THE SUPERINTENDENT AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RURAL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS IN WASHINGTON STATE

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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THE SUPERINTENDENT AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RURAL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS IN WASHINGTON STATE

Abstract

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the role of the rural school district superintendent as instructional leader. Specifically, the study focused on rural superintendents who were known as effective instructional leaders and explored their understandings of and motivations for their instructional leadership work, how they fulfilled this work, and how this work was affected by recent federal and state policy initiatives. The study addressed these questions: (a) what are rural school district superintendents’ understandings of their role and responsibilities as instructional leader?; (b) what are rural school district superintendents’ perspectives on the various facets of instructional leadership?; (c) what do rural school district superintendents actually do to fulfill their roles as instructional leaders?; (d) what are rural school district superintendents’ perspectives on their preparation for instructional leadership and their need for continuous professional development?; and (e) how has recent federal and state legislation affected the work of the rural school superintendent as instructional leader? Data were collected through open-ended, phenomenologically oriented interviews with four rural school district superintendents in northeast Washington State. Analysis of the qualitative data resulted in the unearthing of seven major themes: (a) setting direction, (b) supporting the
instructional growth of the district, (c) the superintendents’ direct involvement with the classroom, (d) acquiring resources for the instructional program, (e) the superintendents’ work developing principal instructional leadership, (f) the self-development of the district instructional leader, and (g) challenges faced by rural school district instructional leaders. Each theme also discussed the impact of the rural district context on that theme. Four conclusions were drawn from the study: (a) rural school district superintendents communicate a focus on improved teaching and learning by being heavily engaged in the classrooms observing teaching; (b) rural school district superintendents engage with other rural districts to provide aligned and collaborative professional development; (c) superintendents rely heavily on one another to lead instructionally; and (d) the remote context provides rural school district superintendents with additional and unique challenges to instructional leadership. My hope is that this study will inform effective rural superintendent instructional leadership and lead to discussions regarding policy and research to support superintendents facing rural contextual leadership challenges.
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Melissa, and our four boys, Wyatt, Otis, Tug, and Bear.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

This qualitative study explored the instructional leadership role of the small, rural school district superintendent. Specifically, this study sought a greater understanding of how rural superintendents who were known as effective instructional leaders perceived their work as instructional leaders, how they fulfilled this important work, and how recently adopted federal and state policies influenced the way these leaders go about the work of instructional leadership. For the purpose of this study, effective instructional leadership was defined by alignment with responsibilities and activities identified by Waters and Marzano (2006). Participants were nominated by regional educational leaders, based on these characteristics. As a relatively new superintendent in a small, rural school district, I was highly motivated to address this research topic and to learn from other superintendents, because I face challenges related to instructional leadership in my own work. Furthermore, research on how rural superintendents lead instructionally as they navigate the changing policy environment of educational accountability is sparse; this study will help to fill that gap, thereby providing information about instructional leadership strategies effective rural superintendents use to facilitate instructional improvement.

In recent years, federal education legislation has increasingly focused on school accountability for student learning outcomes. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, for example, set into motion standards-based education reform requiring that 100 percent of students meet proficiency on state assessments in the areas of both reading and math by 2014. Accountability measures enacted in the law included school choice, school district remediation through state education agencies (Crum & Sherman, 2008), and mandates in regard to districts’ use of federal funds. More recently, in 2011, the Race to the Top (RTTP) initiative sponsored by
the Obama Administration allowed states to compete for a share of 4.35 billion dollars if they were able to meet the requirements of the policy’s competitive grant, which included further accountability requirements. Washington State was one of the 41 states that chose to apply for this grant. In the competition for the grants, states were awarded points for satisfying certain educational policies, such as adopting performance-based standards for teachers and principals and implementing Common Core State Standards (Office of Press Secretary, 2009). Although Washington State was not awarded any grant money, the increased accountability requirements contained within federal policies continue to affect Washington State policies as Common Core State Standards and the new state evaluation system for teachers and principals are implemented.

The increased accountability for student achievement embodied by recent federal and state policies has led to an expectation that the school district superintendent should be more involved in the instructional matters of the district. Although superintendents in their daily work must continue to manage budgets, personnel, school boards, and board policy, with the increase in accountability for student outcomes, management has become of secondary importance to improving curricular, instructional, and assessment practices (Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006). For public school superintendents in the United States, raising student performance is now one of their most daunting tasks (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2012), 7,810 out of the 13,567 public school districts in the United States and 175 of the 295 school districts in the state of Washington are designated as rural. Superintendent instructional leadership is especially challenging in small, rural districts due to the unique challenges that these districts face. For example, in recent studies comparing the impact of NCLB on rural and nonrural districts, funding, staffing, and access to professional development were identified as specific challenges
faced by rural superintendents in meeting NCLB accountability mandates (Yettick, Baker, Wickersham, & Hupfeld, 2014). Compounding these challenges is the reality that the small-school superintendent often plays multiple roles in a district due to the relative lack of funding for support staff, which significantly affects the time he or she is able to spend on instructional matters (Arnold, 2000). In addition, the lack of funding combined with the typical distance of rural schools from metropolitan areas affects the superintendent’s ability to engage in professional learning opportunities as well as to provide much-needed professional development for the principals and teachers in the district, which often involves prohibitive travel costs (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

Leading a rural school district in a time of heightened accountability is challenging. Leaders serving in small communities play a very public role and are ultimately responsible for student academic achievement (Lamkin, 2006). Yet despite the large numbers of rural districts scattered across the country, as well as in Washington State, scant research exists regarding the practices superintendents employ in these districts in regard to effective instructional leadership (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012).

**Personal Perspective and Motivation for the Study**

In July of 2013, I accepted a position as the superintendent of the Newport School District, located in northeast Washington State, approximately forty-five miles north of Spokane, Washington. Newport School District is a Class 1A, rural school district serving approximately one thousand students. The Newport community is a predominantly White community, and many of its residents are impoverished. As a result of their economic status, 70 percent of the student population qualifies for free and reduced lunch. The district, centrally located in the town of Newport, consists of three schools: an elementary school, a middle school, and a high
school. The district staff includes three principals, one assistant principal, 70 certificated staff, and 60 classified staff. In addition to my superintendent position, the central office staff comprises a business manager, an accounts payable manager, a special services coordinator, and two administrative assistants.

When I began my journey as the superintendent of the Newport School District, I had very little knowledge of the district or its employees; furthermore, because I was hired in late June, there were very few individuals from whom I could draw information. The challenge of this position with regard to the knowledge that would be required to make informed decisions about all aspects of the district became obvious immediately.

In my first days as the leader of the school district, I hired several new employees for key positions that were vacant negotiated contracts with two unions, finalized a budget, began a levy campaign, met with community leaders, planned and facilitated a board retreat, and strategized for three district professional development days for the coming month. For many of these activities, I was able to draw from past experience and skill sets gleaned from my years as a school administrator. Planning for the all-staff professional development was the task that really set into motion my questions about how to lead the district instructionally. How does a superintendent lead in a way that helps principals and teachers understand that improving instruction is the most important work? How does a superintendent provide guidance for principals to ensure that they are receiving the appropriate development and resources to be able to lead instructionally in an effective manner?

Federal and state educational agencies have proclaimed that academic achievement will come through alignment with the National Common Core State Standards, a new national standards-based assessment, and through a principal evaluation system that has yet to be
negotiated or fully implemented. How and where does a superintendent acquire the knowledge necessary to implement these initiatives effectively?

As the new superintendent of a rural school district on the front lines of trying to improve student achievement and responding to state and federal mandates, I spent the first year and a half questioning my instructional leadership skills and strategies. I wondered whether I was providing my teachers and building leaders with the resources and direction necessary to achieve Common Core alignment. I wondered whether I had provided my building principals with the knowledge, skills, and appropriate tools for the new evaluation implementation. I questioned whether I was evaluating my principals with the new leadership framework in a manner that would help them grow and lead instructionally. I wondered how other rural district leaders were leading instructionally.

My motivation for engaging in this study, then, was to attempt to find answers to these questions and to explore how other rural school superintendents are leading instructionally and overcoming the instructional leadership challenges unique to the small school district context. To achieve these aims, I conducted a study that reflects a heuristic approach (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985) by engaging other superintendents in interviews in an attempt to understand and learn from their lived experiences as small school district instructional leaders. Through this heuristic exploration, I hoped to understand how small school district superintendents understand their instructional leadership role and fulfill this responsibility in a time of increased accountability.

**Background and Research Problem**

The term *instructional leadership* emerged as a result of the effective schools movement (Hallinger, 2003, 2005, 2011; Marks & Printy, 2003; Neumerski, 2012) and is a concept that has
been closely aligned with school principals and their efforts to improve classroom instruction (Rigby, 2013). Smith and Andrews (1989) characterized instructional leadership as giving curriculum and instruction the highest priority, mobilizing resources, and creating a climate of high expectations for academic achievement. According to Smith and Andrews, instructional leaders are dedicated to achieving both schools’ and school districts’ goals, establishing incentives for use of new instructional strategies, and monitoring student progress and teacher effectiveness.

Phillip Hallinger, a pioneer in scholarly studies focusing on effective instruction, was instrumental in operationalizing the concept of instructional leadership into measureable items and developed the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) (Hallinger, 2005, 2011; Neumerski, 2012). The PIMRS is based on a conceptual framework that proposes three dimensions of the instructional leadership role: “(1) Defining the School’s Mission, (2) Managing the Instructional Program, and (3) Promoting a Positive Learning Climate” (Hallinger, 2005, p. 276). According to Hallinger (2011), after 3 decades of using the PIMRS to guide 130 doctoral dissertations, “Instructional leadership and leadership for learning are widely accepted by policy makers and practitioners as essential elements of management practice in schools” (p. 275), and research focusing on the principal’s ability to lead instructionally and to have an impact on teaching and learning has increased (Rigby, 2013). Findings from this body of research suggest that not only are principals making a difference in classrooms, but these leaders are also key catalysts in educational reform leading to improved learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).
Adding to the literature on instructional leadership, a growing body of research suggests that the superintendent or district-level leadership also has a significant impact on schools’ performance (Leon, 2008). Large-scale comprehensive studies addressing this topic include: (a) *Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (Leithwood et al., 2004), (b) *Minding the Gap: New Roles for School Districts in the Age of Accountability* (Springboard Schools, 2006), (c) McREL’s *School District Leadership that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement* (Waters & Marzano, 2006), and (d) *Leadership for Learning: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning a Final Report of Research to the Wallace Foundation* (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010). Waters and Marzano (2006) concluded their study (which included 2,817 districts and the achievement scores of 3.4 million students) with four major findings: (a) district-level leadership matters and, when district-level leadership is carried out effectively, student achievement increases; (b) effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goals; (c) effective districts establish defined autonomy (i.e., although superintendents define clear nonnegotiable goals for learning and instruction, the way in which the work is carried out is left up to individual building principals); and (d) superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Large-scale studies such as these have given insight into specific leadership strategies of superintendents that have led to increased student achievement; however, these studies do not differentiate between leadership in large districts and in small, rural districts.

Scholars are just beginning to study the role of the rural district superintendent as the instructional leader. Research conducted by Forner et al. (2012) correlated findings from the Waters and Marzano (2006) study with leadership practices of rural school district superintendents and found that Waters and Marzano’s work has application to the rural
leadership settings. More recently, Hentschke, Nayfack, and Wohlstetter (2012) compared the instructional leadership behaviors of large and small school superintendents and reported that the small school superintendent is likely to be more hands-on and engaged in instructional matters.

These studies provide a glimpse into rural district instructional leadership; yet a relative lack of research exists that focuses on smaller school districts, and, more specifically, on the role of small, rural district superintendents as instructional leaders (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Forner et al., 2012; Hyle, Ivory, & McClellan, 2010).

**Summary of the Research Problem**

With the increased emphasis on accountability for student achievement brought about by federal and state legislation, scholarly investigation of the superintendent as instructional leader has increased (Leon, 2008). Studies indicate that the role of the superintendent is shifting from that of a manager to that of an instructional leader (Anthes, 2002; Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Rallis et al., 2006) and identify specific instructional leadership strategies of superintendents in successful districts in the context of student learning indicators. Most current research on instructional leadership, however, has been conducted in large districts. Scholars who focus on rural-specific superintendent leadership suggest that there is a significant gap in the knowledge base regarding the work and practice of effective rural superintendents (Arnold et al., 2005). With recent statistics indicating that more than half of the nation’s schools are designated as rural (NCES, 2012), and research indicating that rural superintendents are faced with limited resources (Arnold, 2000; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Levin, Manship, Chambers, Johnson, & Blackenship, 2011; Yettick et al., 2014), more research on instructional leadership practices within the context-specific challenges of the rural
superintendency is warranted (Forner et al., 2012). Research is especially needed in regard to successful instructional leadership practices in these settings.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the role of the rural school district superintendent as instructional leader. Specifically, the study focused on rural superintendents who were known as effective instructional leaders and explored their understandings of and motivations for their instructional leadership work, how they fulfilled this work, and how this work was affected by recent federal and state policy initiatives. The study addressed these questions:

1. What are rural school district superintendents’ understandings of their role and responsibilities as instructional leader?
2. What are rural school district superintendents’ perspectives on the various facets of instructional leadership?
3. What do rural school district superintendents actually do to fulfill their roles as instructional leaders?
4. What are rural school district superintendents’ perspectives on their preparation for instructional leadership and their need for continuous professional development?
5. How has recent federal and state legislation affected the work of the rural school superintendent as instructional leader?

**Research Methodology**

To address the purpose of this study, data were collected through phenomenologically oriented qualitative interviews (Seidman, 2006). Open-ended interview questions were used to
address the research questions and explore participants’ perspectives of instructional leadership and how they engaged in instructional leadership as rural district superintendents. (See Appendix A for Interview Protocol.)

Since the study focused on rural district superintendents who were known as effective instructional leaders, specific participant selection criteria was important. To qualify for this study, participants were selected based on their alignment with superintendent leadership responsibilities and or actions, as identified in Waters and Marzano’s 2006 study, that were determined to have a statistically significant correlation with student academic achievement:

1. Effective superintendents “include all relevant stakeholders, including central office staff, building administrators, and board members, in establishing goals for their districts” (p. 3).

2. Effective superintendents “ensure that the collaborative goal-setting process results in non-negotiable goals in at least two areas: student achievement and classroom instruction” (p. 4).

3. Effective superintendents “ensure that goals remain the primary focus of the district’s efforts and that no other initiatives distract attention or resources from accomplishing these goals” (p. 4).

4. “Effective superintendents continually monitor district progress toward achievement and instructional goals to ensure these goals remain the driving force behind a district’s actions” (p. 4).

5. “Effective superintendents ensure that the necessary resources including time, money, personnel and materials are allocated to accomplish district goals” (p. 4).
Using these criteria, participants for this study were identified through consultation with educational leaders in northeast Washington State. These educational leaders were provided with a rubric based on the criteria from the 2006 Waters and Marzano study, as discussed above. The rubric was intended to help the nominators think through the nomination process rather than as a precise numerical rating scale. (See Appendix B for the Participant Selection rubric.) Four rural district superintendents were selected as interview participants.

Data for this project were collected through qualitative, phenomenologically oriented interviews (Seidman, 2006) with superintendents who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. In-depth, open-ended interviews ranging from 90 to 120 minutes in length were conducted at the participant’s school district site. (See Appendix A for interview protocol.) Analysis and interpretation of the data were facilitated using analytical methods (Merriam, 2009) with the goal of interpreting the experiences of rural school district superintendents as they led instructionally. Details of the study methods are provided in Chapter Three.

**Significance of the Study**

One goal of this study is to contribute to the sparse scholarly literature on superintendent instructional leadership in the rural school district. In particular, my goal in conducting this study was to identify instructional leadership practices that are associated with improved instruction and student outcomes in these settings. Outcomes of the study may well be useful to superintendents in rural school districts who wish to improve their instructional leadership practices and may also inform state policy makers in regard to resources needed in such settings. My second goal in conducting this study was heuristic in nature: to inform my own practice as a superintendent. In other words, I hoped to learn from this study and to become a more effective instructional leader.
Report of the Study

The report of this study comprises five chapters. Chapter One includes an introduction to the study, including the research problem and an overview of methods. Chapter Two is a review of the literature in regard to instructional leadership and, more specifically, in regard to the superintendent as instructional leader and the challenges unique to the rural district context. Chapter Three describes the research methodology and methods. Chapter Four is a report on the analysis of the qualitative interview data. Chapter Five presents conclusions and implications of the study as well as my reflections on the heuristic learnings from the study.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To provide a context for this qualitative study, Chapter Two reviews literature related to (a) instructional leadership, (b) the superintendent as instructional leader, and (c) challenges to instructional leadership specific to the rural school district context.

Instructional Leadership

Research in the early 1980s dedicated to defining the role of the school principal in the K-12 educational system produced the term instructional management. Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee (1982) selected this term because it implied that the role of the principal was more closely aligned with managerial functions focused on the coordination and control of curriculum and instruction. The term instructional leadership, which emerged soon after as a result of the effective schools movement (Hallinger, 2003, 2005, 2011; Marks & Printy, 2003; Neumerski, 2012), became the preferred term due to the recognition that principals relied on expertise and influence to have an impact on student achievement (Hallinger, 2010). Louis et al. (2010) advanced this thought process with regard to the concept of instructional leadership and the impact of a leader’s expertise on student achievement. These authors stated that “instruction will improve if leaders provide detailed feedback to teachers, including suggestions for change. Leaders must have the time, the knowledge, and the consultative skills needed to provide teachers with valid useful advice about their instructional practices” (p. 10). In addition, when the shift from instructional manager to instructional leader began to take place, schools that were effectively educating students regardless of socioeconomic status were being compared with those that were ineffective (Neumerski, 2012). According to Neumerski (2012), “The
result of this movement was a list of characteristics of effective schools and key among them was the role of the principal as a strong instructional leader” (p. 8).

In the United States, instructional leadership became identified as an important role function for effective principals (Hallinger, 2005). Research aimed at defining characteristics of the effective instructional leader led to the development of the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) by Philip Hallinger (2005, 2011; Neumerski, 2012). Hallinger (2005) stated, “The PIMRS is grounded in a conceptual framework that proposes three dimensions of the instructional leadership role: (a) Defining the School’s Mission, (b) Managing the Instructional Program, and (c) Promoting a Positive Learning Climate” (p. 276). The original form of the PIMRS contained 11 subscales and 72 behaviorally anchored items and, because it defines specific leadership practices, the tool is widely used in leadership development programs (Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014) and has been used in more than 200 empirical studies surrounding education (Hallinger, Wang, & Chen, 2013). In recent large-scale empirical studies (Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Supovitz & May, 2010), attention has been focused on tying instructional leadership practices to student achievement. The 2013 Wallace Foundation Report The School Principal as Leader drew from these large-scale quantitative and case studies to highlight five key functions principals must perform if they are to be leaders of learning. The report states that principals who lead schools that deliver effective instruction have responsibility for “(a) shaping a vision of academic success for all students, (b) creating a climate hospitable to education, (c) cultivating leadership in others, (d) improving instruction, and (e) managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement” (p. 4). With regard to the principals’ efforts to improve instruction, the Wallace Foundation maintained that principals
who are focused on the quality of instruction set high expectations for teachers and worked
directly with teachers in their classrooms to support their efforts.

Empirical studies are providing specificity with regard to actions principals in the 21st
century are expected to understand and engage in to be effective instructional leaders (Louis,
Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010), and research continues to categorize the school
principal who engages in these strategies as a key catalyst in improving instructional practice
(Leithwood et al., 2004; Supovitz et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2003). Looking across this literature
on the principal as instructional leader, I identified three overarching instructional leadership
practices that were key to improving instruction and positive student outcomes: (a) classroom
observation and feedback, (b) designing professional development for teachers, and (c) engaging
in continued professional development for the principal as instructional leadership.

Classroom Observation and Feedback

Leithwood et al. (2004) noted, “While definitions of instructional leadership vary,
scholars generally agree that such leadership involves principals working intensively and
continuously with teachers to examine evidence of the quality of the teaching and to use that
evidence to improve how they teach” (p. 736). According to Knapp, Copeland, Honig, Plecki,
and Portin (2010), in schools where students were achieving academically, the principals focused
intently on their work with teachers to improve instruction. Knapp et al. reported that one of the
most effective strategies principals used was “connecting directly with teachers in the classroom
through observations” (p. 56). Similarly, Leithwood et al. found that “high scoring principals
observed classroom instruction for short periods of time making 20–60 observations per week
and most observations were spontaneous” (p. 86). According to the authors, these frequent
observations were focused on learning, and principal feedback was immediate. The observation
and feedback process, which is both collaborative and informal, allows principals to make informed decisions regarding the appropriate professional development teachers need that will lead to improved teaching and positive student outcomes (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008).

Additional studies linked informal observations or walkthroughs to instructional improvement. Crum and Sherman (2008) interviewed 12 highly successful principals who, when asked to identify what they felt were their most successful leadership practices, identified classroom walkthroughs as a key strategy used to improve instruction in their buildings. Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) found that “increasing the visibility of classroom practice through frequent teacher observations has been clearly linked to improved instruction” (p. 459). Louis et al. (2010), in their report Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning, reported that monitoring teachers’ work in the classroom through formal and informal observation was a key strategy perceived by principals and teachers as a means for improving instruction. Furthermore, the degree to which principals engage in classroom observations and feedback has been linked to school performance (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

**Designing Professional Development for Teachers**

“School reform literature has consistently suggested that creating effective schools requires that principals become instructional leaders,” reported Wahlstrom and Louis (2008, p. 478). One key task of the principal as instructional leader is to provide professional development as a mechanism to support teachers’ professional growth (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008). Research indicates that “principal involvement in developing comprehensive professional development can have a positive impact on student outcomes” (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000, p. 35). Stein and Nelson (2003) added the perspectives of administrator as teacher and teacher as learner:
The role of the administrator as teacher is not one of transmitting knowledge but of assuming responsibility for (a) understanding the learning needs of individuals, (b) arranging the interactive social environments that embody the right mix of expertise and appropriate tasks that spur learning, (c) putting the right mix of incentives and sanctions into the environment to motivate individuals to learn, and (d) ensuring that there are adequate resources available to support learning. (p. 426)

Louis et al. (2010) found that effective principals provide professional development to teachers that “emphasize[s] research-based strategies to improve teaching and learning” (p. 77).

With regard to the principal’s role in improving instruction through continuous professional development, current research supports the notion that focused professional learning is making a difference in teaching practices and the quality of instruction (Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011). In fact, teachers in high-performing schools reported that their leaders were actively engaged in discussions around instructional matters and student improvement (Robinson et al., 2008). Supovitz et al. (2010) indirectly linked the success of students to the work of the instructional leader, reporting that the principal is the most important factor in student learning, in part because of the principal’s indirect influence on teacher instruction through collaboration and communication around instruction. Furthermore, when individual teachers interact with the principal and/or instructional leader of the building, the chance that the teacher will improve his or her instructional skills is much enhanced (May & Supovitz, 2011).

Research shows that teachers who engage in professional learning activities to improve their practice will have better teaching practices in terms of the quality of instruction (Thoonen et al., 2011). However, to increase the chances of this learning’s taking place, additional research
is needed to uncover more about how and why some instructional leaders are successful in altering teaching and learning (Neumerski, 2012).

**Engaging in Professional Development as Instructional Leader**

The building principal is expected to have a strong understanding of quality instruction as well as to have sufficient knowledge of curriculum and of how that curriculum is to be delivered (Hallinger, 2005). Mutuality around what constitutes quality instruction may be difficult to achieve because it requires that leaders understand not only the subject matter and how to teach the subject matter but also how students and adults learn the subject matter (Printy, 2008; Stein & Nelson, 2003).

How do principals acquire the knowledge and skills needed to be an effective instructional leader? Honig (2012) completed a study on the central office support for principals’ development as instructional leaders. Honig found that district-provided professional development, which was always job embedded, had a statistically significant relationship with principals’ time spent on instructional leadership tasks such as observing classroom instruction and engaging with teachers outside of the classroom to improve instruction (p. 736). Kimball and Milanowski (2009) added:

Training principals to develop a firm understanding of effective teaching and learning in at least one content will form a foundation for effective instruction that can be applied to professional development and to observations and feedback provided to teachers through evaluation practices. (p. 65)

Without proper training focused on quality instruction and research-based strategies, principals cannot competently or confidently lead instructional improvement in their buildings (Robinson, 2006). To assist principals in being competent, an international movement has arisen among
government agencies to commit to principal training, with much of this training focused on instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2003). With U.S. states such as Washington evaluating principals on their effectiveness as instructional leaders (AWSP, 2010), continuing education for principals must be an in-depth and continual process (Ylimaki, 2011).

Superintendent as Instructional Leader

The first school district superintendent position was created during the late 1830s (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). The original role of the superintendent was head schoolmaster; in this configuration, an appointed lay board of education made almost all decisions considered important (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), and with the reluctance of school boards to relinquish power, the superintendent performed mainly simple clerical and practical tasks (Peterson & Barnett, 2003).

By the end of the 19th century, the superintendent had shed the role of clerical supervisor and become responsible for all day-to-day decisions without being subject to board examination (Callahan, 1966). Although the primary function of the early superintendent was to attend to the daily business of the school, those in the profession were aware of the need to be knowledgeable and skilled in the areas of curriculum and instruction (Kowalski, 1999). Throughout the past century, the notion of superintendent as instructional leader has both lost and gained momentum (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005) and has had a difficult time taking hold for reasons such as position instability, board member expectations, and politics (Peterson & Barnett, 2003). According to Bjork and Kowalski (2005),

Because of the contextual and professional responsibilities of district superintendents, several authors have questioned the concept of superintendent as instructional leader and beg the question of whether or not historical expectations and current dynamics permit
superintendents to actually aspire to the role of leader of curriculum and instruction.

(p. 113)

In 1987, then Secretary of Education William Bennett characterized superintendents as part of an “education blob” that soaked up resources and resisted reform without contributing to student achievement (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). These critiques by Bennett and others suggest that many people question not only whether superintendents have the ability or the desire to be the instructional leader but also whether they have the capacity to be both district manager and instructional leader. However, Murphy and Hallinger (1988), when reporting on characteristics of highly effective districts, began dispelling this myth when they found that in highly effective districts, superintendents displayed strong instructional leadership behaviors that included (a) “setting goals and establishing standards,” (b) “selecting, supervising and evaluating staff,” (c) “establishing an instructional and curricular focus,” (d) “ensuring consistency in curriculum and instruction,” and (e) “monitoring curriculum and instruction” (p. 178). Despite the critics’ opinions, early research like that of Murphy and Hallinger began to solidify the superintendents’ role in creating instructionally effective districts. Fast forward 20 years: Now, within the context of raising student achievement and the current policy environment that exists around education, “there is a growing body of research that demonstrates that district office leadership has a significant impact on the performance of public schools” (Leon, 2008, p. 46). It is now the norm and the expectation that the superintendent as the instructional leader will provide the visionary leadership and planning necessary to produce academic gains for all students in the district (Bjork, 2009).
The Shift to Instructional Leadership

The passing of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act signed into law in 2002 put school superintendents on the front lines of student achievement (Leon, 2008). The measures within the law hold superintendents accountable for school and student performance. Consequently, these heightened expectations led to a renewed interest in the superintendent’s role in improving student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010). As a result, a growing body of research not only demonstrates that the district office leadership has a significant impact on the performance of schools but also provides insight into how superintendents are facilitating this type of leadership (Leon, 2008).

Four comprehensive studies aimed at identifying effective central office behaviors are:

(a) Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning (Leithwood et al., 2004),
(b) Minding the Gap: New Roles for School Districts in the Age of Accountability (Springboard Schools, 2006),
(c) McREL’s School District Leadership that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006), and
(d) Leadership for Learning: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning a Final Report of Research to the Wallace Foundation (Louis et al., 2010).

Leithwood et al. (2004) conducted a review of the literature regarding effective educational leadership to build a broader base of knowledge and inform educators on specific practices that lead to student achievement. After reviewing the research, the authors identified 12 district-level strategic actions focused on efforts to improve student learning: (a) “a strong belief in the capacity of school personnel to achieve high standards of learning,” (b) “a district wide focus on student achievement and the quality of instruction,” (c) “adoption [of] and commitment to district wide performance standards,” (d) “district wide approaches to
instruction,” (f) “alignment of curriculum, assessment and standards,” (g) “system wide use of data to inform practice and monitor progress,” (h) “targeted focuses of improvement,” (i) “investment in instructional leadership development,” (j) “job embedded professional development for teachers,” (k) “emphasis on professional community,” (l) “board and district relations,” and (m) “strategic engagement with state reform policies and resources” (pp. 41-46).

The 2006 Springboard Schools study Minding the Gap was conducted to evaluate the systemic differences between high-performing and low-performing school districts in the state of California. The study, which included in-depth case studies as well as test scores over a 3-year period and a survey of principals regarding their districts’ approaches, allowed for a detailed look at what high-performing districts did to raise student achievement. At the conclusion of Springboard School’s study, seven recommendations were made for central office leaders: (a) “be explicit about learning goals and strategies for student achievement”; (b) “invest and use multiple assessments”; (c) “recruit, manage and develop people”; (d) “report to the public on all subgroups of achievement”; and (e) “own the challenge of English Language Learners” (pp. 4-5).

The Mid-Continental Research for Education and Learning (McREL) published School District Leadership that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement in 2006. The report contained the results of Waters and Marzano’s (2006) meta-analysis, which examined 27 studies dating back to 1970 on the influence of school district leaders on student achievement. The research included 2,817 districts and the achievement scores of 3.4 million students; McREL researchers suggested that the study was, at that time, the largest ever quantitative research study focused on superintendents. The study sought to answer two research questions: (a) “What is the strength of relationship between district-level leadership
and student achievement?” and (b) “What are the specific district leadership behaviors that are associated with student achievement?” (p. 2). The study revealed that district-level leadership matters and that when district-level leadership is carried out effectively, student achievement increases. In addition, Waters and Marzano identified five specific superintendent behaviors that were associated with student achievement:

(a) collaborative goal setting, (b) creating non-negotiable goals for student achievement and instruction, (c) aligning board goals and efforts that support student achievement, (d) frequent monitoring of student achievement and instruction, and (e) utilizing resources to support goals for instructional improvement. (p. 6)

Waters and Marzano also concluded that superintendents of successful districts make sure that the districts have clear boundaries that allow them to act in a self-directed fashion, which translates into school principals’ carrying out the goals of the district independently.

*Leadership for Learning, Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning: A Final Report of Research to the Wallace Foundation* (Louis et al., 2010) was the result of a 6-year study undertaken to “identify the nature of successful educational leadership and to better understand how such leadership can improve educational practices and learning” (p. 5). The study encompassed nine states; 43 school districts; and 180 elementary, middle school, and secondary schools. Qualitative data for this study included survey data from 8,391 teachers and 471 school administrators, as well as data from interviews with 581 teachers and administrators and with 304 district-level personnel. Quantitative methods involved the analysis of state assessments used to measure Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). The large comprehensive study was designed to measure the effects of types of leadership, such as collective and distributive, as well as teacher, principal, and superintendent leadership, on student achievement. With regard to
superintendent and central office leadership, the findings suggest that higher-performing districts
are led by central office staff who:

(a) communicate the capacity of teachers and principals to improve the quality of
teaching and learning, (b) build consensus around expectations for professional practice,
(c) differentiate support to principals, (d) set clear expectations for school leadership
practices, (e) provide opportunities for teachers and principals to engage in school-to-
school communication, (f) develop and model strategies and norms for local inquiry
related to student learning and program implementation, and (g) coordinate district
support for school improvement across organizational units. (p. 197)

The results of the study indicate that when school district leaders engage in these instructionally
focused activities across the district, these strategies have an impact on how principal
instructional leadership is facilitated and therefore on classroom instruction and student
outcomes.

Leon (2008), in an attempt to highlight research that identified leadership behaviors and
district actions that support student achievement, completed a comprehensive review of four
major studies: the PELP Coherence Framework outlined by Grossman and Johnson in 2009, the
Springboard Schools (2006), Minding the Gap: Leading for Learning (2005), and School District
Leon’s review surfaced six emerging trends that were consistent among the research studies.
These trends are:

(a) the importance of leadership in creating and sustaining a mission, vision, values,
(b) support for systems alignment, and maintained coherence across the district, (c) focus
on key initiatives and priorities, (d) collaboration amongst people in the organization,
(e) making teaching and learning the core of the work, and (f) maintaining a balance between district and school autonomy. (p. 55)

These large-scale studies and their synthesis inform superintendents in the field of the key instructional leadership strategies that can be employed to influence district-wide teaching and learning. Not included in those studies, however, are the types of skill sets and knowledge that superintendents must have to carry out these strategies and how superintendents gain this knowledge.

**Superintendents’ Instructional Leadership Knowledge**

In today’s era of school reform, the successful superintendent is a superintendent of learning (Kowalski, 2006) who must develop the knowledge and skills to create and maintain instructional capacity within the district (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). The need for superintendents to be competent as instructional leaders has increased in recent years, and so too has research providing scholars and practitioners with information about the knowledge base and competencies these superintendents must possess. Recent studies call for a deeper look into the type of professional development that is needed to enhance instructional leadership knowledge, including ways in which district superintendents gain these skills (Cantú, 2013).

Successful superintendents are interested in their professional growth and development (Orr, 2007). These superintendents also recognize that building capacity to manage effectively is not sufficient if student achievement is the ultimate goal (Dickson & Mitchell, 2014). However, few programs exist that support superintendent professional growth, and those that do target new superintendents and are developed by professional associations (Orr, 2007).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are used as an avenue of professional growth. A study conducted by Dickson and Mitchell (2014) focused on superintendents engaging in
PLCs as a mechanism for professional growth. The authors found that superintendents who engaged in this type of learning reported a profound shift in how they thought about, talked about, and valued learning.

**Superintendents Supporting Principal Instructional Leadership**

It is crucial for superintendents to understand how to develop and maintain instructional capacity within their districts; however, according to Saphier, Haley-Speca, and Green (2012), the most important work of the superintendent is to promote the instructional leadership capacity of his or her principals. Numerous studies focusing on instructional leadership underscore the importance of principals operating as instructional leaders and the role of the central office in developing that capacity (Honig, 2014; Louis et al., 2010). Louis et al. (2010) found that “district leaders in higher-performing settings invested in the development of common professional learning experiences for principals, focused on district expectations for instructional leadership” (p. 146). Prior research found that when districts provided job-embedded professional development for principals around instructional matters, these principals spent more time engaging in instructional leadership activities, such as observing classroom instruction and working with teachers outside the classroom to improve instruction (Augustine et al., 2009).

Historically, central offices focused on the basic business functions of the district and were not focused on the instructional core of the district (Honig, 2012). The following quote from Honig (2014) not only provides a basis for why the central office should engage in instructional leadership work with principals but also suggests that this work could have positive implications for teaching and learning.

The efforts of school district central office leaders to support principals’ instructional leadership reflect several specific developments in research and practice that suggest the
promise of these efforts for strengthening systems of support for improved classroom instruction and ultimately, results for students. Those developments include mounting evidence underscoring the importance of “instructional leadership” as at least a part of principals’ work; intensive, job-embedded supports for helping principals develop their capacity for such leadership; and central offices as key providers of such supports. However, research also offers central office administrators few guides for how to provide such support and suggest they will face significant challenge in moving in this direction. (p. 736)

The work of Honig (2012) and others suggests that the collaboration between central office staff and principals for improved teaching and learning is beneficial for students. It is the lack of guidance for how this work can and should be done that has the potential to create roadblocks for learning. In her study of how central office staff supports principal instructional leadership, Honig (2012) found that future in-depth analysis is needed to identify specific daily practices of central office staff in supporting principals in their instructional leadership skills. Furthermore, Honig suggested a need for research within the small school context, where, due to limited central office staff, the superintendent is almost solely responsible for the principal’s continuous improvement.

**Rural Challenges to Instructional Leadership**

Hunt-Barron, Tracy, Howell, and Kiminski (2015) observed:

Rural schools continue to be an important part of the educational landscape of the United States. With more than half of all school districts (57%) located in rural areas, over 12
million students, or approximately 24% of our nation’s schoolchildren, attend rural schools. (p. 1)

Tekniepe (2015) made a very clear statement about the importance of superintendent leadership in the success of these rural schools and communities but also alluded to the challenges rural leaders face in today’s education reform era:

Rural school districts play an important part in the national educational landscape. Not only do they provide nearly one in four U.S. children with many skills, including those needed to enter college, but they also act as an economic stabilization force for the communities that they serve. Superintendents of rural school districts, as the leaders of these institutions, play an important role in fostering these objectives. Rapidly changing political, social, and economic landscapes, however, present a new array of challenges and occupational pressures to today’s rural superintendent. Superintendents now must navigate more turbulent environments shaped by the ever-increasing demands of internal and external stakeholders in an era of tight fiscal constraints. (p. 1)

Educational leaders nationwide are experiencing a time of increased scrutiny in their roles as instructional leaders and agents for positive student outcomes. Rural school leaders, however, encounter a leadership context that is very different from that of urban and suburban school leaders (Lamkin, 2006; Theobald, 2005). The context that sets them apart is the remote settings in which they are located, which in turn creates many obstacles and challenges that have been substantiated in rural education literature. These challenges include (a) limited resources and support (Lamkin, 2006; Yettick et al., 2014), (b) distance (Yettick et al., 2014), and (c) funding (Yettick et al., 2014).
Limited Resources

Lamkin’s 2006 study, which entailed focus group discussions with 58 rural superintendents spanning three states, found that “there are challenges that are unique to the leadership of rural school districts” (p. 17) and that the accountability for student outcomes, coupled with limited funding and limited central office staff to share the work, heighten the stress of being a small district superintendent. In the smallest districts, superintendents often play dual roles and serve as building principals, curriculum directors, and managers of programs such as transportation (Arnold, 2000). Lamkin also found that rural superintendents were experiencing greater difficulty in meeting challenges due to the intensity of changes and that “while rural superintendents have for many years concerned themselves with the success of their students, both state and federal governments now rank these small isolated schools against larger schools with more resources” and therefore “perceive a change in the level of their personal accountability” (p. 24.)

Similarly, one study found that “rural communities face a number of challenges in providing education services that suburban and urban areas do not” (Levin et al., 2011, p. 1). And although context-specific challenges exist that make rural areas different from their larger urban and metropolitan counterparts, the legislation entailed in NCLB makes no distinction between what is required of rural and nonrural districts (Lamkin, 2006). In fact, some believe that “components of NCLB tend to ignore the characteristics and advantages of small schools and the uniqueness of rural contexts” (Jimmerson, 2005, p.2). Shortly after the authorization of NCLB, Jimmerson (2005) provided a list of small rural district characteristics and expanded on how these characteristics would make implementation of the law challenging for leaders and detrimental to small rural schools. The author pointed out that the small number of students
would make validating assessment results difficult; additionally, rural areas often have higher populations of poor and minority students, making attainment of benchmarks difficult given that these populations often score less well than their wealthier and more mainstream counterparts. Further, Jimmerson pointed out that small rural schools are located in towns in which local traditions run counter to the requirements of NCLB, and that the remoteness of these areas makes it very difficult for educators to receive the training and ongoing professional development that will lead to improved student outcomes. Although Jimmerson’s review was written while NCLB was in its infancy, the author suggested that the law was “insensitive to many of the needs and problems of rural schooling” (p. 4).

Recent studies on rural education have not only identified specific rural contextual challenges but have also isolated specific challenges brought forth by the accountability legislation of NCLB. A recent study by Yettick et al. (2014) sought to discern exactly how the administration of the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) affected rural and nonrural school districts. The study employed two data sources: interviews with educational administrators and a statewide 60-question online survey administered to superintendents, financial officers, and federal program managers. The study found that five major categories challenged rural schools more than their nonrural counterparts. These challenges were (a) funding, (b) staffing, (c) flexibility, (d) regional services, and (e) professional development.

Challenges Due to Remote Location

Providing regional services and offering access to professional development are extremely challenging for rural school districts due to their often remote locations and the lack of funding (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Additionally, school districts located in remote areas often cannot find service providers who will travel to these rural locations, and those who do
charge heavy fees for travel (Yettick et al., 2014). Providing professional learning opportunities for teachers is very difficult because schools are often located in geographically remote areas, with each having a unique professional development need based upon context (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). As Yettick et al. (2014) stated, “Rural districts often have trouble finding nearby professional development opportunities for which they can afford to pay with their limited pools of federal funds” (p. 11). Distance and lack of funds create a great dilemma for leaders and teachers working to improve instruction: Research indicates that effective professional development is that which is ongoing (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009), meaning that ongoing professional development must be a main strategy for those rural schools that are high need but high performing (Barley & Beesley, 2007). In an attempt to overcome this obstacle, research is being conducted in rural settings on connecting teachers and professional development providers through the use of technology with the hope of eliminating cost and distance as hindrances to professional training (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). Although research is being conducted to eliminate rural costs, lack of funding remains a challenge for rural schools (Arnold, 2000; Jimmerson, 2005; Lamkin, 2006; Yettick et al., 2014).

**Funding Challenges in Rural School Districts**

Since 1923, 10-year reports published by the American Association of School Administrators show that school superintendents consider the financial management of schools to be the most challenging (Glass & Franceschini, 2007), and these challenges were substantiated by additional research. Recently, Levin et al. (2011) conducted a large-scale study to compare patterns of spending in rural and nonrural districts. The researchers focused on school districts across Nevada, California, and Utah, collecting data related to district resources and cost factors and used a multivariate regression analysis to answer three research questions:
(a) How do factors thought to be related to education costs differ between school districts in rural and nonrural locale categories? (b) How do measures of K–12 education resource allocation and spending differ between school districts in rural and nonrural locale categories? and (c) How do regional characteristics relate to patterns of K–12 education spending and staffing in school districts? (p. 4)

The authors found that rural districts spent more per student, hired more staff (especially teachers), and had higher overhead ratios of district- to school-level spending than did their nonrural counterparts.

Education finance literature does suggest that rural districts, unlike their nonrural counterparts, face specific challenges that affect expenditures. These challenges include higher costs per student due to the comparatively small scale of operations; at the same time, these districts often serve students with a higher level of need (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007). A survey completed by the NCES in 2006 showed that 80 percent of rural districts enrolled fewer than 600 students. A qualitative study by Abshier, Harris, and Hopson (2011), conducted to identify financial practices of rural superintendents, found that many of these districts struggle financially due to their small enrollments. And because many states structure funding formulas based on enrollments but require the same level of service, “small school districts have a disadvantage on the expenditure side of the budget” (p. 7); therefore superintendents are tasked with reducing expenditures to avoid cutting programs and eliminating jobs.

**Funding Implications for Defining Rural**

According to Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertson, and Shapley (2007), “Clearly defining what rural means has tangible implications for public policies and practices in education from establishing resources needed to achieving the goals of No Child Left Behind in rural areas”
A 2012 survey by the NCES, described on the organization’s website on the pages about rural education (https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/), showed that 7,810 out of the 13,567 public school districts in the United States are designated as rural. The website also reported that in 2010, some 99,000 public elementary and secondary schools, located in 14,000 school districts, served more than 49 million students in the United States. The NCES has designated 14,000 school districts as rural; however, recent education finance literature shows that the word rural has multiple definitions and that these definitions have an effect on rural school district funding and support. As Arnold et al. (2007) noted:

The word rural has many meanings. It has been defined in reference to population density, geographic features, and level of economic and industrial development. Some definitions use census tracts as the geographic building block to classify rural places, while others use counties or parishes. Some definitions use proximity to a metropolitan area as a measure of rurality, while others use proximity to an urbanized area. One system classifies rural schools according to their distance to an urbanized area, but others do not. Rapidly changing conditions and growing diversity in rural America make defining rural even more difficult. (p. 1)

The Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) (2006) used nine definitions of rural in research and policy making. These definitions classified rural places based on population size, density, level of urbanization, and adjacency to an urbanized area. The U.S. Census Bureau defined rural as “open country and settlements with fewer than 2,500 people” (Arnold et al., 2007). In 2006, the NCES website (https://nces.ed.gov/) classified schools into four major types: city, suburban, town, or rural, based on their location in relation to urban areas. Schools were further classified based upon distance from urbanized areas and placed into categories—small,
midsize, large—and subdivided by their proximity to an urbanized area into the categories fringe, distant, and remote. These categories allow NCES to identify rural schools and school districts in relatively remote areas and to differentiate them from those that may be located just outside an urban center.

Being appropriately defined as rural does have implications; federal and state agencies recognize that rural school districts need additional support to effectively educate their students and meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (Arnold et al., 2007). The federal government responded to rural funding challenges through the Rural Education Achievement Program, which allocates funds to rural school districts with fewer than 600 students. The Rural and Low Income School Program provides funding to rural schools when 20 percent or more of a school’s students are from low-income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Various states also answered the call and provided cost adjustments to those schools challenged by geographic location. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education funds regional educational laboratories that provide access to education research, with 25 percent of the funding designated solely for addressing issues in rural areas. What is defined as rural, however, is left to each regional lab (Arnold et al., 2007).

Agreement about what is rural is far from being reached, and questions remain as to whether one definition or multiple definitions are appropriate in answering rural challenges and policy issues (Arnold et al., 2007). According to rural researchers, not having an understanding of what rural is and of its multiple definitions makes it difficult to study rural education and work toward rural school improvements. The lack of a common definition of rural makes it difficult to compare results among the studies conducted on any particular rural issue (Koziol et al., 2015). Policy makers and educators do suggest, however, that this is an important issue. As
Isserman (2005) noted, “Getting rural right is in the national interest. When we get rural wrong, we reach incorrect research conclusions and fail to reach the people, places, and businesses our governmental programs are meant to serve” (p. 466).

**Summary**

Once termed *instructional management* (Bossert et al., 1982) because of the principal’s ability to manage control over curriculum and instruction, the term *instructional leadership* has taken hold in current educational literature now because of the school principal’s ability to facilitate the type of leadership that has an impact on student achievement (Hallinger, 2010). Looking across this literature on the principal as instructional leader, I identified three overarching instructional leadership practices that were key to improving instruction and positive student outcomes: (a) classroom observation and feedback, (b) designing professional development for teachers, and (c) engaging in continued professional development for the principal as instructional leadership. The passing of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2002 put school superintendents at the forefront of the push for student achievement (Leon, 2008). The resultant heightened expectations led to a growing interest in the superintendent’s role in improving student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010), and as a result, current studies are reporting specific instructional leadership behaviors superintendents are engaging in that are having a significant impact on the performance of schools (Leon, 2008). However, research is lacking that focuses on smaller school districts, and, more specifically, on the role of small, rural district superintendents as instructional leaders (Arnold et al., 2005; Forner et al., 2012; Hentschke et al., 2012; Hyle et al., 2010). Rural superintendents face a leadership context very different from that of their larger counterparts (Theobald, 2005). Geographically isolated and dispersed across large regions, these rural schools are home to a
quarter of the nation’s students. Superintendents are faced with many challenges in leading rural schools, including declining enrollments and funding; difficulty in finding opportunities for professional development and additional services for students; and challenges in ensuring that students receive a level of education equal to that of their larger, better-funded counterparts. How these superintendents overcome these rural challenges and lead instructionally within this context is a topic that needs further consideration.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the role of the rural school district superintendent as instructional leader. Specifically, the study focused on rural superintendents who were known as effective instructional leaders and explored their understandings of and motivations for their instructional leadership work, how they fulfilled this work, and how this work was affected by recent federal and state policy initiatives. The study addressed these questions:

1. What are rural school district superintendents’ understandings of their role and responsibilities as instructional leader?

2. What are rural school district superintendents’ perspectives on the various facets of instructional leadership?

3. What do rural school district superintendents actually do to fulfill their roles as instructional leaders?

4. What are rural school district superintendents’ perspectives on their preparation for instructional leadership and their need for continuous professional development?

5. How has recent federal and state legislation affected the work of the rural school superintendent as instructional leader?

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research methodology and the methods used to select participants and collect and analyze data. In addition, the chapter addresses research ethics and validity, as well as the researcher’s positionality within the study.
Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach that focused on the experiences of four small, rural school district superintendents regarding their role and responsibilities as the instructional leader of their school district (Creswell, 2007). One-on-one interviews allowed this researcher to examine the lived experiences of these superintendents as district instructional leaders to better understand how effective instructional leadership was taking place within this small, rural school district context (Merriam, 2009).

Interviews, as defined in the qualitative methodology literature, are “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (DeMarrais, 2004, p. 55). From the phenomenological perspective, in those person-to-person encounters the interviewer, through skillfully constructed questions, seeks to gain information about the lived experiences of others and the meanings they make of those experiences (Seidman, 2006). With regard to research focused around education, Seidman purports that “the primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the others who make up the organization or carry out the process” (p. 10).

In addition to the phenomenological approach to qualitative interviewing, this study had a somewhat heuristic approach (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985) in that, as researcher, I was directly attempting to learn from the experiences of participants to inform my own professional practice.

In conducting interviews for this study I was guided by the frameworks and suggestions offered by Seidman (2006) and Merriam (2009). Merriam suggests being aware of a few considerations when designing interview questions: “Make sure the question being asked is clear to the interviewee . . . . Use words that make sense and reflect the respondents world view” . . . .
and (c) “avoid technical jargon and terms” (p. 95). Additionally, Seidman outlines eight strategies that researchers should attend to when conducting interviews: (a) “listening is the most important skill in interviewing”; (b) “follow up on what participants say, don’t be afraid to ask for concrete details or clarification”; (c) “ask questions if something is said [that] you do not understand”; (d) “ask to hear more about a subject if the information is adding to the data”; (e) “explore, don’t probe; be cognizant of the way questions are being asked”; (f) “avoid leading questions”; (g) ask open-ended questions; and (h) “follow up but do not interrupt” (pp. 78-85).

As I engaged in this qualitative interview study, I took accountability for the quality of the interview data, which was used for subsequent interpretations (Holloway & Biley, 2011).

Methods

Participant Selection

This qualitative study focused on the instructional leadership of four superintendents in rural school districts who were known as effective instructional leaders. Therefore, the participants selected to participate in this study met specific criteria that included leading a rural district in northeast Washington State and having a reputation for providing effective instructional leadership, in alignment with the five behaviors outlined in Waters and Marzano’s (2006) District Leadership That Works: Striking the Right Balance. In addition, this study assumed that participants faced the many challenges of providing instructional leadership in rural areas, including access, funding, staffing, and school organization issues (Lamkin, 2006; Levin et al., 2011; Yettick et al., 2014). Defining criteria for the term rural and selecting superintendents in districts that met these criteria were also essential to the study.

The United States Census Bureau defined rural as a residual category of places “outside urbanized areas in open country, or in communities with less than 2,500 inhabitants,” or where
the population density is “less than 1,000 inhabitants per square mile” (NCES, 2007, p. 3).

According to the NCES (2007), rural areas are defined in three different ways: fringe, distant, and remote. Fringe areas are those less than five miles from an urbanized area. Distant rural areas are those between five and 25 miles from urban areas, and remote rural areas are those more than 25 miles from the closest urban area. The superintendents selected for this study led districts in distant and remote rural areas.

This qualitative study focused on the superintendent as the sole central office instructional leader. Because student enrollment drives funding and therefore limits the number of central office staff in many rural schools, student enrollment was a consideration for this study. According to the NCES (1997), rural school districts have an average enrollment of 1,000 students or fewer, with “small” rural districts averaging 350 students or fewer. However, this study defined rural districts as those considered by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) as “class two districts.” “Class two” districts have a student population of 2,000 or fewer (OSPI, 2015), and in most cases, due to funding structures, do not allow for an assistant superintendent or other support staff who work directly with principals and teachers regarding instructional matters.

This study focused on rural superintendents who were known as effective instructional leaders. The superintendents selected for this study had a reputation among regional educational leaders as effective instructional leaders and aligned with the criteria established in Waters and Marzano’s (2006) meta-analysis of superintendents’ responsibilities and actions that have a significant correlation with instructional improvement and student achievement. Waters and Marzano’s meta-analysis of 27 studies involving 2,817 school districts and achievement scores of 3.4 million students was conducted to study the influence of school district leadership on
student achievement. The analysis of these findings brought to the forefront five specific district-level leadership responsibilities or actions that have a statistically significant correlation with student achievement. Waters and Marzano state that “all five of these responsibilities relate to setting and keeping the districts focused on teaching and learning goals” (p. 3). Superintendents who have a clear understanding of and facilitate these district-level responsibilities will meet the criteria for effective district-level leadership for this study. The five responsibilities defined by Marzano and Watters (2006) are:

1. Effective superintendents “include all relevant stakeholders, including central office staff, building administrators, and board members, in establishing goals for their districts” (p. 3).

2. Effective superintendents “ensure that the collaborative goal-setting process results in non-negotiable goals in at least two areas: student achievement and classroom instruction” (p. 4).

3. Effective superintendents “ensure that goals remain the primary focus of the district’s efforts and that no other initiatives distract attention or resources from accomplishing these goals” (p. 4).

4. “Effective superintendents continually monitor district progress toward achievement and instructional goals to ensure these goals remain the driving force behind a district’s actions” (p. 4).

5. “Effective superintendents ensure that the necessary resources including time, money, personnel and materials are allocated to accomplish district goals” (p. 4).

As a result of their 2006 study, Waters and Marzano also concluded that superintendent tenure in a district of at least 2 years correlated with student growth. Therefore, holding a
position as superintendent in the same district for at least a 2-year period was a requirement for participation in this project.

With the standard for effective instructional leadership established for this study, the process for selecting the rural school district superintendents who have a history of providing this standard of leadership was based on a nomination by two established and informed northeast Washington State educational leaders: Due to their experiences as successful district-level leaders, their leadership position within the region, and their in-depth knowledge of the leadership practices of rural superintendents within the region, these leaders nominated potential candidates for participation who met the specific criteria outlined. To inform their nominations, I provided a rubric based on the Waters and Marzano’s (2006) criteria. (See Appendix B for nomination rubric.) Participants nominated for this study were contacted via telephone to set up an appointment to discuss the research topic, the purpose of the study, and potential benefits of the study. In addition, candidates for this study were also identified through a snowball sampling approach by asking participants to recommend other viable candidates who could add to this study (Creswell, 2003).

Participants

Four participants were chosen to participate in this study. The participants represented a variety of educational backgrounds and led districts in distant and remote areas, which allowed for a great deal of diversity within the study. Pseudonyms for the participants and for the sites in which they work are used throughout this report to protect the identities of the participants.

Bakersville Superintendent

At the time of the interviews, James was serving as the Bakersville superintendent and had been for the previous 5 years. James had a varied educational background of more than 20
years that included teaching and administrative roles that involved school and district-level leadership. Bakersville is a rural school district and, according to the NCES criteria, is located in a distant location as the school district resides further than 5 miles from an urban area but less than 25 miles. Bakersville is considered by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to be a class two district serving approximately one thousand students with an elementary, a middle school, and a high school. Each school is a separate building staffed with a principal to supervise students and staff.

**Coopersville Superintendent**

At the time of the interview, Bill was serving as the Coopersville School District Superintendent and had been for the previous 10 years. Bill’s professional experience spanned more than 20 years and involved teaching, building level leadership as a principal, and a prior superintendency in a rural school district. Coopersville is considered to be a remotely located school district as the distance from the closest urban area is farther than 25 miles. Serving slightly more than five hundred students, the Coopersville school district is a class two district. Bill’s district consisted of two separate buildings with two building principals to supervise staff and students. Coopersville is situated within a small rural community and has recently seen an increase in student enrollment.

**Jamestown School District**

Sarah was the superintendent of the Jamestown School District and played a dual role, as superintendent and as principal of the district’s Kindergarten through fifth grade elementary school. Sarah had been an educator for more than 20 years at the time of the interview and had served as a teacher and a principal, and was now a superintendent. The Jamestown School District, remotely located, is a class two school that once served more than six hundred students.
At the time of the interview, Sarah’s district, with declining enrollment, served fewer than three hundred students, resulting in the elimination of administrative staff. In addition to serving as the superintendent and K-5 principal, Sarah was the special education director and the Title One Coordinator. The Jamestown school district is located within a small rural community that has seen a shift from industry to a more recreational or seasonal community.

**Kingstown School District**

Rick was the superintendent of the Kingstown School District and the kindergarten through 12th grade principal. James’s professional background consisted of teaching and school- and district-level leadership in both urban and rural districts. The Kingstown School District is remotely located with an enrollment of slightly more than one hundred students. The district is located within a small rural town with two buildings that house students. Student enrollment in the Kingstown School District had been steady; however, Rick, with limited funding, had reduced administrative staff, making him the sole administrator in the district, which includes programs such as technology, homeless, and Special Education.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected for this study through in-depth, phenomenologically oriented, one-on-one qualitative interviews. The intent of these interviews was to bring to light the lived experiences and behaviors of participants that cannot be observed or replicated (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006) regarding instructional leadership. My approach to these interviews was informed by Seidman’s (2006) phenomenologically oriented methods. Open-ended interview questions were constructed to allow the participants to talk freely using their own words, allowing for the superintendents to define their work around instructional leadership and to reconstruct their experiences as district instructional leaders in their own unique ways (Merriam,
The length of the interviews ranged from 90 to 120 minutes; they were audiorecorded using a small handheld device and later transcribed. Each interview was conducted at the participant’s district office or a more convenient place that was agreed upon.

**Data Analysis**

The first phase of data analysis involved constructing categories by reviewing the initial interview transcripts. In this process, open coding was used to identify topics that were relevant for addressing the research questions (Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2009) and allowed for identification of additional topics that were relevant to the study’s purposes. The goal of this process was to identify categories or themes within the data. The second phase of data analysis consisted of an extensive review of the transcripts in which in vivo coding (Saldana, 2009) was employed. Specific participant quotes from the interviews were highlighted to illustrate emerging themes. The third phase of analysis involved analysis of themes to identify interconnectedness and contradictions within the data and the development of a narrative that represented the experiences of the participants.

To ensure the trustworthiness (Roberts, 2010) of the study’s findings, during the data collection and analysis process, I continually reflected on my positionality with regard to the participants as well as my professional knowledge of the topic being investigated to ensure that the data being collected and analyzed remained authentic and not biased by my assumptions. Further, I strove at all times to authentically represent the perspectives of the participants collected through this qualitative approach, using their own words to illustrate findings whenever possible (Creswell, 2009).
Ethics

To explore the instructional leadership practices of the rural superintendent, I asked other rural school districts’ superintendents to share their knowledge. These individuals allowed this researcher access to their thinking and practices. It was crucial to the integrity of this study that the superintendents engaged in this project spoke freely and candidly. Furthermore, the utmost care was taken to ensure that the identities of these individuals and the districts they served were kept confidential. In addition, the participants who agreed to share their experiences and beliefs were assured that their identities will be protected, and this confidentiality had to be established leading up to the interviews, maintained during the interviews, and kept long after the results of this study have been published. Merriam (2009) underscores this necessity by stating, “Although policies, guidelines, and codes of ethics have been developed by the federal government, institutions, and professional associations, actual ethical practice comes down to the individual researcher’s own values and ethics” (p. 230). For that reason, to ensure authentic participant engagement and that no harm will come to the superintendents, pre-established guidelines were set and followed. Before the interviews were conducted, the informed consent document was signed. This document outlined the study and described how the identities of the participants would remain confidential throughout the study. Pseudonyms were used in the report of this study with regard to participant and district names; moreover, identifiable characteristics of specific locations were used minimally to ensure absolute confidentiality.

Positionality

As mentioned in Chapter One, I am a former elementary and high school principal who has recently taken on the position of superintendent in a rural school district. As leader of the district, I am ultimately responsible for the academic success of the students and the continuous
improvement of the teachers as well as the principals. As I am driven to ensure that students are achieving and adults continuing to refine professional practice, I am continually reminded of my own personal need to grow professionally. Superintendents in the era of accountability are fully responsible for all instructional matters in the district, including in-depth knowledge of instructional and leadership frameworks, effective evaluative practices that lead to instructional and leadership growth, continuous professional development for teachers and principals, curriculum development and design, and keeping pace with the federal and state education reform policies that change annually. It was the latter consideration, converging with the fact that I am a new superintendent in a rural school district searching for answers about how to provide quality instructional leadership in my district, that motivated me to engage in this heuristic study. Through this study, I hoped to learn by engaging other small school district superintendents in conversation about how they provide effective instructional leadership within the rural school district context. And upon the conclusion of this study, it is my desire that this research will, in turn, benefit others who take on the great task of leading instructionally.
CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the role of the rural school district superintendent as instructional leader. Specifically, the study focused on rural superintendents who were known as effective instructional leaders and explored their understandings of and motivations for their instructional leadership work, how they fulfilled this work, and how this work was affected by recent federal and state policy initiatives. This chapter discusses themes and concepts that emerged through analysis of the qualitative data collected through interviews with rural school district superintendents in the field.

In the process of analyzing the data, I brought to the forefront possible themes arising from the answers to the following research questions:

1. What are rural school district superintendents’ understandings of their role and responsibilities as instructional leader?
2. What are rural school district superintendents’ perspectives on the various facets of instructional leadership?
3. What do rural school district superintendents actually do to fulfill their roles as instructional leaders?
4. What are rural school district superintendents’ perspectives on their preparation for instructional leadership and their need for continuous professional development?
5. How has recent federal and state legislation affected the work of the rural school superintendent as instructional leader?
Employing the research questions as a guide brought to the surface initial themes; however, because of the heuristic slant of this study and my desire as an acting rural superintendent to learn from these participants, as indicated in Chapter One (see “Personal Perspective and Motivation for the Study”), I was highly sensitive to data that identified specific instructional leadership strategies facilitated by these rural superintendents.

In the analysis of the participant interviews, seven major themes emerged: (a) setting direction, (b) supporting the instructional growth of the district, (c) the superintendents’ direct involvement with the classroom, (d) acquiring resources for the instructional program, (e) the superintendents’ work developing principal instructional leadership, (f) the self-development of the district instructional leader, and (g) challenges faced by rural school district instructional leaders. The themes that emerged in this study support themes found in the literature with regard to: (a) the superintendent creating a common focus for the district (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Springboard Schools, 2006); (b) highly effective districts regularly monitoring student achievement and instruction (Waters & Marzano, 2006); (c) district leaders in higher-performing settings investing in the development of common professional learning experiences for principals (Louis et al., 2010); and (d) successful superintendents being interested in their professional growth and development (Orr, 2007). Although the themes that emerged in the analysis support themes present in recent instructional leadership literature, a significant gap is apparent in the knowledge base regarding how these themes play out for the rural superintendent (Arnold et al., 2005). In the analysis, I found that context plays a very specific role in the way in which each superintendent is able to facilitate these instructional leadership themes.
The following sections present the themes. In each section, I first present how a theme is supported by the literature and then offer relevant findings supporting that theme through evidence supplied by each participant. Each section is followed by a discussion explaining how the differing contexts in which these superintendents worked influenced their work relevant to the themes.

**Setting Direction**

My review of the literature in Chapter Two regarding the superintendent’s role in improving student achievement indicated that large-scale studies show a direct correlation between specific superintendent leadership behaviors and student achievement. Common among these behaviors or strategies is the superintendent’s creating a common focus for the district (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Springboard Schools, 2006). As I analyzed the interview data for this study, it became apparent that these rural district participants also engaged in establishing a common district focus. In addition, a subtheme emerged related to the board’s role in creating and sustaining that focus with the superintendent. The way in which each superintendent constructed and housed the district’s common focus was different; furthermore, context was a factor in determining how this work was completed and is discussed later.

**James**

James was the superintendent of the Bakersville school district. The Bakersville district is in a distant location, according to the NCES, as it is located approximately ten miles from the nearest urban area. Bakersville serves a student population of approximately nine hundred students; it has an elementary school, middle school, and high school, with a principal to lead each building. When discussing how he worked with his principals and teachers around
instruction, James explained that the district administrators and teachers collaboratively agreed that upon the adoption of the Marzano instructional frameworks, they would focus on learning one criteria each year to allow teachers and principals to effectively implement these frameworks into their instruction. James commented that the criteria had been the focus of the district for the previous 4 years and explained that his strategy for sustaining that focus was being direct with the staff and insisting that principals work continuously with teachers in the classroom:

As the superintendent, that’s where you can support your principals by taking some of the heat off of them and saying, “This is a district focus, this isn’t something that the Middle School principal is doing, or the Elementary Principal is doing on their own, this is a district focus, and so if you want to be mad at A, B or C, don’t be, be mad at me,” because they don’t really have a choice on how many hours I want them in classrooms.

James also commented on the benefit of keeping the district focused on the instructional framework criteria:

I think you’re more centered, and you can have a common language and there’s crossover between what the teachers are working on and what the principals are working on, or what the superintendent’s working on. I think you got to really focus your concentration on being really good on a couple of things . . . . TPEP I think has really kind of geared everybody into “Hey, we just want to improve teaching and learning for every kid.”

**Bill**

Bill, the superintendent of Coopersville School, located in a remote area approximately fifty miles from the nearest urban area, served a student population of approximately seven hundred. The district had two separate buildings and a principal in each. When asked about his
role in providing a direction for the district, Bill spoke immediately about the role of teacher leaders in creating the direction through district wide improvement plans, explaining:

We do a program called 3CI, continuous culture of improvement, [for] which we received some training through the ESD. It was a 3-year training program where you develop teacher leaders and involve school board members and the principals. They actually do the school district improvement plan and work with building improvement plans, and they would kind of oversee it so it wasn’t just the principals. And to this day, we still have that structure in place.

The data analysis showed that each superintendent either formally or informally facilitated or supported a district focus, initiative, or plan of improvement. Bill and James seemed to take a more formal approach to identifying their districts focus by allowing administrators and teachers, and in Bill’s case a board member as well, to collaborate. Sara and Rick, however, described a more informal approach to identifying that focus. Sarah spoke to working with the other principal in her district separately from teachers, and Rick independently identified the focus.

Sarah

Sarah was the superintendent of Jamestown. Jamestown is a remote rural school district located approximately one-hundred miles from the nearest urban area with a student population of 230. Jamestown has a K–6 building and a 7th–12th grade building. Sarah’s role in the district was diverse due to her being the K–6 principal as well as the district superintendent. With only one other principal in the district, Sarah described a very informal process for creating a common district focus, saying, “Jim and I will get together and we will have one initiative or so that we really want to focus on that would make a difference in the classroom.” Sarah, who was very
passionate about the importance of using data to increase student achievement, also described a process that she engaged in on an annual basis with her district staff to focus on district-wide improvements using student data. She explained that she brought in multiple sources of data, including achievement, perception, and demographic data. She stated:

I would put together all of that data for them and then at the beginning of the year we would have a district-wide school improvement data carousel. So staff would mingle, both elementary and secondary, and they would go through each of those stations and they would rotate around and they would write statements; [for example] based on this data, what do they think were our strengths? Where did they think we needed to work on this data? . . . . Anyway, so I facilitated that process.

Rick

Rick was the superintendent and acting K–12 principal of the Kingstown school district, which serves approximately one hundred students. Kingstown is a remote district located approximately sixty miles from the nearest urban area. Rick described a very informal process for creating the district-wide focus:

I came up with a 3-year improvement plan which becomes our strategic plan, and it includes everything. I’ll write it based on what I think the needs are, set some goals within it, and give it to the staff and let them tweak it, and then it goes to the board.

When discussing the importance of providing a clear direction for his district, Rick explained, “For us, what’s really given us the greatest growth and most improvement is when we identify an area of focus.” Rick noted that for the upcoming school year, his staff would be
focusing on the homeless students in his district due to the sharp increase of that population over the previous year:

This year we will focus on our homeless. This year it will involve book studies, Ruby Payne’s work, and identifying what is specifically needed with those students as far as academic support, the emotional support, and how it all fits together. But it has to be a very aligned approach.

**Context**

Contextual differences with regard to district location, size, and enrollment seemed to influence the process these participants used to create the direction for the district. Sarah and Rick were superintendents of remotely located districts with low enrollments. As enrollments in many cases dictate staffing ratios, both Sarah and Rick had to play a dual role as superintendent and principal. It was the dual role they played, and quite possibly the daily interactions with staff, that influenced their choice of a more informal process for creating a district focus. Sarah described a process of collaborating with the other principal in the district without the assistance of teachers. Rick established a focus independently from teachers by himself because he had no other administrator to assist him. However, when discussing engaging staff and sustaining the district’s direction, these administrators described processes in which they engaged teachers and worked alongside them in more of a principal–teacher relationship to sustain that focus. James and Bill, in contrast, who were serving districts located closer to an urban area and with larger enrollments, had principals and more teachers. James and Bill described a more formal approach that involved engaging administrative staff and teachers in identifying the district’s focus. As well, these participants who did not play a dual superintendent–principal role interacted more heavily with building principals in sustaining the district’s work toward that focus. Examples
include James’s ensuring that his principals were engaged in observations and conversations regarding the district’s focus on a specific teaching criteria and Bill’s relying more heavily on principals and their work with teacher–leaders in creating and sustaining district-wide improvement.

In conversations regarding their involvement in creating a focus for their district, each rural superintendent spoke to the involvement of their board of directors in supporting the district’s focus on improving teaching and learning. Therefore, the superintendent’s and the board’s focus on instruction and student achievement emerged as a subtheme in the analysis.

**Superintendent and Board Focus on Instruction and Student Achievement**

Bill stated that he had a board member who served on the district’s 3CI team that facilitated the process of creating the district and building improvement plans. Bill’s example of a board member engaged in the district’s focus on the improvement of instruction and student achievement was very prevalent within the interview data. The strategy of engaging the board in the work of improving teaching and learning has also been documented in the literature as a strategy or responsibility that superintendents engage in to improve student outcomes (Louis et al., 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

**James**

When discussing his board’s role in improving instruction, James spoke to the importance of the board’s not only understanding the instructional mission of the school district but supporting that mission as well:

When reporting to the board if you say, “Hey, I want my principals to go to the summer conference” or “We are going to do some online professional development for principals” or “We are going to set aside $25,000 for some specific professional development around
It is important that your school board understands the importance of why that fits the instructional mission of the school district and why you are going to continue to be pushing hard as a superintendent to make that one of the biggest things.

James explained that his board, like the superintendent, principals, and teachers, engaged in a self-assessment of their knowledge of the instructional framework, followed by the creation of board goals and monthly work sessions. In addition, principals engaged the board in student achievement through ongoing reports and participated with the board in collaborative work sessions.

**Bill**

Bill discussed the board’s role in supporting student achievement and stated, “It's a huge focus. We have board goals, and the number one is student achievement.” Bill added that he and his building principals sustained that focus with the board: “We give reports on a regular basis to the board about student achievement, and we develop a school performance report card.”

**Sarah**

Like Bill, Sarah engaged her board in the review of student data, and like James, she conducted work sessions once each month in which she provided her board with student achievement data.

**Rick**

Rick, serving in the dual K–12 superintendent/principal role, described a more informal process when working with his board on student achievement:

I report throughout the year on that. This last year, we had a tough budget year and so a lot of the board focus was on budget, but every so often I would refocus the conversation onto what we are doing towards our school improvement plan. So it just kind of helped
to bring student achievement back to center and it was all related to what we talked about with the Washington State Leadership Academy and the academic goals, and how the new improvement plan addresses how we are handling the shift in our demographics.

When probed further regarding any formal work sessions with the board around student achievement, Rick expressed that his was a more informal approach due to the close relationships developed in a smaller community or district. He stated,

We are really laid back, real laid back, one of them works for me, one of them is a spouse of a teacher, the other one is a coach, and then the other one is a mom that I see all the time. So I see them all the time. I will see them in the hall and I’ll grab them, say, “Hey look at this.” “Here is what we are doing, here’s what I’m going to talk about Monday.” . . . So it is very informal, so we meet once a month, but there is a lot of informal dialogue and texts between us.

The superintendents who participated in this study all expressed the importance of engaging the school board in conversations around teaching and learning. The analysis also showed that these conversations with the board members took place formally in board meetings and work sessions, or informally, as seen in Rick’s case, through side conversations and text messages. Rick’s comments regarding the informal process for working with his board provide insight into how the contextual differences among these districts affect the approach to improved teaching and learning, and how it is monitored at the board and superintendent levels.

**Context**

Context did play a role in how the superintendents in this study worked with their boards around student achievement. Rick, the superintendent and principal of a K–12 school that was
remotely located and in a very small town, described a very informal superintendent–board working relationship. Rick explained that because many who live in the small town are employed by the school district, they share an interconnectedness that allows for a more informal flow of communication about instructional matters, with much of it taking place outside of the board room. In addition, these informal communications, in Rick’s words, created a “very laid back” working environment. At one point in the interview Rick mentioned that he had not received a superintendent evaluation from the board in 6 years. Rick was also the principal of the K–12 building, so he had responsibility for monitoring his and his students’ growth. It was apparent, at least in this particular case, that the remoteness of the district could be dictating the superintendent’s/school board’s approach to monitoring teaching and learning.

Bill and James, who presided over larger districts that were not remotely located, reported using a more formal process when working with their boards. Bill, who had two principals, spoke to how he and the principals formally reported student achievement data at board meetings and mentioned that he and his board engaged in the goal-setting process, which was focused on positive student outcomes. James, in a larger district than both Rick and Bill, had his three principals report to the board and collaborate in work sessions. In addition, the board of directors engaged in a self-assessment and a goal-setting process.

District location, and the impact of that location on the size of school, enrollment, staffing, and, for Rick, access to board members, seemed to influence whether these rural superintendents worked formally or informally with their boards around student achievement. The analysis shows that with these rural school district superintendents, the larger the enrollment and administrative staffing, the more in-depth the processes for engaging the board of directors in the district’s student achievement.
Supporting the Instructional Growth of the District

Superintendents’ leadership in providing support and resources for the continued work toward instructional improvement has a positive impact on student achievement (Louis et al., 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Analysis of the interview data for this study indicated that these rural district superintendents were heavily engaged in providing structures for ongoing professional growth and acquiring resources to improve the instructional program. Within this theme, two subthemes came to light that were relevant and significant to rural superintendent instructional leadership with regard to meeting their districts’ professional growth needs: (a) regionalized professional development and (b) investing in teacher leadership.

James

Bakersville Superintendent James, when discussing professional development, spoke to the importance of creating momentum for adult learning through teacher buy-in. James expressed the opinion that “if you can get the staff to buy into professional development on the individual side, then somewhere I think you can meet in the middle and you can have some continuity throughout your whole system.”

To that end, James described his strategy for increasing his teachers’ need for personal instructional growth by providing an avenue for teachers to provide input on specific professional development needs and structure. He explained,

For this year we did an exit interview with them, and we asked them to give us some feedback on how the PD was working for the year. What was working? What wasn’t working? What did they need more time on? What did they need less time on? . . . . We took the survey, met with a couple of admin and a couple of the teacher leaders, and said,
“Okay, what would you guys like next year to look like?” The number one thing, of course, was “We need time, we need more time together.”

James responded to the teachers’ request and moved his district’s 2-hour late start from 8:00 to 12:00. In addition, James stated that he made decisions in alignment with the survey results with regard to structure and allowed four of the late starts to be driven by each individual building—four to be directed by the teaching staff, and four to be directed by the district. When asked specifically what role he played in providing the professional development beyond facilitating the structure, James responded:

Yeah, we’ve kind of gone through a little bit of a transition. I would say a few years ago I was maybe leading a little bit more, but I have been handing off a lot more to principals and even more so this last year to teachers.

James expressed that as a superintendent, his role in the ongoing professional development of the district was

more to support the principals and the teachers to make sure they’ve got what they need to be prepared, to present, to get feedback, and to keep the communication lines open across the district to find out what they need and what they want to work on.

**Bill**

Bill, the superintendent of Coopersville, a district a little smaller than Bakersville and more remotely located, stated that one of the things he had done to try to improve the teaching in his district was to listen to the teachers’ request for more professional development time. At the teachers’ request, Bill stated, he began working with the school board to help them see the need for more professional development time, which he said they agreed to, whereupon the school had
1-hour late starts each week. In addition, Bill mentioned that as the superintendent of his rural district, he had a responsibility to advocate for his teachers and, with regard to their need for additional professional growth, spent much time “begging” the State Board of Education for 3 professional development waiver days, which his school had made use of for the previous 3 years. When discussing his role in providing for professional development beyond advocating to the district and state board, Bill stated that he had secured speakers and in-service providers over the previous years who had assisted in the implementation of the new teacher and principal evaluations, instructional frameworks, and professional learning communities.

*Sarah*

Sarah, superintendent and principal of Jamestown, like Bill, also applied for and received 3 professional waiver days that she added to the 4 board-approved half-days. When discussing how she used that professional development time, Sarah referred to the rural district context and the importance of recognizing how this context played into preparing professional development for her staff. Sarah explained:

I think in a small district you need to look outside of yourself to what’s impacting kids and what are the resources you can tap into. Teachers probably get tired of hearing us talk, so we use this as a springboard for conversations and just continually having those philosophical discussions. “Okay, here’s where we are.” What worked for us, what didn’t work for us, what we need to focus on.

Expanding on this topic, Sarah spoke to how she and the principal she worked with coordinated to plan the professional development. “We get together and say, what is it that we need as a whole? Or what helps us move forward in our teacher-chosen school improvement plan and the initiatives that we are focusing on?” Sarah commented that she and her principal worked
together independently to plan the professional development and over the previous few years had arranged presentations by speakers from the Developmental Assets Program, Avid, and coordinated with the Educational Service District 101. Although Sarah endeavored to look outside of her district for professional growth opportunities, she had limited funding and resources, and therefore was charged with doing the research and providing the in-service. She reported that playing a dual leadership role in her district while staying ahead of her staff to implement state and national initiatives such as the new teacher and principal evaluation, Common Core, and the Smarter Balanced assessments was a challenge.

**Rick**

Rick, like Sarah and Bill, requested and received from the State Board of Education 3 professional development waiver days, which accompanied 3 late start days. Like Bill, Rick mentioned that he worked with his board and advocated for weekly 1-hour late starts, which were implemented. Like Sarah, Rick was charged with the dual principal–superintendent role in a remote district and thus experienced many of the same challenges with regard to limited funding, staffing, and time to research and plan. Rick expressed that in his district:

> We include everybody. It is the paras, it is the teachers, and when appropriate we call in the office staff because they have so much kid contact. [With regard to in-services], it varies between me leading and Jim, who was the principal. Sometimes we will have some of the staff lead it; it just depends on what we are working on that week . . . . But we try to vary it a little bit so it is not always me talking. I kind of dive in with the staff. I have got to be a little bit ahead of them. I have got to be the one identifying the patterns.
Rick expanded further on the strategies that he employed to facilitate adult learning with among his 13 staff members:

I will use different protocols and sometimes I will start with a protocol and then it will just turn into kind of a back-and-forth philosophical discussion. I have broken them up into smaller groups; I have always mixed it up, elementary and secondary. I have never separated them because I think they need to be together. I do book studies and one group did the first semester and the other group did the second semester. I have done it all together . . . . Because we are small and we just like to do things together.

For all of the participants, a common experience was accessing the ESD to assist them in providing professional development for staff. Specifically, James, Bill, and Rick engaged in the Washington State Leadership Academy (WSLA), which brought superintendents, principals, and teachers together to collaborate on and off site. WSLA was a 2-year commitment by districts in which leadership coaches employed by the state would help districts identify a need, such as closing the achievement gap and creating a problem of practice for addressing that need within their individual districts. Although it was not specific to rural school districts, this program brought other rural districts together to collaborate, which for Bill, Sarah, and Rick, who led smaller districts in more remote areas, was a strategy to overcome contextual impacts such as funding, staffing, and location.

**Context**

Analysis of how context plays into the specific strategies these rural school district superintendents use to structure and provide effective professional growth opportunities showed that district size with regard to the number of teachers receiving the in-service, and administrative staff to help facilitate that process, played a significant role. The larger the
district, the more formal the processes for determining the type of professional development, the structure of the professional development, and how engaged the superintendent was in preparing and providing that professional learning opportunity.

James, with a much larger teaching staff, had a more formal approach to assessing the adult learning needs of the district by gathering data via staff surveys. Using those data, James provided his staff with a voice regarding how the professional development would be structured for the upcoming year. James also reported that for the previous 2 years he had presented the in-services less often, relying instead on a complement of principals who led individual schools to take the lead. Bill, with yet a smaller teaching staff, also solicited input from staff regarding professional development structure. When probed about his role in presenting, Bill did say that he occasionally participated, but he spoke more to his role as an advocate for additional district and statewide professional development and about taking the lead in bringing in people to facilitate learning opportunities for staff.

In stark contrast, Sarah and Rick, with dual leadership roles in much smaller remote districts, commented early on in the interviews about how the rural context influenced how they provided for professional development. Both mentioned the importance of looking outside of the district for alternative ways to provide professional development or changing up the strategies from within to make this process more meaningful. It was very apparent in the analysis that the dual role of principal and superintendent, with the added responsibility of providing adult learning, was very taxing for both Sarah and Rick. Both superintendents expressed passionately that their teachers continued to improve, and both noted that it was their responsibility to facilitate that growth; but both also struggled with the amount of time it took to research and prepare for these opportunities on top of their already busy schedules as superintendents and
principals. With the implementation of the many federal and state initiatives in Washington State and the responsibility of school administrators to implement them, the lack of administrative help in these small remote districts has taken on a new meaning.

**Regionalized Professional Development**

Analysis of the interview data indicated that these rural school superintendents, acting as instructional leaders, ensured that the professional growth of teachers was ongoing. In addition, the analysis provided some insight into how the remote contexts of the relevant districts bring forth specific challenges. Furthermore, the analysis indicated that the participants in this study met the challenges of the remote rural district context by collaborating with other rural districts to meet these specific challenges, and thus this approach became a subtheme: Instructional Growth through Professional Development and Resources.

Bill, Sarah, and Rick led districts considered to be remote due to their being located an hour or more away from an urban area. These superintendents spoke to the challenges of providing professional development given a lack of funding, distance from urban areas, and small staffing numbers that made it difficult for teachers to collaborate and learn from other teachers within grade levels or core content areas. Each supervisor spoke to how he/she met these challenges by collaborating at a regional level.

**Rick**

Rick, who led a teaching staff of 13, described having only one teacher per grade level and content area, which made it difficult for his teachers in those grade levels or content levels to expand their learning. Rick explained that the county he resided in implemented regionalized PLCs and instructional frameworks to facilitate the collaboration of teachers in the same grade and content-specific areas. Rick reported:
Whitman County all adopted the same framework and so what we have is the Whitman County PLC. We meet three times a year now, and every teacher in the county goes to Kingsly and we meet at the elementary level, middle school level and at the secondary level by content area. When we started this it was based around understanding frameworks and what can we do in our grade levels for our own professional development, based on what the framework is calling for.

As mentioned earlier, Rick had three late starts built into the school calendar, which all of the schools in the county had scheduled, allowing them to come together on specific dates. The schools in this county had been involved in this collaboration for 5 years at the time of the interview. “When we first started,” Rick reported, “everybody was skeptical, and now when we trimmed it from 5 days to 3, people were upset because there is value in it, even with PE teachers; everybody likes it.” In addition to the support that this collaboration provided for teachers, Rick noted, the county-wide group as an association shared professional development costs and therefore was able to bring in several keynote speakers and presenters to support their implementation of the new evaluation, PLCs, and instructional frameworks.

**Bill**

Bill, who participated in regional superintendents meetings, was instrumental in bringing rural school districts together twice per year, using their district’s waiver days. Bill referred to this collaboration as “county-wide best practices”; like Rick’s regional group, Bill’s shared in the cost of bringing professional speakers in to implement PLCs and instructional frameworks. Bill reported that for that previous 5 years, this approach had been very beneficial for his teachers and other teachers in other rural districts because it allowed them to collaborate with other
teachers in the same grade levels and content areas. However, the number of districts participating had decreased, which Bill attributed to districts’ having different focuses.

**Sarah**

Sarah, who involved her district in a regionalized collaboration, was also instrumental in arranging the professional development for nine rural school districts. Sarah spoke to the benefits of having her teachers, of whom she had one in each grade level, meet with nine other teachers who taught at the same grade level. In addition, the districts were able to collaborate on grants, such as AVID, that continued to be a benefit to her students. Unfortunately, like Bill, Sarah also saw a decline in participation due to other districts’ not having similar school calendars or time to take teachers away from the district.

**Context**

In this study, a rural district’s classification as fringe, distant, or remote generally correlated with the number of students enrolled and the number of teachers employed, due to the distance of these schools from urban areas. In Washington State, a large portion of the funding schools receive is directly correlated with their number of students or full-time equivalents (FTEs). School districts with very small enrollments receive very few dollars, diminishing their ability to provide programs and, in the case of professional development, to bring in outside resources. Small staffing levels also make it difficult to provide effective learning opportunities given that many teachers teach in isolation because there is only one teacher per grade level or core content area, which limits opportunities for collaborative learning. Analysis of the interview data showed that the superintendents leading remote districts in this study joined with other remote districts at regional levels to enhance professional learning opportunities for their teachers.
Sarah, Bill, and Rick all played significant roles as superintendents supporting the regionalized professional development. And though each spoke to the many benefits of this type of collaboration, it seems that in Bill’s and Sarah’s cases, these opportunities to collaborate had decreased due to implementations schedules and lack of days to coordinate. Although context certainly played a role in motivating these superintendents and other rural superintendents to facilitate their regional collaboration, context did not seem to be playing a role in the decreased participation. Member districts’ locations and their commitments to implementing common initiatives may have played a role in allowing Rick’s regional consortium to sustain its numbers. Rick collaborated with districts that reside within one county and had addressed logistical issues that could act as roadblocks. The regional consortium Rick belonged to identified one central location to meet; agreed to a common school calendar allowing for regular meetings; and coordinated implementation of initiatives such as instructional frameworks, Common Core, and professional learning communities that became a pathway for regionalized PLC groups. Although Bill and Sarah both expressed the benefit to their teachers of meeting with other teachers through these regionalized meetings, both also expressed concern that the number of districts that will participate in future regional meetings will decrease, due to the inability of these districts to receive approved professional development days and the various focuses or implementations that each district is focused on that do not align with one another.

**Investment in Teacher Leadership**

Analysis of the interview data showed that context influences how superintendents provide professional development; superintendents in rural districts are forced to seek out various strategies to meet the challenges of the rural context. Throughout the participant interviews, when discussing the professional growth of teachers, Rick, Bill, and James all
emphasized the teachers’ role in that professional growth, which became a subtheme: Instructional Growth Through Professional Development and Resources.

Rick

Rick expressed that his district and regional partners invested time and money to provide training on how to implement professional learning communities in their school districts. In addition, in an attempt to motivate teachers to continue their professional growth, the regional group implemented a region-wide critical friends model. Rick noted that the model provided an avenue for teachers to take more of a leadership role in the professional development process, saying:

We used the critical friends model and so several received extensive training over the summer on the model. [Teachers learned] how to frame the discussions, how to present, and how each meeting is led. We really wanted the ownership to come from within and from the staff, so it wasn’t me telling you what to do, but it was you guys as a staff buying into what was going on and how can we help each other.

Rick explained that several leaders from the region received the critical friends training and as a result, when the groups came together as a regional PLC, one teacher leader had the skills and a greater understanding of how to facilitate the learning in his or her content or grade level groups. When asked if the superintendents or principals met prior to the regional PLCs, Rick replied, “The principals and superintendents have turned the content and meetings over to the teacher leaders and they meet prior to those regional meetings to discuss that content.”
Bill

Bill’s regional group, like Rick’s, invested in professional learning communities training. Bill expressed his satisfaction that his teachers were following a model used outside of education despite the legislature’s not supporting more professional development. He reported,

The first year we got Bob Eaker, who works with Bob DuFour. He was the keynote speaker and then we had teachers break up into subject or grade level meetings by county. So it’s really nice to get them with other teachers. What other profession doesn't do that, you know, doctors do it a lot and realtors do it. Why don’t teachers do it, and why does the state legislature think it’s a bad thing for kids to be home and teachers working together?

In regard to teacher leadership being a backbone of constructive PLCs, Bill was adamant in saying that

What we have found is it [teacher leadership] helps us with developing teacher leaders.

And we have got some folks that don’t want to be administrators but they are really, really good teachers and they like to share their craft of teaching with other teachers.

And though Bill expressed that he set the tone for the PLCs for the year, it was his teacher leaders who helped support the principal’s work on initiatives such as aligning curriculum and implanting common core.

James

James’s district, unlike those of Bill and Rick, did not participate in regional professional development or professional learning communities. However, James did assert that teachers should play a large role in planning and presenting professional development. James observed
that having teachers participate in that capacity is likely to benefit the district by creating greater overall buy-in from teachers with regard to their own professional growth. James provided an example of how he involved teachers in the professional growth process:

I would say out of the five district professional development late starts, three of them were teacher-led. [For example], what I’ll do is meet with the admin team and say, “Okay, what’s the theme or the pattern that we are looking at for that session?” And they’ll say, “It’s criterion two of [the] TPEP process and it’s around instruction.” “Okay, let’s look at the elements of criterion two and you guys identify a couple of teachers that you think are just nailing it in each of those criteria and have them present.”

James also described the benefit that this involvement provides:

There just seems to be a lot more buy-in by having the teachers do it and they are a lot more accountable to having to get up in front of the staff and present it, and we’ve had brand new teachers right out of the gate, right out of college get up there and present.

And we’ve had some seasoned veterans get up there and present. . . . We are going to be doing more of that this next year, more teacher-led stuff.

Sarah

Sarah, more remotely located and in a smaller district, like James spoke briefly about the benefit of having staff share out in staff meetings but did not speak to teacher leadership as a formal concept for increasing staff buy-in or promoting professional growth.

Context

Looking at the district’s size, location, and enrollment, it does not seem that these elements are a factor in the superintendent’s emphasis on having teachers play a greater
leadership role in professional growth. However, Rick and Bill, who were from smaller and more remote districts than James, invested in the formal professional learning communities training, which relies heavily on having teacher–leaders plan and facilitate the professional growth of their teams. In addition, Rick and Bill formally adopted the critical friends PLC model and the county-wide best practices PLC model, respectively, at a regional level with other rural school districts in an attempt to decrease the isolation felt by many small rural educators. Sarah, who led a rural and more remotely located district, did collaborate regionally to provide opportunities for her teachers to work with other teachers; however, she did not speak to teacher leadership as a formal construct other than by asking teachers to participate occasionally in staff meetings. Therefore, context with regard to district size or location did not seem to dictate these rural districts’ emphasis on teacher leadership; however, their overall rural context did provide for a need for teachers to become more heavily involved in the professional development process.

Superintendents’ Direct Involvement With the Classroom

Instructional leadership literature overwhelmingly points to the principal as the instructional leader (Hallinger, 2005, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004; Neumerski, 2012; Supovitz, Srinides, & May, 2010; Waters et al., 2003). Furthermore, the literature supports the concept of informal and/or formal classroom observation conducted by the principal as a key strategy for improving teaching and learning (Knapp et al., 2010; Leithwood et al.). Although much of the recent literature speaks to the principal’s role as instructional leader, as early as 1988 Murphy and Hallinger reported that in highly effective districts, superintendents were engaged in the monitoring of curriculum and instruction. More recent studies support Murphy and Hallinger’s findings, indicating that superintendents of highly effective districts regularly monitor student
achievement and instruction (Waters & Marzano, 2006) and furthermore communicate district wide the need for continuous efforts toward improving teaching and learning (Louis et al., 2010). Initial findings of the data analysis support the work of Waters and Marzano (2006) and Louis et al. (2010), as it is very clear that these rural district superintendents monitored instruction on a regular basis and that they did so by regularly engaging in classroom observation. Following the presentation of the interview data, I address how context plays into this theme given that, due to their remote locations, two of the rural district superintendents participating in this study were superintendent–principal instructional leaders, a role that affected their engagement with teachers in the classroom.

James

When discussing strategies he employed to improve the teaching and learning in his district, James asserted that it was engaging teachers in the classrooms through observations that led to improved teaching and learning. James described the process he used with his elementary, middle school, and high school principals:

We do walkthroughs every week and we alternate buildings. So like one week we’ll go to the middle school . . . . I’m doing that with each of the principals individually and as a larger group. So a high school principal and I will spend let’s say an hour and a half together, and maybe the assistant principal and I will go spend 45 minutes together one week, and then we’ll go all together to the high school another week.

When asked why he felt it was important for the superintendent to engage in classroom walkthroughs, James replied:

It’s important; this is something we learned from AWSP, that superintendents should be working and observing teachers, observing and watching our principals working and
observing teachers. Most people know that you are there to help them and you want to support them. They love having you in their class but you have to make it a pretty intentional and accountable thing. Principals know that it’s part of their evaluation and it’s part of their coaching and mentoring. If they are getting better, their teachers are getting better and if their teachers are getting better, the kids are getting better teaching and learning.

James also mentioned that he intended to explore the idea of sitting in on pre-observation and post-observation conferences if he could get a teacher at each school to agree to it.

**Bill**

Bill, the superintendent of Coopersville who worked with two principals, expressed the importance of being a good model for his principals and of monitoring classroom instruction. Bill briefly described the walkthrough process he engaged in with his principals:

- I find it works best for me as a rural superintendent to first of all be a strong role model for instruction and to know what’s going on in the classroom. I don’t spend as much time as I want to, but I have high priority to be in classrooms a lot. I work with the principals and we do several learning walks where we took iPads and we did the Marzano frameworks and would focus on different criteria, and teachers knew we were coming.

In alignment with James, who spoke to his intent to sit in on pre and post conferences if given permission by teachers to do so, Bill stated:

- As a small school superintendent, I help evaluate teachers. I think we’re asking principals to do so much, especially a rural school principal, with everything on their
plate so I observe at least two teachers, and I do the full observation and evaluation. As a superintendent, again, one of my personal goals is to get into the classrooms a lot more.

Sarah

Sarah, superintendent and principal of Jamestown, had the responsibility of evaluating teachers. When talking about her role as superintendent and also the principal charged with the improvement of teaching and learning in her district, Sarah explained:

I think that’s an important part of my job. So, I think first of all the awareness of what good instruction looks like and then really feeling and understanding that to make a difference in your educational program that’s what you’re going to have to do—you’re going to have to work with teachers to get in their classrooms. I think if there’s one piece of magic we do, or the thing that’s probably most effective [it] is just spending time having those conversations with teachers over and over. I mean I’m here late, I get here early; I never turn a teacher away.

When probed further regarding her role as principal responsible for observing and evaluating her teaching staff on top of acting as superintendent, Sarah spoke to the many challenges of the dual role:

I think the TPEP piece, while I think it provides rich conversations that we have been having with teachers and should be having, it’s overwhelming and I don’t know how you could really do it as it’s intended. [The instructional framework], it gave us a tool to use, but it was also at a time when we were trying to feel our way around the Common Core and the Smarter Balance field test. So it’s trying to find a way to make it all work. It is getting difficult to keep all the spinning plates spinning and that’s really what you have to
do to be successful. I mean, you have to be good at spinning plates if you are going to be good on this job.

Rick

When discussing walkthroughs, Rick, superintendent of Kingstown, spoke of a different experience due to the fact that he also serves as the K–12 principal and thus is mandated by the state to conduct teacher evaluations in his district. James and Bill spoke from a reference point of spending time in classrooms as a way to mentor principals and to facilitate conversations with their principals about good teaching and learning. Rick, like Sarah, spoke from the standpoint of conducting walkthroughs independently to complete the evaluation process:

One thing I just got in the habit of doing that I used to not do, is if I dropped into a class and even if for a couple of minutes when I’d come back, I’d log in to iObserve and fill out a quick form. That is just a walkthrough form and then that just went into one of the many for the final evaluation . . . And that worked for me because rather than doing it all in 1 month, over a period of a year, I did 20 or 30 walkthroughs and hit most of what I needed to hit.

As the superintendent and principal, Rick spoke to the importance of spending time in classrooms and having rich conversations with teachers around instruction; however, further discussions with Rick led to discussion about the challenges of being a superintendent and a principal in a small rural school district and the challenges this dynamic had on the effective implementation of new initiatives to improve teaching and learning. Rick explained:

For me in my job, I have many hats and I think for the staff too, they all have to wear so many hats. They just get stretched really thin; they just keep piling things on top of the
plate rather than thinning out the plate. [With regard to instructional frameworks], I haven’t had time to really go through it all with them and help lead that process because they don’t know necessarily what to do and what not to do. I say, “Well, here are your standards, follow your standards.” They don’t have time to do that either. So time I think is our biggest issue because we all have so much going on and people are here late, they are here early, they are here on the weekends, they are here over the break . . . . I think that is the hardest thing is that all of us are doing so much. It just—makes it hard.

**Context**

All four participating superintendents were adamant that spending time in the classroom was a high priority for them. Context, however, may play a role in the participants’ motivations for spending that time. Although all four participating superintendents expressed the belief that time spent in classrooms observing teachers leads to improved teaching and learning, those superintendents who played a dual superintendent–principal role facilitated this task independently and as a way to implement the mandated evaluation process.

James and Bill, leaders of rural districts with enrollments that warranted a superintendent and building principals, conducted walkthroughs to model that practice and to mentor their building leaders. James also mentioned that the walkthroughs allowed the teams to further learn the instructional frameworks and quality instructional practices.

Sarah and Rick, superintendents of more remote school districts, were faced with a dual role due to very small and declining enrollments. Sarah and Rick conducted observations and provided feedback to all teachers but did so in tandem with all of the duties that come with leading a district. Both expressed the difficulty of providing this type of dual leadership. Rick discussed “wearing too many hats” and being “stretched too thin,” noting that the rural context
made it difficult to properly implement important state initiatives, such as the instructional frameworks, that were critical for his teachers. Sarah expressed that to be good leader in the rural district, a person had to be good with “spinning plates” and too, that the configuration made it very difficult to properly implement instructional frameworks and the new state mandated evaluation using those frameworks. In fact, Sarah commented that in her context, “this could not possibly be done as intended.”

As the analysis shows, spending time in the classroom observing instruction was a significant function these superintendents engaged in as instructional leaders to improve instruction. Context, however, played into why and how the superintendents of small, remote districts facilitated this process and possibly had a negative influence on the implementation of critical initiatives intended to improve teaching and learning.

**Acquiring Resources**

Waters and Marzano (2006) reported that superintendents who engaged in district level leadership that involved “utilizing resources to support goals for instructional improvement” (p. 6) were more likely to have a positive impact on the overall student outcomes. This finding from the Waters and Marzano study led to discussions with the participants regarding the use of resources to support the instructional program. As a result of those discussions, a theme of this study emerged that focuses on the role of the rural school district superintendent as instructional leader: acquiring resources to enhance the educational process. The superintendents participating in this study and remotely located talked a great about their need to continually seek outside sources to meet the needs of their teachers and students. Again, the context of these rural districts and the effect that this context has on remote school districts’ ability to provide needed programs will follow the presentation of interview data.
Bill explained that there was a delicate balance to be struck between providing resources for the curricular program and keeping an eye on what his small community considered important. He elaborated:

I think you try and find something for everybody and then you make sure your budget can handle that; however, our board has been great about approving money for curriculum and materials, but you have to do things like get the gym floor refinished. I think [in] any district, big and small, but particularly small rural districts, the community wants you to take care of their facility because they are proud of it. But I also find [in] the rural communities, and it’s true everywhere, especially in small rural communities, they want you to treat their kids well. And that includes a safe building, and a warm building.

Bill continued the conversation by expressing that as a superintendent and instructional leader, he believed the best investment was in teachers. Furthermore, Bill described how, by providing assessment scores to his board, he got them to agree to use reserve funds to bring on additional teaching staff:

To me the best use of funds is not curriculum; the best investment is the teachers. We made a decision to hire and create a new position for a reading specialist. We were looking at tier 2 kids K–3, and our third grade reading scores were not good. And our math schools weren’t good, and the board, when they looked at the test scores, decided to dip into the cash reserve for next year to fund that position.
Discussing his position as instructional leader and superintendent managing and allocating resources for the instructional program, Bill specifically mentioned the challenges of the rural district and of balancing the funds between the community’s wants and needs and the internal needs. Bill did not speak to the sparse funding that Rick and Sarah alluded to, and Bill did not mention the need to continually seek grants to fund even basic educational needs, as did Rick and Sarah. Bill, however, did have an enrollment of approximately seven hundred students, almost five hundred more than Sarah and six hundred more than Rick, which significantly increased the number of dollars coming into the district. In the end, when focusing on the instructional needs of his district, Bill did express that current staffing levels needed to be increased based on test scores and that it was access to reserve funding rather than extra dollars that would allow for more staffing.

Sarah

Sarah commented that a very big part of her role was meeting the needs of her district and that therefore, she always looked outside of the formal funding structures of the state to enhance the educational program. Sarah described a time when she consulted with her regional consortium, which included several remote school districts, regarding possible local funding sources:

“Let’s look around this room here, guys,” I said. “I think most of us probably have resources,” you know, District A probably didn’t and maybe District B didn’t. “Steve, you could probably tap into that wave, you could probably go to the tribe.” We just looked around the room and said, “There’s only probably like two of you who don’t have either an industry or something, and there’s another way around that.”
Sarah’s comments show that she was aware not only of resources outside of her district but also that she could find those resources, locally or otherwise. Sarah described a time when her high school principal was passionate about starting a program and needed technology to get the program started.

Jim came back from another district and he was looking at the biomedical course. He was so impressed when the school brought in this cart of iPads and he came back and he was a little depressed, and he said, “Our kids are just never going to have these opportunities.” And I said, “Okay, what is it that you felt was such a springboard?” He said, “Well, those iPads.” And I said, “Okay, if this is important to you then there isn’t any reason why we can’t figure out a way to do that.” So, it’s kind of searching out the grants and the resources that make sense for you and then when you get an award, you say, “Let’s spend this on curriculum,” or “Let’s spend it in a way that moves us forward.”

When probed further about allocating resources toward instruction, Sarah explained, “We don’t put that kind of money away; we just kind of limp along and do what we need, because we don’t buy whole textbook adoptions anymore; we tend to piecemeal things together.” In fact, when discussing the purchase of instructional materials, Sarah made statements like: “We just had a little money left over” or “We just happened to be in a position where we had extra money at the end of the year because enrollment was a little bit better” or “Our mix factor was better and we didn’t hire another teacher so I took that money and purchased instructional items.” These statements indicate that, like Rick, Sarah was happy to be able to support and enhance the instructional program, but only if money was left over after the necessities of the district had been acquired.
Rick

Rick, superintendent and principal of the Kingstown school district, discussed the need for him as a rural school district superintendent to always be looking for grants and opportunities to provide not just the basics for his teachers and students but also enhancements for the instructional program. In terms of support of the instructional program, Rick explained that he was able to acquire a grant through the Environmental Protection Agency that allowed for additional training for his science teacher throughout the year. In terms of support for basic needs to support students, Rick was excited when he talked about working through the ESD and partnering with another rural district to acquire a prevention and support specialist. Rick explained that through a grant, he would finally have a counselor 2 days a week to work with students. Rick explained,

I don’t want to go to the typical “more money, more people” type thing, but the fact that we got that elementary counselor that will start next year is going to make a world of difference. We are only going to have her for 2 days a week, but that is going to make a world of difference because she is going to be able to take a lot of what I would deal with as the principal, because I end up doing a lot of counseling.

When probed further about resources and supporting instruction, Rick mentioned that whereas at one point he was able to focus resources on curriculum and implementation of new adoptions, his aging buildings had taken precedence over instruction and curricular materials. He observed:

My first 5 years we updated curriculum; everything over that 5-year period was re-adopted or changed. However, every year the maintenance issues got worse and worse and we failed the bond three times. We finally passed the capital levy, but it is not going
to do what is needed to do . . . . The reason this year’s budget was so tight was because last year we spent $150,000 over budget on maintenance.

Rick was clear in our interview about experiencing increased pressure to apply for grants to provide the basics for his district. In addition, the above excerpt touches on the added pressure school superintendents are under to pass local measures to maintain aging facilities and supplement state and federal budgets that clearly do not meet basic education needs.

**Context**

The superintendents in this study all expressed the belief that focusing resources toward the improvement or enhancement of the educational program was a priority. However, context, with regard to district location and enrollment affecting the amount of resources superintendents have in their budgets to dedicate to the instructional program, plays a large role in how resources are acquired and allocated. Sarah and Rick led districts in very remote areas with smaller enrollments. With much of the funding predicated upon the district’s enrollment, these schools do not have large budgets. In addition, school districts in Washington State rely heavily on the passage of levies to provide basic services for students. Many rural school districts reside in areas that have higher poverty rates, and therefore monies received from these levies, if they are passed at all, are substantially less than what schools from urban areas or located closer to urban areas receive. Analysis of these participant interviews shows that Sarah and Rick were experiencing this reality and therefore had to look outside of state and federal funding sources and acquire grants and revenue from local sources to improve the overall curricular and instructional program.
Superintendents’ Work With Principals Around Instruction

Recent empirical studies provide specificity with regard to actions principals in the 21st century are expected to understand and engage in to be effective instructional leaders (Louis et al., 2010). Louis et al. (2010) found that “district leaders in higher-performing settings invested in the development of common professional learning experiences for principals focused on district expectations for instructional leadership” (p. 146). With studies indicating that central office support for principal instructional leadership has an impact on student outcomes, specificity around exactly what the superintendent’s role is in that instructional leadership growth has become increasingly important (Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Green, 2012).

As others seek to learn how superintendents are supporting principals in their instructional leadership growth, the heuristic slant of this study had this researcher seeking answers as to how this work is playing out in rural district settings. Analysis of the interview data revealed that superintendents are working with principals to improve building level instructional leadership and that superintendents believe that principals are the avenue for continued improved instruction and student outcomes. The data also show, however, that the unique context of the individual rural districts has an impact on how the superintendents work with their principals.

James

James, who led a district with an enrollment of almost one thousand students, had three separate buildings: an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school, with a principal staffed in each. Asked about how he worked with his principals to improve the teaching and learning in his district, James described many strategies, which included the work he did internally: providing guidance, bringing individuals into the district to assist his team, and
supporting their development outside of the district. What James expressed the most passion about, however, was his role in developing his principals by insisting that to lead instructionally, a superintendent has to see what is happening in the classroom. As discussed in a prior theme, James spent a great deal of time in the classroom himself observing teaching alongside his principals and thus modeling the importance of that practice. He observed:

I think that our role as superintendents is to be not forcing, but gently, and sometimes not so gently, pushing for principals to be spending more time with teachers individually, or in classes, or in groups, and just saying, “What’s working, what’s not working, let’s look at your data, let’s look at your kids.”

James asserted that as instructional leaders, superintendents need to be more intentional about protecting the principals’ time to allow them more time in the classroom, and about making it clear to principals that the expectation is that they will be in classrooms. James stated that he was very direct with his principals when it came to their spending time observing teaching and learning and that he held them accountable for that time. James said that he had his principals develop a walkthrough log, allowing them to keep track of that time electronically, and allowing him to track that time as well. James reported, “I can pull up the principal’s calendar; I can see exactly what classrooms they are in, how many observations that they are doing, and how many evaluations that they are doing.” James also expressed the belief that if he was to support his principals in their efforts to spend more time in classrooms, he had to make sure teachers understood that having principals present in classrooms is a district-wide expectation. James continued, “As a superintendent I think you stand up in front of the whole staff and say, “This is what I expect that our principals are going to be doing; they are going to be in your classes a lot, and you should be expecting to see them on a regular basis.” James was
adamant that instructional leaders are to be in the classroom with teachers, which allows them to be more informed and better able to articulate what, specifically, teachers could do to improve.

Also in line with being a model for his principals, James discussed the importance of having discussions about continuous professional growth and explained that he used the Association of Washington School Principals leadership framework to guide his conversations with principals.

Just like with the teachers, we’ve been tackling one to two criteria per year. The real focus for us with principals has been with criterion one. It’s all about the climate and the culture, and setting the tone in your building. Every single conversation, whether it’s the use of data, whether it’s improving instruction, whether it’s managing resources, it’s all connected back to criterion one.

James also used the AWSP framework in the evaluation and professional growth process. James explained that he had his principals select a criterion and create two professional goals that they would re-visit at mid-year and at the end of the year. At the end of the year, James engaged in discussions regarding the principals’ growth goals and provided feedback to them based on his observations of their work throughout the year.

In addition to the collaborative professional growth process based on the AWSP framework, James mentioned a host of other resources he captured to enhance his principals’ opportunities to grow as instructional leaders:

Having folks like from AWSP or WASA come here has been really helpful . . . . Having other professionals come and spend time with us is really good because it is not just always on the superintendent shoulders. Sometimes they don’t want to hear from you,
but sometimes they need to hear from somebody else; I think that has been really good for them too.

James also worked with his principals through the Washington State Leadership Academy (WSLA) and although they completed the 2-year problem of practice cycle, he continued to have his WSLA coach come out to work with his principals around instruction. James also encouraged his principals to attend the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) and Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP) summer conferences, and said he’d like to have his principals attend national conferences. Within the district, James worked with his principals in meetings twice monthly and was purposeful in not allowing those meetings to become management focused. James explained that his focus was on instruction and said that he often will engaged his principals in book studies as a way to facilitate discussions.

Bill

Bill, the superintendent of a district with an enrollment of approximately seven hundred, had two school buildings, one with a K–5 principal and the other with a 6–12 principal. When asked how he worked with his principals to improve their capacity to lead instructionally, Bill stated that “principals are the key I think to driving instructional improvement.” Like James, Bill expressed that being a superintendent in the classroom allows him to act as a strong role model for monitoring instruction. However, his greater focus as expressed in the interview was on the time he spent with principals to improve their instructional leadership practice. He elaborated:

I sponsor a practitioner’s workshop and it’s in Vancouver, Washington and it’s 3 days . . . Other school districts bring a team of their people, whoever they want to bring. We have basically a two-and-a-half-day team meeting and we’ll plan the year out but the majority of it is focused on improvement of instructions.
Touching further on his work with the principals during the school year, Bill explained that he met with his principals once a week and that although the managerial aspects of leading their buildings were important, the meetings were heavily focused on leadership; Bill noted that he often used book studies to facilitate those discussions with his principals:

So I’ll do the book study and say, “Just pick one or two things that resonate with you,” or I’ll say, “Okay, do you agree or disagree that [the] author makes his points?” We have some good discussions. They have to get outside just the managerial stuff.

Looking outside of the district to assist in his principal’s development, Bill attended the AWSP framework trainings with his principals and called on representatives from AWSP to assist with his principals’ growth using the AWSP leadership framework. Like James, Bill used the AWSP framework to help develop the instructional leadership skills of his principals and had his principals create professional goals that he revisited mid-year and at the end of the year.

With regard to evaluating his principals using those frameworks, Bill acknowledged having some difficulty buying into the framework as a sole instrument in the evaluation and professional growth process:

I know every superintendent is struggling with how hard do you push your principals on evaluation. They are only evaluations. I know they are doing really well and I’m not hung up on making sure that we do everything that AWSP tells us to do. Some of this has gotten so cold and impersonal and I want to model to the principals that it is conversations, those face-to-face conversations that are really important. Yeah it’s okay to check something off and give a mark on the frameworks, but don’t forget the dialogue.
To model the importance of dialogue with his principals, Bill stated, he developed his own tool that focuses more on his staff to reflect on their work to bring forth the needed dialogue.

According to Bill,

Reflection is a tremendous tool to drive improvement because it’s got to be driven within. You can’t force somebody to do something, but you coach it. I created my own instrument and I have the principals reflect on what’s worked well this year and what didn’t work so well—who are you most proud of? And they just hand type it.

Bill spoke a great deal about his work with his principals and his belief that the work is now more about the instruction than about management. Bill expressed very strongly that as a superintendent, it was his responsibility to develop his principals as instructional leaders:

I have to really support and nurture them and I think as a good superintendent does. I connect with my principals. I see them almost every day. But I just think it’s critical . . . And I see my job, well number one is supporting the board and the community and doing what the board and the community wants us to do for the local school district. What that is, it is supporting the principals.

Like James, Bill engaged his principals in the Washington State Leadership Academy and made use of the leadership coach assigned to them through that academy to further their leadership work, which he stated was tremendous professional development for his administrators.

**Sarah**

Sarah, unlike Bill and James, played a dual role as superintendent and principal, which created a very different perspective when discussing her role in developing the instructional leadership capacity of her principal. Sarah served a district with slightly more than 200 students.
It includes a K–5 building, of which she is the principal, and a 6–12 building, with one principal. When asked about her role as the superintendent working with her principal around teaching and learning, Sarah explained that it is a two-way street:

> It’s really a partnership; it’s not really the person in charge . . . . I’m willing to let him head in his direction and if it doesn’t get to where it needs to be, I guess I establish the end goal then say, “Okay, this is where we need to be.”

Because of her role as superintendent and principal and the time constraints that the dual role imposed, Sarah expressed the importance of having the principal she worked with possess the skills needed to lead a building.

> I feel like that is a critical position, especially [because] in my role, dual role, I don’t have the time to run down to the high school; I only have to be able to trust that that person is good, has good thinking skills, good problem-solving skills, a good philosophy on why they’re doing this job.

Sarah reported that for years when she was the superintendent with two principals she would meet with her principals on a weekly basis and, for the most part, have philosophical discussions about education. However, due to the drop in enrollment and a loss of a principal, for the past several years she had not had the time to meet weekly. Sarah did express that she was likely to meet with her principal on a weekly basis in the upcoming year as she transitioned a new principal into her 6–12 building.

When asked about the evaluation and professional growth process used with her principal, Sarah did say that she used the AWSP frameworks to guide those discussions and referred to her past practice with the principal she had worked with for many years:
It was pretty informal as you can imagine; we used the AWSP framework for the principal evaluation. So again, I would just sit down with him in a meeting and just brainstorm and collaborate: “Where is it that you want to be? What is it that you want to accomplish, what can I do to help you get there?” [In terms of using the framework in the evaluation process], I am not really going to look at all those elements, because I think it’s overwhelming. But I think if people picked one and made progress on it, then really that’s what we want, we want a growth mindset, and what better way to do it than to demonstrate it.

Sarah again was adamant that when working with the new principal around instructional leadership she would be taking more of a partnership approach to that professional growth rather than a top-down approach, and she described a conversation she had already had with that individual that informed her approach to working with that principal:

I said, “This is a partnership; there are things that I have to take care of or may ask you to do, but for the most part, you’re kind of the master of your own fate. As long as we have the same philosophy and we’re heading in the same direction, you have a lot of flexibility to get there.”

When discussing the instructional leadership development of her principal, Sarah, unlike James or Bill, did not describe any type of outside professional growth opportunities she had her principal engage in; nor did she speak of having any representatives from AWSP or WASLA facilitate any type of in-district training. Sarah did express that
while some people are more structured at this, we feel our way through it, and in the end, either as a principal or as a superintendent, it is making sure that somebody is doing the work genuinely, with integrity, and not just doing it to get it done.

The comments Sarah made indicate that she had both a passion for a high level of leadership in her district and a very informal approach to instructional leadership growth. The informal approach, however, may have been a function of context in that Sarah led a district in a very remote area with low enrollments, forcing her to play a dual role, and thus requiring that she approach her leadership and model professional growth model more collaboratively with her principal.

**Rick**

Rick, who referred to himself as the “Super Principal,” had a completely different perspective with regard to the superintendent’s role in improving instructional leadership, because he played the dual role of K–12 principal and superintendent. Like James and Bill, Rick did participate in the Washington State Leadership Academy but was able to do so only because he collaborated with other remote, neighboring districts. Like Sarah, he did not describe using any specific assistance from AWSP to guide his work as a principal, but he did refer to his work with the regional principals’ group that met on a regular basis. When asked whether he used a framework to guide his work in the facilitation of the principal role, Rick explained that when he was able to budget for a principal to assist him, he did use the AWSP Leadership Framework to evaluate that principal. When asked further about his own instructional leadership development and it unfolded, Rick stated that he was on his own in this regard and mentioned that the board of directors, which was responsible for evaluating him, had not done so in the previous 6 years.
Rick’s experience was very different from that of James and Bill, who served only as superintendents, and even from that of Sarah, who in her dual role had one principal to supervise. Rick’s answers to questions about instructional leadership show that context played a significant role in terms of what type of professional growth opportunities he sought and the lens he used when engaging in those learning opportunities—that of principal or superintendent.

**Context**

Analysis of the interviews revealed that the rural school district superintendents believed that effective building level instructional leadership is key to teaching and learning. It also indicated that rural superintendents supported their principals in leading instructionally by providing mentorship and training. However, as the analysis shows, smaller, more remote rural school districts, due to the lack of or declining enrollments, have superintendents who play dual roles as superintendent and principal, a dynamic that affects how professional growth plays out, if it is pursued at all. In this study, James and Bill, leading districts closer to an urban area, had principals that led individual buildings, and both engaged in formal approaches to support these principals as they led instructionally. James and Bill ensured that principals were in classrooms providing instructional guidance to teachers, and both assisted in the instructional leadership development of their principals through in-district and out-of-district trainings. In addition, James and Bill both used the evaluation process that involves personal reflection on or assessment of leadership skills and professional growth goals by way of the instructional leadership frameworks. Sarah, because of her very remote location and small enrollment, played a dual role and provided guidance to one principal. As the superintendent, Sarah did express that she was responsible for the district-wide improvement of teaching and learning, and noted that she did engage in conversations with her principal to ensure that he was leading instructionally.
These conversations, however, were very informal, and according to Sarah, tended to be more philosophically based. Rick, like Sarah, remotely located as the sole administrator, engaged in his own professional growth but tended to see that professional growth through the eyes of a superintendent.

**The Self Development of the District Instructional Leader**

In the era of increased accountability for successful student outcomes, the successful superintendent is a superintendent of learning (Kowalski, 2006) who must develop the knowledge and skills to create and maintain instructional capacity within the district (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). Successful superintendents are interested in their professional growth and development (Orr, 2007) and recognize that building capacity from a managerial perspective is not sufficient if the goal is to improve student outcomes (Dickson & Mitchell, 2014). With large-scale studies indicating that the superintendent can affect student outcomes (Louis et al., 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006) this study explores specifically what type of knowledge rural school district superintendent seek to improve student outcomes and how they are engaging in this knowledge while leading a rural district.

**James**

Asked about the concept of the superintendent as instructional leader and the professional knowledge the superintendent needs to effectively lead in this manner, James responded by providing insight into how he engaged in the ongoing learning process:

I think it was Brian Tracey, years ago, [who] said, “If you want to be a great leader you got to be a strong reader, you got to be constantly reading and analyzing and looking at the information that’s out there, and then just picking and choosing your spot. So I think
to be a great instructional leader I think you have to constantly be reading and looking at what’s out there.

When asked about the type of material he read, James replied, “Actually a lot of non-education stuff, a lot of business, a lot of world issues type of stuff.” James spoke about a recent book he had read that he was planning on sharing with his principals:

*The Energy Bus* is a great book, it’s about a guy who basically is struggling at home, struggling in his marriage, struggling with his kids and his car breaks down on him, so he’s got to ride a bus to work. There is another one about soup, it’s about all the important ingredients of good soup, and it starts with people first then ingredients second; *Unbroken* is a story about just perseverance and will and mental toughness, and so those are the books I think that they really help. *The Boys in the Boat*, that’s all about leadership, it’s all about working as a team, all about dealing with diversity. Anything that I think that you can come up that is outside education, I think it’s important too.

When asked about learning opportunities that were valuable to him beyond reading, James asserted that the time spent with other superintendents at regional meetings and the monthly Northeast Washington Association of School Administrators (NEWASA) meetings was an invaluable time to network and learn from peers:

I think the superintendent meetings are always good, because you get a chance to learn from your colleagues and I think that’s the best place to learn. I think you can problem solve more issues that you’re dealing with as a superintendent by talking to a colleague at a meeting. . . . We solve more problems just talking to folks than really any other place.
James noted that he attended as many NEWASA meetings as he could and also found that taking a leadership role in those meetings is a way to learn. Outside of NEWASA, James stated that the summer conference he attends, as well as the annual superintendent’s conference sponsored by Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA), is a valuable time for learning; but in his comments he quickly circled back to the networking and talking with other superintendents as the greatest avenues for learning at those conferences. James had a commitment to his ongoing professional growth and displayed this commitment by completing his Ph.D. Furthermore, James participated in many of the state administrative conferences, passing on what he learned and completing his research.

**Bill**

When asked about his ongoing learning, Bill, like James, spoke very highly of collaborating with other superintendents through regional superintendent meetings and the NEWASA meetings held monthly at the ESD. He elaborated:

Not too much separate, to me it’s collaborative, the Leadership Academy is going good. For me it is the networking with other superintendents, and whether it be with the county —we meet once a month at the ESD or at a NEWASA meeting—it is what are you doing, how are you doing it. So to me that’s the best professional development, the networking and the collaborating.

Outside of the networking at regional administrative meetings, Bill’s work specifically focused on rural education gave him the opportunity to travel outside of Washington State, which he said was a great learning experience as he advocated for rural education, collaborating with other rural educators from all over the United States. Bill, like James, also attended the
WASA Summer Conference and annual superintendent’s conference. When asked whether he read to learn, Bill responded,

Oh yeah, I am always reading something. I am reading that brilliance book. But I also read a lot of fiction. I like English books and different authors and just because I enjoy reading, but I always have some educational book. Usually it’s what we’re doing with the book study.

Sarah

Sarah, like the other participants, affirmed that her time collaborating with the regional superintendent group was the most productive learning opportunity for her. She stated:

I find the regional superintended meetings are more useful, if we spend that time collaborating, saying, “What are you doing? And how are you doing that?” At one time the small-school superintendents had common goals and similar professional development because we were all doing programs together.

When asked whether there were other out-of-district opportunities she took advantage of to grow professionally, Sarah replied that although she always found some type of learning, her dual role as superintendent and building principal made it difficult at times to attend conferences or workshops. She explained,

I try to go to conferences; I don’t get to as many as I used to. Every time I get out somewhere, to a NEWASA meeting, to a superintendent meeting, even to the administrator AWSP training, I always come back with something I didn’t have before. So, I always feel like it was valuable; it’s just trying to find the time to get there. It was much easier before when I was just a superintendent. I don’t know what your schedule is
like, but at the end of June we’ve been cramming on budget these last few years. It’s June and I still have October things to finish. I need to get the I-grants applications done by July 1st and try to finish the year-end reports, so to get all of that done at the end of June is really tough for me.

Sarah’s comment about professional development being easier when she was just a superintendent was followed by a statement regarding distance: “If it’s a 2-hour meeting and while I always get something out of it, it’s not necessarily worth 4 hours of driving.” Understanding those contextual challenges, I asked Sarah whether there was any type of literature that she accessed to help her as a superintendent. Sarah did not expand on this question, only saying that she liked the ASCD books and that when she was able to go to a conference or training and someone recommended something she would pick it up, but she added that she was not always successful in reading it.

**Rick**

Rick, like the other participants, expressed the belief that reading is an important part of growing professionally. Rick said he liked authors who challenged him to think differently about education, and like James, he mentioned the importance of reading other material that focused on leadership. “I like leadership books,” he acknowledged, continuing, “I’m a Jim Tressel fan, I’m a John Wooden fan. So those are personal interests, but they also serve the purpose of what I’m doing.” In addition to reading, collaboration seemed to play a large role in Rick’s learning. Rick spoke to his time on the state WASA board and his collaboration with other members of the board on educational issues and how those conversations led to learning. Rick stated, “I don’t necessarily get different information than anybody else, but I can have some one on one, Q&As sort of discussions with those guys that are right there.” Rick explained that
he was also a member of NEWASA, and in coordination with the monthly NEWASA meetings he collaborated with his regional superintendents group. In addition, because Rick played a dual superintendent–principal role, he collaborated with the regional principal group. Rick mentioned that the superintendent and principals did collaborate at times but noted that the agenda items and nature of the business of being a principal and a superintendent were very different, so those meetings had become less frequent. Rick, like James, demonstrated his passion or need for learning and had completed his doctorate. James expressed that his board of directors had been very supportive of his ongoing professional growth and that they helped provide both financial support and time while he completed his superintendent credentials and his doctorate.

**Context**

The four participants in this study found that collaborative time spent with other superintendents offered the most productive learning opportunities. For Bill and James, their context with regard to distance and job responsibilities did not seem to prohibit their accessing these collaborative opportunities. Sarah and Rick, however, did mention having experienced some contextual challenges with those factors. Sarah spoke to the difficulty of leaving her district because of her role as elementary principal and questioned whether driving 4 hours for a 2-hour workshop or meeting was worth her time away. Rick did not discuss any obstacles to attending workshops or regional meetings, but he too had to travel long distances to attend NEWASA meetings and was the sole administrator in his district, which sometimes prohibited his leaving. Rick did mention, however, that his board was very supportive of his ongoing professional development, which may have allowed Rick to worry less about the challenges of the remote context.
Challenges to Rural Instructional Leadership

Rural school leaders encounter a leadership context that is very different from that of urban and suburban school leaders (Lamkin, 2006; Theobald, 2005). The context that sets them apart is the remote setting in which they are located, which in turn creates many obstacles and challenges that are substantiated in rural education literature (Lamkin, 2006; Yettick et al., 2014). As the purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of how the rural school district superintendent facilitates district-wide instructional leadership, the analysis of this data reflected and supported the rural education literature with regard to the many challenges present due to the rural location of these districts. Furthermore, the analysis specifically highlighted the unique ways in which context influenced how the participants engaged in superintendent instructional leadership within their district.

James

Asked about challenges to leading instructionally in a rural district, James spoke to the frustration of maintaining the implementation schedules of state and federal initiatives. He said,

The legislature is just going to keep throwing more stuff at us so there is no way that we can actually keep up pace because we are still trying to successfully implement things today that they approved 3 or 4 years ago.

Expanding on this statement, James made reference to the limited staffing in his rural district and to the balance of leading instructionally and pushing to implement frameworks and Common Core curriculum while addressing the day-to-day challenges principals and teachers already face. He observed,

I think there are challenges, I think because you are having the same group of folks doing most of the heavy lifting. If you were in a bigger system you would have coordinators or
executive directors who would be doing a lot of the heavy curriculum lifting or maybe the heavy professional development on instructional practices and strategies. So where is the balance between having your high school principal be a great instructional leader and prepare professional development knowing that he or she is working 90 hours a week, plus 5 or 6 nights a week and most Saturdays? And so you have to constantly be looking at where is the balance point because you want to push your principal to get better and keep working on those things, but you don’t want to press him so hard that he can’t stay focused on what his regular day-to-day job is.

James’s comments with regard to leading instructionally in a rural district were very focused on the lack of central office staff to support the heavy lifting that the principals do in his district. Focusing more on how limited staff affects his work, James mentioned that over the previous year he had spent what he felt was hundreds of hours sorting through parent and legal issues that were keeping him away from working with principals and teachers, whereas if he were in a bigger district he would have individuals to address that type of work. Although James led a district much closer to an urban area than those administrated by the other three participants in this study, as discussed in Chapter Three, and with limited enrollment, his district is considered a class two district and thus does not have central office staff, such as professional development coordinators or executive directors, that a district just 10 miles away has.

Bill

Bill, like James, acknowledged the pressure of having only limited staff to help him ferret through many of the day-to-day responsibilities that took away time that should have been spent on instructional matters. Bill described long-term projects and compliance paperwork, and even time spent with board members, as distracting him from leading instructionally. Bill explained:
We just got through a major construction project, so all the time and the effort [it] takes to do that. Our boiler system failed this year, so I have spent considerable time on that, and I spend a lot of time working with the school board. It just seems like we are doing so much compliance, the paperwork. That’s another thing that takes away time from us being an instructional leader: As a superintendent I do paperwork and have to complete many of our grants. The program review we just went through took a significant amount of time.

Beyond commenting on how the limited staff affected his ability to lead instructionally, Bill also mentioned that the location of his district with regard to distance from the larger cities affected his ability to find subs, and that the increased cost of travel to send teachers out of district for professional development impeded his ability to send teachers to valuable training opportunities.

Subs and location is very costly. I have said no to a lot of folks that want to go somewhere out of district. They have to be able to show me how it ties into what we’re doing or how is it going to improve your instruction. If they can show me and I have subs and funding, they go.

Bill simply stated that overall, “I don’t have the money to do what I want to do because of lack of resources.”

Sarah

The superintendent of a remote district like Bill’s, Sarah at one time had 700 students and at the time of the interview had approximately two hundred. When enrollment was higher, Sarah served only as the superintendent and had two principals to lead the two buildings, but when this
study was conducted Sarah served a dual role as principal and superintendent. She did not foresee that the enrollment would increase at any time in the near future. In fact, Sarah was more concerned that, because her community had become more of a vacation destination with limited industry, and more individuals were commuting daily than were living in the community, her enrollment might further decrease. These changing demographics have significant impacts on remote rural districts and leave superintendents scrambling to find resources to supplement their small budgets and teachers to fill classrooms. When discussing how she as a superintendent worked with her principals and teachers around instruction, Sarah went immediately to her current reality: the difficulty of simply finding quality teachers who want to teach in her remote district.

The problem that we have with finding teachers are those facilities are now hiring people who commute and they didn’t in the past, and again we had two or three applicants for an English position and that was it; one we weren’t interested in at all; the other one never returned the calls to set up for the interview, so essentially we had one. And the last time the English position was open we had one. I’m having the same problem right now with the elementary. I offered a job to somebody who would have been a commuter; he accepted on the spot, went home, talked to his wife, and she said no . . . . I need a quality teacher, even a young teacher; I don’t care if they’re young.

After having a conversation with an administrator from an urban district in Western Washington, Sarah provided some insight as to why she believed she was not able to find quality teachers in her remote district, as well as in Eastern Washington, which serves more rural students than do those districts west of the Cascades.
I talked to Tim at the career fair the other day and he said they pay 40 per diem days.
Forty per diem days, how do you possibly compete with that? There’s no wonder we’re not getting teacher applicants over here—it’s not even equitable. I think teachers need to be paid more, which is an odd position for me to actually advocate because I think you go into this career knowing what it is, but I do sense that we aren’t getting the quality of teachers we should get because it doesn’t pay well, and we aren’t getting them on this side of the state, or at least we’re not getting them here because we’re too far to commute from an urban area.

Adding to the rural instructional leadership challenges previously discussed, Sarah noted that to be good at the dual principal–superintendent role a person “must be really good at spinning plates.” Sarah further described some of the challenges that she encountered as she attempted to lead her district instructionally on a day-to-day basis while playing both roles, saying:

I have a kindergarten teacher sending me a student, our first-grade teacher sending me little Joey because he won’t do his school work—how do you turn that down? And I try to make students and teachers a priority so I never turn them away, ever. It does mean some late nights, to be quite honest.

Expanding further on her role as the principal responsible for observing and evaluating all staff, Sarah commented:

The teacher–principal evaluation piece, while I think it provides the rich conversations that we have been having and should be having, it’s overwhelming, and I don’t know how you could really do it as it’s intended. Well what you do and what more urban
districts do is they hire assistant principals who do nothing but evaluate. So, if you want to spend more money in administration, boy, that’s your key right there.

Sarah’s comments regarding being overwhelmed and not able to fulfill the principal evaluation process as intended shows that there is a separation even between rural districts in terms of superintendents having to play a dual role or having principals to provide that building-level leadership. James and Bill spoke to providing mentorship for their principals around observations and conversations with teachers about teaching and learning, but neither said that the observation or evaluation process could not be fulfilled as intended.

**Rick**

Rick, like Sarah, acknowledged the pressure of having limited staff, as he, like Sarah, once had a principal to lead his building but at the time of the interview was the superintendent providing building-level leadership on top of other leadership roles, which included being in charge of special education, technology, and homeless. Again, Rick wore “many hats” in his district, and like Sarah, because of those many hats, had a difficult time implementing and sustaining core state and federal initiatives that should lead to improved teaching and learning. In Rick’s district, he suggested, it was the continued initiatives that created a toxic culture due to the increased pressure on a small staff. As Rick put it:

This is my eighth year and we have had three different assessment systems and I think three different sets of standards and who knows what else; Smarter Balance came on last year, it became all-consuming for them and it created a toxic culture here. So I had to pull them together and have that frank conversation of, “You will stop acting how you are acting about this test, teach your class, stop freaking out about the test. We will take it when it is time and we will be fine.”
As was discussed earlier, limited funding for staffing meant Rick’s school was without a counselor for years because the very small rural community was hesitant to pass a bond because of the increased taxes. As a result, Rick’s budget was largely devoted to keeping old buildings inhabitable. Rick described his reality with the aging buildings:

The blood sucker is the maintenance of the building because it is so old. The high school is 86 years old, the gym was built in 1948, the elementary building was built in 1956—same with this part. The boiler is a 1921 coal boiler that was converted to diesel in the ‘60s. We spend huge amounts of money in maintenance on this building; that is where all the money goes and everybody knows it.

On top of keeping buildings open, Rick, like Sarah, due to the remote location of his school, also faced the challenge of keeping a full staff of teachers to provide needed programs. Rick expressed that because of his remote location he had only two substitute teachers he could rely on to fill in when teachers were absent and that he had a difficult time replacing vacant teaching positions. When asked how he was able to fill positons while following the federal Highly Qualified Teaching law, Rick acknowledged that he already had many of his staff teaching outside of their teaching area to provide needed programs. “I don’t care about the law,” Rick asserted, adding:

I have had one of my elementary teachers teaching middle school English for a couple of years, my Special Ed teacher has been teaching middle school social studies for a couple of years, and my science teacher was elementary endorsed, but I had him teaching high school social studies. Last year I finally did get them all through the tests and they all passed, but my art teacher next year is going to be the sophomore English teacher, and she is not qualified.
Rick’s remote location offered many challenges, including difficulties in simply providing the basics necessary to keep buildings open and warm and to keep teachers in classrooms. Rick offered sound instructional leadership for his district; however, because of the many hats that he wore and challenges he faced, his instructional leadership approach on a daily basis had to be very different from that of a nonrural district superintendent.

**Context**

The data do support current literature regarding the challenges rural district superintendents face as they lead their districts. Those challenges range from the lack of central office staff to difficulties in providing very basic educational needs such as teachers to fill a classroom and a warm building in which to teach kids. The data also demonstrate that although all four participants were leaders of distant or remote rural districts, distance was the common denominator that provided all the participants with unique challenges to providing district-level instructional leadership.

A district’s distance from an urban area has an effect on the number of students accessing those schools. The primary avenue for funding schools in Washington State is based on enrollment; therefore, the smaller the school district, the more limited a district’s budget, resulting in limited support staff, number of administrators to lead buildings, access to a viable teaching staff, and resources to provide basic educational needs.

James, approximately ten miles away from an urban area, had three principals, one to lead each building. James discussed the challenge of having only a limited central office staff to assist the principals and himself. James referenced not having professional development coordinators as larger districts do, which could ease the burden of his principals in having to provide that service. James also discussed not having executive directors to do some of the work
he was doing, such as deal with legal issues that prohibited him from working with his principals around their building-level instructional leadership. James did not speak specifically about challenges in finding a viable applicant pool to fill open teaching positions. With regard to resources, James had two buildings in his district that were less than 6 years old, and he did not speak of having a general lack of resources to ensure that students were receiving a quality education.

Bill, in a remote district but approximately forty-five minutes from the nearest urban area, had two principals, and he also spoke of having limited central office staff. Bill described spending several hours completing compliance paperwork and other annual grants and suggested that the time spent completing these menial tasks took valuable time away from instructional leadership work with his building principals. Bill also described how his remote location made it difficult for him to find not teachers but substitutes to fill in for absent teachers and those wanting to attend professional development outside of the district. Bill added that the professional development piece was also a challenge due to the expense of sending teachers longer distances. Resources were something Bill said he did not have enough of; however, he spoke of the delicate balance of allocating money to different programs due to the perspectives of the small community in which his district resides.

Sarah, approximately two hours away from the closest urban area, was the superintendent with virtually no central office staff, and she was also the K–6 principal. Sarah’s perspective was completely different from that of the other participants given that she struggled to provide instructional leadership to her teaching staff while fulfilling the many demands of the superintendency. As far as providing that instructional leadership support to her co-principal, Sarah saw the process as collaborative, and because of time constraints, said she had to hope that
the individual leading her 6–12 building possessed those leadership skills, because she was struggling already to meet those needs of her teachers. Sarah’s context, a small aging community with a declining population, meant she could not find viable substitutes, let alone a candidate pool to choose from when positions opened.

Rick, also almost 2 hours from the nearest urban area, was the sole administrator in his district. Rick provided the district-level leadership and the K–12 building-level leadership, and he served as multiple directors. Rick reported spending time with teachers whenever possible to improve instruction while playing the superintendent role. The school district Rick led is in a very small community and he, like Sarah, had a difficult time finding teachers. In fact, Rick had several educators teaching multiple subjects and suggested he had to ignore federal highly qualified teaching rules in order to cover the core curricular areas. Rick said that resources in his district were scarce given the minimal enrollment funds at his disposal, which he had to spend almost entirely on maintaining aging facilities.

Rural school district instructional leadership faces many challenges, and the challenges, as the data show, are extreme due to the unique context of each district. What the data also show is that each superintendent had a unique way of meeting these challenges and provided the needed instructional leadership that studies suggest can have a positive impact on student outcomes.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of rural school district superintendents as they provided district-level instructional leadership. This chapter discussed seven themes that emerged from an analysis of the qualitative data: (a) setting direction, (b) supporting the instructional growth of the district, (c) the superintendents’ direct involvement
with the classroom, (d) acquiring resources for the instructional program, (e) the superintendents’ work developing principal instructional leadership, (e) the self-development of the district instructional leader, and (f) challenges faced by rural school district instructional leaders. The theme setting direction was further given a subtheme: the superintendent and the board focusing on instruction and student achievement. Supporting the instructional growth of the district was further divided into two subthemes: (a) regionalized professional development and (b) investment in teacher leadership. Excerpts from the participant interviews were given within the presentation of the analysis to provide the participants’ authentic voice.

The following themes provided insight into what these four participants believed were priorities in facilitating their instructional leadership, how they facilitated this type of leadership, and the unique contextual challenges faced by each as they did this important work. The data also were informative as they provided specific leadership strategies employed by these rural superintendents as they adjusted to their unique challenges and supported the instructional and learning needs of their districts. These identified strategies were important because they informed my practice as a researcher and superintendent and other rural superintendents who read this study. Chapter Five is a summary of the study and presents the conclusions I as the researcher gleaned from analyzing the data and engaging in this research. Furthermore, Chapter Five specifically speaks to how each conclusion may inform future education policy and practice, and to a possible need for future research. Finally, the chapter describes how the heuristic nature of this research increased my knowledge of rural instructional leadership and, more specifically, how it has informed my practice as a rural instructional leader.
CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the role of the rural school district superintendent as instructional leader. Specifically, the study focused on four rural school district superintendents in northeast Washington State who were known as effective instructional leaders. This qualitative phenomenological study captured the voices of these four participants through open-ended interviews as they explored and recalled their lived experiences as the rural district instructional leader. Seven core themes arose from the data analysis, which were discussed in Chapter Four. They were: (a) setting direction, (b) supporting the instructional growth of the district, (c) the superintendents’ direct involvement with the classroom, (d) acquiring resources for the instructional program, (e) the superintendents’ work developing principal instructional leadership, (f) the self-development of the district instructional leader, and (g) challenges faced by rural school district instructional leaders. In addition to the core themes, subthemes emerged in both setting direction and supporting the instructional growth of the district. Context, which played a very strong role in how each superintendent facilitated his or her role as the instructional leader within each theme and subtheme, was also discussed. This final chapter discusses the conclusions and implications of the study and emphasizes the central points and what they mean to educators and administrators.

Conclusions of the Study

Four key conclusions surfaced as a result of this study: (a) rural school district superintendents communicate a focus on improved teaching and learning by being heavily
engaged in the classrooms observing teaching; (b) rural school district superintendents engage with other rural districts to provide aligned and collaborative professional development; (c) superintendents rely heavily on one another to lead instructionally; and (d) the remote context provides rural school district superintendents with additional and unique challenges to instructional leadership. These conclusions are discussed in the following sections.

**Rural Superintendents Communicate a Focus on Improved Teaching and Learning by Being Heavily Engaged in the Classroom Observing Teaching**

The data analysis clearly showed that rural school district superintendents engage in classroom observations, either individually or collaboratively with other school administrators, as a strategy to mentor principals and to promote, and reinforce the need for improved teaching and learning in the district. This practice was established within the instructional leadership literature, through large-scale qualitative and quantitative studies, as having an impact on positive student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988). Also identified within the data were the superintendents’ motivations for engaging in classroom observations. Superintendents serving in locations closer to urban areas facilitated this process as “walkthroughs” or “learning walks” conducted to mentor and observe their school principals. For one participant, the collaborative walkthroughs were an avenue for formally evaluating his principals in the process of observing and identifying evidence of quality teaching practices.

Context has been thoroughly discussed in this study with regard to the unique settings of each rural district and the impact of that setting on how the superintendent leads instructionally. With regard to the superintendent engaging in classroom observations, for those participants playing the dual superintendent–principal role, their purpose for frequent classroom observations
was not to collaborate with principals but to provide specific and frequent feedback directly to the teachers they supervised in their schools. These observations and the subsequent feedback provided were also completed as a function of the formal observation and evaluation process required by law.

Whether through providing feedback to principals about the importance of observing teachers or through providing feedback directly to teachers, the rural superintendents in this study noted, their presence in the classroom improved the district’s focus on improved teaching and learning and led to more in-depth conversations with teachers about quality instruction.

Rural School District Superintendents Engage With Other Rural Districts to Provide Aligned and Collaborative Professional Development

Providing professional learning opportunities for teachers and administrators in rural schools is very difficult due to geographic constraints. Rural schools are often located in remote areas, with each having a unique professional development need based upon context (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). Analysis of the data in this study shows that the rural superintendents serving in remote areas are meeting the challenge of distance by collaborating regionally. These regionalized efforts benefit superintendents by allowing them to collaborate on the implementation of state and district initiatives, pool resources to bring in comprehensive professional development providers, and give teachers the opportunity to learn from one another as they implement these initiatives and apply these learnings in their classroom instruction. These collaborative efforts in some regions have been termed “county-wide best practices” or even “the critical friends model.” These collaborative models have joined rural districts together to uniformly adopt district initiatives such as professional learning communities, and state-wide initiatives like the Teacher Principal Evaluation Process. Financially, these rural districts have
benefited due to the pooling of resources, which has allowed teachers to receive comprehensive professional development from professional in-service providers. In addition to sharing professional development costs, regionalized groups have shared resources to write and receive grants, such as AVID, that supplement and enhance rural district curricular programs. Teachers are often isolated in small rural districts by grade level and content because teaching staffs are small. Regionalized professional development and professional learning community models benefit teachers professionally by providing them with the opportunity to learn from teachers of similar grade levels and content areas, and, furthermore, motivate teachers to take a more active role in their own instructional growth due to the teacher leadership component of the professional learning community model.

**Superintendents Rely Heavily on One Another to Lead Instructionally**

In today’s era of school reform, the successful superintendent must develop the knowledge and skills to create and maintain instructional capacity within the district (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). With studies indicating that superintendent leadership behavior has an impact on student outcomes, additional studies are needed to discern the type of professional development necessary to enhance district-level instructional leadership knowledge and skills (Cantú, 2013). Having a particular interest in furthering my own leadership skills and the learning capacity of my district, I was particularly interested in how other rural district leaders advanced their understandings of district-level instructional leadership. A review of the data revealed that rural district superintendents rely heavily on one another to learn, through regionalized superintendents meetings, formal meetings conducted through the ESD, and informal networking.
In discussions of professional growth, all four participants stated that the most effective avenue for their learning and growth was peer-to-peer discussions at regional superintendent meetings. These meetings are also attended by leadership from the local Educational Service District 101 (ESD) and at times include local legislatures, as well as leaders from local government. The rural school superintendents participating in this study met once a month with their regional peers, discussing and agreeing upon agenda items such as collective bargaining, teacher and principal evaluations, legislative issues, and funding. Discussions on these various topics and on how each superintendent guided his or her district through these topics provided the superintendents with applicable strategies or roadblocks to consider within their individual districts. More importantly, and as it relates to this study, these meetings were an opportunity to discuss federal, state, and district level educational issues specific to rural school district superintendent leadership.

Northeast Washington Association of School Administrators (NEWASA) meetings were also identified in the data as a viable opportunity for rural superintendents to learn collaboratively. NEWASA is a formal organization with an elected board of directors comprised of superintendents from the northeast region. NEWASA meetings are held once a month at the regional ESD and incorporate leadership from urban and rural school districts and include district level leaders representing various programs, from finance to special education. The NEWASA meetings are formal meetings with agenda items created by the NEWASA board and include monthly reports from the superintendent of ESD 101, Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA), the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), and the NEWASA board. These meetings are an avenue for leaders from all sizes of districts representing a number of programs to hear from state-level organizations regarding current
educational topics; they are also a venue for discussion of those topics. Furthermore, time is given for district leaders to present ideas or programs that they have implemented in their districts, and outside vendors are given an opportunity to present programs that have the potential to benefit districts. In addition to the presentations, these meetings include time for component groups, such as superintendents, special education directors, and business managers, to meet and discuss current topics within their groups. The data show that these participants took advantage of this forum to network and that it provided the more remote participants who facilitate other leadership roles in a district, such as special education, a chance to network with other directors of those specialized programs.

The data also indicate that rural school district leaders attend the state-led fall and summer conferences as well as the annual superintendents’ conference. All of the participants expressed the belief that these conferences enhanced their learning when they attended the assortment of breakout sessions; however, they made it very clear that in the end, it was the opportunity to talk to their peers about leadership that assisted them in leading their own districts.

**The Remote Context Provides Rural School District Superintendents With Additional and Unique Challenges to Instructional Leadership**

Context played a very large role in this study. The data analysis presented seven themes, and each was followed by the impact or role of context on that particular theme. Overall, the context that sets rural and urban superintendents apart is the remote settings in which these small districts are located. The rural school district location creates many obstacles and challenges that have been substantiated in rural education literature, including (a) limited resources and support
(Lamkin, 2006; Yettick et al., 2014), (b) distance (Yettick et al., 2014), and (c) funding (Yettick et al., 2014), and these challenges were apparent throughout the data in this study.

Limited central office staff was a challenge that all four rural school superintendents struggled with, and increasingly so due to the full changes in learning standards, assessment systems and requirements, instructional and leadership frameworks, and an evaluation process that has heightened the professional awareness of teachers and principals. The increased workload born from these system changes, due to the difficulties of implementation and of promoting the subsequent necessary professional development, placed a heavy burden on the superintendents as they navigated their districts through these changes. As was noted in Chapter Three, urban districts are often staffed with curriculum coordinators who plan and provide professional development or with executive directors to assist principals in transitioning schools through these changes. The rural school superintendent with a limited central office staff does not have this type of support, which as seen in this study often led to superintendents’ scrambling to fulfill the instructional and managerial leadership responsibilities of the district.

Distance was also a factor in leading the rural school district. Due to the remote locations of these districts, professional development opportunities outside of the district were limited due to the cost of sending staff and difficulties in acquiring substitute teachers to fill teacher vacancies. Although finding substitute teachers was a challenge for these remote leaders, finding qualified teachers to fill teaching vacancies was a greater concern. The data presented in Chapter Four described occasions upon which very few viable applicants pursued teaching positions in the more remote areas, and often teachers were asked to teach outside their areas of endorsement to cover the core content areas required by the state.
Funding is a challenge for rural school districts. Due to the limited enrollments in these small communities, and the declining enrollments experienced by many, budgets are limited. Rural school district superintendents often look outside of the formal state and federal funding sources to supplement educational services, and they have limited room to budget for curriculum and instruction expenditures.

The four participants in this study each described challenges encountered when leading in the rural context. However, the data indicate that superintendents who lead districts in the more remote areas experience challenges far and above those faced by superintendents in rural districts that serve students closer to urban areas. Rural district leaders in distant locations often have principals staffed in each building, which, according to the data, buffers these superintendents from having to facilitate all district responsibilities, for example, researching and providing professional development. These superintendents also have the ability to hire support staff such as special education and technology directors, giving the superintendent more time to focus on instructional leadership activities. Conversely, the more remote superintendents execute a leadership within the district that is more encompassing due to the multiple superintendent–principal–program director role. The remote school district superintendent must effectively lead at the district and school levels and must attend to the relevant duties, needs, and responsibilities required by the law, the board, the community, the students, and the teachers. Rural school districts located closer to urban areas have a larger pool of teaching candidates to apply for vacant teaching positions. In the more remote areas, teachers are leaving, and these smaller communities are scrambling to find qualified applicants to take their places. The result, according to the data, is that administrators in these areas are requiring teachers to teach various core content areas to be able to meet the state required curriculums. Enrollments often differ
greatly between the distant and the remote school districts, leaving a large discrepancy between the sizes of the budgets these superintendents have to work with. Larger districts require more staff and therefore larger budgets; however, superintendents leading in the distant locations are able to budget for additional support staff and curriculum and instruction expenditures. As presented in these data, the superintendents leading in the more remote locations seek grants or other outside funding sources to provide the necessary supports for students, such as guidance counselors and much-needed technology. The remote superintendents in this study did not budget for curriculum and instruction because their priorities were ensuring that they were able to keep their aging facilities open for students.

Implications of the Study

The first implication of this study involves the awareness that superintendents of rural school districts are faced with unique challenges to facilitating instructional leadership within their districts. The impact that the rural school district context has on district-level instructional leadership has been thoroughly discussed in the literature, the data analysis, and the conclusions. The following paragraphs speak to the implications of this study with regard to each conclusion.

Rural Superintendents Communicate a Focus on Improved Teaching and Learning by Being Heavily Engaged in the Classroom

Analysis of the data provided evidence that superintendents engage in classroom observations to mentor principals, evaluate principals in their practice of observing teachers, and finally, for the more remote school district superintendent, to evaluate and provide feedback to teachers. With this understanding, superintendent preparation programs should ensure that discussions are taking place with superintendent candidates about the philosophy of this classroom engagement, both in terms of its importance and of possible structures for making
classroom engagement an effective process within the district. Furthermore, superintendent programs must emphasize the need for district leaders to understand and articulate to principals and teachers what quality instruction is. Much literature and training exists within the state that prescribes the conversations that should take place between the superintendent and principal in the evaluation process; however, little discussion has taken place regarding the practice of superintendents and principals engaging in classrooms, or the appropriate superintendent guidance resulting from that activity—for example, protocols that provide structure for the walk-through and guiding conversations that follow a superintendent–principal classroom observation.

With regard to future research, many of our rural school superintendents play dual roles that, according to the data in this study, are having an effect on their level of engagement with teachers around instruction due to the time constraints involved in facilitating both leadership roles. State leaders should survey these small, rural district leaders who are serving dual roles to evaluate their needs with regard to teacher engagement. Future research on rural school leaders facilitating several leadership roles within the district could also provide insight into the possible impact that the multitude of roles is having on instruction in the small, rural school district setting.

**Rural School District Superintendents Engage With Other Rural Districts to Provide Aligned and Collaborative Professional Development**

This study highlights specific strategies employed by regional groups to promote and provide for the professional growth of their principals and teachers. The data also highlight barriers to consistency such as scheduling conflicts, differences in implementation schedules, and multiple district focuses. By identifying successful collaborative strategies as well as barriers to them, this study may inform other regional groups about practices that strengthen their
collaborative efforts to provide effective regionalized professional development. At the regional level, ESDs are making efforts to provide professional development to teachers, but for the most part provide that training at the ESDs. ESDs could be more proactive and support the concept of regionalized professional development by bringing rural superintendents together to have discussions that identify barriers to regional professional development and support professional development calendars and structures that are more aligned district to district, which would allow ESD professional development providers to reach several districts at one time. This study has mentioned the many legislated items that have driven changes in our schools but has not mentioned the state-funded school improvement days that were taken away by the state. State policy would do well to provide uniform days for professional development, which would increase the chances of regionalized professional development’s being enacted. Future research focusing on those regions that have been able to implement and sustain regionalized professional development could inform those that create policy about the importance and effectiveness of this concept.

**Superintendents Rely Heavily on One Another to Lead Instructionally**

All four rural superintendents in this study emphasized the value of networking and collaborating with other superintendents as the most effective avenue for learning. In the past 4 years, the state of Washington has implemented instructional frameworks for teachers, leadership frameworks for principals, a new evaluation process for teachers and principals, and the Common Core curriculum. Although the state has provided both the directive and timelines for implementing it, it has left the details of these implementations up to the local districts. With this understanding, superintendent preparation programs should be developing district leaders by focusing on the aspects of implementation and change in organizations. If the past is any
indication of what superintendents will experience in the future, district leaders need to be prepared to navigate their districts through change, and leadership preparation programs should prepare future superintendents by arming them with skills to effectively guide organizational change. Specific to preparing leaders for the rural district superintendency, organizations such as WASA hold in-services for superintendents who are new to the position. These trainings are inclusive of all superintendents, urban and rural. These organizations would do well to provide training that focuses on leading in a rural district. These trainings could provide insight into many facets of rural educational leadership, including managing budgets and facilities, negotiating, and navigating the many challenges of leading in a rural district. In addition, these organizations should provide a more structured mentoring program that matches rural veteran superintendents with those entering the rural leadership. Mentors are currently identified, but a more structured program could provide mentors with talking points as well as designated timetables for assisting and meeting with new leaders.

This study brought to the surface the importance of regional superintendents’ meetings as an avenue for learning; however, many smaller remote rural district leaders are unable to attend these meetings due to dual leadership roles or distance. This researcher, recently attending a NEWASA and superintendent meeting, observed that many of our remote school district leaders were not in attendance. Regional leaders are aware of the challenges that prohibit rural superintendents from attending; however, surveying the specific challenges that prevent rural superintendents from attending these monthly meetings could provide state and regional leaders with information that could help offer the more remote leaders access to their peers. Future research could address the limited access of many rural leaders to their peers and the
implications of this lack of access for rural districts’ implementation of state and federal initiatives and possible student academic outcomes.

**The Remote Context Provides Rural School District Superintendents With Additional and Unique Challenges to Instructional Leadership**

The data analysis presented in Chapter Four highlighted the many challenges rural district superintendents face, and furthermore, the unique and very difficult challenges experienced by the more remote districts. As mentioned in the section above, state organizations should be providing focused professional development for these leaders that prepare them for the many challenges of rural leadership, including knowledge of where to find resources to assist them and mentorship for ongoing support. Regional ESDs could also provide rural-focused professional development and structured mentorship programs that match novice and veteran rural superintendents in like districts. Regional ESDs are aware of the many challenges of leading these school districts, and from this researcher’s perspective provide many services that assist rural district leaders. State educational leaders and policy makers, however, need to be more cognizant of the many challenges faced by rural district leaders to ensure that budget constraints are not limiting these leaders’ efforts to provide a basic education. Information regarding the hardships or challenges faced in these remote areas should be gathered and policies created to support rural district funding. In addition, with the teacher shortage being felt in many districts in Washington State, information should be gathered regarding positions that are not being filled and the lack of candidates applying for these positions. Focusing on the severity of the challenges the more remote school districts experience, future research should be considered to evaluate the impact that these challenges have on the superintendents’ ability to fully implement state and federal initiatives.
Reflection

In Chapter One of this study, I included a section that described my personal perspective and motivation for the study. In summary, as a new superintendent of a rural school district focused on student achievement, I wondered whether I was providing my teachers and building leaders with the resources and direction they needed to do the important work. This study allowed me the opportunity to go out and seek those answers through the lived experiences of those who do this work right beside me, and reflecting on the research, the interviews and analysis, and finally the conclusions, I feel that I have learned. The willingness and foresight of my advisor who assisted me in approaching this study in a heuristic manner allowed me the opportunity to be very specific about my goal of learning about the rural school district instructional leadership role. The data analysis and conclusions of the study reflect my learnings; however, specific to my own practice as the instructional leader of a rural school district, I intend to continue or strengthen my leadership in the following three areas: (a) increase time spent in the classroom observing teaching with principals; (b) engage the board more actively in the process of improving instruction and student outcomes; and (c) provide more structure when working with school principals around data and instruction.

Increase Time Spent in the Classroom Observing Teaching With Principals

Although the rural district context and the enrollment that a school district has dictate a school district’s ability to have both a superintendent and principals or a superintendent who must play a dual role, this study reaffirmed my belief that superintendents must be actively engaged in the classroom. More importantly, because of the small district context, rural school district superintendents should take the opportunity to have an impact on instruction and learning. Each participant in his or her own way was in the classroom having an impact on
classroom instruction and, either via superintendent to principal or superintendent–principal to teacher, they spoke to the importance of the conversation about instruction and suggested that the superintendent has to be in the classroom in order to facilitate a conversation.

**Engage Board More Actively in the Process of Improving Instruction and Student Outcomes**

The participants in this study actively engaged their boards in the conversations and processes that take place in a district around instruction. Some participants were more formal regarding the process they used to involve the board in this process; the important takeaway was that it was taking place and that research supports the notion that this process has an impact on student learning. My conversations with the participants allowed me to glean ideas from each that I will use with my board of directors to facilitate conversations concerning our district’s goals and processes for improving instruction, and how we are using data to inform our decisions regarding our use of resources to support our students.

**Provide More Structure When Working With School Principals Around Data and Instruction**

As the superintendent of the Newport School District, I have the opportunity to work with three school principals. After interviewing the participants in this study, I was able see how the other superintendents in this study worked with their principals to improve instruction. One of the participants stated that “the principals are the avenue for improved instruction.” I agree with this statement, and going forward my practice will reflect this belief as I facilitate a more in-depth, structured professional growth process for the principals in my district. This process could include in-depth book studies, administrative professional learning communities, meetings
that are multiple days and allow for a more focused learning process, and more formal observations of principals engaging with teachers.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What is your perspective of instructional leadership in your district?

2. If you had to break down the responsibilities of the instructional leader into different areas, what would they be?

3. As the superintendent, how do you see your role and responsibilities with regard to instructional leadership?

4. With regard to the superintendent as district instructional leader, can you identify challenges to facilitating this role within the rural school district context?

5. What are your perceptions as the superintendent with regard to policies stemming from the NCLB Act and your role as the district instructional leader?

   How have the federal and state accountability measures impacted the amount of time you spend on instructional matters compared to other leadership activities you engage in as the superintendent?

6. Reflecting on your preparation to be an instructional leader, what has been most helpful?

7. As the superintendent, what types of professional development do you engage in to develop and/or improve your instructional leadership capacity?

8. What do you think you could use more help, or professional development in?

   Is there anything else you would like to talk to me about regarding this topic of instructional leadership and the superintendent role?
Please read the five district level responsibilities below and to the best of your ability please rate the superintendent between 1 and 5 based on your knowledge of the superintendent in effectively carrying out these responsibilities, with 1 being the lowest score and 5 being the highest.

1. **Collaborative goal-setting**

   Effective superintendents include all relevant stakeholders, including central office staff, building-level administrators, and board members, in establishing goals for their districts (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 11).

   - Board members are involved in the goal setting process.
     
     Rating: 1 2 3 4 5

   - Building-level administrators throughout the district are heavily involved in the goal-setting process.
     
     Rating: 1 2 3 4 5

   - The school district has implemented articulated goals.
     
     Rating: 1 2 3 4 5

2. **Nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction**

   Effective superintendents ensure that the collaborative goal-setting process results in nonnegotiable goals (i.e., goals that all staff members must act upon) in at least two areas: student achievement and classroom instruction. Effective superintendents set specific achievement targets for schools and students and then ensure the consistent use of research-based instructional strategies in all classrooms to reach those targets (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 12).

   - The district sets specific achievement targets for the district as a whole, for individual schools, and for subpopulations of students within the district.
     
     Rating: 1 2 3 4 5

   - All staff members in each building are aware of the goals and an action plan is created for those goals.
     
     Rating: 1 2 3 4 5

   - The district has adopted a broad but common framework for classroom instructional design and planning, common instructional language, and consistent use of research-based instructional strategies in each school.
     
     Rating: 1 2 3 4 5
3. Board alignment and support of district goals
In districts with higher levels of student achievement, the local board of education is aligned with and supportive of the nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction. They ensure that these goals remain the primary focus of the district’s efforts and that no other initiatives detract attention or resources from accomplishing these goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 12).

- The board ensures that these goals remain the top priorities in the district and that no other initiatives detract attention or resources from accomplishing these goals.
  
  Rating: 
  1 2 3 4 5

- The district publicly adopted five-year goals for achievement and instruction and consistently supports these goals.
  
  Rating: 
  1 2 3 4 5

4. Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction
Effective superintendents continually monitor district progress toward achievement and instructional goals to ensure that these goals remain the driving force behind a district’s actions (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 12).

- The superintendents continually monitors district progress toward achievement and instructional goals.
  
  Rating: 
  1 2 3 4 5

- The superintendent ensures that each school regularly examines the extent to which it is meeting achievement targets.
  
  Rating: 
  1 2 3 4 5

5. Use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals
Effective superintendents ensure that the necessary resources, including time, money, personnel, and materials, are allocated to accomplish the district’s goals. This can mean cutting back on or dropping initiatives that are not aligned with district goals for achievement and instruction (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 13).

- Funding is dedicated to professional development for teachers and principals.
  
  Rating: 
  1 2 3 4 5

- Professional development resources deployed at the school level align with district goals.
  
  Rating: 
  1 2 3 4 5

- Time, money, personnel, and materials are allocated to accomplish the district’s goals.
  
  Rating: 
  1 2 3 4 5