Leadership Practices of Effective Rural Superintendents: Connections to Waters and Marzano's Leadership Correlates

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This study examined the leadership practices of seven rural superintendents, selected via a sampling strategy which identified disadvantaged rural districts that had experienced marked increased in test scores during the superintendent's tenure. Researchers examined how the practices of these superintendents were linked to Waters and Marzano's (2006) six correlates of effective leadership practices (which had not necessarily been developed using data from rural districts). A multi-case study approach was utilized involving a site visit to each of seven rural districts, including interviews with four individuals: the superintendent, one principal, one teacher, and one board trustee. Secondary sources included a review of board meeting minutes, school newsletters, school memoranda, and observations. Findings revealed seven core leadership practices, consistent with previous research on leadership, with one exception. The goal-setting in these rural districts was largely driven by the superintendent, not necessarily a formal, collaborative bottom-up process. Other effective leadership practices for these rural superintendents involved building support for reform through direct, personal conversations; using constructive confrontations to assist struggling students and teachers; removing low-performing teachers and principals; leveraging close working relations with building principals; taking a hard line in union contract negotiations; and realigning financial commitments to match district priorities focused on student outcomes.

In the era of accountability, raising student performance is now viewed by most public school superintendents as one of their most daunting tasks (Bryd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). Previous scholarship reveals that superintendents of academically successful school districts share similar leadership practices and approaches. In particular, Waters and Marzano's (2006) meta-analysis of effective superintendents identified six leadership practices positively linked to improved student achievement. These include: (a) collaborative goal-setting that includes all the district's relevant stakeholders; (b) establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instructions; (c) aligning board support for the district's non-negotiable goals; (d) continuous monitoring of the district's progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals; (e) effectively utilizing resources to support the accomplishment of district goals, and; (f) superintendents providing defined autonomy to principals within clearly defined operational boundaries.

Waters and Marzano's (2006) correlates represent a basic skill set for district leaders intent on pursuing meaningful school reform. But according to Leithwood (2005), a basic skill set is necessary but not sufficient for leadership success. Leithwood insists that successful leaders must be able to respond effectively to the unique school contexts in which they work. He notes that superintendents are increasingly being called upon to deliver contingent responses to their context-specific challenges.

So while Waters and Marzano's (2006) correlates represent a set of common leadership practices for superintendents, these practices alone may not be sufficient to ensure a district leader's success in all manner of school contexts. Indeed, scholarly research increasingly emphasizes context as a critical factor in leadership success (Louis et al., 2010), with various contingency theories focusing on the link between the leader and the situation within which the leader is being asked to lead. As different contexts pose different challenges, successful leadership becomes a matter of matching the appropriate response to a particular challenge.

This concept of matching leadership practices with context-specific challenges has important implications as we attempt to better understand the work of rural

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superintendents. While Waters and Marzano's (2006) meta-analysis provides important insights, much of their work was grounded in an operational context more consistent with that of urban and suburban school districts.

Indeed, rural superintendents face a leadership context very different from that encountered by urban and suburban school leaders (Theobald, 1988; 2005). Yet, most of what we know about effective school district leadership practice has been gleaned from studying urban and suburban school leaders (Arnold, 2004; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Conversely, the leadership practices of rural superintendents have generated little academic interest and even less scholarship (Arnold, 2000; DeYoung, 1987). The result is a significant gap in the knowledge base regarding the work and practice of effective rural superintendents (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; DeYoung, 1987).

The purpose of our study, therefore, was to examine whether this leadership research has applicability to rural educational leaders whose context so distinctly shapes their work. Our work examined two questions. First, do Waters and Marzano's (2006) six correlates represent a set of common leadership practices for effective superintendents who operate within a rural school context? And second, are there leadership practices used by successful rural superintendents that are unique to their rural school contexts?

The Rural Leadership Context

Rural schools have unique contextual characteristics that require unique leadership (Chalker, 1999; Morris & Potter, 1999). In particular, there are three contextual challenges that often distinguish rural school leadership. These challenges are: (a) a rural community often defined by poverty and economic loss (DeYoung, 1995; Herzog & Pittman, 1999; Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997; Morris & Potter, 1999); (b) a rural administrator overburdened with a wide range of responsibilities (Chalker, 1999; Lamkin, 2006; Peshkin, 1978, Seal & Harmon, 1995); and, (c) a rural school leader forced to serve a uniquely public role (Arnold, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Lamkin, 2006).

Poverty and economic loss define the first contextual challenge for many rural school leaders. There are over 9.6 million public school students living in rural communities in the United States, representing roughly one out of every five public school children (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). Data shows that 24.4% of these rural children are from families living in poverty, compared to 21.6% of children within metropolitan areas (USDA, 2011). For rural children who live with a female head of household, the poverty rate doubles to 40.8% (USDA, 2011). While the challenges of educating poor urban children have been widely-publicized, the reality is that poverty is more prevalent in both the general and school-aged segments of the rural population—a phenomenon that is seldom recognized (Herzog & Pittman, 1999).

As a second major challenge, the rural school leader often operates within a community and school organization characterized by resource scarcity (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Peshkin, 1978; Seal & Harmon, 1995). Absent middle management to share the administrative load, rural school leaders are involved in virtually every operational decision that takes place within their districts. In the smallest districts, the superintendent may serve as the curriculum director, school principal, transportation director and athletic director. Because of staffing limitations, the superintendent is often required to lead the standards-setting process for academics (Arnold, 2000). For these superintendents, responsibility for student academic achievement cannot be delegated to another administrator. For many rural school leaders, no administrative or hierarchical buffer exists to shield them from being the school official primarily responsible for student academic achievement (Lamkin, 2006).

As a third major challenge, the rural superintendent tends to lead a uniquely public life. In most rural communities, the position of superintendent is a high profile job. The communities that rural superintendents serve are characterized by close-knit relationships among life-long residents (Lamkin, 2006). As a result, rural school leaders generally enjoy little privacy, carrying out their work as public figures within a rural community where personal and working relationships are intimate, complex and multi-dimensional (Arnold, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Lamkin, 2006).

These factors combine to create a leadership work context that is difficult, especially with the current push toward higher academic standards and advanced formal learning. Indeed, in rural communities, only one in eight adults possess a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2010). The fact that advanced academic proficiency is now required for participation in a globally-competitive work force is a notion not always well-received (Seal & Harmon, 1995). For generations, Midwestern factories, producers of such hard goods as John Deere tractors and Maytag washing machines, sustained the region and allowed "shop" workers to earn a decent living (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). However, future generations can no longer depend on such a labor market, and post-secondary education and training have become increasingly important for securing an economic livelihood, often in a place somewhere other than the home community. These social and economic changes, coupled with the other contextual challenges of the rural superintendent's job, have made the pursuit of academic reform a formidable challenge.

There are, however, some rural superintendents who have indeed met this challenge. Yet, scant research exists

regarding the practices such successful superintendents employ within their rural districts. The purpose of our research study, therefore, was to gain a better understanding of what effective leadership practices look like within a rural setting, and to see how such practices compare to the correlates postulated by Waters and Marzano's (2006) work.

Methodology

Our study utilized a multiple case study design to look at effective superintendent leadership in rural districts in one Midwestern state. Case studies are appropriate when researchers need to understand some specific people or unique situation by studying a few examples of the phenomenon in great depth (Patton, 1990). For the purposes of this study, we employed a sampling strategy that used marked improved district test scores as the proxy for assessing effectiveness. This has its limitations, since effective educational systems are about more than simply test scores, but such indicators are clearly privileged by current educational policy. A five-step, criterion-based sampling methodology was used to identify individuals and sites with the greatest potential for study (Creswell, 2007). The first sampling criterion identified all rural school districts in the state, equaling 304 of the total 678 districts in the state (Michigan Department of Education, 2010a).[1]

The second criterion narrowed the sample to include only those rural districts that had: (a) an economically-disadvantaged student population of 40% or higher, and; (b) successfully met the U.S. Department of Education's Adequate Yearly Progress performance requirements for the 2008-09 academic year (Michigan Department of Education, 2010b). This 40% figure reflects the national average among rural school districts according to NCES (2010). This criterion helped ensure that each sample district's student population reflected a typical or representative demographic profile. This criterion narrowed the sample pool to 85 districts.

The third criterion further filtered the sample pool to include only those rural districts whose high schools had received a letter grade of A on the Michigan School Report Card in either the 2007-08 or 2008-09 academic years (Michigan Department Education, 2010b). The Michigan School Report Card is the accreditation system used by the state to assign a letter grade to each building based upon overall improvement and performance on the state's standardized assessment. This criterion narrowed the sample pool to 16 rural school districts.

[1]For the purposes of our study, a rural school district is operationally defined as any school district with a Rural/Fringe, Rural/Distant, Rural/Remote or Town/Remote locale classification (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010).

The fourth criterion identified those rural districts whose high schools had received a letter grade of B or lower on the Michigan School Report for the 2004-05 academic year. This criterion was designed to identify districts where academic performance had improved over the five-year period from 2004-05 to 2008-09. This criterion narrowed the sample pool to 12 districts.

The fifth and final criterion identified those superintendent leaders who: (a) had been hired by their districts in 2005 or earlier, and; (b) had maintained their employment with their districts over the next five years. This longevity-based criterion was designed to mitigate the effect a previous superintendent's reforms might have had on the district's academic performance. This narrowed the research sample to eight superintendents. Each of the eight school leaders were contacted by telephone and seven agreed to participate in the study.

A site visit to each of the seven rural school districts occurred during which interviews with four individuals were conducted: the superintendent, the high school principal, one teacher, and one board trustee (although no board member was available to be interviewed at one district, and four interviews had to be conducted by phone). In districts where the superintendent also served as the high school principal, the middle school principal was interviewed.

Overall, a total of 27 interviews were conducted with study participants, with each interview lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Interview questions focused on ascertaining the leadership actions participants ascribed to the improved student achievement gains evidenced in their district. Questions asked of the superintendent were similar to those asked of the board members, principals, and teachers, with the superintendent offering a self-assessment of his actions, and the others describing their superintendent's leadership role. Interview questions were provided to all participations in advance allowing time for reflection, and following a member-checking process. The written transcripts served as the primary source of research data for this study. Secondary sources included a review of board meeting minutes, school newsletters, school memoranda, and direct observations during the visits.

To reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation, we used a process to record multiple perceptions to verify an observation. Because our focus was on the specific leadership practices of rural superintendents, special care was taken during the interview protocol to encourage participants to limit their responses to work-based activities.

Case Descriptions

Individual case descriptions of the seven superintendent subjects and their school districts served as our units of

analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to subjects and school districts for privacy purposes, and fictitious names were used for various regional lakes, landmarks and towns referenced in the study. Here is a glimpse of each superintendent and district profile.

Case One: Superintendent Bronson

Situated on the shores of a major lake, Cooper Beach is economically diverse: equal parts farm, resort and port community. Cooper Beach is not an affluent community. The U.S. Census (2000) cites the average per capita income at just shy of $15,000, fully one-third less than the state's average. Of the school district's 600 plus students, nearly half qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

Superintendent Bronson has been the head administrator at Cooper Beach Schools for 13 years. The school district covers some 120 square miles. The previous year, the district merged the positions of superintendent and high school principal and Bronson serves both roles. During the site visit, Bronson's desk sits in the middle of the high school's central hallway. Bronson insists this is a matter of convenience, making it is easier to collar passing students and register them for classes for the following school year.

Like most districts in this Midwestern state, in recent years, Cooper Beach has suffered from a steady decline in student enrollment. During Bronson's tenure, the district's enrollment has dropped by one-third. When asked to characterize the district's future challenges, Bronson lists financial and enrollment stability as the areas of greatest concern.

Case Two: Superintendent Brynner

The village of Carpenter (population about 1,200) is surrounded on all four sides by expansive cornfields equipped with huge irrigation systems. This is Midwestern farm country. There are no fast food chains in town and the three-block downtown area consists mostly of closed businesses and vacant commercial buildings. The adults who live in Carpenter, located in the southeastern corner of the state, either work in agriculture or make the thirty-minute drive to a larger city for work.

In the conference room at Carpenter Community Schools, the sign reads "We don't care how they do it in New York City." The poster's not so subtle message provides an indication that the community is strongly independent. This helps to explain the presence of Superintendent Brynner. Brynner, an African-American, is the lead administrator of a public school system where 97% of the students are white.

The people who live in Cooper are mostly poor. The village's per capita income of just over $16,000 is 27% below the statewide average. According to Brynner, nearly 60% of the district's 950 students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. In his fifth year as superintendent, Brynner believes the district's greatest challenges involve declining enrollment and reduced revenues.

Case Three: Superintendent Coburn

The community of Midnight Lake (population just over 300) is located in the northwest region of the state. The village is only three blocks wide but almost one mile long, and the local economy is heavily dependent on tourism and the summer residents who own and rent cottages on Midnight Lake. There are no red lights, yellow lights or even a stop sign to slow down tourists as they pass through town on their way to other, northern destinations. The largest employers in the area are the local casino and the public school system. Most of the area's residents are white (over 90%) and impoverished (with an average per capita income of just over $15,000, some 32% below the state average).

Superintendent Coburn of Midnight Lake Schools is a busy man. Coburn is a dual superintendent, serving as superintendent of both Midnight Lake Schools (just shy of 400 students with 55% of students receiving free or reduced lunches) and Sturgeon North Schools (enrollment 700 with 75% of students receiving free or reduced lunches). Coburn spends 40% of his time in Midnight Lake (Tuesdays and Fridays) and 60% of his time at Sturgeon North (Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays). His secretary travels with him and her salary, too, is split proportionately between the two districts. Coburn is a one-district man, having worked his way up the ladder from fifth grade teacher to superintendent during his 40-year career. When asked to characterize the district's greatest future challenges, he provides a simple, three-word answer: "Budget, budget, budget."

Case Four: Superintendent Dexter

The village of Grissom (population about 1,800) stretches along the south shore of Chippewa Lake in the upper part of the state. This region contains small, isolated communities connected by two-lane highways and the trials of enduring brutally, long winters.

Superintendent Dexter, the leader of Grissom Public Schools, described his district as a mixed community, containing both affluent and poor people. The area houses faculty who are employed at a nearby university, as well as, farmers and loggers in what Dexter characterized as a "melting pot" community. The village's per capita income is just over $18,000, the highest of the seven subject districts included in the study, but still some 19% below the statewide average. The school district has about 270 enrolled students with just over half qualifying for free and reduced price lunch.

Superintendent Dexter was retiring at the end of the school year, and for financial reasons, the district had decided to promote the high school principal and create a single superintendent/principal administrator position to lead the school. When asked to describe the district's future challenges, Dexter was cautiously upbeat: "It is going to be

a challenge in terms of the chaos in the economy and the educational community. But we are well-positioned because our enrollment has stabilized."

Case Five: Superintendent McQueen

The town of Schirra (population about 900) is located in the state's most northern region, and the town's buildings take their color from the rich copper deposits found in the native soil.

Superintendent McQueen is the leader of the public school district in Schirra, the largest district in terms of both enrollment (about 1,500 students) and geographic size (just over 400 square miles) in the study. Additionally, Schirra is the poorest community in the study, with an average per capita income of just over $12,000 just about one-half of the state's average. According to McQueen, about 60% of his students qualify for free and reduced price lunch, a rate similar to that of many inner-city school districts. The two main employers in the area are the hospital and two local universities. McQueen is a nontraditional superintendent, a public accountant who was hired by the district as a business manager and later promoted to superintendent. When asked about the district's future challenges, he cited school finance; the previous year the district was forced to cut one million dollars from its $13 million budget.

Case Six: Superintendent Dr. Vaughn

Shepard Bay (population about 1,900) sits on the north shore of a major lake in the northern part of the state. The community is poor; the average per capita income is about $15,750, roughly one-third less than the statewide average. Of Shepard Bay Community School's roughly 300 students, just less than half qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

Superintendent Dr. Vaughn is the leader of Shepard Bay Community Schools. A former Division I head football coach, Vaughn speaks in the straight forward manner you would expect of an athletic leader. A local native, Dr. Vaughn was hired as Shepard Bay's superintendent in 2004.

When asked to characterize the district's future challenges, Dr. Vaughn was blunt: "This school is the focal point of this community. Without this school, the community would cease to exist. Our biggest future challenge will be to maintain our enrollment."

Case Seven: Superintendent Wallach

Slayton Falls, in the northern part of the state, is a thoroughfare for tourists headed north to vacation in the state's upper regions. Like so many small communities in this state with their 1950s era motels, the local economy of Slayton Falls, (population about 340), is tourist-dependent. There is no downtown area. Two gas stations, two restaurants and a few motels sit along the highway in a community that is three blocks wide and eight blocks long.

Superintendent Wallach is a tall, friendly man who has taken a traditional path to the superintendency of Slayton Falls. Wallach describes Slayton Falls as a blue-collar community with most adults driving to the neighboring cities for work. In per capita terms, the area is poor; the average per capita income of just over $15,000 is one-third less than the statewide average. The school district's enrollment is about 250 and just less than half of those students qualify for free and reduced price lunch. When asked to describe the district's key future challenges, Wallach cited declining enrollment. In his six-year tenure as superintendent, the student population has dropped from 325 down to 250 students.

Cross-Case Findings

From the interview transcripts, a coding process was used to highlight the macro-level leadership practices cited during each interview. From these, common leadership priorities across the seven superintendents were identified. For the purposes of this study, it is important to draw a clear distinction between leadership priorities and leadership practices. Leadership priorities represent the superintendent subjects' primary goals and work commitments; leadership practices represent the means and methods used by subjects to pursue their leadership priorities.

Leadership Priorities

1. All students can and will achieve academic success. The first and most important superintendent priority to emerge from the interview transcripts was their clearly illustrated belief that *all students can and will achieve academic success* in their districts. Despite having student poverty populations nearing 50%, the schools and communities described by interview subjects were places where high student academic performance was valued and expected (and was actually being accomplished, per the data used as a criterion for this study). Superintendent McQueen spoke of his conversation with the board of education at the time he was hired:

> I just want what's best for kids….When I make decisions, even when I got hired on from the board of education, when they decided to hire me, my comment to them was there are 1,530 students in the district and I told them I had just adopted 1,530 students. I will treat every kid like they were my own.

The leadership priority that all can and will truly learn also applies to the adults in school leadership positions. One teacher described it this way: "It starts with setting the expectation of taking responsibility. You know, this is what we are going to do. We are going to get everybody to achieve."

2. A high quality teacher in each classroom. The second superintendent priority to emerge from the data was their efforts to *ensure a high quality teacher in each classroom.* Interview subjects cited the quality of the

classroom teacher as being the most critically important factor in determining student academic success.

One board trustee described how his superintendent has made the recruitment of teacher talent a district priority:

> The key to our school district is our teachers. You know you have to have good teachers to have good instruction. Our superintendent has been very, very adamant about lining up excellent teachers to replace retiring teachers or teachers who leave. We are constantly making a list of prospective teachers from the local universities.

In a similar vein, Superintendent Bronson noted: "I look for people that are committed to, not giving lip service to, but are committed to kids. And are honest, have integrity and that have a solid work ethic."

3. Creating resources. The third superintendent priority which emerged involves *efforts to create resources.* Superintendents in our study had to become more creative in terms of finding new sources of school monies and more assertive in terms of reprioritizing how existing monies are spent.

As Superintendent Brynner related: "You know you can have a priority on being academically sound, but you have to be financially sound to get to it. It's a chicken and egg thing. So you are always trying to balance that." And Superintendent Dr. Vaughn described the priority of creating resources in this way:

> The mantra here for me is that kids come first. If we are going to have to curtail something, it will be with some magic if I could. We are going to push numbers, push resources using our Title I monies, using our at-risk monies.

Leadership Practices

Leadership practices are the daily actions, activities and habits the school leader uses to actively pursue leadership priorities. Each study participant was asked to describe witnessed actions or activities used by the superintendent, helping to lead their districts to academic success.

The interview transcripts revealed 388 specific references to specific leadership activities from among the 27 interviews. For data authentication purposes, each leadership activity had to have been offered by at least two interview participants for it to be recognized. From these, seven significant broader leadership practices emerged, profiling the tenets of effective rural school leadership as practiced by the seven superintendents in our study.

1. The superintendent establishes goals and expectations, and drives reform in the district. Surprisingly, we found that the academic reform efforts taking place in these rural districts were not overtly collaborative, nor established by committee. Instead, academic reform in these rural school districts involved the superintendents pushing core leadership priorities (e.g., all students achieving, and quality teachers in each classroom) until they became the district's two main priorities.

Superintendent Dr. Vaughn shared his thoughts on the need for more direct action (and confrontation) in public education:

> Quite frankly, I think we have to move from communication to confrontation in education. What's happened is that we communicate the problem, we don't have this or we don't have that. The problem is that nobody wants to confront the issue. So, what we have is avoidance, we continue to communicate and talk about our problems but nothing gets done...

As Superintendent Bronson described his approach to creating the reform agenda for his district:

> It was the backbone of my interview….And I made it very plain and clear, that if they choose me as superintendent, that our one focus would be on student achievement and student achievement for all. And, that if they hired me, their days of micro-managing the district were over.

2. Support for reform built through direct, personal conversations. Our study reveals that these effective rural superintendents built support for academic reform through direct, personal conversations regarding the importance of improving student achievement. These conversations involved board members, teachers, adults and students in the community. One teacher described how her superintendent is both accessible and approachable:

> He knows our kids and families and I think that's a big part of his success. I see him walk down the hallway and some little child walks up and says "superintendent, superintendent" and he stops and talks to them like they are the most important person in the world.

Our study found that these superintendents talked constantly about student achievement. As one principal observed: "He talks the talk continually. He talks all the time. This is our job. We are here to have students be successful. Student achievement is our number one focus."

Several subjects described the importance of keeping the organizational conversation focused on student academic achievement. As Superintendent Bronson explained:

> I guess the day by day message in our district, I think if you ask any board member what's the one reason we exist—it's student achievement. And how often do they hear that from me? They hear it in every conversation that we have.

Superintendent McQueen also described his effort to stay visible in the local community:

We want to get better….The only way that I will get better and the school will get better is by having [the community's] input. So, that is why I am very visible and I am in the hallways, in the classroom and in the lunchroom and everywhere. I talk to people on an informal basis. They are our friends and part of our family and I talk to them like that.

3. Constructive confrontation: Intervention strategies are provided for struggling students and teachers. Our third major finding involved the constructive confrontation practices used by school leaders to monitor student academic achievement and teacher instructional performance. Performance evaluations by school leaders were constructively-focused rather than critically-focused. Instead of being labeled a success or failure, student academic and teacher instructional performance was evaluated in terms of how that particular performance could be improved. Such cited practices as student achievement data being broken down and analyzed for gaps, and targeted tutoring being provided to students who need academic help, were designed to help improve student academic performance. Similarly, such cited practices as peer coaches assigned to teachers who need to improve their instructional performance and paraprofessionals assigned to classrooms that require additional academic support, were designed to help support and improve teachers who struggled with their instructional performance.

Nowhere is this leadership practice more apparent than in those actions focused on student achievement for all. Superintendent Coburn described the process in his district for reviewing student academic performance with the board of education: "With the school board we share scores, very specific in terms of why we think the score is where it is and if the scores are below what our expectations are, then we begin to ask the question 'why'?"

Superintendent Bronson spoke of efforts to improve student academic performance in his district: "We look at [our student achievement] data so that we can determine next year what our staffing should be. Where do we need more skills at? Where do we need more support?" Bronson also described his district's approach to providing tutorial programs for those students who need additional help:

[We run] tutorials before, during and after school. We run a Saturday school program, a Sunday afternoon program based on our students' needs, not for discipline issues, strictly student achievement issues….During our Christmas vacation we ran six half-days of school where we had tutorials and we'll run it all summer long.

Constructive confrontation also applied to teacher instructional performance in terms of expectations for growth. This sentiment is clearly echoed by a teacher as she describes her role as a peer coach:

Along with being a teacher, I'm also a teacher coach. Coaching has been positive. But I'm not going to lie, it's not been easy. But, when it comes right down to it, it's about student achievement. You have to be honest constructively with them [teachers] in order to encourage them to improve. It's not going away. And, our teachers are starting to realize that. And, if they are not willing to embrace the help that is being given to them, maybe they don't need to teach here anymore.

4. Low-performing teachers or principals are removed. Our fourth major finding involved the willingness of these rural superintendents to remove teachers and building principals who were unable or unwilling to improve their job performance as it related to student achievement. The superintendents in our study clearly adopted a "grow or go" approach to teacher and principal performance. Teachers who were unable to sufficiently grow their instructional capacities, and principals who were unable to grow their leadership capacities, were removed. A teacher described the removal of a teacher for performance-related reasons in this way:

Our superintendent is not popular with some of our teachers because he is brutally honest. But, I think some people don't want to change and have a hard time taking constructive criticism. No teacher is just going to be let go. With the coaching, we are going to help you to improve and to get better. But, sometimes it depends on the personality of the teacher, whether or not they decide they want to change.

One principal described his superintendent's commitment to teacher and principal accountability in this way:

He's made some hard decisions about getting rid of people. Those who didn't exhibit leadership or who didn't get it or those he couldn't trust or didn't perform their job the way that they should have maybe. So, he's made it clear that he has high expectations as well. Which is OK with me—because that's where I am at.

Superintendent McQueen discussed the importance of tracking instructional performance:

We've had a couple of probationary teachers that we've let go and some tenured people that we've let go….We went through the process of trying to help them. But if the capacity is not there to improve and to be an effective teacher…if that person cannot show the growth and improvement that we feel they need to be effective in this school district, then it is time to move on.

5. The close working relationship with the building principal is leveraged. Our fifth major finding involved the close working relationship between the superintendent and building principal, a relationship that can be characterized as intimate, immediate and informal. As a result of this special relationship, these superintendents displayed a willingness to support their building principals by granting them broad operational autonomy in their efforts to improve student academic achievement.

One principal noted the following: "I feel like he [my superintendent] gives me tons of authority. That helps me feel like I'm credible and respected and that my ideas are something that he values." Superintendent Bronson described his approach to managing his principals in this way:

> They can make any decision that they are willing to be responsible for. I encourage that….[The middle school principal] has at the present time the ability to deal directly with the board. And, that's based on trust and performance and respect….That's how it works. So, if you say, is there anything that they can't do? The answer is there is nothing that they can't do.

Superintendent McQueen echoed Superintendent Bronson sentiments in this way:

> I give them [my building principals] full authority to make decisions, because I do trust them. Yes, they are going to make mistakes but you learn from those mistakes….And, I let them make decisions but again I tell them, make decisions in the best interest of kids. So, when you make a decision, make the decision as though it were your kid. Would you make the same decision if it was your child instead of John Doe's child in that classroom?

Superintendent Dexter spoke of the importance of listening in terms of uncovering the hidden talents in others:

> Everybody has leadership talent. It is in recognizing what area that their strong points are in. And how do you recognize it? You listen, because the thing that develops more talent and the willingness of people to come forward and share the load is when you listen to what they have to say.

Many of the school leaders in this study described the transformative power of autonomy and its potential for empowering an entire school organization. As one principal noted: "He is tremendous about listening to my ideas. I've always felt like my opinion matters and is considered even if it isn't always agreed with."

6. Superintendent takes a harder line in union contract negotiations. Our sixth major finding involved superintendents taking a strong stand during the union contract negotiation process. This included practices that involved one of the following contract initiatives: employee health care benefit reductions, employee salary freezes, employee seniority step freezes, the privatization of operational services, or the declaration of impasse and unilateral imposition of the school district's last contract offer. The majority of these superintendents engaged in one or more of these practices.

Superintendent Dexter described the process of leading the board of education through difficult negotiations in this way:

> You know, we have been negotiating for three years and we are very close to probably declaring impasse. So that is very, very challenging….This would be the second district I've done that with and so I am becoming an expert in something that I don't want to get too good at.

Dr. Vaughn spoke of his most recent battle with the local teacher's union and described it in this way:

> I am still going to be tough when I have to be tough….Frankly, I don't think the teachers believe this, but do I think they are underpaid? Yes. Do I think they get a very good health insurance plan? Yes. But, the dynamics are such that we don't have the money because we are not a profit-making organization to give them more….You have to make those kinds of tough decisions and stay within the framework of what you have.

In difficult financial times, the negotiations process can generate a great deal of anger in both the local and school communities. A board trustee described how his superintendent was able to withstand the pressure of the collective bargaining process and remain focused on the district's priorities:

> Being a small school, when we go through negotiations, it really works against us because we take a lot of flack from the teaching staff. The superintendent before, he wouldn't stand up to the pressure of the negotiations on a person. This superintendent is tougher, he's thick-skinned and he's doing what he has to and it is not always easy. He really dug in and held the line with all kinds of pressure. And, so our programs didn't suffer. We've got the teaching staff mad at us but we held the school together better. And our kids are better off for it.

For the rural superintendent, the acrimony of difficult union negotiations can exact a heavy toll in terms of

Table 1
Ten Most Frequently Cited Superintendent Leadership Practices

Practice	Citations
Does not limit Principal's authority	27
Has an open door policy	23
Secures grant/bond money for technology upgrades	20
Creates hybrid positions	18
Talks constantly about student achievement	17
Balances/cuts the school's budget	16
Encourages professional development for teachers	16
Takes a hard line in union contract negotiations	14
Student achievement data is analyzed for gaps	13
Teaching staff develops school's curriculum	10

negatively affecting the quality of personal and professional relationships. The school leaders in this study were all individuals who were willing to bear that burden if it served their pursuit of improving student academic outcomes.

7. Re-aligns financial commitments to match district priorities. Our final major finding involves the practice of re-prioritizing the district's existing financial commitments, and re-aligning those resources to support the district's efforts to improve student academic performance.

One of the oft-cited leadership actions was creating hybrid positions, used by these superintendent subjects to balance their district's budgets. Creating a hybrid position involves the practice of combining two, usually administrative, positions and having one individual serve both roles. Examples of hybrid positions created by superintendent subjects in this study include: Superintendent-Business Officer, Superintendent-Principal, Principal-Curriculum Director, Guidance Counselor-Teacher and Dual Superintendent. At its most basic level, creating a hybrid position requires the superintendent to ask a single individual to perform the work responsibilities previously held by two individuals.

When it comes to asking the district's employees to do more, many of the superintendent subjects in this study were individuals who believed in leading by example. Superintendents Bronson (Superintendent-High School Principal), McQueen (Superintendent-Business Manager), Brynner (Superintendent-Business Manager) and Coburn (Dual Superintendent) all were school leaders who, at the time of this study, were serving their districts in a dual or hybrid capacity.

Realignment of budget priorities also means making difficult decisions. As one principal described it: "The conversation we had yesterday was how do we save $900,000 next year and stay out of the classroom?" A board trustee described how his district re-prioritized expenditures based upon academic need:

> When we establish a budget, we are always looking at the best ways to put the dollars closest to our kids….We found that kids in the middle school were struggling with Algebra….So, now all our math classes K-12 are an hour and a half.

Superintendent Bronson described the controversy that ensued when his district made the decision to eliminate the high school guidance counselor position and instead place five paraprofessionals in the classroom:

> We were the first district in the area to layoff our guidance counselor….And, so when we did that, there was a big uproar in the community. This person had been here for 40 some years, etc., etc. My question to the board was simply this: tell me how a guidance counselor positively impacts student achievement for all? That was the discussion. And, when people came to the board meetings [I asked them to] bring me the
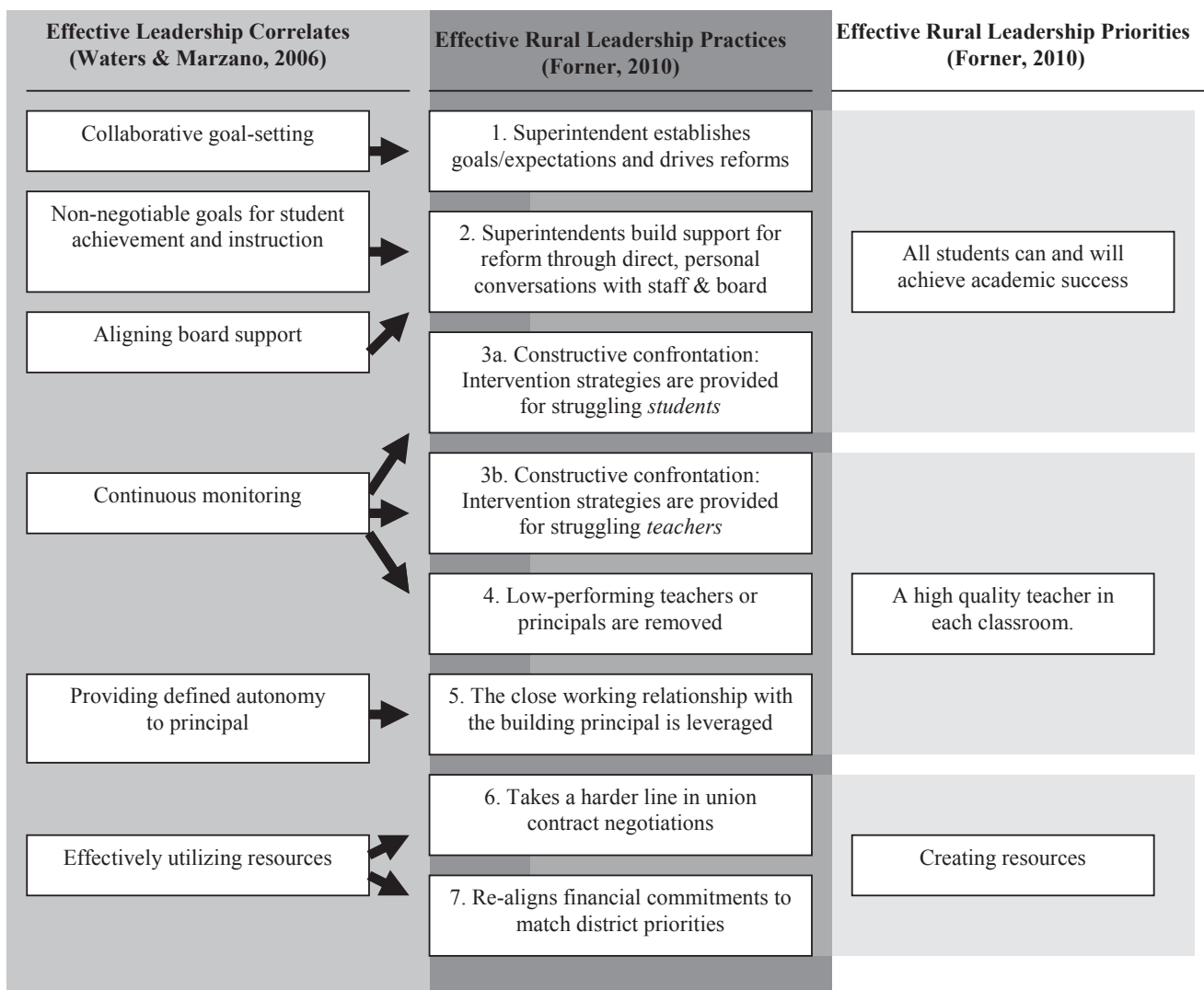
Effective Leadership Correlates (Waters & Marzano, 2006)	Effective Rural Leadership Practices (Forner, 2010)	Effective Rural Leadership Priorities (Forner, 2010)
Collaborative goal-setting	1. Superintendent establishes goals/expectations and drives reforms	All students can and will achieve academic success
Non-negotiable goals for student achievement and instruction	2. Superintendents build support for reform through direct, personal conversations with staff & board	
Aligning board support	3a. Constructive confrontation: Intervention strategies are provided for struggling *students*	
Continuous monitoring	3b. Constructive confrontation: Intervention strategies are provided for struggling *teachers*	
	4. Low-performing teachers or principals are removed	A high quality teacher in each classroom.
Providing defined autonomy to principal	5. The close working relationship with the building principal is leveraged	
	6. Takes a harder line in union contract negotiations	Creating resources
Effectively utilizing resources	7. Re-aligns financial commitments to match district priorities	

Figure 1. Effective Rural Leadership Practices Found Via Case Studies [Forner, 2010], as Aligned with Effective Leadership Correlates.

documentation or data that substantially addresses that spending $100,000 on a guidance counselor is more productive than spending $100,000 on five highly-qualified aides that can help our kids with skills in literacy and numeracy and we'll do it. At our institution…student achievement drives everything.

Connections to Waters and Marzano's Correlates

As can be seen in Table 1, our findings are generally consistent with five of Waters and Marzano's (2006) six correlates. We found that these superintendents offered *non-negotiable goals* for student achievement, and *aligned board support* via their direct, personal conversations with

board members and others in the district and community. Such actions were an important part of their efforts to pursue the priority that *all students can and will achieve academic success.*

These superintendents offered examples of *continuous monitoring* via their constructive confrontations involving intervention strategies for struggling students and teachers. And, they used the results of their continuous monitoring to remove low-performing teachers and principals as needed. These effective superintendents also *provided defined autonomy to their principals,* by establishing and then leveraging a close working relationship with these principals. These actions were in alignment with the leadership priority of having a *high quality teacher in each classroom.*

And finally, these effective rural superintendents were

skilled at *effectively utilizing resources*. Numerous examples were offered of study subjects taking a hard line in union contract negotiations, and realigning financial commitments to match district priorities. Given the declining enrollment trends in each district, the third leadership priority of *creating resources* is a practical reality: the need to pursue improvement in student academic outcomes with ever-shrinking resources. When asked to name the biggest challenge their districts would face in the near term, six out of the seven superintendents listed "limited finances." Because of this, these leaders devoted much time and energy to conjuring up new and different ways to improve their district's financial efficiency. As a result, much of the creativity and hard decision-making of the study's subjects evolved out of necessity—the need to make pragmatic decisions in order to stretch school resources and put them to their best and highest use.

Although there was great consistency with much of Waters and Marzano's (2006) work, there was one exception. There was no evidence to indicate that "formal" collaborative goal-setting was a common practice in these rural districts. The rural leaders in this study clearly established the goals and expectations, and then used direct, personal conversations to convince staff and community members to adopt these priorities as their own. This appeared to be more of a consensus-building exercise, centered on a set of goals identified by the superintendent, rather than a bottom-up, goal-setting process. Given the close proximity and accessibility of these rural superintendents (to both those within the district and the outside community), a more direct approach to goal-setting for the district was employed.

Taking Advantage of the Rural Context

Overall, our research focused on superintendent practices within rural districts that had demonstrated documented student achievement gains. As noted earlier, rural superintendents face some unique rural contextual challenges, including high poverty levels, wide-ranging job responsibilities, and a significant public role. Each of these challenges held true within the seven rural districts examined for our study. Yet, these superintendents embraced these concerns as opportunities. Because these superintendents were forced to wear multiple hats and to be very public figures within their communities, they were able to confront the need for higher expectations for all students (despite high poverty levels), and drive home the need for change at every opportunity.

So, what are the implications for other rural superintendents? Clearly, there is a need for rural superintendents, acting as the catalyst for reform, to hold more direct, personal conversations with community members regarding the importance of improving student achievement. Because rural schools lack layers of organizational bureaucracy, rural superintendents are highly accessible (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). The seven superintendents in our study encouraged accessibility and used it to their advantage. That meant engaging in conversations about the importance of academic reform at church, the gas station, the barbershop and the football stadium. For these rural superintendents, support for meaningful academic reform was largely built one conversation at a time.

These rural superintendents also remained focused on a limited number of priorities (e.g., all students achieving academic success; high quality teachers; and creating resources) to support needed academic reform. They closely monitored both student academic and teacher instructional performance and implemented intervention practices to help struggling performers. For the rural superintendents in our study, the risk of bruising an individual student's or teacher's psyche was of secondary importance when compared with the need to improve their academic or instructional performance. The priorities of academic success for all and a quality teacher in each classroom outweighed the social stigma of providing tutors to struggling students and peer coaches to struggling teachers.

Another key insight was the value these leaders placed on holding teachers and principals accountable for their performance, despite the "smallness" of their rural community. In our study, unacceptable instructional performance was met with intervention strategies designed to help improve that performance. Teachers or principals who were unable or unwilling to improve their performance were removed. Such decisions are difficult but necessary for rural districts committed to academic success.

Given the close proximity and intimate nature of their small districts, these rural superintendents possessed special knowledge regarding the unique strengths and weaknesses of their building administrators. These smart rural superintendents took advantage of this special knowledge and leveraged the strengths of their building leaders in support of the district's reform efforts.

These seven rural superintendents were also able to make difficult decisions and to withstand the short-term, constituent wrath that is highly likely to occur when such decisions are made. They made hard decisions to ensure that adult-driven financial interests did not supersede student-driven academic priorities. This is particularly true in matters involving the collective bargaining process (particularly important in a Midwest union state) and the re-alignment of district resources. Our study found that these effective rural superintendents articulated that making hard choices is about toughness and sacrifice. It is about toughness in terms of the school leaders' ability to make and live with decisions that negatively impact the lives of others, and sacrifice in terms of the school leaders' relationship with the affected

individuals and their constituents. The subjects in this study were disciplined and thick-skinned, individuals who were prepared to sacrifice some personal popularity in the short term if it meant furthering the district's interests over the long run.

Finally, these superintendents were cognizant of the concern that a greater push for academic outcomes could result in more students being pushed out of school. They fought a perception that the best and brightest students would need to permanently leave the community to be successful. These superintendents were quick to point out that when they spoke of advanced learning they were not saying that a traditional four-year university education was the only path to success. They had no interest in pushing higher learning outcomes at the expense of diminishing the community, but instead spoke of the need for current students to help lead the future revitalization of their communities.

Overall, the seven superintendents in this study demonstrate practice consistent with Waters and Marzano's (2006) correlates of effective leadership practice, although the more leadership-driven nature of their goal-setting practice in these rural districts is different than that initially described by these correlates. As Chalker (1999) observed, the school in the rural community is still a respected institution, with more of an emphasis on the *people* than on the *business*. Clearly, the subjects in this study understand this aspect of their rural context, adopting a highly personal, albeit, more direct approach in their efforts to make improving student achievement the district's top priority. We conclude, therefore, that Waters and Marzano's (2006) work has application to the rural leadership settings within this study, and we believe our analysis has captured some important application nuances (e.g., direct, personal conversations to move forward change; the heavy toll that budget decisions can exact within a small rural community; usage of hybrid leadership positions). Waters and Marzano's (2006) correlates, as further detailed by our study, have the potential to assist more rural superintendents in their efforts to pursue academic reform.

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