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Central office administrators are charged with the implementation of various education initiatives each year with the desired end result being an improvement in student performance. The purpose of this study is to discover how central office administrators exhibit leadership, carry out their roles, and perform their functions in district-wide improvement initiatives. Readers will gain a better understanding of how central office administrators work and lead from their positions in the school district. The participants shared their feelings and gave feedback on their direct experiences as central office administrators who are charged with the responsibility of implementing district-wide improvement initiatives.

In order to collect and analyze rich data about central office employees, a qualitative study was conducted where there were no preconceived theories. Data were collected through the tape recorded interviews of 12 central office administrators from four different school districts and the collection of relevant documents that pertain to the roles and functions of their jobs. The participants were categorized according to the similarities in their job titles and the findings from the interview data were presented for comparison. The document reviews were used to compare against the information gained from the participants.

The three main takeaways from this study were that central office administrators have placed a high value on collaboration, communication, and strategic leadership in order to effectively implement district-wide improvement initiatives. Practitioners can

reflect on the newly-gained information from the emerging themes from these interviews and document reviews to propose new studies for research.

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE ROLES, FUNCTIONS, AND LEADERSHIP  
STRATEGIES OF CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS IN  
DISTRICT IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife Becky Muller and our three children Caden, Addison, and Collins. Thank you for your love, patience, and support throughout my time in graduate school. We have certainly earned this together as a family.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Brian Muller, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

School districts are often criticized for being top heavy in central office leadership with regard to salaries and position titles that some people could consider unnecessary. Central office administrators have been scrutinized in the recent days due to the budget cuts in education. Shields, Hsu, and Foley (2010) assert:

Discussions about similar fiscal solutions have been taking place across the country, at board of education meetings, in budget hearings and in superintendents' offices. When funding gets tight, board members, local legislators, parents and even administrators look to cut the central office. (p. 22)

Cutting district administration to save money has been an issue for quite a while, as Protheroe (1998) states, "Since public school administration was first termed the 'blob' more than a decade ago, many school reformers have called for radical reductions in the number of administrators" (p. 26). If every dollar counts, taxpayers want to be reassured that money is being spent wisely and with deliberation. Chubb and Moe (1990) linked higher student achievement to lower levels of bureaucratic organization in schools, setting off a privatization revolution in education despite the methodological critiques of their analysis (e.g., Sukstorf, Wells, & Crain, as cited in Rasell & Rothstein, 1993). Similarly, Peterson's (1999) analysis of National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) data provided evidence that central district office power had a negative effect on student achievement through its negative effect on school climate.

Conversely, Waters and Marzano (2006) conducted a study that determined the characteristics of effective schools, leaders, and teachers. Waters and Marzano refute Secretary Bennett's description in 1987 of the blob of people who work outside classroom soaking up all of the money and resources that should be spent in the classroom. The Waters and Marzano (2006) study argues, "However, we have found a substantial and positive relationship between district-level leadership and student achievement when the superintendent, district office staff, and school board members do the right work in the right way" (p. 20). Although this research study was conducted using meta-analysis, which contributed to the validity of the finding, Waters and Marzano (2006) assert, "Undoubtedly, there are school district bureaucracies for which this label [blob] applies" (p. 20). Even though there are examples of ineffective school district bureaucracies, Waters and Marzano (2006) argue:

However, our research does not support Mr. Bennett's broad-stroke condemnation of superintendents, district office staff, and school board members. To the contrary, our findings indicate that when district leaders effectively address specific responsibilities, they can have a profound, positive impact on student achievement in their districts. (p. 8)

## **Problem Statement**

### **Background**

Central office administrators are charged with the implementation of various education initiatives with the desired end result being an improvement in student performance. These initiatives have come from state boards of education and state education agencies, local boards of education, central office administrators, and

sometimes the school level such as principals or teachers. The initiatives under consideration in this study directly impact the district as a whole and not just the school level. District level leaders are interested in the success of all schools, so the perspectives of the participants in this study include their thoughts on district wide achievement. The topic of district wide improvement was chosen because I noticed that most of the improvement studies and reforms are centered on individual schools. I felt that the subject of district wide improvement was not as plentiful and could benefit from additional investigation and research in order to add to the existing district level research described in Chapter II.

### **Practical Purpose**

I really wanted to discover the widely used leadership strategies, roles, and functions used by central office administrators in district-wide initiatives. There has not been a significant amount of research conducted with central office administrators, especially when it comes to their own roles in district improvement. Honig and Venkateswaran (2012) assert:

Various federal and state policies over the past 10 years have placed significant, new demands on school systems to use data, research, and other forms of evidence to improve school performance, a process we refer to generally as “evidence-based decision making.” These demands have helped spawn a growing body of research on evidence use in education. This research for the most part has aimed to understand evidence use within schools; far fewer studies in the past decade have addressed evidence use in central offices. (p. 199)

Since there are various sizes and types of school districts, I had a desire to explore the thoughts of central office administrators who hold similar titles in order to learn more about how they carry themselves in district-wide improvement initiatives.

Principals are often appointed or promoted to central office positions. It was revealed that the difference between these roles was vast and there was a steep learning curve once they were appointed to a central office position. Newly-appointed central office administrators did not know what to expect when it comes to learning how to operate at the district level. This study can lend some insight and give a candid preview of what to expect at the central office as an administrator.

### **Research Purpose**

What is the history and what is known about central office leadership with regards to district-wide initiatives? The fact is that there is limited research on this topic especially with the details of the job of the central office administrator. Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) state, “Most of what we know empirically about leaders’ effects on student learning concerns school leaders. District leadership effects on students have, until recently, been considered too indirect and complex to sort out” (p. 20).

Does an effective central office have an impact on student achievement when they implement district-wide initiatives? Leithwood et al. (2004) conducted a study that concluded:

This review has summarized a broad range of empirical research and related literature. Our purpose was to summarize the starting points for a major new effort to better understand the links between leadership and student learning.

There seems little doubt that both district and school leadership provides a critical bridge between most educational reform initiatives and their consequences for students. Of all the factors that contribute to what students learn at school, present evidence led us to the conclusion that leadership is second in strength only to classroom instruction. Furthermore, effective leadership has the greatest impact in those circumstances (e.g., schools “in trouble”) in which it is most needed. This evidence supports the present widespread interest in improving leadership as a key to the successful implementation of large-scale reforms. (p. 70)

The literature review in Chapter II extends the evidence of central office leadership and its impact on district-wide improvement. This study explored the specifics of the central office administrator’s job and drilled deeper into their day-to-day operations.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to discover how central office administrators exhibit leadership, carry out their roles, and perform their functions in district-wide improvement initiatives. District improvement can be categorized in several different ways such as instructional improvement, safety, student achievement, character education, and many others. For the purpose of this study, district improvement initiatives are defined as a deliberate initiative where the ultimate goal is to increase student achievement. Examples could potentially include African American male initiatives, parent involvement, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) programs. Given that the empirical research (e.g., Waters & Marzano, 2006) includes evidence that supports an existing relationship between effective district leadership and student achievement, it would be sensible to conduct further research on the specific leadership strategies, roles, and functions of central office administrators. The findings of this research can be used to help understand the leadership strategies,

roles, and functions of central office administrators as they apply to education in the current times.

The North Carolina Read to Achieve legislation for third-grade literacy and the Multi-Tiered Systems for Support (MTSS) have been the two most recent statewide initiatives in 2014. School district administrators referenced these improvement initiatives in the interviews. The Read to Achieve legislation required that all third-grade students pass the reading portion of the standardized test at the end of the year before being incontestably promoted to fourth grade. Students could become exempt by meeting other objective indicators of being proficient in reading. MTSS has been embraced by most school districts with the goal of providing leveled interventions for struggling students in the regular education setting. The school districts that were included in this study implemented showed similarities and differences in the way that they implemented these initiatives. The details of these strategies are included in the findings of the study.

Interviews were conducted with central office administrators from four districts in the Piedmont Triad area of North Carolina. In order to collect and analyze rich data about central office employees, a qualitative study was conducted. This approach was also influenced by grounded theory because the findings and theory were driven by the data rather than the theory being imposed on the data. There were no predictions or preconceived ideas that were imposed upon the data. On the contrary, the data from the interviews were the foundation for the development (theory). Charmaz (2006) claims, “Grounded theory can give you flexible guidelines rather than rigid prescriptions. With

flexible guidelines, you direct your study but let your imagination flow” (p. 15). I focused on leadership strategies, roles, and functions when collecting data. Themes emerged from the various participants. Strauss and Corbin (1998) assert, “Thus, grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (theory) of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants” (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 63).

The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. How do central office administrators exhibit leadership in district improvement initiatives?
2. What roles and duties do central office administrators exhibit in district improvement initiatives?
3. What functions and skills are important for central office administrators in district improvement initiatives?

This research will examine central office administrators’ roles, functions, and leadership strategies in district-wide improvement initiatives. The interview questions have been crafted to reflect my desire to discover how central office administrators carry out their daily practices. The literature review will be guided by the research questions. The results of the interviews will be categorized and grouped by the job title and common themes will be explained at the end of the sections. Themes will emerge and conclusions will be made about the roles, functions, and leadership strategies of central office administrators. It will be the goal to add to the existing body of research about the ground level skills of central office administration.

In Chapter II, the literature review will reveal the empirical studies and theories behind central office leadership and their impact on district-wide improvement. Chapter III describes the methodology which includes the type and rationale for the qualitative study. This section also describes the research setting, participants, and recruitment procedures. Chapter IV will go beyond the methodology and analyze the raw data gathered from the participants regarding their perceived roles, functions, and leadership strategies in district-wide initiatives. Chapter V is an extension of Chapter IV because it also involves data analysis. This was written as a separate chapter due to the volume of data that emerged from the interviews that applied to leadership strategies. Chapter VI summarizes the study by reviewing the findings, conclusions, and interpretations. The chapter also discusses what can be learned from the study, and the major themes. Ideas for future research are mentioned as a result from this study.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Waters and Marzano (2006) have determined through extensive empirical research that district level leadership makes an impact on student performance. Waters and Marzano (2006) stated, “The McREL research team, led by McREL President and CEO Tim Waters and McREL Senior Fellow Robert J. Marzano, found a statistically significant relationship (a positive correlation of .24) between district leadership and student achievement” (p. 3). Also, Shannon and Bylsma (2004) collected and analyzed more than 80 research reports and articles with the intent of studying the characteristics of improved school districts and the impact of central office administrators on student achievement and school improvement. Shannon and Bylsma (2004) assert:

The current body of research illustrates that what happens at the district level can help improve schools and student learning. Educational reform efforts that bypass districts and concentrate on schools can raise performance in individual schools, but reaching all students across a district requires a system-wide vision and strategy as well as the implementation of a well-designed improvement plan. (p. 55)

However, it is my intent to discover how central office administrators exhibit leadership, carry out their roles, and perform their functions during district improvement initiatives.

The literature review describes the general responsibilities, roles, functions, and leadership strategies of central office administrators in the preceding research in these areas.

O’Doherty and Ovando (2009) conducted a qualitative study on a school district that consistently closed the achievement gap by making district-wide improvements. O’Doherty and Ovando (2009) stated, “When asked how VISD had increased achievement for all student populations, a central office administrator explained—it wasn’t an accident or a single effort, a single program effort, or a single thrust” (p. 12). The respondents claimed that the success was a credit to the culmination of multiple efforts converging together backed by the commitment and support of the central office administration.

Further conclusions were made based on this study on the effectiveness of district-wide improvement efforts and the impact from central office administration on closing achievement gaps. O’Doherty and Young (2009) stated,

Districts that have successfully closed achievement gaps have employed processes that include creation of a demanding culture, development of shared mission and vision supported by planning and goals; strategic allocation of resources; capacity building; alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment; and expansion of partnerships. Leaders in these studied districts have also demonstrated the courage and commitment to continuously engage in the difficult work of comprehensive system-wide reform and improvement. (p. 1)

This background information about effective central office administration gave some insight to the common processes that have made an impact on district-wide improvement.

### **Responsibilities and Context of Central Office Leadership**

The historical context in which central office administrators worked was built around the concept of authority and delegation such as the delivery of state policies and mandates to the schools. The context of the work of central office administrators has

changed since its inception due to the accountability and high pressure for student achievement. Honig and Rainey (2014) explain,

District central office administrators across the country are increasingly working to shift their traditional roles from a primary focus on regulatory and business functions toward supporting teaching and learning improvement district-wide (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002; Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). (p. 2)

There has been a clear shift in the focus of central office administrators' responsibilities. Much like the principal is no longer just a building manager, the level of accountability and responsibility has risen for central office leadership. These leaders are expected to support the schools, be a resource, and delegate authority to the principals while following up with holding the schools accountable for student growth. Hord and Smith (1993) claim:

The goal of central office staff now is to support school staffs by giving them the authority, flexibility and resources they need to solve the educational problems particular to their schools. Meeting that challenge must be a primary focus of the new model for central office school leadership. (para. 3)

This challenge should come with a shift in in the mindset of central office administrators in the form of reversing the role where the principal serves the central office. Crow (2010) noted,

That means our central office serves the schools, rather than vice versa. We have to provide services to schools in a timely manner that will allow schools to get on with teaching and learning and what's best for students without worrying constantly about meeting the needs of a central bureaucracy. (p. 10)

This suggests that the current framework of the central office should now be structured to support the principals and be a resource school-wide, which would result in district-wide improvement. Hillman and Kachur (2010) assert, “Central offices should develop partnerships for collaboration between the central office and schools that reflect movement from a ‘working on’ to a ‘working with’ mentality” (p. 22). The overarching area of responsibilities of central office administrators should reflect this strategy of being a supporter to the individual school leaders.

What are the major areas of responsibility in which North Carolina central office administrators are expected to be proficient? The job description for assistant superintendents and central office administrators outlines that leaders are expected to provide leadership in establishing system-wide goals, assist in the development of a comprehensive program plan, and effectively communicate with staff and community and in the planning for professional development of self and staff. The participants in this study elaborate on these topics in Chapters IV and V.

### **Roles, Functions, and Leadership Strategies**

#### **Roles**

One of the research questions in this study prompts the administrators to describe their leadership roles. Roles are defined in this study as the fulfillment of their position and the job responsibilities assigned to the administrator. A few examples of roles fulfilled by administrators could be described as a supporter, researcher, or consultant.

Central office administrators carry out various roles when it comes to the operation of a school district. But what is their overarching role that is necessary to

achieve an equitable and consistent improvement across the district? Dickson Corbett and Wilson (1992) stated:

Depending on which school a child attends and to which classrooms the child is assigned, the student will encounter a varied array of programs and activities. . . . From the students' perspective, then, the quality of their educational experiences rests on the 'luck of the draw.' The central office instructional role is to remove this luck factor from the instructional program, i.e., to ensure that idiosyncratic variations in programs, people, and policies do not result in systematic differences in the quality of education for children. (p. 46)

This suggests that there would be a high likelihood of students across the district receiving the same high-quality educational experience and the district can provide an equitable opportunity for all students regardless of their home address. The next step for central office administrators would be to prioritize this theory to take out the luck factor and emphasize equity for all students. If that emphasis is not present, then their roles could end up being misguided and far from socially just.

If it is the goal of the central office to provide equitable access to a sound education and consistent quality of instruction across the district, then what should be the strategic measures put in place to put this into action? What roles should be played by central office administrators? Mac Iver and Farley (2003) emphasized three important roles of the central office roles as decision-makers about curriculum and instruction, supporters of good instructional practice, and good evaluators of the results (p. 10). Hillman and Kachur (2010) explain, "The ultimate goal of the central office transformation was to build the capacity of all faculty and staff through professional development to offer a quality education and accept responsibility to meet the needs of a

diverse population” (p. 22). Equity and improvement can be accomplished with the combination of these roles being played by central office administrators.

### **Functions**

We know that the central office has the responsibility to work with the school board to carry out the policies of the state. One of my major points of interest is to uncover the detailed functions of the central office administrators. So, what do the researchers say about the functions that are required to implement district-wide improvement initiatives and are they similar among the various districts?

For the purposes of this study, functions are the skills, tasks, and actions that the participants felt were important to engage as central office administrators during district-wide improvement initiatives. What do the scholars say about the functions of educational leaders?

**Communication.** Waters and Marzano (2006) describe the function of communication in their study, “Communication refers to the extent to which the school leader establishes strong lines of communication with and between teachers and students” (p. 46). Waters and Marzano (2006) assert, “One might say that effective communication is an implicit or explicit feature of most aspects of leadership” (p. 47).

**Flexibility.** Due to the ever-changing policies and state legislation such as North Carolina’s Read to Achieve, flexibility is another essential function of central office administrators. Implementing and participating in any type of change calls for the skill of flexibility. Fullan (2001) explains:

To recommend employing different leadership strategies that simultaneously and sequentially combine different elements seems like complicated advice, but developing this deeper feel for the change process by accumulating insights and wisdom across situations and time may turn out to be the most practical thing we can do—more practical than the best step-by-step models. (p. 48)

The skill of flexibility is essential for central office administrators and all school employees. School cultures often have difficulty with accepting change, but change is inevitable and school leaders must require their colleagues to acquire and retain the skill of flexibility in order to achieve positive results from the initiative.

**Building relationships.** Leaders must have the skill of building relationships regardless of their professional area. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) assert, “One of the distinguishing qualities of successful people who lead in any field is the emphasis they place on personal relationships” (p. 75). Relationships help stakeholders feel valued, heard, and connected to the school. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) stated:

School leaders play an important role in this process when they help to establish more positive relationships between educators, students, and their families and communities, and when these relationships are built on trust, deep familiarity, and genuine appreciation for the assets of the family or community. (p. 7)

This review of the literature has given me early indications that the building of relationships could be one of the key functions of central office administrators.

### **Leadership Strategies**

Cunningham and Cordeiro (2006) describe the importance of leadership: “An administrator’s leadership to a large extent determines how successful his or her organization will be in delivering appropriate services and winning community support”

(p. 155). School districts and businesses hire the best leaders because leadership makes a difference in the organization. To better understand how leadership is exhibited, it would be sensible to discuss some prominent and widely accepted leadership theories: transformational leadership, transactional leadership, Total Quality Management (TQM), and transformative leadership.

Leadership, management, and administration are terms that are used interchangeably to describe the leaders of organizations. However, these descriptors are also thought of as being different from one other. Cunningham and Cordeiro (2006) assert:

Although the meaning of administration, management, and leadership is often debated, there is some agreement that administration is the broadest term related to organizational responsibility, management focuses on efficient use of resources, and leadership focuses on organizational direction and purpose. Leadership is doing the right things, management is doing things right, and administration is responsible for both. Administrators are expected to be effective leaders and efficient managers. (p. 155)

We could presume that central office administrators are properly named as administrators because they communicate visionary ideas and make sure that the vision comes to life in a practical way. Cunningham and Cordeiro (2006) claim, “Superintendents often have little time to supervise central office administrators directly and have to depend on their staffs’ ability to follow up on the vision established by the superintendent and board” (p. 131). So, what are the different styles of leadership that central office administrators exhibit? Let’s examine leadership ideas from prominent theorists who have been prevalent in education.

**Transformational and transactional leadership.** Transformational and transactional leadership styles have been compared in the work of James MacGregor Burns. Burns is known for his development work in modern leadership theory. While mostly working in the area of politics, his modern leadership theory has been applied to both the business and education sectors. Burns (1978) explains transactional leadership and states,

The first I will call transactional leadership. Such leadership occurs when one person takes the initiative in making contact with others for the purpose of an exchange of valued things . . . The bargainers have no enduring purpose that holds them together; hence they may go their separate ways. A leadership act took place, but it was not one that binds leader and follower together in a mutual and continuing pursuit of a higher purpose. (pp. 19–20)

There is a stark difference between transactional and transformational leadership. Burns (1978) compares transactional leadership with transformational leadership and states,

Contrast this with transforming leadership. Such leadership occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Their purposes, which might have started out as separate but related, as in the case with transactional leadership, become fused. (p. 20)

Shields (2003) concurs, “Transformational leadership is generally described as leadership that focuses more on the collective interests of a group or community” (p. 11).

Transformational leadership has also been described as a strategy that enables the collective group to foster visionary team goals while providing intellectual stimulation.

Leithwood (1995) asserts, “It is concerned with developing a vision, fostering acceptance of group goals, and providing intellectual stimulation” (p. 86). Central office

administrators are often faced with overseeing the implementation of new programs that are expected to boost student performance at the school level. New programs bring change, and change initiates transformation. It would be beneficial to take a closer look at the differences between transactional and transformational leadership.

Bass and Avolio (1994) describe three types of transactional leadership: management-by-exception-passive, management-by-exception-active, and constructive transactional (as cited in Marzano et al., 2005). Passive transactional leaders tend to be problem solvers who engage in leadership after the problem has risen. These leaders fix problems after they occur by using a problem-solving and systemic process. Active transactional leaders succeed further by paying careful attention to details and communicating an expected standard of performance while monitoring the behaviors of his or her direct reports. Marzano et al. (2005) assert, "In fact, they are so aggressive in their management behavior that followers of this leadership style believe that they should not take risks or demonstrate initiative" (p. 14). This is a problem because great ideas and innovation can be drawn from teachers and employees who work directly on the front line and who are considered the followers of leadership. These are the people who put theory into action and experience the trials of the everyday responsibilities. Leaders can learn from the led about what is working and what needs to be improved.

Constructive transactional leaders appear to be the most effective out of the three transactional leadership styles. Marzano et al. (2005) assert, "This type of transactional leader sets goals, clarifies desired outcomes, exchanges rewards and recognition for accomplishments, suggests or consults, provides feedback, and gives employees praise

when it is deserved” (p. 14). Although this is transactional by definition, the constructive transactional leader becomes a part of the management process and invites the direct reports to share and integrate their ideas.

The term transformational leadership sounds inspiring and innovative. Transformational leadership is thought of as being the preferred style of educational leaders because it fosters a culture of vision, collaboration, and improvement. Burns (1978) describes the transformational approach: “Transformational leaders develop followers, help map new directions, mobilize resources, facilitate and support employees, and respond to organizational challenges. They see change as necessary and strive to cause it” (as cited in Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2006, p. 187). Ambitious and driven central office administrators typically use the transformational leadership style because districts using transactional leadership are not likely to be visionary. Cunningham and Cordeiro (2006) comment on transformational leadership in schools, “School personnel are inspired to rise above self-interest goals, make commitments to continuously improve student learning, and take responsibility for instructional innovation” (p. 188). The pressure is mounting on school districts to perform and improve student achievement. Transactional leadership would be a risky form of leadership style for central office administrators because it most often yields status quo results.

**Transformative leadership.** The theorists on transformative leadership have made it clear that it is not to be confused with transformational or transactional leadership theories. Shields (2010) summarizes the basic expectations of the transformative leader:

It is not simply the task of the educational leader to ensure that all students succeed in tasks associated with learning the formal curriculum and demonstrating that learning on norm referenced standardized tests; it is the essential work of the educational leader to create learning contexts or communities in which social, political, and cultural capital is enhanced in such a way as to provide equity of opportunity for students as they take their place as contributing members of society. (p. 572)

One can understand why it might be a challenging task to be the transformative school leader in the current times of high pressure regarding standardized testing, accountability, and the data driven mindset. There must be a radical shift in the mindset of educators to embrace this theory of transformative leadership. Shields (2011) concludes, “Educational leaders practicing transformative leadership have a commitment to go beyond traditional notions of democracy and, instead, promote a radical application of democracy in their schools” (p. 251). Theoharis (2007) conducted an empirical study on transformative leadership and referred to it as “leadership for social justice.” Theoharis (2007) explains,

Leadership to mean that these principals make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools. (p. 223)

As it has been explained, transformative leadership has distinct qualities with the end result being deep and equitable change in social conditions, whereas transformational leadership has a focus on effectiveness and transactional leadership tends to emphasize smooth operations through transactions. Shields (2003) claims, “We must attend to both individual and organizational needs, we must engage in transactional, transformational, and above all, transformative processes” (p. 21).

**Total quality management (TQM).** Marzano et al. (2005) credit the work of Edward Deming (1986) on the concept of TQM. Marzano et al. (2005) cite, “Although TQM was created for the world of business, it has had a strong influence on the leadership practices in education. Central to Deming’s conception of TQM are 14 principles that pertain to organizations of all types” (p. 15). Does a relationship exist between TQM and transformational leadership? Waldman (1993) asserts, “A culture conducive to TQM might provide more allowance for the emergence of transformational leaders” (p. 69). Waldman (1993) took Deming’s 14 principles and arranged them into five categories of leadership behaviors of effective leaders: change agency, teamwork, continuous improvement, trust building, and eradication of short term goals. Sosik and Dionne (1997) assert, “Because of its prominence within Deming’s philosophy, leadership can be considered to be the force which provides the energy that fuels a complex interaction among the five TQM behavior factors” (p. 448).

***Change agency.*** The change agency leadership behavior is a key factor in transformational leadership in order to initiate organizational change. Marzano et al. (2005) assert:

The leader does so by analyzing the organization’s need for change, isolating and eliminating structures and routines that work against change, creating a shared vision and sense of urgency, implanting plans and structures that enable change, and fostering open communication. (p. 15)

This suggests that leadership should have a long-term vision and a systemic procedure of identifying the areas that are in need of change, removing the obstacles and excuses for

failure, inspiring the stakeholders who are involved in the change, and effectively implementing a plan for improvement.

***Teamwork.*** The teamwork leadership behavior fosters collaboration and communication. TQM emphasizes teamwork in order for an organization to be effective.

Sosik and Dionne (1997) claim:

Teams consist of two or more individuals with complementary skills who interact with each other to work toward a common task-oriented purpose. Team members consider themselves to be collectively accountable for the attainment of their goal. Teams are formed to serve organizational interests within departments, and across departments and divisions. (p. 449)

Teamwork and collaboration have become the preferred method of operation in education. Teammates learn more from each other and synergize when communication is effective and a culture of sharing is encouraged within and across various departments. This can be done within a school building and also within and across central office administration departments.

***Continuous improvement.*** The mission of continuous improvement should be on the minds of all leaders in the world of business and education. After all, leaders are responsible for the growth of an organization and they can quickly be blamed or fired if production does not yield positive results. Sosik and Dionne (1997) assert, “By envisioning and clearly articulating continuous improvement as an organizational value, leaders are able to encourage employees to improve processes, products and services” (p. 450). Once the employees buy into and begin implementing the value of continuous improvement, their contributions of ideas and innovation are inspired which can have an

effect on future improvement. Central office administrators are responsible for the continuous improvement of the school district and therefore need to be cognizant of its importance at all times.

***Trust building.*** Establishing trust with stakeholders is an important factor especially in leadership positions such as principal and central office administrator. The absence of trust can cause followers to hesitate or resist the transformational leader. Building trust with subordinates requires content knowledge but also relies on the character and integrity of the leader. Sosik and Dionne (1997) claim, “Thus, trust-building is defined as the process of establishing respect and instilling faith into followers based on leader integrity, honesty, and openness” (p. 450). Leaders earn the trust of their followers by being tested on a daily basis. Direct reports trust their leaders when they know that the leader is truthful, approachable, respectful, and takes the time to genuinely listen to concerns and ideas.

***Eradication of short-term goals.*** The eradication of short-term goals was an idea originated by Deming (1986), who discouraged an abundance of quantitative goals based on quotas. These goals were usually short-term and did not contribute to the long-term vision of the organization. Although Deming was not opposed to specific and detailed goals, he emphasized the importance of the long-term vision. Management by Objectives (MBO), conceived by Peter Drucker, encouraged the superior/subordinate goal and reward system. Sosik and Dionne (1997) claim, “Deming’s disdain for MBO is based on MBO’s characteristic focus on short-term goal/standard achievement at the expense of

long-term system improvement” (p. 450). Deming clearly valued the importance of setting goals that focus on long term results.

As discussed, transformational leadership suggests change in an organization led by mapping new directions and responding to the needs of the organization. Michael Fullan has been a great contributor to the world of leadership theory. Fullan is best known for his work on implementing change as an educational leader. Fullan (2001) summarizes his five components of leadership:

The conclusion, then, is that leaders will increase their effectiveness if they continually work on the five components of leadership—if they pursue moral purpose, understand the change process, develop relationships, foster knowledge building, and strive for coherence—with energy, enthusiasm, and hopefulness. If leaders do so, the rewards and benefits will be enormous. (p. 11)

Fullan emphasizes that energy, enthusiasm, and hopefulness should work in harmony with the five basic components of leading a culture of change. We could presume that central office leaders should also retain these characteristics in order to be effective leaders.

### **Summary and Connections**

This literature review was driven by the research questions in this study, which centered on the roles, functions, and leadership strategies of central office administrators in district-wide improvement initiatives. I began the search for literature by citing the empirical study led by Waters and Marzano (2006) that indicated a positive correlation between district leadership and student achievement. For the purpose of this study, I

wanted to emphasize that it was the intent to reveal what central office administrators do on a daily basis to implement these improvement initiatives.

I searched the UNCG database for journal articles, books, reports, dissertations, or any other empirical sources to explore the research that has been conducted on the subject of central office administrators. The terms used in the search engine included central office administrator, roles, functions, and leadership strategies. I used the bibliographies of the studies that were conducted and the common names of authors that were referenced in this chapter were continuing to come to the surface of the literature review.

The methodology will show that the interview questions also coincide with roles, functions, and leadership strategies. When district-wide improvement and equity are emphasized, Dickson, Corbett, and Wilson (1992) made a great point by challenging school leaders to take the role of being a social justice leader and eliminating the luck factor when students simply get a better schooling experience because they are at school A and not school B.

The functions of central office administrators were vast, but certain characteristics continued to surface in the literature review such as communication, flexibility, and relationships. Waters and Marzano (2006) went as far to say that communication is an implicit or explicit feature in most aspects of leadership. Due to its significance, the concept of communication at the central office level is further discussed in Chapter IV.

There was a plethora of literature to be found with regard to leadership strategies, because it is such a broad term. Some of the most significant scholars such as Burns, Waters, Marzano, and Shields were referenced for their work on transformational,

transactional, and transformative leadership strategies. Deming was also used in this literature review for his work on TQM which some say paved the way for transformational leadership.

So, what does it mean to have all three of these components of roles, functions, and leadership strategies together? Working from the ground up, functions are the daily skills, tasks, and actions that are either present or developed through experience at the central office level. The roles are the fulfillment of their position, job responsibilities, and duties of the employee that are wrapped over the functional skills. These roles and responsibilities are often driven by the vision of the top leaders in the district such as the superintendent. The leadership strategy is the general philosophy or “the way we do things around here.” The leadership strategy can vary based on the personal style of each central office leader, but this too can be regulated by the higher-level administrators.

This literature review gave some foresight to some of the common practices of central office administrators. The methodology chapter will describe the type and rationale for the qualitative study. The research setting, participants, and recruitment will be discussed that shows that the participants were carefully selected to represent their district and share some common responsibilities with participants in other school districts. Through the interviews the participants were encouraged to explain their thoughts on their roles, functions, and leadership strategies in district-wide improvement initiatives. Finally, the data collection, analysis, trustworthiness, and researcher subjectivity will be explained along with the benefits and risks of the study.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Type of Study**

The purpose of this study was to discover how central office administrators exhibit leadership, carry out their roles, and perform their functions in district improvement initiatives. Marzano et al. (2005) concludes, “Our meta-analysis of 35 years of research indicates that school leadership has a substantial effect on student achievement and provides guidance for experienced and aspiring administrators alike” (p. 12). Although research has indicated that central office leaders have an impact on student achievement, what exactly do they do in their roles as employees of the school district? What are detailed functions of central office administrators, and do they differ in various districts? What leadership practices are evident at the central office level?

It was my intent to analyze the perceptions of central office administrators and analyze the documents that pertain to the roles and functions of their jobs. Documents for data analysis included the strategic plan for the school district, formally written job descriptions of central office administrators, evaluation instruments designed for central office administrators, annual reports, district fact sheets and profiles, and organizational charts. Interviews were conducted with 12 central office administrators among four different school districts located in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. My intent for this qualitative study was to provide meaningful and candid evidence from the

interviews and supporting documents that would help form conclusions about the various leadership characteristics, roles, and functions of central office administrators that influence district-wide improvement.

### **Rationale for Using Qualitative Research**

Having worked in both rural and urban school districts, it has become quite evident to me that the organizational structure of central office administration tends to determine the distribution of the roles of personnel. Central office administrators in smaller districts assume a wider variety of roles and responsibilities and oversee a larger number of departments. Larger districts assign specialized roles with a narrower focus to the central office administrators. This makes sense because the responsibilities remain the same regardless of the size of the district and the funding for personnel is proportionate to the district.

The research for this dissertation reflects the voices and stories of central office administrators from both large and small districts. It is important to find out how these administrators viewed their leadership styles, roles, and functions in district improvement initiatives. Creswell (2007) asserts, “We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored. This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that can be measured, or hear silenced voices” (pp. 39–40). Creswell (2007) states that “qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human

problem” (p. 37). This definition describes the purpose of the interviews and reason for collecting qualitative data during this research.

Although it would be easy to allow assumptions to influence me in the beginning of this research project, it was my intent to permit the data and the participants to tell the story. It was my responsibility to analyze the data and look for emerging themes that helped make some conclusions about the research questions in this study. The themes and conclusions are described in Chapters IV and V. During this study, the themes arose from the data instead of the themes being imposed upon the data. Also, there were no preconceived theories or prescribed coding to this project. Instead, I wanted the data to speak without imposition.

## **Research Setting**

### **Description of School Districts**

Four local school districts agreed to participate in the study. Shull County Schools had one participant, Addison County Schools had four participants, Collins County Schools had four participants, and Caden County Schools had three participants. Pseudonyms were used for the names of each district and each participant in the study in order to preserve confidentiality with the data collection. Refer to Table 1 for a general description of each school district. The type of district was determined by the following definitions:

1. Rural, Distant: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

2. Rural, Fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
3. Town, Distant: Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area. (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d., “Locale, Urban-Centric,” para. 1)

Table 1

## School District Descriptions

District Name	Type	# of students
Shull	Rural: Fringe	6,660
Addison	Town: Distant	13,179
Collins	Rural: Distant	8,242
Caden	Rural: Fringe	22,237

**Shull County**

The Shull County School District is located in a rural/fringe area in the Piedmont Area of North Carolina. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines rural/fringe as census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. In 2014, the district served 6,660 students in 12 elementary schools, three middle schools, and five high schools for a total of 20 separate schools. The district employed 475 teachers.

**Addison County**

The Addison County School district is located in a town/distant area in the Piedmont Area of North Carolina. The NCES defines town/distant as territory inside an

urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area. In 2014, the district served 13,179 students in 15 elementary schools, four middle schools, five high schools, and one alternative school for a total of 25 separate schools. It should be noted that in the 2013-2014 school year, Addison County closed one elementary school and merged students into one school due to declining enrollment and inadequate building conditions. The district employed 943 teachers.

### **Collins County**

The Collins County School District is located in a rural/distant area in the Piedmont Area of North Carolina. The NCES defines rural/distant as census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster. In 2014, the district served 8,242 students in 11 elementary schools, four middle schools, and 5 high schools for a total of 20 separate schools. The district employed 560 teachers.

### **Caden County**

The Caden County School District is located in a rural/fringe area in the Piedmont Area of North Carolina. The NCES defines rural/fringe as census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. In 2014, the district served 22,237 students in 20 elementary schools, seven middle schools, and nine high schools for a total of 36 separate schools. The district employed 1,586 teachers. This was the largest district in the study and although this is considered rural fringe according to

NCES, it should be noted that Caden County encompasses a large urban area in the city of Freeman and schools are located in both rural and urban areas.

### **Research Participants**

Dr. Glavine was the Executive Director of the Exceptional Children's Program in the Addison County School District. She earned her doctorate in educational leadership in 2012 from a local state university. She also held a master's degree in special education and a master's degree in school administration. She earned a bachelor's in U.S. History and a bachelor's in Physical Education. She has proven to have a diverse background of training and education. At the time of the interview, she was in her 30th year in education and she has been employed in Addison County Schools for the last 13 years. She has held other titles in central office prior to her current roles, and she has been in the central office for the last three years.

Mrs. Horner was the Director of Instructional Improvement and English as a Second Language and Director of Federal Programs in the Caden County School District. She has been in this role for almost two years at the time of the interview. She started her career as a teacher for 15 years, then a teacher-coach, then an assistant principal and principal for five years before accepting her current central office position.

Mrs. Jones was the Director of Federal Programs in the Collins County School District. She retained a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in K-6 education. She taught first through fifth grades for 13 years and was an instructional specialist for 10 years. She has been the Federal Programs Director for the last seven years as she has entered her 30th year in education.

Mrs. Lopez was the Director of K-5 and Title Programs in the Shull County School District. Just a few short months before the interview, she was the elementary and middle school director. She held a bachelor's degree in elementary and middle grades education, a master's degree in school administration, and she has been pursuing a doctorate degree for the past few years. Mrs. Lopez was an elementary principal for five years and a middle school assistant principal for a year and a half prior to her current role. She has been employed in the Shull County School District for 24 years and she has been in her current role for the past three years.

Dr. Maddux has been the Director of Elementary Programs and Title I in Addison County Schools for two years. She was a teacher, assistant principal, and principal prior to her role at the district level. She recently completed her doctorate in educational leadership. She has been a central office administrator for three years.

Mrs. Mercker was the director of elementary education in the Collins County School District. She came to the central office through a non-traditional route because she was never a principal. She taught for 10 years, then became an instructional supervisor for middle grades curriculum, then was selected as the Director of Federal Programs before serving as the Director of Elementary Education. She has served in Collins County for 20 of her 28 years in education.

Mr. Justice was the Director of Instructional Media, Teacher Quality, and Communications in Collins County Schools. He has held this director's position for two years at the time of the interview. Prior to this role, he was the Teacher Quality Coordinator, Curriculum Facilitator, and a Technology Facilitator. All of those positions

were held in Collins County Schools even though he began his career in a different school district. Mr. Justice retained a bachelor's degree in Middle Grades Education and was a classroom teacher for middle grades in social studies and language arts. He also earned a master's degree in Library Science with a Technology add-on licensure.

Dr. Klesko worked in the Caden County School District as the Executive Director of Elementary Leadership. She has been in this position for eight years and has been employed in this school system for 30 years. She recently earned her doctorate degree in educational leadership at a local university. Her background included 17 years as an elementary principal, assistant principal, and teacher. She considered herself to be the historian of the school district due to her long tenure of 30 years and various roles.

Dr. Murphy was the Executive Director of Curriculum and Professional development in Caden County Schools. She has been in the field of education for 20 years as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, Director of Human Resources, Recruitment and Retention, Executive Director of Professional Development and Innovation, and she has been in her current role for over two years as the Executive Director of Curriculum and Professional Development. Her areas of responsibility were the K-12 curriculum, professional development, instructional improvement, ESL, RTI, AIG, and federal programs. She earned a bachelor's degree in teaching, a master's degree in school administration, Educational Specialist degree, and a doctorate in Education Leadership.

Mr. Avery was recently appointed as the new Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction in the Addison County School District. Prior to this role, he

was the Director of School Administration in High Schools, high school principal, middle school principal, elementary school principal, and a teacher in the same district. His entire educational career has been in Addison County. He started as a teacher in 1998 and went into administration in 2004 and came into central office to the district office in 2012. He earned his bachelor's degree in education, a master's degree in school administration, and an educational specialist degree. He is currently working on his doctorate in educational leadership.

Mr. McGriff was the Director of Middle Grades and CTE in Addison County Schools. He has held this title for nine years. He earned an undergraduate degree in Visual Arts, a master's degree in school administration, and an educational specialist degree. He was a teacher and a middle school principal prior to joining the ranks of the central office.

Dr. Smoltz was the Director of Secondary Education in the Collins County School District. Collins County defined secondary education as grades 6–12. Curriculum and instruction, CTE, AIG, PBIS, professional development, and business advisory also fall underneath her role. She has been in this current role as director of Secondary Education for two years, but has been in the central office for seven years. She was previously the Director of Technology and CTE and Media, high school principal, and assistant principal, and teacher prior to her current role. She has entered her 25th year in education at the time of the interview. See Table 2 for a summary of research participants by district, title, and category.

Table 2

## Research Participants

Name	District	Title	Category
Dr. Glavine	Addison	Executive Director of Exceptional Children's Program	Federal Programs
Mrs. Horner	Caden	Director of Instructional Improvement and English as a Second Language AND Director of Federal Programs	
Mrs. Jones	Collins	Director of Federal Programs	
Mrs. Lopez	Shull	Director of K-5 and Title I	Director of Elementary Education
Dr. Maddux	Addison	Director of Elementary Education/Title I	
Mrs. Mercker	Collins	Director of Elementary Curriculum and Instruction	
Mr. Justice	Collins	Dir. Of Communications and Teacher Quality	Teacher Quality
Dr. Klesko	Caden	Executive Director Elementary School Leadership	
Dr. Murphy	Caden	Executive Director of Curriculum and Professional Development	
Mr. Avery	Addison	Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction	Director of Secondary Education
Mr. McGriff	Addison	Director of Middle Grades and CTE	
Dr. Smoltz	Collins	Director of Secondary Curriculum and Instruction, K-12 CTE Curriculum and Instruction, and VoCATS	

Various settings were utilized for interview during this study. Twelve interviews were conducted in four different school districts in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. Each participant selected the location of the interview to ensure comfort and with the intent to maintain confidentiality. Eight participants chose to be interviewed at their office in the central office administration building. One participant offered to meet me at my school for the interview. One participant asked to meet me at a neutral location for the interview, a building owned by my school district. Two participants asked me to meet them at a school site located in their district that was away from their central offices. All interviews were conducted in a private room with a good recording atmosphere.

Since the interviews were recorded using a Sony digital recorder, it was ideal to conduct the interviews in a quiet setting that yielded a clear recording. I allowed the participants to suggest a setting and assumed that he or she would choose the most comfortable and accommodating atmosphere that would produce adequate data.

Creswell (2007) suggests:

For one-on-one interviewing, the researcher needs individuals who are not hesitant to speak and share ideas, and needs to determine a setting in which this is possible. The less articulate, shy interviewee may present the researcher with a challenge and less than adequate data. (p. 133)

It can be assumed that the autonomy given to the participant to choose a setting generated an adequate and most appropriate setting. I informed the participant about the digital recording device and that the background noise should be considered when choosing a setting. Although there was a slight risk of compromising the participants' identity when

the interview took place at the district level office, the participants did not communicate or disclose the purpose of my visit to any other employees. In fact, the interviews at central office were private with no interruptions.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

The large scale decision makers in a typical public school district are the school board members, superintendents, directors, executive directors, and principals. This qualitative study gathered the perspectives from various individuals or groups of people who have played a part in the vision and direction of district initiatives. It was imperative that the recruitment process was successful with a high participation rate since there was not an abundance of central office administrators who played these key roles in district improvement initiatives.

I began the recruitment process by working with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to acquire approval of an email recruitment script, oral recruitment script, and a telephone recruitment script. The IRB made some suggestions for editing the scripts for full compliance. I was granted approval for the email, oral, and telephone recruitment scripts and received stamped documents (see Appendix A) which were the only approved forms to use in the recruitment process. The adult consent form was also stamped and approved by the IRB (see Appendix B). The stamped documents were used in the recruitment of all participants in this study as required by the IRB.

I applied for research approval in five different school districts because I was uncertain about the length of time it would take to be approved, and I predicted the possibility of denial in one or two districts. Each local school district had different

procedures for research approval. Caden County, Addison County, and Collins County School systems simply required that an email be sent to the Director of Accountability with a description of the study. They responded within a week and an email was sent to me granting permission to conduct the research in the respective counties. All three districts followed up with an official memo printed on district letterhead with the approval for research. Leon County Schools required a standardized form that was filled out and then submitted along with the IRB to their internal research board. This board met on an infrequent basis to discuss the applications for research requests in their county. The Director of Accountability sent an email to inform me that my request for permission to conduct research had been denied. I thanked them for considering my request and then immediately terminated Leon County from the study. Shull County asked me to send an email to the Director of Accountability and was informed that the study would be discussed in a cabinet meeting that included the superintendent. Shull County sent me an email and granted permission to conduct research. I was ultimately granted permission to interview central office administrators in four school districts (Shull, Addison, Collins, and Caden). This was the first step before I began the recruitment of individual voluntary participants from each district.

Much like the recruitment of district participation, I began this study with a prediction that there would be some central office administrators to turn down the opportunity to participate in the study. I felt that greater success would be achieved if each participant was called directly on the phone, using the IRB-approved (stamped) telephone recruitment script in the conversation. Using the approach of personal contact

proved to be successful because all of the individuals whom I contacted agreed to participate in the study. A follow up email was sent to each participant that included the IRB-approved email recruitment script and adult consent form. Even though the position titles varied in each district, I recruited central office administrators who held similar roles in each district for continuity and consistency of interview data. This helped to make some connections and comparisons of the strategies from different districts where the participants had similar roles and responsibilities.

It should be noted that smaller districts had fewer central office administrators who were responsible for a broader range of departments. Larger districts had administrators who specialized in certain areas or departments. Administrators were chosen from various departments such as Curriculum and Instruction, Title I, Federal Programs, Elementary Education, ESOL, Exceptional Children, Communications, Instructional Improvement, Professional Development, and Secondary Education (see Table 1). The selection of participants from this broad range of departments gave me a diverse range of perspectives. These departments were targeted because of their high likelihood of involvement in district-wide improvement initiatives.

### **Data Collection**

The two main data collection procedures were interviews of central office administrators and the collection of relevant documents that describe roles, jobs, and strategic plans for the school district. See Appendix C for the interview protocol. Creswell (2007) describes the data collection process as an interrelated circle of activities: “These activities are locating a site or individual, gaining access and making

rapport, sampling purposefully, collecting data, recording information, exploring field issues, and storing data” (p. 117).

I had to gain the approval of each school district prior to any attempt to recruit individual participants who worked in the district. The first research request was sent in January of 2014 and was approved on January 28. The last district’s approval was received on March 19. Interviews were scheduled with the individuals as soon as each district sent its letter of approval for research. I did not wait to gain access to all districts before recruiting the participants in the approved districts. The first interview was conducted on March 5, 2014, and the last interview was conducted on May 2, 2014.

There were 10 interview questions that led the discussion during this research. The initial contact was made by telephone where I gathered some basic information from the participants such as verifying their names, titles, and places of employment. Each phone call took an average of 15 minutes. The long interview was scheduled to be in-person where the 10 questions were asked. The interviews averaged one hour and 15 minutes. Data from the interviews were collected using a Sony digital recording device. Data were uploaded to a computer, transcribed, edited, and ready for coding, which is further explained in the data analysis section. It should be noted that participants were asked if they wanted to add anything else to the conversation that might be pertinent to the topic in this study.

The process of the interview was gradually easier with each subsequent interview. It was advised by a doctoral committee member to make the interview comfortable and encourage the participant to continue to talk and provide rich information about the topic

of central office leadership. Creswell (2007) advised, “The last point may be the most important, and it is a reminder of how a good interviewer is a good listener rather than a frequent speaker during an interview” (p. 134). I was consistent with this approach of doing more listening and less talking from the first through the last interview.

The open-ended questions allowed participants to feel confident with their responses. The interview questions did not require rote answers that was a test of their factual knowledge of being correct or incorrect about a certain topic. Most of the questions required the participant to share their thoughts, feelings, and observations about leadership during district-wide improvement initiatives. It was found that the participants began to elaborate once they answered the interview question and then they expanded their comments to include stories or other related evidence in the interview.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I sent the transcripts to the participants for their review. They were asked to analyze their transcriptions for accuracy, intent of their comments, and to add afterthoughts to the transcriptions that might be significant to the study. I called each participant and checked in with him/her to make sure that s/he was able to review the document. The participants were satisfied with the transcriptions and also sent an email confirmation to document their approval.

Research also included the review and analysis of the following documents in each of the four school districts:

- District strategic plans
- Written and formal job descriptions of central office administrators
- Evaluation instruments designed for central office administrators

- Annual Reports
- District fact sheets and profiles
- Organizational charts

I searched for these documents on the websites of each school district. These documents gave me something to compare with the interview data to see if the information from the interview was aligned with the published materials.

### **Data Analysis**

The collection of data included the transcribed interviews and electronic copies of documents acquired from the school districts' websites. Grounded theory inspired my approach to analysis in that I expected to make ongoing and continuous discoveries while in the data analysis stage. I attempted to discover patterns and relationships among the various sources of data in order to draw valid and meaningful conclusions about the leadership strategies, roles, and functions of central office administrators.

I used NVIVO 10 student software to code the data collected from the interviews and documents. The NVIVO 10 software was very easy to use, and it was found to be practical while keeping the codes, categories, and themes organized. It was important to know what it meant to code something and what guidelines should be followed when coding the transcripts. Saldana (2013) asserts, "The portion of data to be coded during First Cycle coding processes can range in magnitude from a single word to a full sentence to an entire page of text to a stream of moving images" (p. 3). In order for the information to be accurately interpreted by the reader and in the context that was intended, the codes ranged from short sentences to entire paragraphs. In other words,

some codes had to include the previous sentence in order for the participant's comments to be fully understood. Please refer to Appendix D for interview questions and how they apply to each code or category.

The data were collected and coded into the emerging categories and then themes. This process began by highlighting the code in the transcript and then transferring it into a compartment with the other codes that were categorized with a name. Every time there was a code that did not fit into an existing category, a new one was created. At the end of the coding process, these categories were reduced again into themes. I ran a report in the NVIVO 10 software that showed quantitative data on how often coding references were used in each category. These data helped me decide on the emerging themes.

What are the actual roles of central office administrators as employees of the school district? What are detailed functions and skills that are required of central office administrators, and do they differ in various districts? What leadership practices emerge from these roles, functions, and skills at the central office level? The data were examined and Chapter IV included comments from the participants that were cited as evidence of patterns in the data. There were some unexpected categories that emerged from the study such as collaboration and the challenges that principals faced during the transition from principal to central office administrator. Finally, the data was analyzed, interpreted, and discussed in Chapter V to make connections between the leadership skills and how they are carried out in district wide improvement initiatives.

### **Researcher Subjectivity**

The investigator's perspectives, personal experiences, and biases can directly affect (or taint) an investigation or inquiry. Subjectivity is an unintended outcome, even in the case of scientific or empirical studies. Peshkin (1988) asserts:

Subjectivity is not a badge of honor, something earned like a merit badge and paraded around on special occasions for all to see. Whatever the substance of one's persuasions at a given point, one's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and non-research aspects of our life. (p. 17)

I have experience as a teacher and administrator in both an urban and rural school district. My background experiences with these two types of central office administrations became an asset because he understood their struggles and challenges. Upon reflection of the interviews, researcher subjectivity did not tend to surface as a problem. I was originally concerned that the findings of this study could be very different from my own personal leadership style or beliefs. It was a relief to discover that the central office administrators who were interviewed shared his beliefs about leadership and equity. They valued collaboration, shared decision-making, and believed in being consistent with respect to the individualized needs of the students in each school, regardless of location.

### **Trustworthiness**

It is important that this study contains trustworthy data in order for it to be considered meaningful and applicable in the leadership field. Carlson (2010) cites:

Qualitative inquirers mindfully employ a variety of techniques to increase the trustworthiness of the research they conduct; that is, how much trust can be given

that the researcher did everything possible to ensure that data was appropriately and ethically collected, analyzed, and reported. (p. 1103)

I interviewed 12 central office administrators. This large number of participants yielded a sufficient amount of data that helped him to come to a conclusion about central office leadership and its impact on district-wide improvement initiatives. Data from multiple sources such as semi-structured interviews with central office administrators and document reviews and analysis allowed me to triangulate the data and guard against researcher bias. Member checks were conducted which gave the participant an opportunity to add clarifying or additional information along with checking for accuracy in the transcripts. My goal was to add to the existing body of knowledge regarding the leadership, roles, and functions of central office administrators and the impact on district improvement initiatives.

I was the only person who collected the data and conducted the interviews. This provided consistency in the data. The interview transcripts were presented to the participants for review and to check for the accuracy of the interview. Again, during the member checking process, the participant was encouraged to clarify and add any information to the original interview. Member checking was used to increase the trustworthiness of the data. Carlson (2010) supports Creswell (2007) and his thoughts on rapport: “A pivotal point where participant rapport can be especially tenuous is during a particular aspect of qualitative inquiry used for increasing trustworthiness known as member checking” (p. 1102). This is a procedure where the participant has the chance to review the information and make sure that the interview data is interpreted and presented

as they intended during the interview. I sent the transcripts to the participants for their review and analysis. It was important to verify with the participants that the transcripts were accurate and that they had a chance to extend their discussion if it reminded them of additional information that was not included in the long interview. I followed up with each participant and confirmed his/her approval of the transcripts. There were no changes or additions suggested by the participants.

### **Benefits and Risks of the Study**

I found that there has been a great amount of research conducted on school leadership and individual school-level improvement. However, the research is inadequate on district-level improvement and there are fewer studies that show how the leadership practices, roles, and functions of central office administrators affect district wide achievement. There may be a benefit for scholars and practitioners because this study expands the research in the area of district-wide improvement and central office administration.

School districts and the central offices may gain a benefit from the analysis and reflection of the findings of this study. Four school districts were used as resources and the findings highlight some of the key leadership practices that have proven to be successful. Although the conclusion should not be used as a prescription for the reformation of any central office administration, other districts may reflect on the strategies and theories employed by the selected districts and modify them to fit their individual district needs.

It could be considered a risk if this study is used as a handbook or guide to directly implement the leadership strategies exactly as described by the participants with the idea that it would yield similar results. Every school and school district is unique and should be treated according to its individual needs. The privacy of the interviewees could also be a potential risk due to personal stories or identifying comments made by the participants.

### **Summary and Connections**

Chapter III described the methodology of the study and the important components of the interviews such as the recruitment, setting, and the descriptions of the districts and participants. The purpose and type of study were also described in order to bring a sense of value to the study. This chapter also described the data collection and analysis. Chapter IV will take this a step further by going into greater detail by using raw feedback from the participants regarding their perceived roles, functions, and leadership strategies in district-wide initiatives.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction**

The information provided in this chapter focuses on the roles and functions/related skills of central office administrators during district-wide improvement initiatives. The subject of leadership strategies was separated from this and will be discussed in the following chapter since it encompasses the roles and functions. The sections were categorized by the similar titles of the participants (Federal Programs, Director of Elementary Education, Teacher Quality, and Director of Secondary Education). The information in each section gives an overview of the category of participants and then the quotes from the participants. I will use these quotes to make claims and conclusions in the final chapter.

The codes from roles and functions are in separate categories, so the comments from the participants are grouped together and organized according to the type of participant. The headings are arranged by the type of participant, and I noticed some strong similarities in some of the feedback given by the participants in each category. For this reason, there were subheadings included only at the end of the sections that I noticed the similarities.

## **Participants**

All of the participants in the study were large-scale decision makers in their respective districts. This qualitative study gathered the perspectives from various individuals or groups of people who have played a part in the vision and direction of district initiatives. The official titles of participants varied in each district, and this was mainly due to the size of the district. All participants were categorized into groups of three who hold similar roles in each of the four districts. This strategy helped provide continuity and consistency of interview data that can be used to compare against participants with similar responsibilities.

The categories were CTE and Secondary Education Directors, Elementary Education Directors, Federal Program Directors, and Directors of Teacher Quality/Professional Development. Each of the participants was assigned one of these general categories based on descriptions of responsibilities and which departments they oversee. Each of the four categories had three participants, which provided an adequate balance of roles and perspectives.

## **Roles**

### **Elementary Education Directors**

The roles of directors can vary depending on the number of responsibilities or departments that each Elementary Education Director oversees. Although these participants are responsible for Elementary Education, the data shows that the number of additional departments they oversee varies in each district. The data showed that the larger districts were able to assign fewer departments to each director. This caused each

participant to have the ability to narrow his/her focus on just a few objectives or be forced to broadly share their attention to several departments.

For example, Dr. Maddux from Addison County stated,

I oversee all the Title I programming, so there is 12 Title I schools, and I also oversee all the elementary programs, so that's all 15 of our schools and the programs that they are carrying out. So actually district initiatives is something that I am fairly familiar with in making sure, not that they're having to do the same thing in all 15 schools, but that what the choices they are making are evidence-based and that they're thinking strategically about using their resources and so on and so forth. So I don't micromanage what they do, but they may consult with me with Title I programming.

Dr. Maddux has also found herself to be in the role of providing guidance, consultation, and evaluations for principals and building leaders. She shared,

You know, of course we have to do our annual Title I application, so they do a comprehensive needs assessment at every school in the spring. So there's just providing guidance and consultation in those areas. The other part is, I do evaluate seven of our principals, elementary principals. I don't evaluate all 15, now of course I mean I engage with all 15 principals on a regular basis and of course coordinate our elementary meetings.

Dr. Maddux's title (Director of Elementary Education and Title I) clearly defined her only roles as a central office administrator.

The contrary was found with Mrs. Mercker in Collins County, which is smaller than Addison County. Mrs. Mercker is the Director of Elementary Education and AIG in the Collins County School District. Although the title only indicates elementary curriculum and academically/intellectually gifted, she is responsible for overseeing other departments. Mrs. Mercker mentioned, "Although it is not in my title, I am also

responsible for the following: Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS), Professional Development, Childcare Program, and a Teacher Leaders Program.” This is an example of how many central office administrators in smaller districts are required to fulfill the roles of leading various departments.

Mrs. Mercker also discussed some of the change her role as a central office administrator and how that required an adjustment period to break free from the K-12 role she had fulfilled. She said,

Our office was restructured, and we knew that our existing superintendent was leaving and we'd be getting another one but our assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction was retiring so that's when we were organized and that was two years ago. So at that time I had always been, you know, in federal programs. I was K-12 and professional development, I was K-12 PBIS, and I was K-12 AIG—so I had this whole perspective of K-12. But until two years ago, that's changed. So now I am K or Pre-K-5 and that was real different for me, it's been a challenge for me not to be K-12.

Building relationships and serving in the role of researcher for district initiatives to be implemented in the classroom are cited as important pieces to Mrs. Mercker's job as a central office administrator. Mrs. Mercker stated,

Research, to talk to people about, might be an idea, what would you think about, you know, it's always important to me to make sure that if I bring along people with me and I have a good relationship with them then they're going to be so much more accepting of implementing something in their classroom than if they have a feeling that's it's being forced on them. Yeah, so my relationship with people is very important to me, so my—I feel like my role would be starting the vetting process of researching, talking to people about the positives and the negatives and let's look at it together, let's see what it might do and then we might try it and see, but that's on a very small scale before it would ever grow.

Among the school districts in this study, Shull County Schools was the district with the fewest number of students enrolled with a total of 6,660 students. Mrs. Lopez was interviewed in this category of Elementary Education Directors and represented Shull County Schools. Although her title is Director of K-5 and Title I, she also oversees other departments and is in charge of major projects outside of her title, which is similar to Mrs. Mercker from Collins County. Mrs. Lopez asserted,

I am responsible for all things elementary, Title I, and AIG. I am the liaison for our advanced data accreditation that's coming up and I'm leaving one out that's not coming to me right now. I'm responsible for all the school improvement plans. I'm responsible in large part for the county professional development plan, strategic plan.

Her role expands beyond K-5 and Title I responsibilities and goes into being a facilitator or leader of these specific district-wide projects.

Although Mrs. Lopez serves as the director of Elementary Education and Title I, she disclosed that she did not directly evaluate the principals in the K-5 or Title I schools in her position. Mrs. Lopez claimed,

I don't evaluate anybody. So it's sort of a nebulous sort of position, sometimes I'm not quite sure exactly what my responsibility is in terms of working with principals. I am a support person but I am not an evaluator. So there's an interesting line there that I'm not always too sure about.

Mrs. Lopez also interpreted her role as a visionary who plans for communication efforts and professional development opportunities for principals. Mrs. Lopez said,

I was responsible and continue to be responsible for what information we're going to share, and then coming up with the logistics to make that happen. When are we

going to do this? Where are we going to do this? Who does it need to include? I am responsible for getting principal buy-in to allow those people to be out of the building if that's what it takes. Then once we did the training process to say this is how we want to process to go, then we shifted into a, sort of a coaching model.

According to the data collected in this section, the Elementary Education Directors felt that their initial roles in the implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives are to be good researchers and good communicators. They also described that their roles of being a facilitator of consistency of the implementation across the district, consultative leaders, and good supporters through guidance and communication are important as central office leaders. It was implied that fulfilling these roles are essential in the early planning stages and also after the initiative is in place.

### **Federal Program Directors**

This particular category of Federal Program Directors consisted of central office directors who held positions that varied from their peers. This was unlike other categories such as Elementary Education Directors who often managed similar secondary departments such as Title I and AIG. For example, the Federal Program Director in Collins County served solely in the area of Federal Programs even though they are one of the smaller districts. The Federal Program Director in Addison County also supervised the Exceptional Children's Program. The Federal Program Director in Caden County also led the Department of Instructional Improvement and English as a Second Language (ESL).

The Director of Federal Programs in Collins County Schools, Mrs. Jones, reported that she viewed her role as two major parts. She noted,

Since I'm with federal programs, that involves several applications and grants that you have to write and also maintaining budgets for those grants. So I have a dual purpose: I have to make sure that the money is straight and the entire monitoring piece, the federal requirements are in place. But then at the same time, I try to provide instructional support for different areas, and for Title I, which are economically disadvantaged students.

She asserted, "I have reading specialists in every school and I meet monthly with them."

She also reinforced the claim in the beginning of this section of Federal Programs that Title I is sometimes separated from the Federal Program Director role and assigned to the Elementary Education Director. She said,

Now, some systems have the elementary director of curriculum is also the just Title I director, so they only do that piece of it, they're—they may not do all the other federal programs, it just depends on how each system is broken down and I don't know how they end up when you do your four systems and how they play out.

The Federal Program Director in Caden County, Mrs. Horner, is also in charge of Instructional Improvement and ESL. She described her role as one that puts ideas into action and the person who is a pipeline from central office to the academic coaches who work in the schools. Mrs. Horner stated, "A lot of what I do is in the roll out of stuff. Again because I am instruction, so I am direct, I'm generally the direct line to the instructional leaders in the building being the academic coaches with the administrators."

Many of the participants mentioned the importance of communicating consistent information to schools, principals, teachers, and students. Mrs. Horner also described her role as that person to regulate and maintain consistent messages being sent from the central office. She noted,

I am the person that helps to roll it out in lots of cases to make sure that it is consistent, that schools are getting the same information, that coaches are aware of how it needs to go be communicated to teachers, that kind of stuff I am generally involved in that pretty heavily.

She went on to describe her role and relationship with the academic coaches, “I’m not their boss, but I am their funnel to central office. Yeah, they communicate back through me and then I go to them, I mean it’s a constant funnel back and forth.” Acting as a funnel rose as a description of her role a few times in the interview.

Being in the role of providing support to schools became a common topic among the participants in this study. Mrs. Horner reflected on an experience she had as a central office administrator, “I just sat with those coaches and I kind of walked them through a timeline that we were thinking about, and said give me your feedback, what works, what actually works in your building, what questions do you have, what concerns do you have?”

Dr. Glavine was the Executive Director of Exceptional Children’s Program from Addison County Schools. She described her responsibilities as those that directly pertained to the Exceptional Children’s department. She said,

Well, I oversee the Exceptional Children’s Programs but with underneath that umbrella of exceptional children there are just all kinds of things that go on that I can oversee. I have two program coordinators who work directly under me, then two program leads that work directly under me. So I supervise, for example, all of the speech and language therapists in our county, all of the occupational therapists, all of the physical therapists, all of the EC teachers, all of the EC bus monitors, EC teacher assistants, behavioral therapists, pre-K self-contained resource. And I also manage the day treatment program in our county, The Pride Center, which is our alternative school. I supervise all of the school psychologists, and I supervise the kids after school and before school program

called Kids Enrichment Program. So I supervise that as well. So all in all, you know, it's a fairly large responsibility.

According to her description, Dr. Glavine's role appeared to be contained within her department, which was fairly spread out.

The role of providing support to schools and principals seemed to be important to Dr. Glavine when it came to implementing new district initiatives. She stated,

Our district understands that we're here to serve our principals in order to help them do the very best they can to educate the kids in their schools. So we're there to be a support, and to consult, and to advise, and to provide resources that will allow them to go out there and do this.

She described the role of the supporter and the many forms that support can be given to the schools. Dr. Glavine illustrated,

Let's say it was a K-12 literacy initiative, which is something that we did three years ago, where principals came out to the district office, and that's the other thing, you're going to support the principals and you're going to give those principals, you know, training and everything, and then you're going to go out to, you're going to support each school, and I think at some point you know, depending upon how many resources you have, and what you have in terms of supporting that school, it could be that that support comes in the way of monetary support.

She realizes that the job of the central office administrator is tough, but the schools hold the power of the success of the improvement initiative. Dr. Glavine remarked, "You're consulting and you're doing a lot but you're not really in control."

This group of administrators shared that they generally see themselves as playing the role of putting ideas into action during district-wide initiatives. They shared

consistencies with the Elementary Education Directors because they also have role in the communication process during the initiatives by being communicators of consistent information. One administrator mentioned a unique role or being a two-way funnel of communication between the school building and his central office superiors. Another administrator also described their role during initiatives as being a consultant to the schools to provide support.

### **Secondary Education and CTE Directors**

The Addison County Schools Director of Middle Grades and CTE, Mr. McGriff, declared his assigned area as a central office administrator although he had some concerns with defining his actual role. I asked Mr. McGriff to name some departments and that he oversees. He claimed, “During my tenure it’s been, you name it. Right now it’s just Career and Technical Education Director and Middle Grades Director.” So, the assigned area as declared by Mr. McGriff matches his title and stays within that particular job description. When it came to describing his actual role in the district, Mr. McGriff liked the idea of supporting principals during improvement initiatives by giving them space to do what is best for their school. He claimed, “I think that the principals that I work with I really work and support, but a whole lot of my working to support them is backing up and giving them space. You know, just kind of advising them and giving them space to run their own school.”

The Addison County Schools Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Mr. Avery, has also been in charge of the Secondary Curriculum and falls into this category of participants. Mr. Avery suggested, “I think sometimes it’s just hard

in small districts when you oversee so much, you know, it's hard to sometimes do all that. But I think that it is our role to really help and support and be there for schools.”

Even though he claimed that it should be the role of central office administrators to be a supporter to schools and principals, he admitted that this role can be improved. Mr.

Avery claimed,

Let's say with our academies, I attended some meetings and lots of parents had questions about transportation, it's important for us to kind of think about what those questions are going to be and really give that support to the principals. And I don't think we have done a great job of always doing that so hopefully that's something that we can improve upon, you know, moving forward.

Dr. Smoltz was the Director of Secondary Curriculum and Instruction, K-12 CTE Curriculum and Instruction, and VoCATS in Collins County. The length of her job title covered her roles as a central office administrator. Collins County can be described as a smaller sized district where many of the central office administrators have a broad range of roles and responsibilities. Dr. Smoltz noted, “We pride ourselves in the fact that as small as we are, we all wear multiple hats. Sometimes the lines are blurred between those hats and those roles that we have.” The concept of administrators assuming a broad range of roles seemed to be a pattern the in smaller school districts just as Dr. Smoltz and Mr. Avery described.

The role of servant leadership seemed to be significant for Dr. Smoltz. Principals and schools need the support and service of central office administrators in order to carry out district initiatives. She stated, “And we believe that it is our duty to serve out principals and to serve our schools. I—it's kind of that servant leadership thought, you

know, and what service do we provide to help support principals. We certainly are a phone call away, an email away, you know?” In the Secondary Curriculum and CTE Department of Collins County Schools, leadership has been exhibited through working alongside principals, schools, and students as a support structure. Dr. Smoltz explained,

How do I work alongside you to help make this happen? We’re all in this together, I am certainly not in a role in this district as the Director of Secondary Education to go to them and say you will do it my way. You will do it this way. It’s not like that. It’s a work alongside, serving them, service-oriented position.

These administrators described their role during district-wide improvement initiatives as one of a servant leader. This feeling was consistent among the participants in this category. Although one of the participants struggled to define or describe his overarching role, he agreed that one of his major roles was to give his principals enough space to lead and have the autonomy to implement the initiatives in their building.

### **Teacher Quality Directors**

Mr. Justice was interviewed in what has been described as a smaller district in Collins County as the Director of Communications and Teacher Quality. The beginning of the interview quickly revealed that his role is much more broad and complex than his title suggested. He received a phone call directly from the superintendent right before the interview began. He disclosed that the superintendent relies on him to fulfill various roles because of his dedication to the job and the enthusiasm that he displays when working with district employees.

The rigorous demands and broad range of roles of central office administrators in Collins County Schools are quite evident. Mr. Justice claimed,

I oversee the full Communications Department. I also do Teacher Quality, which means that I write the Title II grant for Federal Title II moneys, and I'm in charge of the beginning teachers and their mentors and everything that goes along with beginning teachers and mentors. The other program that I supervise would be the Librarians, the Media Coordinators. We have 19 schools, and 18 of those schools have media centers. So I supervise 18 media centers.

Mr. Justice clearly understood the most important role that was assigned to him from the superintendent. He stated, "My job is to get Collins County Schools in the newspaper every single day, and I'm pretty good at doing that." His role has enabled him to be a part of all district initiatives due to the fact that he is relied on so heavily to get information to the media. He further described his role,

My part, though, as Director of Communications, I'm involved in all this stuff because I get the media there. So that's one of the reasons I'm involved in knowing a little bit about everything because I'm always in charge of getting TV, radio, and the newspaper there.

The role of Communications Director appeared to be a major priority for the district, but this could possibly affect the attention given to the other responsibilities and roles. He states, "Because Director of Communications is really a full time job within itself, I'm spread very thin to get to all the other areas."

The Executive Director of Curriculum and Professional Development, Dr. Murphy, was interviewed in Caden County which was the largest district with over 22,000 students. She listed a few of her roles beyond curriculum and professional development. She added, "The areas of responsibility for me currently are K-12 curriculum, professional development, instructional improvement, ESL, RTI, AIG, and federal programs." Although she added federal programs, I felt that her role was larger

with teacher quality and categorized her accordingly. She felt that her role as a central office administrator was to create a buffer and to protect and support the schools, especially when it came to district improvement initiatives. She claimed, “We’ve had so many things pushed down from the state level that I think that it’s important as a district for us to make sense of those things, make connections with those things, and help create a buffer for schools from some of the craziness.”

Dr. Klesko also shared the responsibility of teacher quality and leadership in Caden County Schools. Her role as the Director of Elementary School Leadership was to oversee elementary school leaders and professional development. She noted, “I work with the school improvement division to grow teacher leaders, so that’s an area that we do together.” Her role as the Director of Elementary School Leadership was one that was unique among the districts that participated in the study. Dr. Klesko explained,

I’m in a school every day. They can get me 24/7 and do. It’s just—it’s constant and you know, that is our whole role is that we are—we actually call ourselves central support and so, you know, they know, schools know all they have to do is call, you know, and most the time I know there’s an issue before it even becomes an issue.

She saw herself as a support to schools and building teacher leaders through professional development and district improvement initiatives such as the data teaming.

Many of the central office administrators continuously mentioned that they see their role as one that is meant to provide support to schools, principals, and teachers. Dr. Klesko discussed,

When we're talking district-wide initiatives I think that the central office's role is to support the schools for whatever the school needs. We provide that support in a variety of ways, resources as well as in physical support. Sometimes it may be personnel or it could be materials. In my role, I provide support mainly through the think tank kind of deal where we're, you know, we're talking through processes. I'm there to support decision making, I'm there to support ideas, questions, and communication.

She also mentioned that central office administrators should be physically available and accessible for hands-on emergencies. She stated, "When it comes to emergencies and that kind of thing, our district has, you know, we drop everything and as a system we go to help. We've done that on several occasions from, you know, emergencies that is not uncommon to see the assistant superintendents and the executive directors at a school helping in whatever capacity we need to do to help. So that's our role. Our role is to support." She clearly emphasized support as an important part of her role as a central office administrator.

The Directors of Teacher Quality gave feedback that suggested that their roles were to be a protector of the teachers and schools by serving as a buffer between the initiative and the people. They referred to their roles as being leaders who build teacher-leaders so that the district-wide initiatives can be implemented with fidelity by the people in each separate school. In summary, the major takeaways from their thoughts on roles are that they believed that it is important to be a good supporter, consultant, and empowering leader who can communicate a consistent message across an entire district.

### **Functions and Related Skills**

In this study, functions should be considered actions or activities that a person does in his or her job. Skills describe a person's ability to do something well. For

example, the skill of being a good communicator would include the functions of speaking and writing clearly. Think of a general skill as being made up of several functions. In this chapter, the function is mentioned as a part of the skill when applicable and if it is mentioned by the participant.

Functions and skills seemed to be easy to talk about for the participants. I noticed this immediately because the participants spoke quickly and for a long period of time once the topic of skills and functions arose in the interview. Additionally, the participants mentioned the necessity for central office administrators to possess specific skills, even in the interview questions that were not initially intended to focus on skills. I coded all of these references of skills in the *functions and skills* category regardless of whether or not the interview question intended to draw out information about the skills of central office administrators. I also noticed that the functions and skills category tallied the second highest number of code frequencies. The only code that was recorded more frequently was the topic of leadership strategies.

### **Elementary Education Directors**

Two of the three Elementary Education Directors were principals prior to being appointed to a central office position. Dr. Maddux and Mrs. Lopez served as principals prior to their current role as Elementary Education Director. Mrs. Mercker came to the central office the non-traditional route through a supervisory role for middle school curriculum. However, Mrs. Mercker's role was still one of a leader, and she needed to develop the necessary skills to be successful in leading a department. The data from the interviews revealed that the skills learned as a principal transferred to many of the skills

that are now being used as a central office administrator. Which skills were most common among these administrators in this category of elementary education directors?

The Addison County Elementary Education Director, Dr. Maddux, mentioned various skills and functions that she has developed and used in various situations. She summarized,

Budgeting. You must be a skilled budgeter. Organization. Good communicator. Clear, concise communicator. Don't muddy the waters for people because—just don't muddy, you know, you just have to be very clear. And I think—and I consider those skills important. So, good communicator, budgeter, organized.

She also mentioned some other important skills that are necessary in her role. Dr. Maddux noted, “This is not necessarily a skill, this is more kind of personality trait, but don't internalize when things go bad because you know things can happen that you don't anticipate because we can't anticipate everything, you know.”

Dr. Maddux also mentioned some other significant functions such as the monitoring of accountability paperwork such as Title I documents and the evaluation of principals. She noted, “Also maintaining—monitoring and documentation, Title I requires a lot of documentation, so that's a process.” As mentioned in the roles section, even though she does not evaluate all 15 principals in her district, performing an evaluation is a major function that is required in her role as a central office administrator.

Mrs. Mercker from the Collins County School System discussed several valuable functions and skills that are required in her position as the Elementary Education Director. According to her responses, she appeared to have a personal strength and emphasis on interpersonal skills such as listening to and helping people. She noted,

“Another skill that I try to use is asking a lot of questions and being a good listener. Sometimes I’m not going to know exactly what they’re thinking unless I ask and listen. So, I try to listen.” She noted that central office administrators need to understand that adequate people skills are required because every day there are opportunities to supervise and coach leaders with diverse skill sets. She described, “I think first of all to have the right people skills because we work with all different kinds of people. I work with really strong teachers. I work with really weak teachers. I work with really strong principals. I work with some who aren’t as strong.”

There were four important skills that summarized Mrs. Mercker’s thoughts about the essential skills that should be possessed by central office administrators who are responsible for implementing district-wide improvement initiatives. She noted, “So those are the four main areas: The organization, the people skills, the background knowledge, and the confidence that I think are main, or are some really strong skills that we need to have in the central office.” The organization and background knowledge is discussed further in this chapter.

Mrs. Lopez, the Elementary Education Director from Shull County Schools, described accessibility, visibility, and credibility as some of the vital skills and functions of central office administrators. She suggested,

I think people have to know that you’re credible and you’ve done the behind the scenes work and the research to say this is the way we need to go and people need to have enough trust in you and you need to be credible enough that they’re willing to go along that path with you.

She also mentioned that central office administrators can be better supporters to their direct reports in district-wide initiatives if they are more visible and accessible. She asserted,

Visibility is important, being in the schools is important, being accessible is important, having answers readily available. And if you don't have the answers, being able to access them readily in giving correct information is important. Being able to troubleshoot is important, making sure they have the resources that they need is important.

She continued, "Being accessible, I think is a biggie. Physically accessible, you know, but approachable, all those things sort of fall under that but approachable and accessible I think makes a huge difference."

**Flexibility.** Among the major skills that were most commonly mentioned, flexibility was one that stood out in the interviews with Elementary Education Directors. Although all school employees in the building should be flexible due to the unpredictable nature of a school day, central office administrators should also possess this skill in their efforts to implement district-wide initiatives. Mrs. Mercker noted, "We have to always keep in our minds, I believe, to be a generalist because we have to be flexible enough to go into a new area with an open mind." Dr. Maddux also agreed with Mrs. Mercker about the importance of flexibility when an initiative does not materialize as originally planned. She stated, "So I guess that skill of being able to adjust and being flexible is important."

**Knowledge and credibility.** Individuals do not make it to the hierarchical level of central office solely on people skills and organizational abilities. Background

knowledge of content and experience in the lower level roles helped these central office administrators develop credibility and respect in order to attain their current status in the upper part of the school system's hierarchy. This helped them gain the support from their direct reports when it came time to implement a district-wide improvement initiative.

Mrs. Mercker asserts,

I think you have to have some background knowledge, and I think I bring that strength to our school system because I've been here forever. The other thing that I made note of is that I have to have confidence. If people see that my confidence is shaken, they don't believe in me. But if they see that I'm confident in what I'm talking about, and that's been hard for me for the last two years, but I think that people need to see that confidence so that they can believe in you and believe that you're heading in the right direction.

This director believed that confidence builds credibility and that it is important to the function of a central office administrator.

**Organization.** One could say that organization is important in every professional field and in the personal lives of everyone. In the role of central office administration, there is no shortage of people who are depending on you to give them clear and accurate information. Organization was described as a key skill of a central office administrator. This is especially important during district-wide initiatives because the organization of facts and information can help foster a consistent message to the many people who need to help implement the initiative, which can also be a law or state mandated initiative.

The importance of organizing the communication efforts of central office administrators with clarity was mentioned earlier in this section by Dr. Maddux. Mrs. Mercker agreed to the importance of organization especially during district-wide

initiatives. She stated, “I think I have to have a lot of organizational skills, because I balance so many things. I’m balancing so much that I’ve got to have a lot of organization to be able to balance that, and that’s the way it is in a smaller district, you know.”

Although Mrs. Lopez did use the term organize, she referred to the concept by describing the skill of planning and being prepared for communicating district-wide initiatives to all of the stakeholders. She stated, “I was responsible and continue to be responsible for what information we’re going to share, and then coming up with the logistics to make that happen. When are we going to do this? Where are we going to do this? Who does it need to include?” She added, “Planning, obviously, foresight to see what’s coming and what the impact is going to be.”

**Communication.** As with any successful organization or department, effective communication can be credited as a significant contributing factor. Direct reports need to know the expectations and the rules of newly implemented district-wide improvement initiatives. Dr. Maddux explained,

I would not present something to them that I have not already thought through. You know, maybe it’s not every little detail is not fit, but the big picture about how we’re going to move forward and how it’s going to sustained. So at that point my job is to put those things in motion and to communicate with the relevant people.

Mrs. Lopez added her comments on communication,

I just think that’s huge when you’ve, you know, you’ve got questions or you need something right away, I know for me when I work with the people that have supervised me, if I knew I was going to get the right answer and get the right answer quick, that meant so much to me. And to know that no matter when I

needed them, what time I contacted them, when I sent the email, I was going to be able to get in touch with them. That for me is huge.

### **Federal Program Directors**

Much like the Elementary Education Directors, two of the three central office administrators in this category of Federal Program Directors served as principals prior to their current central office position. Dr. Glavine was an elementary and middle school principal, Mrs. Horner was an elementary principal, and Mrs. Jones came to central office by way of serving as a teacher and instructional specialist for 23 years. Although the participants in this category mentioned similar skills from the other categories, there were some additional skills that emerged which they deemed important for central office administrators when implementing district-wide improvement initiatives.

Dr. Glavine spoke about the importance of being a good planner, communicator, assessor, flexible leader, and a few other skills that central office administrators should have in order to be effective in the implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives. She noted, “And again, a lot of that was a lot of pre-planning, a lot of kind of talking to principals and seeing where people were in the capacity of their staff, looking, and gauging with surveys about professional development.” Communication was an important skill deemed by many of the participants in the study. Dr. Glavine described,

So you look at those people that are across the district that are in charge of various departments but that can also lead the charge, so to speak, in their department and communicate that clearly to all of those underneath them, because sometimes, you know what it’s like, I mean sometimes communication is the barrier. Sometimes we take communication for granted. We know we think we’re communicating clearly and that everyone is getting the same message and clearly we are not

doing that. So you know, trying to help make sure that the same communication gets out to everybody.

So, she described that communication and consistency are skills that should work along in tandem to help send out a message about district-wide improvement initiatives that all stakeholders are hearing.

Humbleness and having the skill of micropolitical awareness were described by Dr. Glavine when she was asked about important skills and functions of central office administrators. She stated,

I kind of go back to all those different skills that leaders have, you know, that you think about with micro political, I mean that's a big issue. I think we are probably fairly lucky in Addison County in that you know, maybe we're not big enough to be too micropolitical, like too political, although there is some jockeying, there is always some jockeying for things to happen here or there.

Going along with the subject of politics, Dr. Glavine also described the necessity of the skill to remain humble. She noted,

Sometimes you have to be a gauge of what is happening in your district and how much more can teachers take. You know, you also have to be able to assess, I think that's a skill. Be someone that can assess the capacity of our district and what kinds of things we have in place. Can we really do this? You have to kind of check your ego at the door.

Although this was one of the seldom times that a participant mentioned humbleness, it is understandable why it would be a good skill to have when you need to collaborate with people at similar levels of power and implement district-wide initiatives. She also spoke

about considering other people's perspectives, which will be discussed in more detail in this chapter.

Mrs. Jones talked about specific skills that have helped her become successful in her Federal Program Director role such as budgeting, observing, writing/documenting, background knowledge, respecting others, and problem solving. She noted, "I write a Migrant grant and I have four or five people within that department that work with me." As previously mentioned in the section about roles, Mrs. Jones described two major responsibilities in her role, which is to maintain the budget along with providing instructional support to the schools. Naturally, the required skills for these responsibilities should be to become a resourceful maintainer of the budget along with being an organized monitor of the resources being used with federal funds. Other skills needed for her instructional support role would be to have the background knowledge of curriculum and instruction. Mrs. Jones, similar to Dr. Maddux, noted the importance of respecting and valuing the people who work in the central office as colleagues who have meaningful ideas to contribute to the successful implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives.

Being a good problem solver was one of the most versatile skills that Mrs. Jones mentioned along with some other central office administrators. It is especially important to be a problem solver during district-wide improvement initiatives because there are so many unforeseen obstacles and conflicts to resolve when such a large scale project is in motion. Mrs. Jones stated, "You need to be able to really identify a problem, look at it closely, and then figure out what's the best solution within your framework. And that

could be your streams of money, people, resources, what's going to be the best solution?" Later in the interview, Mrs. Jones asserted, "You have to be able to be strong enough to express that opinion and then kind of work together to come up for the best solution possible. The people skills are something that I think I feel like is important." So, having the people skills along with being a problem solver can prove beneficial in the implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives.

Mrs. Horner from Caden County Schools agreed with her counterparts by emphasizing the significance of being a good planner, consistent, flexible, supportive, and an effective problem solver. She referred to a current district-wide initiative and the fact that she has tried to be consistent across her district for the benefit of the students.

She said,

So we've put a ton of things in place earlier in the year and of course the state has done all kinds of crazy things since that time. But as we have done those things to kind of keep our district consistent so that kids within our district are getting consistent experience in the Read to Achieve process.

### **Secondary Education and CTE Directors**

Although there were significant findings among the Secondary and CTE Directors, this category of participants provided variable data when it came to the topic of functions and skills. The data were described as variable instead of inconsistent because the findings were not contradictory at all. The data were just simply different. The two codes that were commonly mentioned were being an advocate/voice for students and being reflective during the implementation of district-wide initiatives. These skills are mentioned in more detail at the end of this section.

Some of the skills that Mr. McGriff mentioned as important in his job as a central office administrator stood out from the others because they tended to be creative and more abstract. For example, he mentioned the skill of being able to ask the right questions in order to get a direction on the plan of action. He noted, “You just have to ask the right questions. I think the vast majority of success as a leader is just simply asking the right questions. The answer is out there someplace. It’s just a matter of asking the right questions.” He also mentioned the skill of thinking differently when trying to create solutions or plans. He stated, “Asking the right questions and getting them to think about things differently and getting them to really take a heart like what will make a fundamental change in their school.” So, as a central office administrator, he felt that having the skill of thinking outside the common solutions and thinking differently were important to making change and implementing improvement initiatives.

Other skills that were rote and basic that Mr. McGriff included were budgeting and problem solving. He stated, “You know, there’s still things like paying the bills, budgeting money, and doing other bureaucratic stuff that you have to do.” Central office administrators are still required to have some of those skills and functions that are less visionary such as budgeting. Mr. McGriff was the only participant in this category who noted problem-solving skills as a significant part of his job. He said,

But to solve those problems you have to use both sides of your brain, and right now we’re just teaching the procedural fluency part of it, not necessarily the problem solving part of the brain. So conversations like that I think can help push my principals to think about what might be in the best interest of the kids in their school. But you know my strategy, things I would hope come from them about how to solve the problem. I just think that I’m particularly effective in outlining the problem.

Mr. Avery mentioned skills that were more practical and hands-on. He has clearly spent a considerable amount of time in the school building as a supporter and implementer of district-wide initiatives due to the skills that he claims are important. Being a good listener and having tough skin were indicated by Mr. Avery as important functions or skills. He described,

I think you have to have some tough skin and be willing to listen to the frustration that usually develops from new initiatives and be able to not to, you know fight the urge to defend always. Because I think sometimes, you know, if I'm in charge of something and or this initiative we're leading and there are some challenges, you know, one of the things you want to do is defend why it's the right thing to do, but sometimes you do need to. Just listen and gather as much feedback as you can and acknowledge that you understand that this is a challenge or it's creating some hardships—but you're committed to working through that to make this initiative better.

Surprisingly, Mr. Avery was the only administrator in this category to mention visibility as a function of his job. Principals should be visible to the teachers, students, and parents in their schools in order to gain credibility. Similarly, central office administrators should be visible to the principals in order to show support and to gain an understanding of the needs of each school. He noted,

I think you have to be visible as well, because it's real easy to say okay this is something we're doing, we're going to start this, we're planning for this, and then step back and let others, you know, kind of worry with the responsibilities. I think if it's something that is going to be a district initiative where you're expecting all schools and all levels to do and to follow this initiative, I think you've got to be visible and not only in the kind of assessment of the progress but also and through the planning and through the implementation and the feedback of it as well.

Dr. Smoltz was very detailed when she described the vital skills and functions of central office administrators during district-wide initiatives. As a matter of fact, she began by saying that she has multiple skillsets and various roles due to the smaller size of her school district. She noted earlier in the roles section that she wears multiple hats. In order to be a visionary and planner for these initiatives, she also noted some rote functions and skills that help bring the initiative to life.

Educators are required to be accountable for implementing initiatives and this means that being able to prioritize, manage time, juggle tasks, and manage conflict become essential to reach success. Dr. Smoltz stated,

A skill of being able to juggle lots of hats, lots of to-do list items, you know? I do big things and little things. I do a lot of details and a lot of to-do lists. I feel like most days I'm not an expert in anything, I'm just hitting the high spots, you know? So I have to be a juggler and as a skillset I have to be able to manage my time.

There are a plethora of educators who are extremely intelligent, but these skills can help bring the theory into action in an organized manner. She asserted, "I have to be able to manage and prioritize lists of things to do, but I think I'm going to go back and I'm going to say it again that service leadership is when I'm trying to provide a service, I'm trying to provide some assistance to the schools kind of mentality."

Naturally, the implementation of any new initiative brings forth change. People have a tough time with change that leads to conflict. Dr. Smoltz noted that managing conflict is something that leaders should not be afraid of facing during these times of change. She described,

I'm always willing to take on something new if it's going to be the best thing for kids and the schools and the teachers. So I think, again, I think that's a skillset is to be able to manage conflict, none of us like conflict but I can manage it and then to be able to be excited about new initiatives and tackling new things even though it may mean more work for myself, I'm willing.

Dr. Smoltz referred to the skill of teamwork and collaboration on several occasions during the interview. She described her working relationship across the departments as the Secondary Education Director and especially with the Elementary Education Director since her position is in counterpart. She noted,

And the K-5 elementary director and I, they call us Laverne and Shirley. We're together all the time. We plan together all the time. I mean she has to do some things that are K-5 things, like Read to Achieve and I have to do CTE for 6-12 but we're constantly working together, constantly working in each other's heads, making sure that we have a common message.

This example sounded to be a strong indicator of their passion for teamwork and collaboration. Although collaboration was a common theme that emerged throughout the study, it only revealed itself once in this category of participants in the skills and functions section.

There were only two codes that resurfaced as important skills in the interviews among these participants. Both Mr. McGriff and Mr. Avery mentioned being a voice/advocate for students and district initiatives. They also alluded to being reflective as an important skill for central office administrators when implementing a district-wide improvement initiative.

**Voice/advocate.** Mr. McGriff spoke with enthusiasm about being an advocate for students and initiatives that would be beneficial for student growth. He spoke humbly

and was clearly ready to do anything necessary in order to provide support for students.

He noted,

One of the things I think about is that if you can (a) take a step back have a pretty good idea of what's in the best interests of the kids, and (b) step back and step really want to do what's in the best interests of kids. So if we as leaders can step back and meet them there and really put together a proposal that really, regardless of taking me out of the equation, taking the administrator out of the equation, really makes sense and really speaks to people that's in the best interests of the kids, then I think you can build a pretty big swell of support for that particular initiative.

Advocacy and being a voice for students were high on the list of skills according to this central office administrator.

Mr. Avery agreed that being a voice and advocate for students should rank high on the skillset of central office administrators. He stated,

I think you have to individually believe in the initiative and you have to be kind of the voice of it. Especially if maybe the initiative is not a popular one or if there's some concern about it. So I think you have to be willing to be that leader and be the champion for that cause or that initiative, and because if you're not willing to kind of step up and say, you know, I believe in this and I believe we're doing this because one, two, three, and be able to effectively articulate that, you're certainly not going to have many that are willing to come and follow you through that process so I think you, you have to, you know, own that initiative and be able to articulate the relevance and importance of why we're pursuing that.

**Reflection.** Mr. McGriff noted the importance of reflection when it came to implementing district-wide improvement initiatives as he noted earlier about stepping back and thinking about what actions should be taken by central office administrators in order to meet the needs and interests for students. Mr. Avery agreed with the concept of reflection when it comes to implications of decisions made during district-wide

improvement initiatives that affect students. Mr. Avery stated, “I think you have to own it, I think you have to listen, and you have to be reflective.”

### **Teacher Quality Directors**

The functions and skills of Mr. Justice in Collins County were much more diverse than the other two central office administrators in this category. He has to possess skills that enable him to communicate with the news media, plan events, deliver professional development, advise the superintendent, and much more. As previously stated, Mr. Justice oversees the full Communications Department, Teacher Quality, Title II grant for Federal Title II moneys, beginning teachers program, and the Media Coordinators. Considering how he is spread so thin among these departments, he noted that he needed to be proficient in the skill of time management. He explained, “I really have to manage my time very carefully. I make lots of lists every day, and I try to count on people.” He believed that this skill was crucial for all leadership roles. He asserts, “Time management has to be a huge quality of any good leader. So everybody in our department has to have good time management skills, has to be very organized.”

Mr. Justice mentioned some unique skills that did not emerge from other participants in this category. He found that it was important to establish and maintain good relationships with colleagues in central office. He noted,

I mean, it takes a little time for my day, truly, but I make sure that I speak to everybody every week. I go to their office, hello—you know, because I’m not anybody special or in particular but I think it’s important to establish those relationships. So if you make it to the district office level, don’t forget those people in those offices every day.

Along the same topic of establishing relationships is listening and following through with concerns that have been reported. Leaders at any level should be proficient in the skill of interpersonal awareness. Mr. Justice stated,

I try to look at them, you know, face-to-face, eye-to-eye. I want them to feel important. I want them to know that I'm doing the best I can and if I don't know the answer I will definitely find it out. And I try to get back with people as soon as possible and follow through with what I said I'm going to do. So follow through is an important skill to have too.

Follow through can build a sense of trust and it can help those who need follow through gain a sense of value.

Dr. Murphy's role was narrower than her colleague Mr. Justice. She listed practical skills that have helped her get to her current position in central office and more importantly, she described how these skills have helped her function successfully in the central office atmosphere. One unique and intriguing skill that she listed was the ability to operate in ambiguity as a central office administrator. She stated, "It can be very humbling to be at the district level. I like things to be black and white and they're not. You have to learn to operate in ambiguity." She went on to give some examples of how this has happened and how she has learned to get better at operating in the grey areas. She asserted,

I'm told, you know, a couple of my program specialists I've given them that advice. They're go-getters, they want things to be just so, they want to make things happen and I've said, I know that there are times that I seem like I'm being nonchalant about something and it's not that, it's that if you want to survive at this level you have to learn to operate in the grey sometimes, things can be very grey and messy and if you can't learn to deal with some level of ambiguity and how to

function within that. You just won't survive at this level, and it's taken me a while to get to that point.

She summarized, "Yeah, you have to have thick skin and you have to be able to deal with things being muddy sometimes and unclear."

The skills of being intentional and having the awareness to gain the input of others through dialogue were valuable to Dr. Murphy. She appeared to be a very deliberate, organized, and insightful type of leader. She noted, "We've really tried to be intentional about whatever it is we're moving forward with saying let's talk about your role in this process." These are valuable skills for central office administrators to possess during the implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives.

Dr. Murphy gave an example of why dialogue with stakeholders is so important. She asserted,

There was another example that we looked at last year, it may have been implementation of Teach Scape. So what—let's really drill this down to what this means, how are you going to approach this at the school level, let's talk about it on a practical level how you rolled this out, let's talk about how you take your data and use it, let's talk about what this looks like in the class—what are the expectations in terms of what you should see in the classroom, what you should hear in the classroom, what really actually hands-on kind of walking through thinking about those kinds of things, running scenarios with principals, we've really tried to be practical about that.

It sounded like dialogue with stakeholders gave central office leaders a starting point on a plan to support the schools with the implementation of initiatives.

One of the most intriguing skills that Dr. Murphy valued was the ability to negotiate and compromise. No other participant mentioned this function of a central office administrator. She stated,

I think being able to negotiate, being able to have some level of compromise without compromising your ideals, I mean certainly things that you're committed to you're not willing to compromise but when you're working with a team of people who are on the same level as you and maybe have different perspectives.

Many of the participants noted that they have had to take their own personal ideas to others in central office for approval and that process was time consuming and sometimes even abruptly discontinued. Dr. Murphy simply claimed that negotiation and compromise can be a strategy or skill that can get ideas passed through the appropriate channels.

Some of the basic personal skills such as being honest, sincere, transparent, and open with colleagues were deemed important by Dr. Murphy. She stated,

I think one thing that helps me as I work with principals like at a principals meeting, you have to be prepared to be honest and sincere and transparent, you know, if you make a mistake you have to be willing to say we made a mistake here and I think modeling that is good because people do make mistakes.

It is equally as important to be approachable to where people can feel comfortable being honest with central office administrators and to give constructive criticism. She noted, "I want people to feel like they can be honest with me and have opinions and I like for people to have, you know, different viewpoints, I think that's healthy, so I think that's a really important skill, too." Dr. Murphy also alluded to the skill of being self-confident

in your role. She stated, “I think you have to be secure enough in yourself that you’re comfortable surrounding yourself with smart people who might be smarter than you and you’re okay with that, and I’m okay with that.”

Dr. Klesko listed similar skills that the other participants in this category mentioned such as being a good listener, problem solver, and seeing the big picture. These skills are later mentioned in more detail since they were common. However, Dr. Klesko brought forth a skill that no one directly mentioned. She thought that the skill of being a thinker was valuable in central office leadership positions. This sounds simple, but it goes deeper than just thinking about initiatives. She expanded on this by talking about being current with the research and information to share with the schools. She stated,

Being a thinker, being current I think is important and helping people. Okay, you have to be current and you have to be up on the research. I have to be a teacher and a leader with my leaders, because I see my leaders as my principals as my class, and so I have to make sure that they have the most current information, so when I’m meeting with them as a triad and we’re collaborating, I have to keep current things in front of them.

**Organization.** Although this is an obvious skill that could be assumed that central office administrators possess, these participants did not overlook being organized as a crucial part of their skillset. As Mr. Justice mentioned earlier, central office administrators must have good time management skills and be very organized. Dr. Murphy agreed, “I’m a pretty organized person and I feel like I’m a pretty reflective person.” The stakes are too high and the responsibility is too great to risk being disorganized and miscommunicate something during a district-wide initiative.

**Good listener.** All three participants in the category of Teacher Quality Directors specifically described being a good listener as a necessary skill of a central office administrator in district-wide improvement initiatives. Mr. Justice referred back to his comments about establishing relationships. He claimed, “For me personally, friendly, I just try to be friendly to everybody. I try to listen to people.” Dr. Murphy added to her comments earlier about being receptive of people being candid with feedback. She noted, “I think you have to be a really good listener. You have to listen.”

Dr. Klesko went into more detail about the skill of listening to her direct reports. She stated, “So when we talking leadership practices, you know, I’m trying to help guide my administrators so sometimes I’m a listener. And I let them, I try to help them figure out what they need to do by not telling them directly what to do.” Clearly, this is a skill that has been developed through experience and wisdom of her 30 years in education. When she was asked about her most valued skill, Dr. Klesko noted, “Probably a good listener would be the other thing because I work so much with the community, but also listening to their concerns.” The administrators made it clear that the skill goes beyond the simple task of listening. It is equally as important to resist the temptation of giving advice or solutions. This would enable the other person to build some problem solving skills and learn from the experience. The other person would also feel valued just for knowing that their director will listen to them.

**Problem solver.** As in most leadership roles, being a good problem solver can be a required skill for the job. Two of the participants in this category noted the skill of solving problems as one that they use often. Dr. Klesko recalled a situation when a

school needed physical help and the central office administrators were there to help solve the problem. She described,

When it comes to emergencies in that kind of thing, we drop everything and as a system we go to help. We've done that on several occasions. That is not uncommon to see the assistant superintendents and the executive directors at a school helping in whatever capacity we need to do to help.

District-wide improvement initiatives can come with obstacles to overcome and plans are needed to implement them successfully. When Dr. Murphy was asked about the essential skills needed in her role, she noted importance of being a good problem solver. She also offered, "I'm pretty good at problem solving."

**The big picture.** Typically, the picture zooms out to be broader for each step taken higher up the hierarchical ladder. Speaking from her role as a central office administrator, Dr. Murphy describes her thoughts about the awareness of the big picture. She said,

Well, and I think that having a district perspective, I think that it benefits principals to be able to see that they're part of a larger system than themselves—than the school themselves because you can be in a bubble at a school if you don't have some mechanism to collaborate and come to some understanding as a district.

This is important to understand when implementing district-wide initiatives because there has to be an understanding that it's not all about one classroom, one teacher, one school, one principal, or even one department. The big picture should be seen by understanding how initiatives can be rolled out with effectiveness throughout the district with equity.

Similarly, Dr. Klesko noted the same skill of being able to see the big picture when implementing a district-wide improvement initiative. She was asked which skills were necessary to lead district initiatives from her position as a central office administrator. She responded,

To be a planner, to be able to think big picture, because I think at the central office level we have to think big picture. At the school level, and I use that example a lot with my principals, you know, a classroom—as a classroom teacher I just worried about my classroom and then when I became a school principal I only worried about my school and I'd fight for my school. Here at the central office level I really have to look at the elementary schools and look at everything from that perspective, so you've got to be able to see things from the big picture and sometimes I have to help principals see things from the big picture.

The participants clearly valued the ability to see the big picture and realized the need to develop strategies from a broader perspective as a central office administrator than they were accustomed to in their previous job as a principal.

### **Summary and Connections**

If someone were aspiring to work in the central office as an administrator, it would be useful for him/her to know about the related functions and skills that these participants found to be useful in their jobs. The subcategories that were listed at the end of the participant sections were the common functions and skills that were mentioned in the interview. I created these subcategories only in the case where multiple participants quoted the same functions/skills. These are the functions and related skills that participants found to be significant in their work with district-wide initiatives:

- Flexibility
- Knowledge and Credibility

- Organization
- Communication
- Being a Voice/Advocate
- Reflection
- Good Listener
- Problem Solving
- Seeing the Big Picture

This chapter described the connections and commonalities of the feedback provided by the participants. There were several consistencies and redundancies that were mentioned in this chapter that has given some validity to the data and will help me form some conclusions about the findings. The next chapter describes the leadership strategies used by the participants during district-wide initiatives. This chapter was separated from roles and functions because it is a broader subject and it encompasses those two categories.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **ANALYSIS OF LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES**

#### **Introduction**

How do central office administrators exhibit leadership and what styles are used during the implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives? This was a major overarching research question within the study. Although the comments made regarding leadership strategies varied depending on the role and the district of the participant, there were definitely some common strategies mentioned such as collaboration/teamwork and the concept of the administrator working alongside the people whom they support. The responses in the following part of this section were drawn from various interview questions because leadership strategies arose throughout the whole interview and not just during specific questions. It should be noted that the code for leadership strategies tallied the highest number of frequencies during the interviews. The leadership strategies were difficult to categorize by describing them with one word or short phrase. The participants described leadership strategies as concepts or protocols on how they operate as an individual and as a district from a leadership perspective during improvement initiatives.

#### **Elementary Education Directors**

Although not all of the leadership strategies that were mentioned in this study can be described with one word or phrase, the participants in this category commonly referred to the concept of collaboration/teamwork and being a hands-on administrator. These two

common references will be specifically discussed at the end of this section. They seemed to all agree that district initiatives can be derived from various initial sources and the implementation should not be done in isolation. They need the expertise and teamwork from those who work alongside them in the central office and also school based administrators.

It was noted that Mrs. Lopez continuously referred to the fact that she feels that the leadership strategies and concepts used in her district are not top-down. She stated,

Collaboration seems to happen almost like a grassroots kind of thing in our district. It's not something that's top-down where we are directed to get together such as, you and you and you get together and work on this. It will come up as a need and almost all of us have been in Shull County for a long time and know each other really well, so we sort of know who we need to pull in to accomplish certain tasks and who's responsible for what program. So we seek out one another. I wouldn't say that it's necessarily top-down.

Later, Mrs. Lopez talked about the origin of a proposed district-wide initiative and the process on how it is presented to the other central office administrators. Again she referred to the district leadership strategy as not being a top-down style. She stated,

And at our district it's primarily the directors who would see a need for an initiative, propose it to the superintendent or associate superintendent and get their blessing, and then make it happen. Rarely is it top-down, it's more likely that we see a need, we devise a plan for how to address it, and then we get approval to do so, so depending upon what the need is we would pull in different folks.

According to these comments from Mrs. Lopez, the central office in Shull County clearly operates without the use of iron-fist leadership. They capitalize on each other's strengths and ideas to support each other.

Being a visionary and having the people to support the vision was a leadership strategy that was important to Mrs. Lopez. She noted that the district needs to have a direction and vision from the superintendent when implementing a district-wide improvement initiative. She described,

Somebody has to set the direction. And again, that happens at the school level and that may work for that school but it's not going to work for the district. Somebody at the district level has to say this is where we are, and this is where we're going, and this is how we're going to get there because all schools are going to do X, Y, or Z. So, I think it's about setting a purpose and a direction is the most important thing. Some people who are a little further on the hierarchy are in the trenches making it happen, but somebody has to set that direction.

The core leadership strategies that were described by Mrs. Lopez from the perspective of a central office administrator were being personal and being physically available for support. She stated, "It ought to begin with being personal, that's how I feel about leadership. It ought to begin with being personal, and particularly in this business it ought to begin with being personal. That's the core to me." She later added, "Being accessible, I think is a biggie. Physically accessible, you know, but approachable, all those things sort of fall under that but approachable and accessible I think makes a huge difference." Throughout the interview, Mrs. Lopez repeatedly mentioned working alongside her colleagues as an important leadership strategy. She described,

I think—there's this notion of leadership that you have this entitlement and you've made it, and you're entitled to delegate, and then there's this notion of leadership that says you should carry the brunt of it and that's why you're the leader, and I tend to espouse the second part.

This strategy of working alongside others is discussed at the end of this section since it was a recurring comment among the other participants in this category of Elementary Education Directors.

Dr. Maddux said that she was very familiar with the implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives since she is in the role of both Elementary and Title I Director. She described herself as being the person who does not lead by micromanagement. She leads by supporting and monitoring her expectations in the schools. She noted,

So actually district initiatives is something that I am fairly familiar with in making sure, not that they're having to do the same thing in all 15 schools, but that the choices they are making are evidence-based and that they're thinking strategically about using their resources and so on and so forth. So I don't micromanage what they do, but they may consult with me.

She alluded to leading with consistency in all 15 elementary schools that she supervises and that topic is further discussed in this section because the other participants mentioned consistency as a priority.

The structure of leadership strategies was mentioned by Dr. Maddux as she described the protocol and culture of how initiatives have been handled. She described,

There is a conduit, I think. The way the process in my mind works is, if there's something I feel like needs to be considered, then I should have the data to support it. I go to my assistant superintendent, who is cabinet level, and then that person takes it to cabinet, and the cabinet members are all the assistant superintendents.

She added that the assistant superintendents were made up of Instructional Services, Student Support Services, Curriculum and Instruction, and the Associate superintendent is in charge of facilities and maintenance. Although the chief financial officer is not an assistant superintendent, that person is a part of the cabinet along with the Director of Human Resources and the Superintendent. She noted their influence on district-wide initiative decisions, “So those are really the people who ultimately can stop what you want to do, or come to you and say, I want you to do this. You know, I mean it flows both ways, I think.” Even though the cabinet can eliminate the ideas of others, the ideas are heard by them and can be pushed through as an initiative with their support.

District-wide improvement initiatives were described a few times by Dr. Maddux as being presented from both the top and the bottom. In other words, ideas can come from top-down and from the bottom-up. This is not to suggest that the leadership strategies of the district are top-down. It was simply noted that the ideas can come from the superintendent. She gave an example of a top-down initiative and an initiative that was pushed up from a director.

First, she talked about an initiative brought forth by the superintendent. She described,

The academies stemmed from something that our superintendent Dr. Selig felt was important for us to—a direction for our district to go. And so that trickled down to our department obviously teaching and learning, and so then the people in our department that oversee, like the middle and high schools, and then you know, working with the public information officer, and so on and so forth, then those people were charged with, okay, make this happen. Here’s the vision. Make it happen.

Then, she mentioned an initiative that was initiated by a director.

Dr. Maddux explained that there were not many central office administrators who have experience as an elementary principal. This has enabled her to push initiatives to the top from her level as a director and she is trusted because she has the credibility and history of being an elementary principal. She stated,

With my programs, see one of the advantages I have is nobody really knows about elementary. I mean nobody in cabinet has much experience with elementary. Because even Dr. Giamatti, she had no experience at elementary. So I don't get a whole lot coming down. Now I do push a whole lot up and say, we really have to do some of these things and either the district invests in them or don't expect change.

She added, "They're focused on graduation, which to me, like they're not going to graduate if we don't get some things here under control, you know, or improved, not under control but improved district wise." Dr. Maddux believed that district-wide initiatives at the elementary level could set the stage for success and graduation from high school for students.

She also believed that the superintendent has employed the leadership strategy of hiring leaders who possess various types of skills. She credited Superintendent Selig, "He's a believer in hiring the right people to do the right things, and so he recognizes that he's not a detail oriented person and so he's hired detail oriented people in general." The superintendent was described as being a visionary who has great ideas and he has positioned the appropriate personnel to lead the details of these visionary initiatives.

There were some academies that were created by a director in the district. In the end, collaboration was a necessary leadership strategy in order to get the program up and

running, but the original idea was creative. The superintendent allowed his cabinet and directors to be creative and think beyond the daily tasks. Dr. Maddux credited a fellow director,

Now he can get things done especially if it allows him to be creative. So you know he typically takes on some of those creative like the academies. He did the research on the right careers we need to focus on. But in terms of the communication and those kinds of things, that was more of a collaborative effort. And how do we roll this out, sequentially roll it out. So you kind of really have to have a balance. You need creative people and you need detail oriented people and some people are both, I am not, but some people are both.

So, the leadership strategy that Dr. Maddux valued in her interview were the diverse skills of creativity and detail-oriented leaders who can come together and implement a district-wide initiative by capitalizing on each other's strengths.

There was a leadership strategy mentioned by Mrs. Mercker that was unique. She thought that being a generalist and being able to work in an unfamiliar area were important. She explained,

We're anticipating the retirement of our assistant superintendent and, you know, anytime in our size organization that you have one person to leave it can directly affect you in very real ways, so we have to always keep in our minds. I believe we have to be a generalist because we have to be flexible enough to go into a new area with an open mind.

I asked her why it would impact the district significantly. She asserted, "Because we're small, and we're such a team."

Mrs. Mercker brought up another leadership strategy that was different from the other participants in this category when she talked about empowering the staff who

worked in the schools. Since Collins County is a smaller sized district, it was wise for central office leaders to empower the people in the school buildings to help make decisions and lead training. She explains,

So our core team teachers, with the budget woes we have lost our instructional support so we've identified some teacher leaders and the teacher leaders we meet with quite often and they do a lot of work for a little bit of extra money, but mostly for the leadership experience.

Being a resource and approachable is a strategy that she has used and it has worked for her. Mrs. Mercker described,

I don't want to intimidate anyone, that's not my style. I feel like I'm a resource and if I'm a resource then people will call me if they have a question. I'm not their principal, I'm not their instructional specialist, but I do need to have a relationship with them and I need to have assistant principals that feel comfortable calling me, I need to have principals that feel comfortable calling me. I'm a resource, you know, we're all in the same business, I want the same things from the schools that they want, so it's to our benefit to work together.

The participants in this category spoke about various ways that their district and they as individuals carry out their leadership styles. Although many of them were unique and different from each other, there were a few recurring codes that should be mentioned in their own section. Collaboration/teamwork and working alongside the schools or direct reports seemed to be mentioned the most in the interviews.

### **Collaboration/Teamwork**

All three of these central office administrators mentioned the significance of collaboration in the interviews. As noted earlier when Mrs. Lopez talked about not being top-down with leadership style, she mentioned that the collaboration happens like a

grassroots effort in Shull County Schools. She described the fact that the administrators have worked together for a long time and know that they need to pull together when it is time to implement big initiatives.

When Dr. Maddux was asked about her opinion on leadership practices, it was clear that she valued and depended on collaboration and teamwork. She noted,

The first is collaboration. I think that's crucial. Involving the people who are going to be impacted, involving them in conversations along the way about what direction we may need to go in. Not just blindsiding, people. So you have to have that collaboration in getting input from other people.

Mrs. Mercker also added her thoughts on collaboration as an important leadership strategy in her district which is considered to be a smaller than average size. She particularly valued collaboration because of the fact that many of the schools are several miles apart from each other. The district purchased a software system that allows students, parents, teachers, and administrators to collaborate. She explained,

Brian, we have teachers who are at Rocky Point, remotely to the west, and teachers at Sugar Mill, remotely to the east bordering Marta County that get on here and work together. But they get on here and they talk. And they, you know, they work together and they share resources, and so there's a strength in that, there's a strength in doing that, so this is something that we've kind of latched on to, and we just keep working through here to strengthen everything.

She talked about the fact that all of the central office administrators are involved in the district-wide initiatives. She added, "Yeah, we need a point person, but that point person is just kind of there for organizational purposes and background information and—but everybody's involved with that initiative."

### **Doing This Together**

Mrs. Lopez said earlier that she thought that she should carry the brunt of the work instead of delegating it to others. She noted, “For me personally, I would say and I think the people I work with would say do it with them. I’m not a top-down person. I do it with them.” She talked about doing tasks for teachers and taking the burden as the leader. She stated, “Most of the principals and at the level, at the district level, anything we can do for teachers, we do it for them, we don’t ask them to do it.” These were the examples of her notion of working alongside her direct reports.

Mrs. Mercker talked about working alongside each other as central office peers. She described,

We all here have—we have varied backgrounds but I think everybody was a strong teacher and has some strong leadership qualities, and I think that we use all those to our advantage but we work really well together. Our superintendent has told us it’s one of the strongest central offices he’s ever seen, but we’re a team and we can do a lot more as a team than we can individually.

### **Federal Program Directors**

When asked about their leadership strategies of during the implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives, all three of these participants repeatedly talked about collaboration, communication, and being a strategic leader. The mentioning of these three specific leadership strategies was much more frequent than in any other category. Mrs. Jones mentioned collaboration five times; Mrs. Horner six times; and Dr. Glavine four times. The concept of having a diverse departmental representation was also a common topic with the interviewees. The recurring topics will be discussed at the

end of this section. The participants discussed the leadership strategies that were common in their school district.

The concept of being a central office leader who is also a student of the practice and being a researcher were strategies that were important to Mrs. Jones during the implementation stage of the initiative. She noted, “I just went to the Collaborative Conference for Student Achievement which is technically what the Closing the Gap used to be in terms of that, so you’re always hearing from different experts.” Mrs. Jones also thought that relationships were important in order to build trust and buy-in from the stakeholders. She stated, “I have a very close working relationship with all the principals.” Mrs. Jones talked about collaboration and communication as a key to successful implementation, which will be discussed later.

Mrs. Horner from Caden County Schools talked about the leadership style that has been used to gain a direction in the improvement initiatives in her district. She stated, “We talked about with the kinds of things we needed to do and what we could—we’re concerned about, what do we think that we need to do to help, to be able to support schools.” There was a sense of support that was evident throughout the central office administrators in Caden County. Another key leadership strategy that Mrs. Horner talked about was the approach to include a variety of departments in order to diversify the perspectives of the central office administrators and their ideas for the initiative. She described,

As we’ve traveled to get training as district leaders, we’ve gone to those trainings and it’s been, you’ve got a person from EC there, an ESL representative there, a

regular ed. person there, and so you're looking at how this impacts instruction pervasively in the district which I think has been a great thing.

Mrs. Horner also extensively referred to communication and collaboration which is discussed later.

Dr. Glavine was consistent with her sentiments on communication and collaboration with the other three participants. Clearly, these are two major strategies that are important to central office administrators. She also shared the strategy of diversifying the representation of departments included in the implementation of initiatives. Dr. Glavine noted,

And it's about responding to that instruction so you know, there is sort of a leader, here I am, but there will be a team. And you know, usually when you put together a district level team, you know you kind of think of who are the people that are going to be the champions for it and are going to be able to be the persuaders of their different levels.

Shared leadership was a strategy that was at the forefront for Dr. Glavine. She felt that it was at the forefront of implementing a district-wide initiative. She stated,

When we are enacting an initiative I think, you know, it depends I guess but what I would say is certainly an air of shared leadership. You know, that in the fact that when you put together a district level team, it is about sharing. And it is about everyone sort of carrying their weight or you know, kind of working together as this is a leadership—a team, not just one individual.

Dr. Glavine was the only participant who mentioned shared leadership and it fit into the concept of collaboration. Although shared leadership is evident, there is still a need for a leader out in front of the team. She further described,

But you know and I know that everybody has—there has to be a leader. I mean there has to be at some point a person who's kind of taking the point on what the initiative—what's driving the initiative. And I think, you know, depending upon that individual's style it could look very different. I've worked for people who at the district level whose style is very much more authoritative and more positional kind of power, you know, where I am who I am, and we will go forth and do because that is what we do. But I think, you know, I think that kind of leadership probably doesn't lend itself very well to people feeling that they have any autonomy or any options within that kind of framework. So I would—I think in our district we really try to see that as more of a shared leadership. And we recognize that really what we are is to some degree a servitude kind of model because we know that really what we do is we support schools, and you know schools are very unique.

Dr. Glavine wanted to emphasize that there is a bigger picture and that central office administrators should be cautious to avoid the belief that the initiative personal or self- identify with the initiative. She described,

You can't—it's not all about you. It really isn't. Not at this point. Not at this level. You are, you know, I think that when you're a principal it's easier for it to be about you because you are the leader of that school, and no matter what you're leading, you are creating and helping to guide the vision, but when you are at the district level you're really not in control of a whole lot of things that happen in schools. You're really not.

This was a humble statement made by a person in a high-ranking position.

It was noted by Dr. Glavine that the position and vision of the superintendent can drive the leadership of the other employees in central office. In other words, the directors and assistant superintendents follow the leadership strategies of the superintendent. She explained,

I think it starts from your superintendent down. I mean I don't know how you can—I've actually been in districts when we didn't have a very effective superintendent, and when that happens, when you've been in a district where you

don't have it from the top down, you know, ineffective leaders can have a significant impact on you know, the progress that your district is making towards any initiatives, but also just in the vision and mission of where you want—you're are heading. And I think sometimes you can get stalled, kind of you know, like in murky water, so to speak, if your leader isn't a strong visionary leader.

Staying with the concept of collaboration, Dr. Glavine implied that the cohesiveness of central office administrators is a key component to the success of the implementation of any initiative. She stated,

I just think that when it comes to improvement overall in the district that any district must have, and I think district wide leadership has absolutely got to be on board with how are the things that we're doing all across our district and how is our leadership at the central office as a cohesive team, if we are one, and I'd like to think we are, but you know, I think in a perfect world we'd be a really great cohesive team, I think we are a pretty good cohesive team.

The topic of leadership strategies of central office administrators was easy to talk about for Dr. Glavine. She continued,

I really believe in a plan. I mean I've really—I've always believed that you put a plan together and you monitor that plan, you, you know, you nurture that plan, you monitor that plan, and then you evaluate that plan. And then you turn right back around and you make another plan based on the data from the previous plan.

She gave credit to her superintendent about growing leaders and leading through the utilization of the right people in the right places. She explained,

So I think you know starting from your central office down and then permeating throughout all of your offices, it has to be about having good leadership skills within each department and then as a superintendent, trying—tapping into the sort of the potential of each of those individuals. And one thing that I think is absolutely necessary is the leader must grow leaders.

## **Collaboration**

As previously stated, collaboration arose numerous times through the interviews of the participants in this category. Collaboration was implied during some of the interviews. Mrs. Jones said, “It’s a process of working together in a team and I think by having monthly meetings, I have monthly meetings, we do these book studies, I read them with them, we talk about it, we discuss it.” On other occasions, collaboration was clearly and explicitly stated. Mrs. Jones explained, “We collaborate and I think that’s what makes a good team at the central office is collaboration and that ability to work together.”

Mrs. Jones further described the leadership strategy of collaboration and why it is important to work together to solve problems or plan for the implementation of an initiative. She stated,

It’s like a collaborative team effort, it’s professional learning community in a way just not at a grade level, it’s at an area, like reading specialists or my ESL teachers in that process, so it’s that team effort and being able to pull everybody together to problem solve, I think, and address your needs.

Later in the interview, Mrs. Jones spoke about the reason why it is important to collaborate. She explained,

If you can work together and give that support, it’s not the central office versus the schools kind of thing. And so if you can, as you have demands on your time, demands on your funds, you really do have to look at the needs of your county and try to work together, so I think having that central office support is extremely important for the principals because it’s going to filter down to the teachers eventually and then the students.

The success of any initiative can depend largely on the collaboration efforts of the team. Mrs. Horner stated, “I will absolutely say there are places where it is not as successful as others, you know, a lot has to do with the collaboration ability of the teams, with the leadership in the building, with the coaching support.” She also described the collaborative efforts of the district as a whole. She noted, “I would say we’re a pretty collaborative team. We get together on a weekly basis as a district leadership team and in the school improvement division and we talk about what’s at risk or what do we see our biggest needs are.” These are the collaborative conversations that drive the direction of the initiative that needs to be implemented.

Collaboration among central office administrators was also implied at times by Mrs. Horner instead of being explicitly described. She stated, “So one of the great things I’ll say that I think about working here right now is that we’ve really been pretty successful about losing some of the silo process.” The concept of working in a silo would suggest working alone and segregated from others. She described her approval of the fact that the district was slowly getting away from the silo mentality. She explained,

So a lot of what were silos and have been in our district a few years ago, we’re losing a little bit of that and that’s helping create a consistent model that seems to be able to flow for how does instruction look for all kids, what can we do to benefit how teachers pervasively in a building look at what kids do.

The elimination of the silos resulted in a benefit for students in the district. Mrs. Horner thought of her central office peers as a group of people with a common vision who value the collaboration concept when making decisions and implementing initiatives. She

claimed, “So but I would say here, right now, that it’s been a pretty collaborative process.”

Dr. Glavine also alluded to the concept of collaboration when she was asked about important leadership strategies of central office administrators. Although this comment fits both of the categories of collaboration and communication, she notes that they are the keys to success and reaching a goal. She claimed, “You recognize the fact that collaboration and really communicating with people is the key to getting from one point to another about what you want to do.”

### **Communication**

Communication and collaboration are not synonymous terms. Leaders can be good communicators without being good at collaboration. However, leaders cannot be successful at collaboration without effective communication. All three Federal Program Administrators said that communication was important when implementing district-wide initiatives and they all emphasized how communication and collaboration can work together as one leadership strategy. Mrs. Jones stated, “We have a cabinet, instructional cabinet meeting and so that’s our time and our opportunity to meet together, to discuss what we’re going on, to talk about initiatives or share information or just something we might need to work together on a team.” Communication was implied as she described the district’s mode of working together.

Mrs. Horner also gave an example of communication and how it is intertwined with collaboration during district initiatives. She noted, “We collaborate, they email back and forth, I mean we do a lot of communication back and forth with regards to what is the

district, you know, so what is the district's clarity about how you want this to happen in schools?" She also described the leadership strategy of effective communication with the end result of avoiding disconnection between central office and the school building. She explained,

I try to involve them also so that we're creating at the district level a means by which something can actually really happen in their buildings, you know, it—because what we don't want is disconnect between something I try to put into place and what is realistic for what can really happen in their buildings.

She described her style as one of effective communication, collaboration, and foresight.

She said,

I would definitely think that my approach is generally to look at what's coming or what's expected, try to kind of wrap my own head around it first, and then I want to talk about it and I want to communicate, I want to collaborate with not only people who are going to experience it, but also peers that are working with me.

It was interesting to hear about Dr. Glavine's perspective as she spoke from a different perspective when she said that the absence of communication across central office departments can be a barrier to the success of a district-wide initiative. She explained,

So you look at those people that are across the district that are in charge of various departments but that can also lead the charge, so to speak, in their department and communicate that clearly to all of those underneath them, because sometimes, you know what it's like, I mean sometimes communication is the barrier.

She also thought that clear and consistent communication should be a leadership strategy for central office administrators. She said,

Sometimes we take communication for granted. We know we think we're communicating clearly and that everyone is getting the same message and clearly we are not doing that. So you know, trying to help make sure that the same words and the same communication gets out to everybody.

Dr. Glavine brought communication and collaboration together by saying, "You recognize the fact that collaboration and really communicating with people is the key to getting from one point to another about what you want to do."

### **Strategic Leadership**

The participants felt that being a strategic leader was a strategy that many administrators use in their district. Mrs. Jones further described this concept and explained the process of making prioritized and purposeful decisions. She said, "I'm very fortunate if I may say that, to look at our needs and address that in terms of what we thing our initiatives need to be." She added along the same lines of being deliberate with decisions, "You really do have to look at the needs of your county and try to work together." Dr. Glavine concurred with Mrs. Jones's thoughts on strategic leadership. She said,

I think that's just—that's sort of like an overall permeating theme when we think about strategic leadership because we know that, we have a district-wide plan and you know you kind of go back to that plan to make sure it fits, and that it aligns, and is it fitting what we want to do in the next, say, three to five years, you know within our district, and can we see that moving forward, you know, for our districts.

Dr. Glavine summarized her thoughts on the importance of being a strategic leader. She stated, "And then I think you also have to think very analytically and strategically, you have to be a strategic thinker."

### Secondary Education and CTE Directors

The participants in this category did not reveal as many thoughts on specific leadership strategies as participants in other categories. Mr. Avery was recently promoted from a director level position to an assistant superintendent position and oversees the same department. He gave some interesting insight on the difference he has seen in the level of autonomy between director and assistant superintendent. He described,

Well now, and I didn't have this perspective until about three weeks ago, but as a new assistant superintendent for the last three weeks I have set in at cabinet, at superintendent's cabinet every Monday. In the past, before getting to sit in on one of those discussions we would have our own departmental meeting and our assistant superintendent would come in and just say this is what we're doing, you know, Charles I want you to work on this and it was kind of just a top-down kind of directive and you were kind of given, okay this is what we want you to work on and then we just kind of turned it over to you. So it wasn't so much his brainstorming—it was kind of like the idea was given to us and then, you know, these are the resources you have, these are the people you have, this is what we want the end result, go do it and so—and I think one of the things that was missing from my perspective is at the—from the director perspective is, like I said, it was just kind of top down but at the cabinet level I have seen a lot more discussion, rationale as why this program should be here and I, and that's only in three weeks, you know, just seeing that so.

He was the only administrator who reflected on this and maybe it was because he was recently appointed to this new assistant superintendent position.

Mr. Avery referred to his district in Addison County as one that has a top-down leadership strategy in the central office. It wasn't necessarily described in a negative connotation, but just as a style that the district has adopted. He described, "Well, it, in my opinion a lot of things in our district are pushed down from the superintendent. It's

something that, you know, maybe some of the initiatives are driven by certain perceived activities in the district or in the county.” He added his thoughts about the future of leadership styles in the district and how it might change for him as an assistant superintendent. He stated,

We’ve had a superintendent that’s been here for eight years and, you know, had a lot of consistency with that and it—you know, it has been, you know, the ideas have just been pushed down and then we just carry them out, so it’ll be interesting to see my perspective moving forward with—from an assistant superintendent, you know, position, you know, how much additional insight and input that I’ll have in some of these decisions.

He sounded optimistic about the possibilities of being that person who can promote a broad vision and communicate ideas for district-wide initiatives much like the superintendent.

The superintendent was given a tremendous amount of credit from Mr. Avery regarding his ability to read people and apply their special strengths in a strategic manner when implementing initiatives. He said, “So I think everybody has specialties that I’m not so sure that we have said okay, that’s our specialty. But someone had said okay we think this is an area of talent that this director has and so things get kind of, you know, pushed in that direction.” He indicated that he has felt empowered to make his own decisions within his role. Mr. Avery said,

I’ve seen, since becoming the assistant superintendent though, officially, that at the cabinet level it—you have just complete autonomy within my department to, you know, I can, you know, I can—I feel like I have a hundred percent autonomy just to go in the direction that I want to go in.

Mr. McGriff agreed that Addison County Schools has operated under a top-down leadership style. He stated, “To be completely candid, most of our—a good portion of our major initiatives come down from our superintendent, somewhat from our assistant superintendent in charge of instruction.” He testified that solid and creative initiatives can come from the bottom-up. He described,

I’m the visionary person and I know where we need to go now, it’s just my job to lay it out to you all, that this is where we need to go, whereas the things that I tried to do unsuccessfully in my role were bottom up, meaning that I worked very hard to gain support amongst teachers first, gaining support amongst counselors, anybody that has a stake involved in what’s going on I try to build that well of support.

This approach of leading through empowering and supporting from the ground level was not mentioned by any other central office leader.

Since student test results and data have been held at such a focal point in education, leaders have begun to scramble for quick fixes and fast results. Mr. McGriff did not subscribe to this urgency of fixing a problem by using temporary measures. He explained,

All of our efforts go into what happens in May, and so it’s up to those short term fixes, we’re always chasing short-term fixes and that looking really, really, really long-term what might be in the best interest of the kids, and so anything that might to see a little bit of an implementation dip, you know, and that would take a long time for real results to show usually get discarded and say, you know, we just don’t have time for that because it’s not going to immediately show up in our data.

He implied that long-term fixes would be in the best interest of students, but they do not get immediate positive results which are what the authorities are seeking.

There was a sense of frustration when Mr. McGriff implied that school districts in general have shifted their focus away from the students. He said, “It’s almost like we get lost in the numbers and we start—and our allegiance becomes to the numbers rather than to the kids. That’s the most—that’s one of the most frustrating things about my job.” Mr. McGriff has boldly taken the high road of doing what is best for students regardless of the bureaucracy that often gets in the way. He spoke about the principals who report to him and what they think about his leadership style. He explained,

I think they know that I’m really not that interested in me. I think they know that I’m not particularly interested in the next testing session. I think they know that I understand that’s is one indicator of how the kids are doing but if you’re going to make meaningful changes it’s going to take years to get the kind of climate and really crack this problem that we’ve got.

This reinforced his earlier comments about avoiding the temptation to implement short-fix solutions.

The feedback received from smaller school districts such as Collins County Schools where Dr. Smoltz leads the Secondary Curriculum Department showed that they valued teamwork and avoided working in isolation. The key point that Dr. Smoltz talked about were being strategic, demonstrating teamwork and collaboration, being a servant leader, and seeing the whole picture. She felt that these leadership strategies were necessary for central office administrators to use because that is what makes smaller districts run so effectively.

Dr. Smoltz recognized that democratic decisions with all stakeholders at the table cannot be made every time, but that it is important to have the input from various departments during district-wide improvement initiatives. She explained,

I believe one thing you would find in our district is that nothing is done in isolation. I'm not a team by myself. We're all in this together. We would be teams of us together, different directors from different departments and we always then bring principals in and try to bring the teachers in too. So we make decisions based on input from all of the stakeholders. I'll be honest, not every decision is made that way.

She described a scenario when Collins County Schools implemented a One-to-One Laptop Initiative for their students. They brought several departments together including teachers, principals, central office administrators, and the technology department to discuss the best plan for the implementation. Their central office leadership strategy has been to use the knowledge of various departments and their expertise to join together to make an informed decision. She stated,

So I would say that one of the things we do very well I think in our district is we work together as a team and we try to decide together and it's not one person on an island or in a silo trying to make something happen in a school district so I think that that has been good for us.

Although all districts seemed to agree with this opinion, smaller districts such as Collins tended to put a great amount of value in teamwork leadership strategies.

Dr. Smoltz described her leadership style and strategy that she has used and how it fits into the style of her district. She said, "I am not asked to be a certain way. I think I'm granted leeway to be my own person and my own style, however in this district there

is an expectation that central office leaders as I said earlier are service oriented and we work alongside. I don't dictate." She was consistent with many other participants when she mentioned the importance of being a strategic leader. She stated,

We might guide strategically to get schools and principals to make certain decisions and to get them to where we need them to be, but we work alongside them. I'm a hard worker and I want my principals to see that I'm a hard worker and I work hard for them to provide them as much support.

Servant leadership was one of the most unique leadership strategies that Dr. Smoltz declared as the expectation in her district. She described, "We believe that it is our duty to serve our principals and to serve our schools. It's kind of that servant leadership thought and service that we provide to help support our principals." As an example, she wanted to emphasize that if schools or principals need them, the central office administrators are only a phone call or email away. She went back and summarized her thoughts on servant leadership as a central office administrator. She claimed, "I'm going to say it again that service leadership is what we do. I'm trying to provide a service. I'm trying to provide some assistance to the schools and keep that type of mentality."

### **Teacher Quality Directors**

Once again, the concept of being a strategic leader and good communicator was valued among these participants when we discussed leadership strategies. These two topics along with empowerment are discussed separately at the end of this section due to the pattern that was seen in the transcripts among the participants in this category. The participants also shared strategies that were on the creative side such as empowerment,

giving opportunities, trying something new, and setting goals prior to the implementation of new initiatives.

Mr. Justice mentioned the strategies of meeting and communicating, working together, and being strategic with the implementation of district-wide initiatives. She noted, “We meet—every time I’m in the office we talk about what is next and we make charts of things that we work on monthly.” Mr. Justice also thought that it was significant to work together as a unit with the end result of reaching the goal effectively. He described,

One of the things that I hope that you will hear me say is that we have different directors in our Collins County central office, but everybody really does work very well together. We meet every Monday morning for a director’s meeting, and we tell each other what’s going on and who will need help with certain projects. We just keep up with what each one of us is doing so that we can make everything work well.

It was implied by Mr. Justice that the leadership strategy of Collins County Schools does not reflect a top-down approach. His comments suggested that the top superintendents in the cabinet are important to help drive the vision, but that they should also be visible and connecting with the employees at every level in the organization. He stated, “You still have to have that leadership at the very, very top with the superintendent and the assistant superintendents. If I could give any advice to anybody, it’s for those top people in the district offices to not forget to pay attention to the people in your district office.”

Dr. Klesko, a veteran of 30 years, provided an assortment of leadership strategies that she has used in her career. She attested that Addison County Schools has not been a

top-down style district and that the central office has used the practice of bringing everyone together to discuss plans for district-wide improvement initiatives. She stated, “When we are looking at school improvement initiatives, there are a lot of people who come to the plate. We do a lot of brainstorming. Very few of our initiatives are top-down in this district.”

The leadership strategy of assigning individuals or departments to take the lead on an initiative is something that no one else talked about besides Dr. Klesko. She credited her superintendent for structuring the central office in a way that can enable the appropriate department to take charge and still have the support of the other surrounding departments. She described,

We are always trying to improve and to get better, so that’s just the way our superintendent set it up. If it’s an instructional initiative, then the School Improvement Department would probably be the lead point. Then, where I would be involved would be to help support the implementation of that through the leader’s perspective. So I do everything with the leaders so to make sure that the leaders are informed, to make sure they are aware of the initiatives, to make sure they have their resources.

Another unique leadership strategy that Dr. Klesko has used is to listen to people and not to jump right in and give orders. She listens to people and then guides them to figure out some options without telling them what to do. She described,

So when we talking leadership practices, you know, I’m trying to help guide my administrators so sometimes I’m a listener and, you know, and I let them, I try to help them figure out what they need to do by not telling them directly what to do. However, there are in fact times when I may have to say—this is what you need to do.

There were definitely some common themes that these participants included in the interviews such as being strategic, a good communicator, and empowering others.

However, there were some distinctive leadership strategies that the participants in this category deemed to be present in their district. Dr. Murphy recalled the implementation of a district-wide initiative from last year and the process that they used in order for it to be successful. She explained,

So let's really drill this down to what this means. How are you going to approach this at the school level? Let's talk about how you will roll this out on a practical level. Let's talk about how you will take your data and use it. Let's talk about what this will look like in the classroom.

This was an example of how central office administrators have used mental imagery on how an initiative could look once it is implemented and if there are any unforeseeable negative consequences.

When she thought about the way people sometimes claim that a particular strategy has been in place for a long time and no one wants to change it because it has always been done that way, Dr. Murphy revealed her progressive leadership strategy of trying something new and taking a risk. She described,

I'm not saying you just turn the apple cart over for no reason, but why wouldn't we try to get better and think about things differently and I do feel like we're at a place now where you don't hear the argument ever, we're doing this because this is the way that we've done it or this is the way that we do it.

She went on to add that leaders need to step out in front of an initiative that is in their genre and take the lead with the collaboration of other departments. She noted,

I tend to be somebody who steps up and takes charge of the situation, not in a bossy way but here's an example: We are planning for an initiative and we did some brainstorming in our school improvement division meeting. We have an assistant superintendent so I'm one of our team in there. I kind of step up and do that sort of thing. People are okay with that. I have found that even though I can't be the boss like I would be at the school level, the principal role, I am able to assert myself but I do it in a way that is about me being supportive and trying to make something work and really rolling my sleeves up and getting the work done instead of taking the approach of telling people that this is the way we're going to do it because this is the way that I want to do it. Part of it is probably attributed to the fact that I've been at this level for a while and so it's not like I'm completely brand new to this. So I guess that experience gives me a certain amount of legitimacy to step in and say I'll lead this process.

Even though the central office is full of people with higher college degrees and the environment can be competitive, Dr. Murphy stated that it has been her leadership strategy to surround herself with intelligent people who will challenge her to perform her best as a leader. She explained,

I like to surround myself with smart people and I like for people to be comfortable challenging me. I think that is important because I know that if my program specialist or director of instructional improvement challenge me on something or question something, I'd rather it be challenged in a meeting with 12 of them than challenged in the community or at a principals meeting.

This strategy has helped her be better prepared for initiatives and predicting the possible questions from stakeholders.

### **Strategic Leadership**

All three participants within the Teacher Quality Director category alluded to strategic leadership as an approach that is required to set and reach goals. Mr. Justice recited an example, "We certainly look at those teacher working conditions surveys and

try to figure out if there's anything we could improve on. We made plans for several improvements based on suggestions or things that were commented on last year.”

Dr. Murphy also told a story where her team was very intentional and strategic when it came to a new initiative. She claimed,

I focused on the intended outcomes and really intentionally looked at where we want to be at the end of this year. Where do we need to be a year out from now? We are preparing for standards this year, what is preparation, what does prepared look like, and then what does success and implementation look like a year out from now? What do our program specialists' roles look like in supporting that and really try to be very intentional about that and really work to message it on the front end, that was really important to me.

Being intentional and being deliberate was something that was important to Dr. Klesko as a central office administrator. She remembered the strategic leadership processes that she has used in the past. She recalled,

When we're choosing initiatives there's also a lot of communication with principals. No one just said this is what we are going to do. We investigated it, took some principals with some central office folks, went and observed it at another system, actually sent some teachers with them to observe it and then came back and had discussion on whether this was right for us or not. Not everyone had input, but many people did have input because what we've seen and what I've seen is if this is an initiative that comes from top-down it's probably not going to work unless you have buy-in from other folks.

She added her thoughts on who to include and what their roles might be. She stated, “So we try to make sure that we have some key people who are key communicators and are not yes people. We need leaders who will give you their true opinion.”

**Empowerment**

It was believed by these central office administrators that they should use the strategy of empowering others and giving them opportunities to work through problems on their own while giving them support if needed. Dr. Klesko stated, "I'm working directly with leaders, I can't just make the decision and tell them what to do. I need them to problem solve and think about the decision. I want to give them those experiences prior to being in that situation so they can have something to reflect on." Dr. Murphy also indicated that empowerment and giving opportunities for principals to lead their schools with autonomy. She described, "We want principals to be leaders in their building, we want them to be able to chart the course for their school and then we would hold them accountable for that."

**Communication**

This was a common topic in the interviews and also something that was not necessarily predicted to be so prevalent prior to the study. All three participants in this category talked about the importance of communication. Mr. Justice noted, "We try to communicate everything that we can and keep everybody focused on what's going on and what's coming up next and not leave anybody out." Dr. Murphy also held communication at a premium as she spoke about her leadership strategies as a central office administrator. She stated, "I really try to be very intentional and really work to message it on the front end. That was really important to me, communicating." Dr. Klesko reiterated her comments about not being a top-down district and then emphasized

the importance of communication. She claimed, “When we are choosing initiatives there’s also a lot of communication with principals. This is not a top-down system.”

Leadership strategies incorporate roles and functions into its makeup. The common terms that were mentioned in leadership strategies were different than those from roles and functions. The participants were reminded that their responses to the questions should be related to the leadership strategies during district-wide initiatives. When it came to leadership during district-wide initiatives, the following key strategies were consistently mentioned during the interviews:

- Collaboration/Teamwork
- Communication
- Strategic Leadership
- Empowerment

### **District Initiatives**

The purpose of this study was to discover how central office administrators exhibit leadership, carry out their roles, and perform their functions in district improvement initiatives. District improvement can be categorized in several different ways such as safety, student achievement, character education, and many others. For the purpose of this study, district improvement initiatives can be defined as a deliberate initiative where the ultimate goal is to increase student achievement. Listed below are some district-wide improvement initiatives and the number of participants from each category listed as significant during the interviews. For example, there were two Federal

Program Directors and two Secondary/CTE Directors who listed the 1:1 Laptop Initiative as significant in their district.

Table 3

## District-wide Improvement Initiatives

<b>Name of Initiative</b>	<b>Elementary Education Directors</b>	<b>Federal Program Directors</b>	<b>Secondary and CTE Directors</b>	<b>Teacher Quality Directors</b>
1:1 Laptop Initiative		2	2	
Blast Program	1		1	
Common Core				1
Data Teaming				2
Foundations	1			
Literacy First				1
Math Expressions				1
Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)		1		
Piedmont Visits				1
Project Lead the Way		1		
Read to Achieve (RTA)	1	1		1
Response to Intervention (RTI)	1	1		1
Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)		1	1	1
Teachscape				1
Virtual Academy		1		

According to Table 3, the district-wide initiative that was discussed the most was the 1:1 Laptop Initiative, followed by RTA, RTI, and STEM. The 1:1 Laptop Initiative was mentioned because it has been an ongoing initiative in a few districts that has taken a lot of preparation and continued work on the implementation. This initiative was fresh on the minds of the participants. RTA is a current initiative that is state-mandated and the central office administrators have been organizing efforts for their district implementation and support for their elementary schools. RTI is not new, but it is an initiative that most districts have had experience with trying to implement across all schools. STEM has become quite a buzzword over the last few years. School districts have been challenged to integrate Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math into one experience that demonstrates the connectedness among these subjects and not to be taught in isolation. It is my conclusion that STEM was referred to because it is one of the latest trends in K-12 public education.

### **Document Reviews**

As stated in Chapter III, available documents from each school district were reviewed. It should be noted that some documents were not available, as they did not exist in certain counties. The types of documents that were available were: District strategic plans, formal job descriptions of central office administrators, evaluation instruments designed by the state of North Carolina for central office administrators, district annual reports, district fact sheet and profiles, and organizational charts. There were no department strategic plans found in any of the districts like I had hoped. These

available documents gave me something to compare with the interview data to see if the information was aligned.

### **District Strategic Plans**

It was surprising to discover that some school districts either did not have a strategic plan at all or they were in the initial stages of creating their first plan. Addison County and Collins County Schools had strategic plans that were in effect. Caden County Schools began the process of developing a plan when this research study began and it was officially adopted in June 2014. Shull County neither had a strategic plan nor were they working on developing a strategic plan for their district. The district strategic plans encompass many leadership traits and strategies simply because of the visionary structure and purpose of the plan which is to set measurable and purposeful goals to support the vision of the district for their students. I noticed that there were some specific goals in the strategic plans that shared similar language with the feedback from the participants in the study.

Addison County began its plan by defining the purpose: Strategic planning is the process by which leaders of a school district determine what it intends to be in the future and how it will get there. This work results in a vision for the district's future and determines the necessary priorities, procedures, and strategies to achieve that vision. Participants in the study also placed great value in central office administrators being forward thinkers and visionaries. One of the goals in the strategic plan in Addison County was to strengthen parental involvement. Communication and developing

relationships were strategies that participants shared in the interview which were also used in the strategic plan.

The strategic plan in Collins County lacked the detail that was included in the plan in Addison County. However, one of their goals was to attract, retain, develop, and support quality teachers. Participants in the study also valued the concept of providing professional development and supporting teachers and schools. Collins County also listed a goal of enhancing communication and relationships with elected officials and community agencies with the end result of delivering up to date services to their community.

Caden County Schools included some board comments and documents on their website that was relevant to leadership. The school board had input and written feedback on the proposal of the first draft of the strategic plan. There were a few goals in the strategic plan that aligned tightly to the feedback received from the participants in the study. Goal #1 focused on exemplary classroom teaching and instructional leadership. Participants agreed with the strategy to create a culture of adherence to and support for these expectations by the Board of Education, Superintendent, central office administrators, principals and teachers. The strategy for goal #6 was also tightly aligned with the specific feedback from participants when asked about their support for schools. Both the strategic plan and participants agreed that it was important to develop definitions and determine reasonable district-wide expectations as minimum standards.

## **Job Descriptions**

Out of the four school districts that participated in the study, none of them had job descriptions that were provided by the local district. However, the state of North Carolina had formal job descriptions available on their website. The NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) included a disclaimer, “Local school systems (LEAs) can and often do modify the job descriptions to meet their individual needs” (NCDPI, 2014, para. 1).

The job description for the assistant superintendent/central office administrator was found on the NCDPI website. The job description for the assistant superintendent/central office administrator expects for the leader to provide leadership in establishing system-wide goals, assist in the development of a comprehensive program plan, and effectively communicate with staff and community and in the planning for professional development of self and staff. This is consistent with the findings from the interviews because of its emphasis on effective communication, establishing system-wide goals, and planning lined up with the comments from the participants.

## **Evaluation Instruments**

It was my idea that the evaluation instrument could be used to check the validity of the comments of the participants. Are the elements in the evaluation instrument relevant to the roles and functions that the participant has revealed? Is the administrator doing more than what is expected? Are they performing tasks that do not fit into the evaluation instrument? The NC Rubric for Evaluating NC Instructional Central Office Staff was used to reference the roles and expectations of the participants.

The North Carolina Standards for Superintendents and Central Office Staff includes seven major leadership standards: Strategic, Instructional, Cultural, Human Resource, Managerial, External Resource Development, and Micropolitical. This document includes specific competencies that the state of North Carolina considers to be essential for central office staff and superintendents. The competencies that are listed in this document that also surfaced as data in the interviews are: Communication, conflict management, global perspective, organizational ability, personal ethics and values, results orientation, time management, and visionary. It was very clear that the participants naturally considered these competencies to be of great value in the interviews.

### **Annual Reports**

The annual reports for both the Addison and Collins County school districts included information about graduation rates, financial data, district vision, and superintendent's message. The only relevant information from the annual reports was the superintendent's message from Addison County and the STEM initiatives from Collins County. The superintendent's message claimed that the school board and administrators strived to improve the educational opportunities and move the district forward such as an improvement initiative. The STEM initiatives found in the annual report from Collins County gave examples of district-wide improvement initiatives that central office administrators are responsible for implementation. The annual report from Shull County simply listed the educational data statistics and financial figures for the district and it was

not very informative or supportive of the interviews. There was no annual report available for Caden County Schools.

### **District Fact Sheets and Profiles**

The only fact sheet available was from Addison County Schools and it was comprehensive and detailed. The board of education goals were listed on the fact sheet and one of the main goals was leadership. The document stated that school leaders will create a culture that embraces change and promotes dynamic, continuous improvement. This supports the comments made by participants and is consistent with their thoughts on district-wide improvement.

### **Organizational Charts**

There were organizational charts available for the Addison and Collins County School Districts. Shull County and Caden County did not publish a document, but their central office administrators were listed on their website. The organizational chart from Collins County went into a detailed description of the hierarchy as they listed the responsibilities and departments under each person's name. The participants clearly knew about their responsibilities listed in this document because they named these responsibilities in the interview. The data from the interviews also validated the organizational charts as the participants described the departments that they oversee.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the central office administrators shared their personal experiences and opinions with me about their roles, functions, and leadership strategies when implementing district-wide improvement initiatives. They were encouraged to draw

upon other experiences in central office if they held any other roles than their current position. It was found that the participants were candid and forthcoming with the dialogue. It became evident after the first few interviews that there were some clear themes that would develop from the responses such as collaboration, communication, and strategic leadership.

The purpose of the next chapter is to make sense of the participants' responses, look for consistencies and common themes, and come to a conclusion about the leadership strategies of central office administrators. What can be learned from this research? How has it expanded the limited research that has been done on the approach of central office administrators to district-wide improvement initiatives?

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND INTERPRETATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will describe what I was trying to learn and the new information that was gained from the research. There are sections dedicated to what was learned, the results from the research questions, and suggestions for future research. The data collected showed strong feelings from the participants about the use of collaboration, communication, and strategic leadership. As I was synthesizing my own learning from the data, I realized that it was a great advantage for me not to have ever been a central office administrator because this gave me a clear and unbiased perspective that increased the integrity and trustworthiness of this study.

#### **What Can Be Learned from This Research?**

There were four categories of participants from four different school districts in this study: CTE and Secondary Education Directors, Elementary Education Directors, Federal Program Directors, and Directors of Teacher Quality/Professional Development. The participants were strategically chosen for job titles to align with the participants from the other districts. My intent was to interview people with similar job titles and responsibilities from different school districts. This allowed for direct comparisons and implications to be drawn in reference to the leadership strategies, roles, and functions of each category of participants.

## **Major Themes**

In this study, the themes emerged from the data rather than the themes being forced upon the data. I began the interviews without a preconceived idea of what the commonalities might be among the participants. The major themes that emerged from this research study are:

1. Collaboration
2. Communication
3. Strategic Leadership

Each participant either specifically mentioned these key terms or they implied these concepts about leadership strategies by the way they described their protocols of leading an initiative in their district. These three themes are embedded in the summary and conclusions. These are considered findings because these are the concepts that run through the data to connect roles, functions, and leadership strategies to the operation of district-wide improvement initiatives. Table 4 shows the repeated or recurring findings within each participant category. Checks were placed in the table if more than one participant from each category emphasized collaboration, communication, or strategic leadership.

### **Collaboration**

The concept of collaboration began to surface early in this study in the literature review. The interview questions did not address collaboration, but the participants clearly agreed that this was a vital strategy in the central office environment. Dr. Glavine stated, “You recognize the fact that collaboration and really communicating with people

is the key to getting from one point to another about what you want to do.” Mrs. Jones described collaboration as an essential part of leadership success, “We collaborate and I think that’s what makes a good team at the central office is collaboration and that ability to work together.” It is not surprising that this theme emerged from the study. The participants spoke positively about the effects of collaboration and how they cannot imagine being successful by operating in isolation.

Table 4

Recurring Findings by Participant Category

<b>Key Finding</b>	<b>Elementary Education Directors</b>	<b>Federal Program Directors</b>	<b>Secondary and CTE Directors</b>	<b>Teacher Quality Directors</b>
Collaboration	✓	✓		
Communication	✓	✓	✓	✓
Strategic Leadership		✓		✓

### **Communication**

Communication quickly became a heavily referenced concept during the interviews. Communication is unique because it can be considered a role due to the fact that a person can fulfill the role of a communicator in an organization. Communication can also be considered a personal skill or function because a person can retain the ability to communicate. Furthermore, communication can be considered a part of a leadership strategy because the efficiency and success of an organization can rely heavily on communication strategies implemented by the leaders. The topic of effective

communication was a developing theme in this study across all of the participants because they felt that they could not operate without it.

### **Strategic Leadership**

Strategic leadership can be described as creating conditions for implementing strategies for schools that result in improved performance for students. Strategic leadership for central office leaders encompasses a wide range of areas such as academic initiatives, human resources, and fiscal resources. Central office administrators are intelligent, ambitious, and likely reached this level of leadership because they were organized and strategic. The participants consistently mentioned strategic leadership because they valued setting goals, being efficient, measuring progress, and achieving success.

### **Theory Supported by Data**

The data show that the participants clearly felt that collaboration, communication, and strategic leadership were of utmost importance for the successful implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives led by central office administrators. Leadership strategies were coded 145 times in the transcripts which was the highest number in the study. This part of the data simply told how many times strategic leadership was mentioned. However, I was convinced beyond simply looking at the number of times strategic leadership was mentioned. It was equally important to consider how long each participant spoke about strategic leadership. In other words, some participants mentioned it once, but they stayed on the topic for a long time. They would often return to the topic without being prompted. So, the length of the discussion on this emerging theme was

equally as important as the number of times it surfaced in the interviews. Dr. Glavine stated, “I think you also have to think very analytically and strategically, you have to be a strategic thinker.”

The same concept held true for collaboration as an emerging theme. The data showed that it was coded 71 times, however it was noted that the participants took time to explain and give examples of how their office collaborates during district-wide improvement initiatives. This theme truly emerged and became quite evident especially due to the fact that the interview questions did not prompt the participants to talk about collaboration. Collaboration continued to resurface with 9 out of 12 participants. Mrs. Mercker stated, “Yeah, we need a point person but that point person is just kind of there for organizational purposes and background information and—but everybody’s involved with that initiative.”

Although communication showed up 37 times in the coding, it was implied and referred to throughout the interviews. This was also coded as a function in the data collection. It is also important to know that communication was a common thread woven between most of the categories of participants as something that was most important to them. The headings and subheadings in the table of contents reflect the popularity of communication across the participants from their discussions. Central office administrators talked about the importance of effective communication and with the appropriate stakeholders in district-wide initiatives. Dr. Klesko stated, “When we are choosing initiatives there’s also a lot of communication with principals. This is not a top-down system.” Dr. Glavine tied these three emerging themes together. She stated, “You

recognize the fact that collaboration and really communicating with people is the key to getting from one point to another about what you want to do.”

### **Findings Connected to the Literature Review**

The literature review gave the historical context of central office administration and included the work from widely known scholars who have developed and studied leadership theories. Now that the research is complete, it is prudent to compare the findings from the participants to the literature review. The participants provided evidence that supported the work of these scholars.

The finding of collaboration was connected to Hillman and Kachur (2010) who stated that central offices should develop partnerships with the schools and become more collaborative. Participants agreed with the importance of collaboration and supporting the schools as discussed in Chapter V. Honig and Rainey (2014) also claimed that the roles of central office administrators have shifted from away from managerial and towards supporting district-wide teaching and learning. The plain fact that Mrs. Horner’s job title is Director of Instructional Improvement is evidence that her school district has chosen to focus on and place resources on supporting Honig and Rainey’s claim that the role has shifted. The job titles of other participants also supported Honig and Rainey’s (2014) claim to shift towards the role of central office administrators in the improvement of teaching and learning such as: Director of Elementary Curriculum and Instruction, Director of Teacher Quality, Executive Director of Curriculum and Professional Development, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, and Director of Secondary Curriculum and Instruction.

Hord and Smith (1993) stated the importance of schools receiving the support of central office and how the schools should be given autonomy to make their own decisions that fit their individual needs. The data from Mr. McGriff and Mr. Avery's interviews supported the statement that central offices should be there to support the schools and allow flexibility. Mr. McGriff claimed, "I think that the principals that I work with I really work and support, but a whole lot of my working to support them is backing up and giving them space. You know, just kind of advising them and giving them space to run their own school." The Addison County Schools Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Mr. Avery, has also been in charge of the Secondary Curriculum and falls into this category of participants. Mr. Avery suggested, "I think sometimes it's just hard in small districts when you oversee so much, you know, it's hard to sometimes do all that. But I think that it is our role to really help and support and be there for schools."

Communication was a finding in this study that was linked to the literature review through Waters and Marzano (2006) who emphasized that communication itself can be an implicit or explicit feature of most aspects of leadership. For the purposes of this study, communication has been categorized as a function. The consistency of this topic in the data served as evidence to support Marzano and Waters. During the interview, Mr. Justice said, "I really try to be very intentional and really work to message it on the front end. That was really important to me, communicating."

There were several findings of strategic leadership in the interviews that connected to the literature review. The major strategies included in the literature review were transformational leadership, transactional leadership, transformative leadership, and

total quality management (TQM). As described in the literature review, Burns (1978) differentiated between transformational and transactional by saying that transactional is merely trading one thing for another, whereas transformational is focused on change. Dr. Glavine gave an example of transformational leadership when she noted the importance of sharing information with one another and carrying your weight as a stakeholder in the district-wide initiative. Dr. Glavine added that leadership comes in the form of teamwork, not as an individual. This allows for people to focus on sustained change instead of a fixed transaction. Transactional leadership was included in the literature review as a leadership strategy but was not found to be evident at all with any of the participants in the interviews.

Transformative leadership is one of the most intriguing leadership strategies within the literature review and interviews. Shields (2011) claims, "Educational leaders practicing transformative leadership have a commitment to go beyond traditional notions of democracy and, instead, promote a radical application of democracy in their schools" (p. 251). Theoharis (2007) supported Shields when he referred to transformative leadership as "leadership for social justice." Mr. McGriff stood out above the rest of the participants with his comments about data and how it can detract from the welfare of the student. He stated, "At one point they're talking about kids, then they start talking about data. Then they stop talking about kids, they start talking about the data." This leads me to believe that he has the fortitude to demonstrate that he is a transformative leader in a current educational environment where it is encouraged to meet data benchmarks and get caught up in the numbers instead of being a leader for social justice.

## Research Questions

Central office administrators felt that it was vital to keep an open line of communication with across the departments and the schools. They found that it was a good practice to bring all of the relevant departments to the table and collaborate when making decisions about a district-wide initiative. How has the data spoken to the original research questions and what can be learned from this?

***Research Question #1: How do central office administrators exhibit leadership in district improvement initiatives?***

According to the data, the subject of leadership strategies was coded 145 times, which was the highest frequency of any of the codes in this study. What leadership strategies are used by central office administrators when implementing district-wide improvement initiatives? As noted in Chapter IV, the participants described leadership strategies as concepts or protocols on how they operate as an individual and as a school district from a leadership perspective during improvement initiatives. There were a few common themes that were consistent within the four categories of participants.

The Elementary Education Directors used collaboration and teamwork, and they worked alongside their direct reports during district-wide improvement initiatives. I found that collaboration, communication, and shared leadership were especially important in the smaller districts such as Collins County Schools. The participants valued these strategies because they needed the input and ideas from one another. The negative effects from a mistake or a gap in communication had a larger impact on these

smaller sized districts because they depend on each other so heavily since there are fewer central office employees and schools are spread out several miles across the county.

The administrators in this study have earned their credibility by demonstrating teamwork and working alongside people with whom they have supervised. The Elementary Education Directors used the leadership strategy of doing the tasks that they are asking others to accomplish. It has been their practice to take the burden off of the schools, principals, and teachers. So, leading by example and by working alongside the schools was something that has worked for these central office administrators. I think this was especially prevalent within this category of Elementary Education Directors because they were former elementary principals. The culture of elementary school principals has been to get their hands dirty and work with the teachers. This has transferred to their role in central office.

I found it to be interesting that the Federal Program Directors explicitly discussed the three major themes in this study within this research question (collaboration, communication, and strategic leadership). I think that the fact that this department is so broad and that it touches every school in some form contributed to their emphasis on collaboration, communication, and strategic leadership. The directors thought that collaboration helped make a good central office team because it is like a professional learning community. I have concluded that these directors depend on federal paperwork and accountability to be in compliance, so they can't afford to fail at communication. There are too many people out there in the school system that they depend on to follow

the federal guidelines and requirements. Communication efforts have to be often and accurate in order to meet their department objectives.

The Federal Program Directors also stressed the importance of strategic leadership. They valued the practice of looking at the needs of the district and establishing a protocol for the implementation of a district-wide initiative. A person must be strategic and deliberate with their efforts to lead a school district in order to make it to the level of central office leadership. Apparently, the other categories of participants felt the same way about strategic leadership since it was a major emerging theme across the study. The Teacher Quality Directors talked about using surveys to analyze their areas of needed improvement. They also were strategic with their planning efforts by beginning with the end goal. Then, they developed a plan and listed resources that would help them reach their goal. Another Federal Program Director described strategic leadership by looking at the district-wide plan, aligning the plan, and making sure it fits into the long term goals.

One Secondary Education Director defined service leadership as a strategy that she has encouraged her colleagues to practice. This is not something that I expected to hear as a leadership strategy and this was new to me. It made sense, but it was new. This leader really wanted to provide a service to her principals and schools. She described servant leadership as a way of serving and supporting her direct reports. I was pleasantly surprised to hear such democratic, collaborative, and respectful leaders speak about their leadership strategies. There was only one occurrence that a participant described his

district leadership strategy as a top-down system. All other 11 participants agreed that their district operated under shared and strategic leadership.

***Research Question #2: What roles and duties do central office administrators exhibit in district improvement initiatives?***

I was very interested in the feedback from central office administrators regarding their thoughts on the roles that they played in their district-wide initiatives. I found that that each statement varied depending on the structure of their central office staff and the size of their district. Roles tended to be narrower in the larger sized districts. The smaller sized districts assigned more responsibilities to each director. The participants were so driven in their jobs that they naturally expanded their roles to fill the needs of the district because they knew someone had to step up and lead.

I found that the roles for Elementary Education Directors were coupled with various departments. Even though the Elementary Education Directors were in charge of all elementary schools in their district, they might not evaluate all of the principals and in some cases they do not evaluate any of the principals. One director was in charge of all 15 elementary schools and she only evaluated seven of the principals. Her role was also coupled with overseeing the Title I department and the budget that goes along with both of these responsibilities. She made it clear that she would be the implementer of any of the district-wide initiatives which involve either of these departments. She also explicitly defined her role as a central office administrator who is there to provide guidance and support to principals and schools. I have worked as a principal in both small and large districts. I view this as an advantage for her to be able to provide this support and

guidance from the perspective of the Title I Director and the Elementary Education Director. The advice and support is streamlined when one person is filling this consultation role and being an expert in both areas of elementary education and Title I. There is a risk that principals will get mixed messages from larger districts that have separate administrators to fill these roles.

Another Elementary Education Director stated that she is also in charge of Title I and the Academically Gifted Program. She said that she is not responsible for evaluating any of the principals even though she is the director and her role is sometimes unclear. She agreed with her peers that her role is to be a supporter. Lopez noted, "I don't evaluate anyone. So it's sort of a nebulous sort of position. Sometimes I'm not quite sure exactly what my responsibility is in terms of working with principals. I am a support person but I am not an evaluator. So there's an interesting line there that I'm not always too sure about." This was the only statement about roles that appeared to be frustrating or confusing for the participant. It seemed like she didn't agree and she knew that it sounded strange when she made this statement out loud. Perhaps this concern should be addressed with the superintendent.

Continuing with the variations of roles among the participants in this category, the third Elementary Education Director was also in charge of the Academically Gifted Program, Professional Development, Childcare, and the Positive Behavior Interventions and Support Program. She is one of the directors that I found who served roles far beyond what her title indicated. She left no room for doubt that her titles and supervisory responsibilities were not her main roles. She declared that the role of relationship

building and talking with stakeholders must precede the implementation of any district-wide initiative.

It was rapidly apparent that there was less consistency in the interpretation of the roles of the participants in the Federal Programs Director category. Why did the data show this inconsistency? Although these directors managed the federal programs, the other departments which they supervised varied across participants. I concluded that this caused the variations in their responses. As one director described, the Title I piece of the federal programs is often separated from the rest of the programs and is assigned to the elementary education director. I found that each school system has the autonomy to organize and assign these roles as they deem appropriate for their district.

Since the Federal Program Directors work with a great number of schools, participants agreed that communication efforts and expectations should be consistent. One director thought of herself in the role of a funnel between the schools and the central office during initiatives. She felt that she needed to collect information or concerns and funnel it to the central office and also to funnel helpful information back to the schools. She saw her role as a major supporter of the schools and this meant to be available and be a listener.

One Teacher Quality Director elaborated from a different angle when she described her role but more specifically the process in establishing her role in district-wide initiatives. No other director in any other category explained his/her process. Either she was the only administrator who was cognizant that this happened, or the others just failed to think about the process of establishing their roles. She said, "Our assistant

superintendent is the point person so I have to figure out where my role is in relation to that. I have been comfortable stepping in and saying we've got it. I feel like now we're at a place where I may have the take the reins on that and I think she'd probably be grateful for that at this point because I think she intended for that." It appears that this district naturally assigns roles to the best-qualified person according to the needs of the initiative. In turn, that is a district-wide leadership strategy.

Much like principals do for their teachers, this central office administrator also saw herself in the role of a buffer between the state mandates and the schools. This appears to be a role that was transferred from her previous principal position. The discovery and take-away from these descriptions of roles was that all of the directors clearly served roles that were outside the boundaries of their titles. They also did not view their role as a title. They described their roles as a way that people need them, such as supporter, listener, facilitator, or advisor. These types of descriptions seemed more personal to me than simply listing a title. Their general attitude of building relationships supported my conclusion on this.

***Research Question #3: What functions and skills are important for central office administrators in district improvement initiatives?***

Part of what I really wanted to find out from this study is the detailed functions and skills that central office administrators deem important in district-wide initiatives. Functions and skills were coded the second most in this study behind leadership strategies. It is my thought that functions and skills were mentioned so frequently because participants could name skills and functions throughout all of the interview

questions. I also think that this was easy to talk about because leadership skills can be applied at any level whether it is in central office or the school building. However, I really wanted to know which specific ones were useful in the implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives.

It is common during state initiatives to change the rules or requirements even after the initial launch. These participants are experienced school administrators and they have been through these changes. This leads me to believe that the participants named flexibility and adaptability as key skills to have as a central office administrator. The nature of the school atmosphere lends itself to requiring flexibility of all employees. Schedules change, unexpected things happen, and we are a service oriented business that involves human error. Thus, it is important to have flexibility and be able to adapt to unexpected circumstances.

In order to achieve buy-in from stakeholders during a district-wide improvement initiative, leaders must have knowledge of the subject and credibility with the people who are going to help implement the program. One administrator went beyond knowledge of academic content when she described the importance of background knowledge of the district and the people. She viewed her status of longevity as an opportunity to develop the skill of working with people and gaining credibility. Longevity is not the skill; rather it is the conduit that has allowed the administrator to develop the background knowledge of the culture of the district that can help with employee buy-in of new initiatives.

Organization sounds so simple. This skill was repeated by many of the participants. Statewide initiatives that are imposed on the local school districts carry a

large weight with them because the initiatives are typically tied to legislation. This means that the law is broken if the initiative isn't followed. Central office administrators talked about the importance of organization because it is mandatory that these initiatives are carried out and the rules are followed during the implementation and completion process. If important facts are omitted or deadlines are not met due to disorganization, there are serious consequences for the school district. The level of accountability is higher at the central office level and this comes with more stringent penalties. The skill of organization is also applied to foresight, planning, and being prepared to communicate. These responsibilities are frequently required of central office administrators.

Communication can be intertwined into several categories. It could be included in the categories of roles, functions, and leadership strategies. The root of the word communicate has been used in two contexts in this study such as the role of a communicator and the skill of communicating. Nonetheless, communication was a skill that was explicitly mentioned by several participants. I can understand why this was such a popular skill because there are so many facets to communication such as communicating early, often, honestly, accurately, timely, and to the appropriate crowd. The skill of listening is on the other end of communicating. Listening and reflecting are a result of good communication. This part is important because communication can be done in vain if none of the information is processed and applied.

I was not surprised to see the skill of being a problem-solver on the list of commonalities among the participants. Much like the skill of organization was explained, the stakes get higher at the scale of central office level when you are a

problem-solver. In the classroom, a teacher might solve a scheduling problem which bears no consequence. One step higher, the principal might have to solve a problem about one student not being served appropriately in the special education setting. At the central office level, the consequence of failing to be a good problem-solver can inflict greater penalties such as large scale lawsuits. It seemed like these central office administrators had a great amount of experience being problem-solvers throughout their tenure as principals and in the central office. It is inevitable that there will be some obstacles or problems to solve during district-wide initiatives. If the skill of adaptability was bound together with problem-solving, central office administrators can work through these problems.

In summary, these are the skills that the participants deemed important in district-wide improvement initiatives. I agree that each one of these skills is important. However, I do not think that there would be positive results if these skills are applied by themselves. I think that the combination of these skills make a well-rounded administrator who would have the ability to put together the necessary resources for a successful implementation of an initiative due to the fact that they possess these various skills.

### **Future Research**

I chose to study central office administrators in district-wide improvement initiatives because I knew that the research was deficient in this area. There were only a few different scholars who explicitly studied district-wide improvement that kept resurfacing in my literature review. My goal was to dig deeper to find out what these

administrators practice during these district-wide improvement initiatives. I was successful and I was pleased to learn more about some of the common leadership strategies, roles, and functions of central office administrators during the implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives.

I thought of some ideas for future research as I was in the middle of my third interview. I saw a pattern when the participants began to disclose that they had a rough time with the transition from the principalship to being a central office administrator. This feedback wasn't elicited and it didn't really match up with the intent of the questions. For some reason, they felt the need to talk about that transition at some point in the interview and the comments were not always made within the same interview question. It happened at various points during the interviews. I knew that I would uncover some surprises during the interviews, but I had no idea what would be said or how many people would agree. It would be wise to conduct research on the transition from the principalship to a central office position. After a quick article and book search on ERIC, there were no results found when I used the principalship and central office as keywords. This tells me that the subject of the principal's transition to central office is uncharted territory with regards to empirical research.

Although collaboration has recently become a buzzword, it is truly taking place in different environments such as grade level meetings, department meetings, principal cohorts, and central offices. During this study, the concept of collaboration was mentioned so frequently at central office leadership level that I believe it is worth studying at a deeper level. Collaboration was a widely used strategy that the participants

talked about during the implementation of programs or initiatives. I would like to find out how collaboration takes place at the central office level and how they measure its effectiveness.

### **Suggestions for Practitioners**

Practitioners can reflect on the newly-gained information from the emerging themes from these interviews and document reviews to propose new studies for research. The results of this study can be useful for principals and superintendents even though they were not included in the interviews. Principals and superintendents can gain an understanding of the perspectives of central office administrators and their leadership styles during these initiatives. Superintendents, central office administrators, and principals typically work together during the implementation of these initiatives. However, the central office administrators are often the leaders who receive the challenge to lead district-wide initiatives. It would be helpful for all of these leaders to understand one another and learn how they can lead together as a team.

Central office administrators and principals are evaluated on the North Carolina Standards for School Executives. These standards include the terms collaboration, communication, and strategic leadership. Collaboration is emphasized in standard three (cultural leadership) by expecting school administrators to emphasize a collaborative work environment. Communication is mentioned throughout all of the standards as a key practice. For example, the administrator should effectively communicate a school vision, information with staff and community, positive attitude, and high expectations. Standard one is named strategic leadership and it requires the administrator to create conditions

that result in strategically re-imagining the school's vision, mission, and goals in the 21st century.

These findings are clearly important in the evaluation system for school executives in North Carolina. I would suggest to the district level administrators that professional development should be deliberately centered on the three findings of this study. The culture of collaboration, communication, and strategic leadership needs to be established and clearly understood by the central office staff. In other words, the central office employees need to know how each one of these concepts work in their district and what is expected during their practice.

### **Suggestions for Leadership Preparation Programs**

The ELC department at UNCG declares their commitment and purpose

to create educational leaders who work with parents, staff, students, and communities to develop critical understandings of the assumptions, beliefs, and regularities that support schooling and who identify and create practices that allow schools to function more fully as democracies while preparing students for democracy. (The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, n.d., p. 1)

This leadership preparation program has the responsibility to prepare school leaders to effectively lead schools with this in mind.

After reviewing the findings of this study, I would suggest that leadership preparation programs consider integrating these concepts as a point of reflection throughout their coursework and specifically in the internship portion of the Ed.D. program. I believe that educational leadership programs should value the participants'

emphasis on collaboration, communication, and strategic leadership not only as it applies to district-wide initiatives, but also to the overarching concept of school leadership.

### **Conclusions and Thoughts**

The purpose of this study was to discover how central office administrators exhibit leadership, carry out their roles, and perform their functions in district-wide improvement initiatives. The study was conducted through interviews of central office administrators and the collection of relevant documents that describe roles, jobs, and strategic plans for the school districts.

I was genuinely and thoroughly impressed by the level of professionalism, care for students and colleagues, and the positive attitude of the participants in this study. It is very comforting to know that the people who hold these powerful roles in our public school districts are intelligent and they have intent of making decisions that benefit all of the children in their schools. After the dialogue that I shared with these central office administrators, the reasons for their promotion to this level of leadership became quite obvious to me.

I asked three research questions that really exemplified what I wanted to understand that were answered in this chapter. I had no preconceived notions about what to expect or what would be revealed from this study. I wanted the readers to know that I was not trying to prove a personal opinion. I really just wanted to know what leadership strategies, skills, and functions were required of central office administrators during district-wide initiatives, which has not been a widely studied topic. I allowed the data from the interviews to tell the story and show some common threads. I also hoped that

this research project would provide more details to the existing research on central office administrators. I feel that the results of this study have shown that these goals were met. I have come to the major conclusion from this study that collaboration, communication, and strategic leadership are essential and are often practiced in the central office environment and especially in the implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives.

As indicated in the responses to the research questions earlier in this chapter, the three main takeaways from this study was that central office administrators have placed a high value on collaboration, communication, and strategic leadership. In general, the participants believed that all three of these concepts should be present during the implementation of district-wide improvement initiatives. The participants valued consistency with communicating messages and an equitable distribution of resources across the district.

In Chapter I, it was declared that the intent of the research was not to prove that Secretary Bennett's blob theory that central office administrators soak up money and aren't worth the money that they are paid. As a matter of fact, there was a statement in the oral, email, and telephone recruitment script that explained that it was not my intent to prove the existence of a relationship between central office administrators and district-wide achievement. I did not want the participants to think that I was trying to catch a useless central office administrator because it could have caused the participant to be cautious or guarded in the interviews. Through the qualitative data, I have concluded that central office employees are in fact vital in the development and vision of school

districts. I think that their positions are validated through the heavy responsibilities of enforcing policies, monitoring the big picture, and supporting the schools.

During this study, I had the chance to be physically present in the interviews, reflect on the dialogue, and analyze the transcripts. Now that this research has concluded and I have reflected on this whole experience, I have gained a great deal of respect for central office administrators, what they do, and how they do it. I have also concluded that it is a completely different job compared to the principalship and I want to remain in my position as a principal for a while before pursuing a central office administration position. But when I am ready for that challenge, I have now had the opportunity to hear the candid reality of the inner workings of the central office leadership strategies, roles, and functions.

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## APPENDIX A

### EMAIL, ORAL, AND TELEPHONE RECRUITMENT SCRIPTS

#### UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO EMAIL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

**Project Title:** A Case Study on the Roles, Functions, and Leadership Strategies of Central Office Administrators in District Improvement Initiatives.

Student Researcher: Brian Muller  
Faculty Advisor: Carl Lashley

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

I am asking you to participate in my study because the large scale decision makers in a public school district are the school board members, superintendents, directors, executive directors, and principals. You are a member of a department that falls into this category. The purpose of this study is to discover how central office administrators exhibit leadership, carry out their roles, and perform their functions in district improvement initiatives. It is not my intent during this study to discover a relationship or lack thereof between district leaders and student achievement because research already exists that indicates the positive correlation between the two. With your participation in this study, there may be a benefit for scholars and practitioners because this study could expand the research in the area of district wide improvement and central office administration. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. There is no compensation to you for participating in this study.

You will go through three interview phases if you agree to participate in this study: 1) Structured Interview and recruitment, 2) Long Interview, and 3) Follow Up and Member Check. The structured interview will ask general questions about the person, position, number of years experience, etc. The long interview will ask questions that provides the main portion of data. I will ask questions about the district, involvement in the improvement initiatives, leadership practices, roles, and functions of their job. The follow up and member check will provide the participants with an opportunity to read their responses to check for accuracy and add clarifying or additional information. The total time for interviews could take from 1-3 hours. The interview can take place at a location of your choice.

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you. Please contact me at (336) 402-1653 or [briansmuller@gmail.com](mailto:briansmuller@gmail.com) if you would like to participate.

Date Presented: \_\_\_\_\_

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1/14/14

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO  
ORAL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT**

**Project Title:** A Case Study on the Roles, Functions, and Leadership Strategies of Central Office Administrators in District Improvement Initiatives.

Student Researcher: Brian Muller  
Faculty Advisor: Carl Lashley

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

The purpose of this study is to discover how central office administrators exhibit leadership, carry out their roles, and perform their functions in district improvement initiatives. It is not my intent during this study to discover a relationship or lack thereof between district leaders and student achievement because research already exists that indicates the positive correlation between the two. With your participation in this study, there may be a benefit for scholars and practitioners because this study could expand the research in the area of district wide improvement and central office administration. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. There is no compensation to you for participating in this study.

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. Every effort will be made to protect the identity of the participant and the name of the district with the use of pseudonyms. If your job title is unique to your district, this will also be protected and changed appropriately. If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated or if you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at UNCG toll-free at (855) 251-2351. Questions, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Dr. Carl Lashley, faculty advisor who may be contacted at (336) 334-3745.

You will go through three interview phases if you agree to participate in this study: 1) Structured Interview and recruitment, 2) Long Interview, and 3) Follow Up and Member Check. The structured interview will ask general questions about the person, position, number of years experience, etc. The long interview will ask questions that provides the main portion of data. I will ask questions about the district, involvement in the improvement initiatives, leadership practices, roles, and functions of their job. The follow up and member check will provide the participants with an opportunity to read their responses to check for accuracy and add clarifying or additional information. The total time for interviews could take from 1-3 hours. If additional information is required from you as a participant, notification will be made to you about what specific additional information is needed. All interviews will be audio recorded. All audio tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet in my possession and will be destroyed three years after the conclusion of this study. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the

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## Telephone Recruitment Script

### 1. Introduction of Investigator

Hello Mr. or Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_. My name is Brian Muller. I am the principal at Southwest Elementary in Guilford County and a doctoral candidate at UNC-Greensboro. Is this a good time to talk?

### 2. Make a BRIEF statement about why he/she was selected.

I am conducting a research study on the roles, functions, and leadership strategies of central office administrators that in district improvement initiatives. I selected you as a participant because of your involvement in district improvement initiatives as a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ (position title).

### 3. Explain the details of the study.

I am conducting this study as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctorate of education degree. The purpose of this study is to discover how central office administrators exhibit leadership, carry out their roles, and perform their functions in district improvement initiatives. It is not my intent during this study to discover a relationship or lack thereof between district leaders and student achievement because research already exists that indicates the positive correlation between the two. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. There is no compensation to you for participating in this study. The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

You will go through three interview phases if you agree to participate in this study: 1) Structured Interview and recruitment, 2) Long Interview, and 3) Follow Up and Member Check. The structured interview will ask general questions about the person, position, number of years experience, etc. The long interview will ask questions that provides the main portion of data. I will ask questions about the district, involvement in the improvement initiatives, leadership practices, roles, and functions of their job. The follow up and member check will provide the participants with an opportunity to read their responses to check for accuracy and add clarifying or additional information. The total time for interviews could take from 1-3 hours. All interviews will be audio recorded.

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. Do you have any questions at this time?

### 4. Ask if he/she is interested in participating.

Would you be willing to participate in my research study?

- If not interested, thank the individual for his/her time.
- If interested, then set an appointment to get the first interview and adult consent form signed.

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## APPENDIX B

### CONSENT TO ACT AS HUMAN PARTICIPANT

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

#### CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: A Case Study on the Roles, Functions, and Leadership Strategies of Central Office Administrators in District Improvement Initiatives

Principal Investigator: Brian Muller  
Carl Lashley

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

#### What is the study about?

This is a research project and your participation is completely voluntary. The purpose of this study is to discover how central office administrators exhibit leadership, carry out their roles, and perform their functions in district improvement initiatives. It is intended for this research to provide meaningful and candid evidence from the participants' interviews that will help form conclusions about the various leadership styles, roles, and functions of central office administrators that influence district-wide achievement.

#### Why are you asking me?

I am asking you because the large scale decision makers in a typical public school district are the school board members, superintendents, directors, executive directors, and principals. This study should gather the perspectives from various individuals or groups of people who have played a part in the vision and direction of district initiatives. Administrators will be chosen from various departments such as Curriculum and Instruction, Title I, ESOL, Exceptional Children, Instructional Technology, and Professional Development. These departments are targeted because of their high likelihood of involvement in district-wide achievement initiatives. You are a member of a department that qualifies underneath these guidelines.

#### What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, a structured interview and follow up interview will be asked of you. The initial interview should only take about 15 minutes. I will ask you basic questions about your job title, years of experience, and background information. The second interview should take about 1-2 hours. During this interview, I will ask questions about the school district, your involvement in the improvement initiatives, leadership practices, roles, and functions of your job. This interview will include specific questions about your role and function as a central office administrator. The third interview will be informal and you will have a chance to review the original script and add comments or clarifying statements to the script. The total interview time combined from all three interviews could range from 1-3 hours.

#### Is there any audio/video recording?

All interviews will be audio recorded. All recordings will be stored in a locked cabinet or file drawer in my possession and will be destroyed three years after the conclusion of this study. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although I will try to limit access to the tape. Only my faculty advisor and I will have access to the recordings.

#### What are the risks to me?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that

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participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Dr. Carl Lashley who may be reached at (336) 334-3745 or Brian Muller who may be reached at (336) 402-1653. If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?**

There may be a benefit for scholars and practitioners because this study could expand the research in the area of district wide improvement and central office administration. School districts and the central offices may gain a benefit from the analysis and reflection of the findings of this case study.

**Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

**How will you keep my information confidential?**

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Any discussions related to interviews and findings will be limited to the doctoral advisor setting at UNC-Greensboro. Pseudonyms will also be used in order to protect the identity of any research participants, schools, and school districts. I will keep a master list which links the pseudonyms to the real participants' names. This list will be kept on a separate flash drive in a separate locked container in my office at Southwest Elementary in High Point, NC. I will be the only person with a key to this container. If email is used to communicate with the participants, absolute confidentiality through the Internet cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access.

I have secured a locked filing cabinet where all data and materials will be stored (except for the master list of pseudonyms which is separate) at Southwest Elementary in High Point, NC. I am the only person with a key to this secure cabinet. The principal investigator will maintain an original copy of the consent forms in a locked filing cabinet on the UNCG campus. After three years, all audio tapes will be deleted. Likewise, all written documents related to this study, including consent forms, will be shredded. Electronic files will be stored on a computer that is password protected and shall be permanently deleted from the hard drive, recycle bin, and the back-up USB flash drive.

**What if I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you

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are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Brian Muller, student researcher.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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**APPENDIX C**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

**Interview Protocol**

1. Tell me your name, title, degree, and how many years you have been in this school system in this current role.
2. Which departments do you oversee?
3. How does the district choose a new initiative for system-wide improvement?  
Probe: Test data, school board suggestions, outside consultation
4. What is your involvement in the decision to select an improvement initiative?
5. What are your responsibilities once the initiative has been selected?
6. Describe who is involved in district-wide improvement initiatives. Which departments are included?
7. What leadership practices are used to implement these initiatives? Do you have the autonomy to use your own personal practices, or are they implied by the district?
8. What skills are necessary to lead district initiatives in your specific role?
9. Describe the general impact of central office administrators on district-wide improvement. Why is it important to have effective leadership in central office?
10. What type of support do you provide to schools? How often?

## APPENDIX D

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Interview Question	Leadership Practice	Roles	Functions
Question #1		✓	✓
Question #2		✓	✓
Question #3	✓		✓
Question #4		✓	
Question #5		✓	✓
Question #6	✓		
Question #7	✓		
Question #8			✓
Question #9	✓		
Question #10	✓	✓	✓