board looking for?
17. How have these procedures and criteria changed over the past five to six years?

Leadership: Elected Trustees
18. Do the trustees have a primary focus? If so, what is it?
19. How directly are trustees concerned with improving student performance?
20. How has this focus changed over the past five to six years? What prompted the change?
21. How would you describe relationships between the trustees and other members of the school system (staff, parents)?
22. How engaged are the trustees in the system’s day to day work versus setting policy and monitoring its implementation?
23. How has this focus changed over the past five to six years? What prompted the change?

Relationships: Internal
24. How would you describe the working relationships and problem solving processes between central office staff and the board of trustees?
25. How does communication and problem solving occur among trustees and between central office staff and trustees?

Relationships: Ministry of Education
26. Please describe the nature of your school system’s relationships with the Ministry of Education.
27. Can you describe one or two examples to illustrate the nature of this relationship?
28. How does your school system typically respond to Ministry initiatives? Can you illustrate this response with a recent example?
29. How has this relationship changed over the past five to six years?
30. What should this relationship be like in the future? Please explain.
Appendix D
Principal Survey

Ontario School System Research Project

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey (it should take about 15-20 minutes). The survey is part of a larger Ontario study in which most of the province’s school systems are participating. It asks about many features of your school system as they actually are at the present time. Evidence from the survey along with a survey of system-level leaders will be used to help identify features of school systems that matter most to the improvement of student learning and well-being.

All responses will be anonymous: no individual, school or district will be identified in either formal or informal reports of the results. You are asked to identify your district only to assist in data analysis.

Results of the study will be disseminated to all school systems in the province and used as part of the evidence for revising the “System Practices and Procedures” section of the Ontario Leadership Framework. Your candid response to this survey is very much appreciated.

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If you have any questions, please feel free to Email Me

1. Please select (click) your of school system from the drop down menu below:
   Ontario School Systems

   
   
   

   Curriculum and Instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do you agree that your school system:</th>
<th>1 = Disagree strongly; 4 = Agree strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Strongly supports schools’ efforts to implement curricula that foster students’ deep understandings about “big ideas”, as well as to develop the basic skills students need to acquire such understandings.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Works effectively with schools to help provide all students with engaging forms of instruction.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Works effectively with schools to help establish ambitious but</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
realistic student performance standards.

| 5. Has aligned all elements of school programs and resources (e.g., curriculum, instruction, assessment, staff, budget). | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6. Pick the one statement below which best describes your board/system’s instructional improvement work with schools: (Check your choice)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o The instructional improvement work is limited to a very small proportion of teachers and a narrow array of instructional practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o The instructional improvement work includes teachers in a large minority of schools, although it is focused on a narrow array of instructional practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o The instructional improvement work includes teachers in a large minority of schools and helps them to significantly expand the size of their instructional repertoires.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o The instructional improvement work includes teachers in a majority of schools and assists them in developing sophisticated understandings of powerful instruction for students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7. Pick the one statement below which best describes your board/system’s work with schools to align curriculum, instruction, assessment and teaching resources. (Check your choice)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o So far, the board has made little effort to align curriculum, instruction, assessment and teaching resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o So far, the board’s alignment efforts have been restricted to one or two areas of the curriculum and usually have involved only small groups of staff members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o The alignment efforts in my board are now expanding to include many more areas of the curriculum and greater participation by stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o The alignment efforts of my board are extensive, ongoing and involve most stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Uses of Evidence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent does your school system:</th>
<th>1 = Not at all; 4 = To a great extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. Has efficient information management systems?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Provides schools with relevant data about their performance?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Assists schools in using data to improve their performance?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Creates collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation of data in schools?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Calls on expertise from outside the school system for help with data interpretation when needed?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Uses appropriate data for accounting to stakeholders?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Makes effective use of existing research to guide policy making and planning?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Professional Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15. Very little time is devoted to routine administrative matters in meetings of teachers and principals. Meeting time formerly used for such matters is now devoted almost entirely to professional development.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Most professional development is carefully aligned with board and school improvement initiatives.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Differentiated professional development opportunities are provided in response to the needs of individual schools, administrators and teachers.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Extensive opportunities are provided for both teachers and administrators to further develop their expertise.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Almost all schools provide time for collaborative work on instructional improvement initiatives. Schools are provided with the resources they need to provide this time and leaders are provided with training in how best to facilitate such work.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20. The following statements outline stages of a school system’s growth in the uses of contemporary learning theory as a foundation for designing professional development methods. At which stage is your district? *(Check your choice)*

- System-sponsored professional development still seems to be driven by an outmoded “behavioristic” understanding of how people learn. This PD typically occurs outside of classrooms and schools, is usually “one-shot” in nature, and treats participants as passive consumers of new information.
- System-sponsored professional development is based on an unpredictable mixture of outmoded “behavioristic” understanding of how people learn and more contemporary, constructivist assumptions about professional learning. A substantial portion of the district-sponsored pd still treats participants as passive consumers of new information but more active and close-to-the-school models of professional development are beginning to be used.
- The majority of system-sponsored professional development is now informed by a sophisticated understanding of contemporary learning theory. It is largely job-embedded, builds on participants’ tacit knowledge and engages them actively in the construction of new knowledge and skills.
- All system-sponsored professional development is now closely aligned with the best evidence of how people learn.

21. To what extent do you agree that your school system provides you with all of the resources you need to do your job well?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagree Strongly</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

To what extent do the following aspects of your school system enhance your understanding of how best to exercise your leadership?
22. Professional development opportunities provided by the system about Ministry initiatives and new programs
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent
23. Resources provided to support school based professional development for me and my staff
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent
24. Support by the system for networking and sharing of best practices, experiences and challenges with other principal colleagues and schools
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent
25. Release time for me to create PLCs with staff and develop initiatives towards school improvement
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent
26. The priority awarded to instructional leadership (vs Management)
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent
27. Emphasis placed on analyzing, interpreting and using data to inform decision making
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent
28. Help provided to me by system leaders in developing, monitoring and providing feedback about the school’s improvement plan
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent
29. Snapshots provided by the system indicating the progress being made in my school
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent
30. Advice on how to build productive relations with teachers and contribute to their development
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent
31. Accessibility of system leaders for information or personal assistance
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent
32. Opportunities provided by the system for my school to engage parents and local community groups in our school improvement efforts
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent
33. Two way communication between the central office and my school
   Not at all       To a slight extent       To some extent       To a great extent

Alignment

34. Which one of the statements below best captures your board’s alignment of its financial resources with the support needed to achieve the board’s goals for student learning? (Check your choice)
   o No effort has yet been made toward such alignment.
   o Unsystematic attempts are being made toward such alignment.
   o Such alignment occurs on a project by project basis but does not extend across the board’s efforts as a whole.
   o My board has a systematic and ongoing process to continuously align our budget with the goals we are pursuing for students.

35. Which one of the following descriptions best captures your board’s alignment of
personnel policies and procedures with the instructional expectations for staff? (Check your choice)

- No effort has yet been made toward such alignment.
- Unsystematic attempts are being made toward such alignment.
- Such alignment occurs on a project by project basis but does not extend across the board’s efforts as a whole.
- My board has a systematic and ongoing process to continuously align our personnel policies and procedures with the goals we are pursuing for students.

36. Which of the statements below best captures your board’s alignment of structures with the instructional improvement work required of staff? (Check your choice)

- No effort has yet been made toward such alignment.
- Unsystematic attempts are being made toward such alignment.
- Such alignment occurs on a project by project basis but does not extend across the board’s efforts as a whole.
- My board has a systematic and ongoing process to continuously align our organizational structures with our staff’s instructional improvement work.

37. Which of the following descriptions captures your system’s efforts to align the time and money allocated to professional development with the value of such PD to the district? (Check your choice)

- The board has an ambitious set of goals for improving student learning but has allocated very little time or money for preparing staff to accomplish those goals.
- While some time and money have been allocated for the professional development of leaders and teachers, these resources badly underestimate what will be required if staff are to accomplish the goals established by the district.
- Although still underestimated, there have been recent and significant increases in the time and money allocated to professional development.
- Adequate amounts of both the time and money have been allocated for the professional development of both leaders and teachers.

To what extent do the following contribute to the confidence that you and your principal-colleague(s) have that you will be able to accomplish the expectations for school improvement held by your district:

38. Professional development provided to me by the system
   
   Not at all          To a slight extent          To some extent           To a great extent

39. Advice, feedback and knowledge available to me through my network of other principals in this system
   
   Not at all          To a slight extent          To some extent           To a great extent

40. Examples I see of other principals succeeding at what I also need to do
   
   Not at all          To a slight extent          To some extent           To a great extent
41. The school system’s alignment of its resources with our goals
   Not at all           To a slight extent           To some extent           To a great extent

42. The system’s assignment of me to a school for which I am well suited
   Not at all           To a slight extent           To some extent           To a great extent

43. Support that I can count on from my superintendent whenever I need it
   Not at all           To a slight extent           To some extent           To a great extent

44. High levels of mutual trust my colleagues and I have in one another.
   Not at all           To a slight extent           To some extent           To a great extent

45. Encouragement I receive from others for the work that I do
   Not at all           To a slight extent           To some extent           To a great extent

46. Expressions of appreciation/celebration of the value of our work.
   Not at all           To a slight extent           To some extent           To a great extent

47. The guidance the board’s improvement plan provides for developing my school improvement plan
   Not at all           To a slight extent           To some extent           To a great extent

48. The autonomy I have to do what is in the best interests of my school and students
   Not at all           To a slight extent           To some extent           To a great extent

### Relationships Between Teachers and Administrators

49. Pick the one statement below which best describes the relationships between with school administrators and teachers: (Check your choice)

- School and central office staffs have very little contact and school staffs rarely participate in school system decisions.
- There is some contact between central office and school staffs but participation by school staffs in system decisions is rare, as is the presence of central office staff in schools.
- School staffs sometimes participate in system decisions, are sometimes in contact with central office staff for support and assistance. Central office staff are in schools regularly and know some staff members by name.
- School staffs often participate in system decisions, are in frequent contact with central office staff for support and assistance. Central office staff are in schools frequently and know most school staff members by name.

### Relationships Between System and School Staffs

50. Your school system’s support for networks or professional learning communities (PLCs) is best described by which one of the following statements? (Check your choice)
There is little awareness of the need for, or value of, professional networks or communities for either central office or school staffs.

Networks and professional communities are evident in some schools and central office staff may participate occasionally in their own PLCs, but they are rarely viewed as effective instruments for staff learning or decision making.

PLCs or networks are established at both school and system levels. While central office staff have come to value participation in their own PLCs or networks, they do not insist on such participation by teachers or administrators in schools.

Networks and PLCs are well established at both school and system levels and have become the established way of solving problems and taking care of other business.

**Relationships With Parents**

51. Which **one** of the following statements best captures your school system’s efforts to help teachers and administrators develop the capacities they need to foster productive parent engagement in the school? *(Check your choice)*

- We are expected to figure this out for ourselves.
- My board has provided some help in the past but no such help has been provided in the past year.
- School system staff often talk about the importance of parent engagement in schools but they have provided very limited opportunities for us to develop the knowledge and skills we require to do that part of our jobs better.
- My school system provides us with very helpful opportunities to acquire the insights and skills we need to productively engage our parents in school.

52. Which **one** of the following statements best captures your board’s efforts to help teachers and administrators develop the capacities they need to assist parents in creating conditions in the home which support the success of their children at school? *(Check your choice)*

- We are expected to figure this out for ourselves.
- My board has provided some help in the past but no such help has been provided in the past year.
- Central office staff often talk about the importance of helping parents create such conditions in the home but they have provided very limited opportunities for us to develop the knowledge and skills we require to do that part of our jobs better.
- My school system provides us with very helpful opportunities to acquire the insights and skills we need to productively assist our parents in creating conditions at home for supporting the success of their children at school.

53. Which **one** of the following statements best captures how your system holds schools accountable for productively engaging parents? *(Check your choice)*

- We are expected to figure this out for ourselves.
- My board has provided some help in the past but no such help has been provided in the past year.
- Central office staff often talk about the importance of helping parents create such conditions in the home but they have provided very limited opportunities for us to develop the knowledge and skills we require to do that part of our jobs better.
- My school system provides us with very helpful opportunities to acquire the insights and skills we need to productively assist our parents in creating conditions at home for supporting the success of their children at school.
My school system makes no effort to hold schools accountable for parent engagement.
My school system’s efforts are limited to occasional encouragement and informal questions from some district staff about what we are doing in my school.
The performance appraisal of principals in my school system includes assessment of the nature and success of their schools parent engagement strategies.
In addition to being part of our principal appraisal system, our school system has a formal policy on parent engagement and conducts periodic audits across the schools about the extent to which that policy is being implemented. School staffs and parents are asked for evidence as part of these audits

54. How extensive is your school system’s efforts - independent of what schools do - to provide programs and other opportunities aimed at helping parents ensure the success of their children at school?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 = Schools initiate all parent engagement</td>
<td>4 = System’s efforts quite extensive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relationships With Local Community Groups

55. Which one of the following descriptions best captures the nature of your school system’s ties with local community groups? *(Check your choice)*

- Potential contributions of community groups are unrecognized and these groups have no involvement in the school system.
- Potential contributions of community groups are sporadically recognized, as are consultations with these groups and their involvement in school system decisions.
- Community groups are often recognized for their contribution and support; they are consulted on many decisions affecting the community. School system staff are often members of these groups, themselves.
- Community groups are routinely recognized for their contribution and support and consulted on almost all decisions affecting the community. School system staff are regularly members of these groups themselves.

Demographic information

56. What is your current position?

- Principal
- Vice principal
- Other school leadership position
- Superintendent
- Director of Education
- Other central office position
- Trustee

57. How many years in your current position?

- Less than 1 year
- 1 to 3 years
- More than 3 years
Thanks!
Appendix E

Senior Leader Survey

Ontario School System Research Project

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey (it should take about 15-20 minutes). The survey is part of a larger Ontario study in which most of the province’s school systems are participating. It asks about many features of your school system as they actually are at the present time. Evidence from the survey along with a survey of system-level leaders will be used to help identify features of school systems that matter most to the improvement of student learning and well-being.

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If you have any questions, please feel free to Email Me

1. Please select (click) your of school system from the drop down menu below:
   - Ontario School Systems

   Beliefs and Vision for Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do the following statements describe your school system’s beliefs and vision for students:</th>
<th>1 = Disagree strongly;</th>
<th>4 = Agree strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. My school system has developed a widely-shared set of beliefs and vision about student learning and welfare that falls within the parameters set by the province.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My school system’s beliefs and vision includes a focus on closing achievement gaps.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My school system’s beliefs and vision includes a focus on “raising the achievement bar”.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. My school system’s beliefs and vision include a focus on nurturing student engagement and welfare. 

6. Which of the following statements best describes the extent to which your school system’s beliefs and vision for students are understood and shared by staff? (Check one of the following.)

- Understood and shared by very few staff members
- Understood and shared by a small proportion of staff
- Understood and shared by a large proportion of staff
- Understood and shared by almost all staff

**To what extent has your school system’s elected board:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 = Disagree strongly; 4 = Agree strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. Led or participated in assessing community values and interests and incorporating them into the school system’s beliefs and vision for students?</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Helped to mobilize parents and the wider community in developing and supporting the vision?</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Helped to mobilize teachers and administrators in developing and supporting the vision?</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Helped to create a climate of excellence that makes achieving the vision possible?</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Uses of Evidence**

**To what extent does your school system:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 = Not at all; 4 = To a great extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. Have efficient information management systems?</td>
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<td>12. Provide schools with relevant data about their performance?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Create collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation of data in schools?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Call on expertise from outside the school system for help with data interpretation when needed?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Use appropriate data for accounting to stakeholders?</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Make effective use of existing research to guide policy making and planning?</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Professional Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How well do the following descriptions apply to leadership development in your school system/board?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. My board has well-designed and carefully implemented procedures for identifying, recruiting, selecting and appraising school-level leaders.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. My board implements procedures for transferring school-level leaders that does no harm and, whenever possible, adds value to improvement efforts underway in schools.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. My board ensures that the most skilled leaders in the system are placed where they are most needed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. My board encourages school-level leaders, when useful, to supplement their own capacities with system-level expertise.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Efforts by your board to hold principals directly accountable for the quality of instruction in their schools are best described by which one of the following statements? (Check your choice)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instruction quality is viewed by senior system leaders as teachers’ responsibility. Teachers’ are held directly accountable for the quality of their instruction. Neither system nor school leaders are expected to contribute significantly to instructional improvement.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instruction quality is viewed by senior system leaders as teachers’ responsibility. Teachers’ are held directly accountable for the quality of their instruction. School leaders are expected to provide general support to teachers in their instructional improvement efforts.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>System leaders expect principals to be knowledgeable about the quality of their teachers’ instruction. This is among the criteria used for selecting school leaders and for their performance appraisal.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>System leaders expect principals to be knowledgeable about the quality of their teachers’ instruction. This is a central criterion for selecting school leaders and for their performance appraisal.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Has well-designed and carefully implemented procedures for identifying, recruiting, selecting, and appraising system-level leaders?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
24. Which one of the following statements best captures the orientation of most of your system’s senior leaders to their role in instructional improvement?  *(Check your choice)*

- Most system leaders do not view themselves as having the knowledge about, or significant responsibilities for, the quality of instruction in schools. Principal selection and evaluation policies and practices do not reflect an instructional leadership focus for school leaders.
- Most system leaders encourage an instructional focus on the part of school leaders and assume that it is responsibility of school leaders to acquire the capacities needed to pursue this instructional focus. Instructional leadership occasionally appears in principal selection processes and sometimes becomes a topic during their supervisory processes with principals.
- System leaders encourage an instructional focus on the part of school leaders, provide opportunities and resources for improving the instructional leadership skills of school leaders and make this the main focus of their school visits. Instructional leadership is an explicit focus in selection and appraisal practices.
- System leaders keep both the community and the central office staff focused on learning and they support principals and teachers in their efforts to improve instruction and ensure high levels of learning for all students. The system assumes responsibility for significantly improving instructional leadership in schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do you agree that your board:</th>
<th>1 = Disagree strongly; 4 = Agree strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25. Expects the behavior of both system- and school-level leaders to reflect the practices and competences identified in the <em>Ontario Leadership Framework</em>, as well as such other practices as might be deemed critical for local board purposes.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Encourages coordinated forms of leadership distribution throughout the board and its schools;</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Elected Leadership*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How well do the following statements describe the practices of the board’s elected officials?</th>
<th>1 = Not at all; 4 = Very well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27. Trustees use the board’s beliefs and vision for student learning and well-being as the foundation for strategic planning and ongoing board evaluation.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Trustees focus most policy making on the improvement of student learning and well-being consistent with the beliefs and vision.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Trustees identify and fund policies and programs that provide rich curricula and engaging forms of instruction for all students and eliminate those that do not.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Trustees maintain productive relationships with senior staff, school staffs, community stakeholders and</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
provincial education officials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Trustees provide systematic orientation opportunities for new members and ongoing training for existing members.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Individual trustees support and act in accordance with decisions made by the board of trustees, as a whole.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Almost all trustees avoid becoming involved in school system administration.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Organizational Improvement Processes**

| How well do the following descriptions capture your school system’s approach to improvement? | 1 = Not at all; 4 = Very well |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 34. My board pursues only a small number of improvement goals at the same time. |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 35. We usually proceed in manageable stages and use the early stages as learning opportunities. |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 36. My board’s approach to improvement is relatively coherent. A small number of key improvement goals are consistently pursued over sustained periods of time. |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 37. Schools are not overloaded with excessive numbers of initiatives. |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 38. Considerable effort is made to build the capacities needed by school staffs for successful school improvement. |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 39. Board improvement efforts typically focus on one portion of the system at a time (e.g., elementary schools then secondary schools; literacy improvement then numeracy improvement) and a schedule is created to ensure improvement in all parts of the school system over the long term. |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 40. Improvement efforts in schools are guided by explicit and well-tested frameworks, policies and practices, as well as widely shared goals that permit local adaptation. All stakeholders have clearly defined roles to play in this approach to school improvement. |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 41. The board integrates new initiatives into existing routines and practices. Established structures and procedures are maintained and built on. Care is taken to ensure continuity and extension of core values. |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
Central Office Staff Relations

42. Pick the one statement below which best describes the relationships among staff in your school system’s central office: (Check your choice)

- Central office staff work in isolation with only minimal communication and no sense of shared purpose.
- There is no evidence of shared purpose, but there is some connection among some roles and a limited amount of communication, although it is sometimes a bit strained.
- Roles are often interconnected and collaboration is common in response to a shared sense of purpose. Communication among staff is positive and occurs regularly.
- Roles are interconnected, work is undertaken collaboratively in the service of a widely shared set of purposes. Communication among staff is frequent and cordial.

Ministry Of Education Relations

To what extent do you agree that the following statements describe your school system’s relationship with the Ministry of Education:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 = Disagree Strongly</th>
<th>4 = Agree Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

43. My school system communicates regularly with the Ministry, both formally and informally, about board goals and directions;  
44. My school system clarifies with the Ministry how it can be of most help to the board;  
45. My school system encourages Ministry collaboration in achieving board goals and directions;  
46. My school system provides feedback to the Ministry about the relevance of its initiatives to board goals and directions.

47. Which one of the following statements best describes how your school system typically responds to the province’s initiatives. (Check your choice)

- Central office staff and some school staff are made aware of new provincial initiatives.
- Central office staff share information about provincial initiatives with principals and principals relay this information to their teaching colleagues.
- Principals are assigned responsibility for implementing provincial initiatives. Procedures are established for schools to gain access to the resources they require for implementation.
- The province’s initiatives are awarded priority in the board, systematic analysis of changes required in the board are carried out, and progress toward implementing these initiatives is reported regularly (e.g., at principals’ meetings).
48. Your school system may choose to supplement government initiatives in order to increase their local impact. Which one of the following statements best captures your system’s current approach to this possibility? (Check your choice)

- There are no clear links between provincial initiatives and activities in schools.
- Personnel are assigned responsibility for implementing provincial initiatives and discussions are held about what implementation might consist of in schools.
- The school allocates the resources (time, money, expertise) required to build the capacities staff need to implement provincial initiatives effectively.
- Problem-solving groups in schools (e.g., PLCs) consider how to implement provincial initiatives in order to get the best results for the school and its students.

49. Which one of the following statements best captures your system’s attempt to leverage the province’s initiatives in the interest of the board’s priorities? (Check your choice)

- There has been little or no effort to integrate board and provincial priorities.
- Board staff has recently indicated the need for efforts to integrate board and provincial priorities.
- A process is now underway for the first time to determine how to integrate provincial and board priorities.
- The board has a multi-year plan that explicitly integrates provincial and board priorities.

E. Demographic information

50. What is your current position?

- Principal
- Vice principal
- Other school leadership position
- Superintendent
- Director of Education
- Other central office position
- Trustee

51. How many years in your current position?

- Less than 1 year
- 1 to 3 years
- More than 3 years

Thanks!
### Appendix F

**Individual District Leader Survey Responses**

(N = 250)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of High Performing School Districts</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Core Processes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>System Directions (Beliefs, vision for student improvement)</strong></td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My school system has developed a widely-shared set of beliefs and vision about student learning and welfare that falls within the parameters set by the province.</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My school system’s beliefs and vision includes a focus on closing achievement gaps.</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My school system’s beliefs and vision includes a focus on “raising the achievement bar”.</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My school system’s beliefs and vision include a focus on nurturing student engagement and welfare.</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. My school system’s beliefs and vision for students are understood and shared by staff.</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Elected officials led or participated in assessing community values and interests and incorporating them into the school system’s beliefs and vision for students.</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Elected officials helped to mobilize parents and the wider community in developing and supporting the vision.</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Elected officials helped to mobilize teachers and administrators in developing and supporting the vision.</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Elected officials helped to create a climate of excellence that makes achieving the vision possible.</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Uses of Evidence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Have efficient information management systems.</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Provides schools with relevant data about their performance.</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Assists schools in using data to improve their performance.</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Creates collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation of data in schools.</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Calls on expertise from outside the school for help with data interpretation when needed.</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Uses appropriate data for accounting to stakeholders.</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Makes effective use of existing research to guide policy making and planning?</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Supporting Conditions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Organizational Improvement Processes</strong></td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of High Performing School Districts</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. My board pursues only a small number of improvement goals at the same time.</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. We usually proceed in manageable stages and use the early stages as learning opportunities.</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. My board’s approach to improvement is relatively coherent. A small number of key improvement goals are consistently pursued over sustained periods of time.</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Schools are not overloaded with excessive numbers of initiatives.</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. Considerable effort is made to build the capacities needed by school staffs for successful school improvement.</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. Board improvement efforts typically focus on one portion of the system at a time (e.g., elementary schools then secondary schools; literacy improvement then numeracy improvement) and a schedule is created to ensure improvement in all parts of the school system over the long term.</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. Improvement efforts in schools are guided by explicit and well-tested frameworks, policies and practices, as well as widely shared goals that permit local adaptation. All stakeholders have clearly defined roles to play in this approach to school improvement.</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. The board integrates new initiatives into existing routines and practices. Established structures and procedures are maintained and built on. Care is taken to ensure continuity and extension of core values.</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. Leadership

4. Professional Leadership

18. My board has well-designed and carefully implemented procedures for identifying, recruiting, selecting and appraising school-level leaders. | 2.97 | .74 |
19. My board implements procedures for transferring school-level leaders that does no harm and, whenever possible, adds value to improvement efforts underway in schools. | 2.86 | .70 |
20. My board ensures that the most skilled leaders in the system are placed where they are most needed. | 2.89 | .75 |
21. My board encourages school-level leaders, when useful, to supplement their own capacities with system-level expertise. | 3.11 | .69 |
22. My board holds principals directly accountable for the quality of instruction in their schools. | 3.23 | .58 |
23. My board has well-designed and carefully implemented procedures for identifying, recruiting, selecting, and appraising system-level leaders. | 2.97 | .65 |
24. Most of my system’s senior leaders assume responsibility for significantly improving instructional leadership in their | 3.32 | .68 |
## Characteristics of High Performing School Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25. My board expects the behavior of both system- and school-level leaders to reflect the practices and competences identified in the Ontario Leadership Framework, as well as such other practices as might be deemed critical for local board purposes.</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. My board encourages coordinated forms of leadership distribution throughout the board and its schools.</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5. Elected Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27. Trustees use the board’s beliefs and vision for student learning and well-being as the foundation for strategic planning and ongoing board evaluation.</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Trustees focus most policy making on the improvement of student learning and well-being consistent with the beliefs and vision.</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Trustees identify and fund policies and programs that provide rich curricula and engaging forms of instruction for all students and eliminate those that do not.</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Trustees maintain productive relationships with senior staff, school staffs, community stakeholders and provincial education officials.</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Trustees provide systematic orientation opportunities for new members and ongoing training for existing members.</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Individual trustees support and act in accordance with decisions made by the board of trustees, as a whole.</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Almost all trustees avoid becoming involved in school system administration.</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### D. Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34. My school system communicates regularly with the Ministry, both formally and informally, about board goals and directions.</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. My school system clarifies with the Ministry how it can be of most help to the board.</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. My school system encourages Ministry collaboration in achieving board goals and directions.</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. My school system provides feedback to the Ministry about the relevance of its initiatives to board goals and directions.</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. My system responds to the province’s initiatives by awarding them priority, analyzing changes and reporting progress.</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. My system supplements Ministry initiatives to increase their local impact.</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of High Performing School Districts</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>49. My system attempts to leverage the province’s initiatives in the interest of the board’s priorities.</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix G

### Individual Principal Survey Responses

(N = 1563)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of High Performing School Districts</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Core Processes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Strongly supports schools’ efforts to implement curricula that foster students’ higher order thinking skills, as well as to develop basic skills</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Works effectively with schools to help provide all students with engaging forms of instruction.</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Works effectively with schools to help establish ambitious but realistic student performance standards.</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Has aligned all elements of school programs and resources (e.g., curriculum, instruction, assessment, staff, budget).</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Instructional improvement includes teachers in majority of schools and assists them in developing sophisticated understanding of powerful instruction.</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Works extensively with schools to align curriculum, instruction, assessment and teaching resources.</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Supporting Conditions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Uses of Evidence</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Have efficient information management systems.</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Provides schools with relevant data about their performance.</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Assists schools in using data to improve their performance.</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Creates collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation of data in schools.</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Calls on expertise from outside the school for help with data interpretation when needed.</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Uses appropriate data for accounting to stakeholders.</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Makes effective use of existing research to guide policy making and planning?</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Professional Development (PD)</strong></td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Very little time is devoted to routine administrative matters in meetings of teachers and principals. Meeting time formerly used for such matters is now devoted almost entirely to PD.</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Most PD is carefully aligned with board and school improvement initiatives.</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Differentiated PD opportunities are provided in response to the needs of individual schools, administrators and teachers.</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Extensive opportunities are provided for both teachers and</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of High Performing School Districts</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators to further develop their expertise.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Almost all schools provide time for collaborative work on instructional improvement initiatives. Schools are provided with the resources they need to provide this time and leaders are provided with training in how best to facilitate such work.</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. All system-sponsored PD is closely aligned with best evidence of how people learn.</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Your school system provides you with all of the resources you need to do your job well.</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Alignment

| 34. Extent of your board’s alignment of its financial resources with the support needed to achieve the board’s goals for student learning | 3.39 | .64 |
| 35. Extent of your board’s alignment of personnel policies and procedures with the instructional expectations for staff | 3.26 | .76 |
| 36. Extent of your board’s alignment of structures with the instructional improvement work required of staff | 3.31 | .68 |
| 37. Extent of your system’s efforts to align the time and money allocated to professional development with the value of such PD to the district | 2.96 | .83 |

Confidence

| 38. PD provided to me by the system | 3.03 | .74 |
| 39. Advice, feedback and knowledge available to me through my network of other principals in this system | 3.15 | .76 |
| 40. Examples I see of other principals succeeding at what I also need to do | 2.93 | .80 |
| 41. The school system’s alignment of its resources with our goals | 3.03 | .73 |

C. Relationships

| 5. Between teachers and Admin | 2.90 | .78 |

| 42. The system’s assignment of me to a school for which I am well suited | 3.30 | .83 |
| 43. Support that I can count on from my superintendent whenever I need it | 3.38 | .82 |
| 44. High levels of mutual trust my colleagues and I have in one another | 3.46 | .68 |
| 45. Encouragement I receive from others for the work that I do | 3.05 | .87 |
| 46. Expressions of appreciation/celebration of the value of our work | 2.80 | .91 |
| 47. The guidance the board’s improvement plan provides for developing my school improvement plan | 3.07 | .79 |
| 48. The autonomy I have to do what is in the best interests of my school and students | 3.09 | .80 |
### Characteristics of High Performing School Districts

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49. Strength of Relationships Between Teachers and Administrators</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. Extent of your school system’s support for networks or professional learning communities (PLCs) is best described by which one of the following statements.</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.78</td>
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</table>

#### 7. Parents

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>51. Extent of your school system’s efforts to help teachers and administrators develop the capacities they need to foster productive parent engagement in the school.</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. Extent of your board’s efforts to help teachers and administrators develop the capacities they need to assist parents in creating conditions in the home which support the success of their children at school</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53. Extent to which your system holds schools accountable for productively engaging parents</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54. Extent of your school system’s efforts-independent of what schools do-to provide programs and other opportunities aimed at helping parents ensure the success of their children at school</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 8. Local Community Groups

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<td>.78</td>
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<td>.91</td>
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<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
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<tr>
<td>33. Two way communication between the central office and my school</td>
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Appendix H
Combined Principal and District Leader Survey

(N = 1813)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of High Performing School Systems</th>
<th>Principal Mean</th>
<th>Principal SD</th>
<th>District Leader Mean</th>
<th>District Leader SD</th>
<th>P&amp;S Agg Mean</th>
<th>P&amp;S Agg SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Core Processes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Uses of Evidence</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>3.17</td>
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<td>8. Have efficient information management systems.</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Provides schools with relevant data about their performance.</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>.63</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Assists schools in using data to improve their performance.</td>
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<td>.70</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Creates collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation of data in schools.</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>.61</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Calls on expertise from outside the school for help with data interpretation when needed.</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>.84</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Uses appropriate data for accounting to stakeholders.</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>3.33</td>
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<td>14. Makes effective use of existing research to guide policy making and planning?</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>3.42</td>
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Appendix I
Principal and District Leader Survey Responses
(Categories and Sub-Categories)

(Principal N =1563; District Leader = 250)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of High Performing School Systems</th>
<th>District Leader</th>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>P&amp;D Aggregate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Core Processes</td>
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<tr>
<td>System Directions (Beliefs and vision for students)</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>3.12</td>
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<td>Uses of Evidence</td>
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<td>.66</td>
<td>3.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
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<td>3.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Supporting Conditions</td>
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<td>Organizational Improvement Processes</td>
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<td>Alignment</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Leadership</td>
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<td>Professional Leadership</td>
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<td>Elected Leadership</td>
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<td>4. Relationship</td>
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<td>2.75</td>
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<td>Central office Staff Relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ministry Of Education</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Between teachers and Admin</td>
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<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local Community Groups</td>
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### Appendix J
Comparison of Principal Survey Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of High Performing School Districts</th>
<th>Provincial (N = 1563)</th>
<th>Greenbridge (N = 8)</th>
<th>Marinee (N = 30)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.19</td>
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<td>3.56</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.65</td>
<td>3.17</td>
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<td>.74</td>
<td>3.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>3.77</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.90</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>3.14</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.87</td>
<td>3.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship with Local Community Groups</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>2.43</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Confidence/Efficacy                              |       |     |       |         |       |       |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Mean | SD | Mean | SD |       | Mean | SD    |       |     |
| 3.12 | .79 | 3.54 | .47 | 3.08 | .75 |
| 38.  PD provided to me by the system             | 3.03 | .74 | 3.71 | .49 | 3.00 | .72 |
| 39.  Advice, feedback and knowledge available to me through my network of other principals in this system | 3.15 | .76 | 3.57 | .54 | 3.00 | .77 |
| 40.  Examples I see of other principals succeeding at what I also need to do | 2.93 | .80 | 3.17 | .75 | 2.96 | .74 |
| 41.  The school system’s alignment of its resources with our goals | 3.03 | .73 | 3.71 | .49 | 2.93 | .62 |
| 42.  The system’s assignment of me to a school for which I am well suited | 3.30 | .83 | 4.00 | .00 | 3.19 | .62 |
| 43.  Support that I can count on from my superintendent whenever I need it | 3.38 | .82 | 3.57 | .54 | 3.50 | .79 |
| 44.  High levels of mutual trust my colleagues and I have in one another | 3.46 | .68 | 4.00 | .00 | 3.50 | .79 |
| 45.  Encouragement I receive from others for the work that I do | 3.05 | .87 | 3.67 | .52 | 3.26 | .86 |
| 46.  Expressions of appreciation/celebration of the value of our work | 2.80 | .91 | 3.00 | .63 | 2.68 | .95 |
| 47.  The guidance the board’s improvement plan provides for | 3.07 | .79 | 3.57 | .54 | 3.07 | .66 |
### Characteristics of High Performing School Districts

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<tr>
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<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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