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THE SEARCH FOR COHERENCE:
AN EXPLORATION OF STRATEGIC CHANGE IN ONE MIDWESTERN
SCHOOL DISTRICT

By

Ashley Tomjack

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Leadership

Under the Supervision of Dr. Tamara Williams

Omaha, Nebraska

October, 2019

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Abstract

THE SEARCH FOR COHERENCE: AN EXPLORATION OF STRATEGIC CHANGE IN ONE MIDWESTERN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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University of Nebraska, 2019

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Due to the increasingly complex nature of work in school systems, leaders are often faced with sorting through a multitude of competing priorities as they work to implement strategic change at the district level. Coherence is needed to filter through the many competing priorities and provide clarity as to the next steps district leadership should take when implementing changes. Understanding the current reality of a district in regard to a proposed change initiative is one critical step along the path to approaching coherence.

This study explored how one urban, Midwestern school district evaluated the perceptions of staff members regarding implementation of professional learning communities as a districtwide strategic initiative. A baseline survey was used to identify the current beliefs and practices of faculty regarding professional learning community practices that currently exist within the research site. Survey responses from 188 participants were disaggregated by building and staffing group prior to being analyzed for areas of coherence and incoherence in beliefs. Results indicated that levels of coherence varied among building and staffing groups with regards to current levels of professional

learning community implementation. The survey results also indicated a lack of coherence regarding the definition of the strategy being implemented by the school district. Implications of this research include gathering baseline data regarding current perceptions of involved staff members prior to implementing districtwide strategic change and analyzing those perceptions for areas of incoherence prior to moving forward with the proposed initiative.

Acknowledgements

Achieving my doctorate has been a dream in the making since I was twelve years old. At the time, I had little understanding of what attaining that level of education entailed. What I now know for sure is that it's a journey that is best done alongside the care and support of amazing people. Though I will never be able to thank each person who supported me, I would like to take this opportunity to thank a few of the many people who have been part of my journey.

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years as a principal. To my fellow elementary principals, Andrew Mather and Ashley Holmes, thank you for the continual encouragement and check-ins through the months of writing. It helped more than you know.

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Chapter 1

The Search for Coherence

Professional educators are continually asked to grow, shift, and refine their pedagogy as new research, new policies, and new information regarding best practices emerges. In the face of this continual change, the need for school districts to provide a focused, cohesive plan for strategic improvement is becoming ever more important (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Forman, Stosich & Bocala, 2018). Developing such a plan at the district level can be a difficult feat as factors like district size, building-specific needs, political context, and stakeholder opinions can vary widely (Childress, Elmore, Grossman & King, 2011). This variance in factors has led well-intentioned districts to attempt to meet competing demands by adopting many different initiatives leading to fragmented plans for systemic improvement as new initiatives are overlaid on existing ones without careful consideration of competing elements (Dufour, 2004; Madda, Halverson, & Gomez, 2007; Fullan, 2011). This continual swinging of the so-called school improvement pendulum can leave teachers feeling under-supported, overwhelmed, and fearful as new ideas are undertaken before old ones are fully implemented or refined in classrooms (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Knecht, 2016; Cobb, et.al., 2018).

Coherence is needed to “integrate the diverse elements, relationships, and values” present in the work of schools (Coherence, 2014). Moving towards a framework of coherence, and away from a fragmented approach to school improvement, provides school districts the opportunity to analyze their current practice and carefully consider implementation of new strategies. Schools and districts that have achieved coherence share common beliefs, values, and purpose surrounding learning which directly impact

the school culture, systems, and instruction provided to students (Kruse, 1994; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Marzano, 2005). This study explored how one school district approached the development of coherence while implementing a new change initiative, in this case, professional learning communities.

Introduction of the Problem

Challenges in Developing Coherence

Even the most well-intentioned school system can lose sight of internal coherence in the wake of the many competing demands that exist. From federal oversight to stakeholder opinions to emerging research regarding best practices, there are a number of places in which school systems can fall short of achieving unity within their organizations. Focusing on the wrong change initiatives or spending resources pursuing too many initiatives can lead to systems that struggle to promote academic achievement for students (Fullan, 2011). As school districts search for coherence during implementation of new strategic initiatives, there are a number of challenges that can arise.

Top-down mandates and bottom-up innovation. One of the greatest challenges in building coherent school improvement plans is navigating the push and pull between top-down, administrative-directed mandates and bottom-up, teacher-led initiatives (DuFour, et. al., 2016; DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Hargreaves (2009) used the terms emergence, the innovation that arises out of systems, and design, the purposeful construction of work in a desired direction, to describe this delicate balance.

Allowing emergence thinking, or bottom-up initiatives, to be the primary driver of an organization can lead to systems where purposes become unclear, staff voluntarily

choose to participate in initiatives, and student achievement actually decreases (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005; Marzano & Waters, 2009; DuFour & Fullan, 2013). This laissez-faire approach hinders the work of a school system by leaving staff to their own devices and limiting districtwide cohesive action forward (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010).

On the other hand, focusing too much on design, or top-down mandates, can create a system of micromanagement that stifles staff innovation and leads to a lack of shared vision in regard to change initiatives (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Coherence is not developed solely through structure, alignment, and strategy (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Though those things can aid in the development of unity, they are not what builds coherence itself.

Instead, organizational coherence is crafted through the development of a “shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work” (p. 1) being done in school systems (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). It is the collaborative reflection, collective efficacy, and deep understanding of change initiatives that develop coherence across an organization (DuFour, et. al., 2016). It is bringing “diverse people together to work skillfully and effectively for a common cause that lifts them up and has them moving in the same direction” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009, p. 32-33). Organizations need to strike a balance between both emergence and design thinking when planning for change. This requires strong vision, strategic goals, leadership, and targeted professional development for staff, often the exact elements that are missing from school districts suffering from incoherence (Muhammad & Cruz, 2019).

Vision. When a school district lacks a compelling vision for strategic improvement, it can be difficult to build coherence and impact student achievement. High-performing schools and districts develop a clear, concise, and shared vision related to any type of reform (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). By articulating outcomes hoped for through the adoption of the strategic change, school staff can pave the way for a clear sense of direction. When staff members district wide are part of those conversations and have a clear sense of vision, purpose and direction, “coherence emerges and powerful things happen” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 1).

Strategic goals. In coherent systems, the district vision for a change initiative becomes translated into a set of strategic goals that drive the work of the school system. What often happens, though, is that, districts fail to carefully analyze their vision for the primary set of goals that they want to focus on, prioritize those initiatives, and work to create coherence throughout the goals (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009). Attempting to tackle multiple goals across multiple areas can lead to “overload and fragmentation” instead of “focus and coherence” (Fullan & Quinn, p. ix, 2016).

Leadership. Without strong vision and specific strategic goals, leaders at both the building and district level can be left sifting through competing initiatives, attempting to find direction for those they serve. This lack of coherence at the district level “can leave some leaders with little interest in making any changes and can leave others paralyzed by unrealistic goals” (Forman, Stosich & Bocala, 2018, p. 1). It can also make a leader’s responsibilities for management, maintenance, evaluation, and leadership all the more difficult, especially at the building principal level where teaching staff are

looking to that leader for clear direction in regard to district initiatives (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009).

Professional development. In fragmented organizations, professional development is often disconnected from the strategic goals and vision of the organization as well as from the daily work of classrooms (Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, 2018). When professional development is closely connected to the work of classrooms, to the vision and strategic goals of the organization, and to the personal perspective teachers have of their role in the classroom, intrinsic energy begins to drive professional development and staff are able to find fulfillment in the “melding of personal and social goals” (Fullan, p. 3, 2011).

Closely examining the ability of staff, and the opportunities provided to them, to “assimilate, transform, and use new knowledge” in regard to a change initiative is key (Zuckerman, Wilcox, Schiller, & Durand, 2018). Too often, change initiatives fail to bring coherence to a staff, not because of a lack of will across employees, but because of a lack of capacity building (Muhammad & Cruz, 2019). Professional development that impacts change takes time and focus. By building the capacity of staff for change initiatives through targeted, sustained professional development, school districts may find better success for initiatives (Zuckerman, Wilcox, Schiller, & Durand, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework foundational to this study is Childress, Elmore, Grossman, and King’s Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) Coherence Framework (see Figure 1.1). This framework is modeled after organizational frameworks, like Tushman & O’Reilly’s (1997) Congruence Model, that were developed

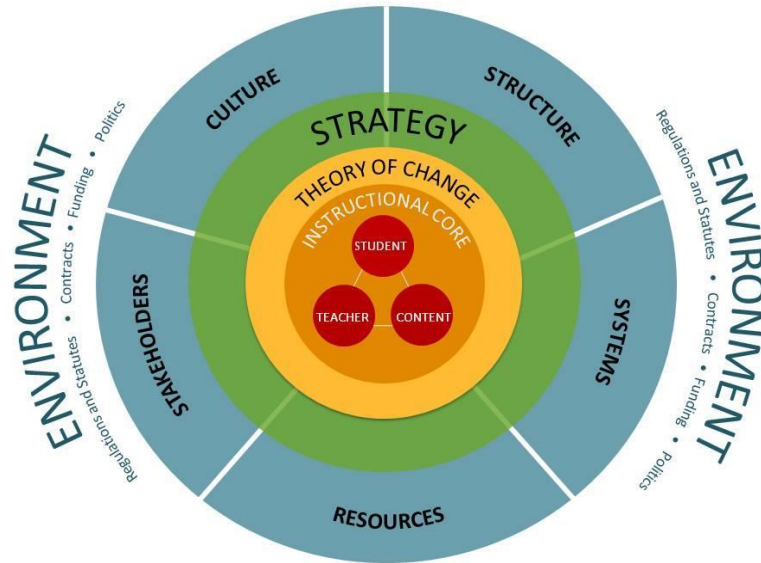


Figure 1.1. PELP Framework.

for the non-profit and business worlds. The goal of the framework is to achieve organizational coherence during and throughout implementation of change initiatives at the district level. According to the authors of the framework, coherence is achieved in four ways by:

1. “Connecting the instructional core with a district-wide strategy for improvement.
2. Highlighting district elements that can support or hinder effective implementation.
3. Identifying interdependencies among district elements.
4. Recognizing forces in the environment that have an impact on the implementation of the strategy” (p. 2).

The PELP Coherence Framework includes three basic elements (instructional core, theory of change, and strategy) surrounding district-level change followed by six elements (culture, structure, systems and resources, stakeholders, and environment) that are critical to the successful implementation of a district-wide improvement strategy.

In the center of the framework is the first of the three basic elements, the instructional core. This central point includes three critical components of teaching and

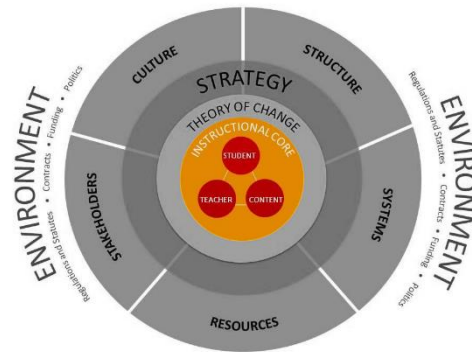


Figure 1.2. Instructional Core of the PELP Framework.

learning: “teachers’ knowledge and skills, students’ engagement in their own learning, and academically challenging content” (p. 3). These three components highlight the complex, interdependent relationship that exists between teachers, students, and content (Cohen & Ball, 1999).

Surrounding the instructional core are the theory of change, the strategy, and the five organizational elements. The theory of change is the closest to the instructional core,

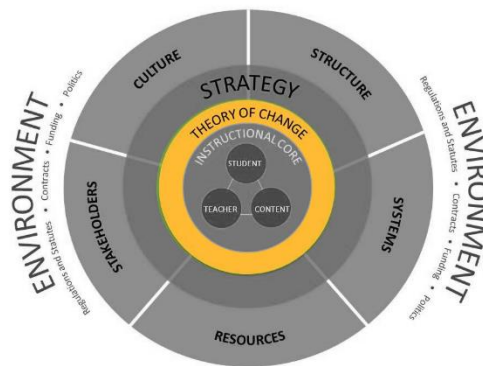


Figure 1.3. Theory of Change for the PELP Framework.

highlighting the organization’s belief about how the work in the instructional core will be affected by the implementation of the strategic initiative. Statements such as “if...then...” are often used to describe the theory of change and its relationship to both the strategy and the instructional core (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, and King, 2011). For the purposes of this study, the theory of change relates to the potential impact professional learning communities might have on the work of teachers and students as they engage with the content of the research site.

Within the language of the framework, the strategy is considered, “the set of actions a district deliberately undertakes to strengthen the instructional core and raise

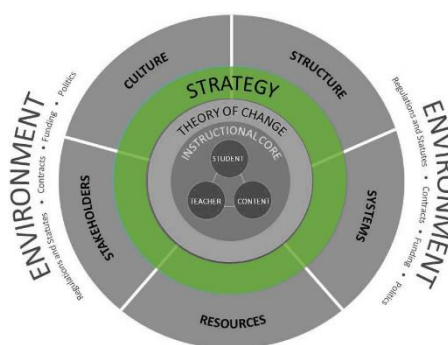


Figure 1.4. Strategy section of the PELP Framework.

student performance districtwide” (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, and King, 2011, p. 3). Effective strategies aid in the growth of each of the three elements of the instructional core with the overall theory being that as these elements grow student academic achievement will increase as well.

The organizational elements included in the outermost ring represent the culture, structures and systems, resources, and stakeholders that may be influenced by the strategy change utilized by the district. Each of these elements should be considered carefully

during a change process as they can each have a critical impact on the success or failure

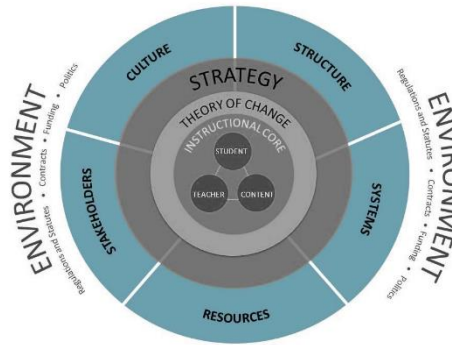


Figure 1.5. Organizational Elements of the PELP Framework.

of an initiative (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, and King, 2011). From outdated structures that hinder new strategy development to stakeholder disagreement in regard to implementation, these five areas can either positively or negatively influence a district’s change efforts.

Finally, the environmental factors represent pieces that may be outside district control (legislation, state funding, politics, etc.), but may have an influence on the

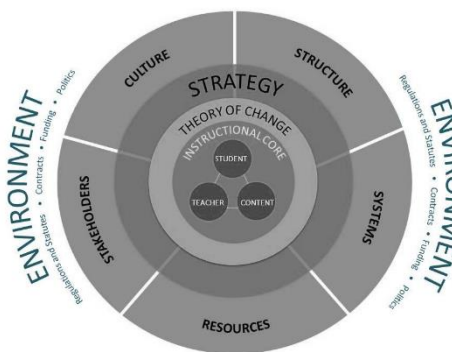


Figure 1.6. Environmental Factors of the PELP Framework.

strategic decisions of the district. Though district leaders rarely have authority over “statutory, contractual, financial, and political forces that surround them,” it behooves

them to “spend significant time managing its effects in order to consistently implement a district-wide strategy (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, and King, 2011, p. 12).

Purpose

The purpose of this quantitative study was to evaluate the perceptions of staff members in an urban, Midwestern school district regarding implementation of professional learning communities as a districtwide strategic initiative.

Research Questions

Main research question. How does one urban Midwestern school district achieve coherence during the adoption of a new strategic initiative?

Sub-research question 1. What are the perceptions of current implementation regarding professional learning communities at the district and building levels?

Sub-research question 2. How do the perceptions of administrators and other certificated staff members differ in regard to the current status of professional learning community implementation?

Operational Definitions

Coherence. Fullan and Quinn (2016) defined coherence as “the shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work” (p. 1).

Professional Learning Community. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, and Mattos’ (2016) definition was used: “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 10).

Alignment. Zuckerman, Campbell Wilcox, Durand, and Schiller’s (2018) definition of alignment was used: “the organizational mechanisms and processes that

cross boundaries (e.g. between district and schools, or between classrooms) and allow these [shared] understandings to emerge” (p. 4).

Certificated Staff. For the purposes of this study, certificated staff included classroom teachers, specialists, counselors, school psychologists, and administrators.

Significance of Study

At the core of the search for coherence is the idea “that every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results it gets” (Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, p. 91, 2018). If school systems do not like the results they are generating, it follows that the staff need to change something within the school system in order to achieve new results.

Sometimes school leaders focus on changing individual elements without considering the whole picture of student learning. Implementation of any strategy warrants a careful look at the impact that strategy may have on the whole district system. One change, like adopting a new math curriculum or asking staff to begin meeting in collaborative teams, can have far-reaching implications for the instructional core and for the five organizational elements surrounding the core (Childress, Elmore, Grossman & King, 2011). The PELP Coherence Framework brings leaders back to the heart of everything we do, the instructional core, the relationship between teachers, students, and the content (Childress, Elmore, Grossman & King, 2011; Cohen & Ball, 1999; Forman, Stosich, Bocala, 2018).

Being cognizant of internal coherence becomes especially important to the role of district administrators, particularly those in settings where management has been decentralized and building autonomy has increased. Managing a level of shared purpose, vision, and values in any school district is no easy task, but especially for those districts

who “engage in differentiated treatment” of buildings (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). As with any organization, coherence across the global environment and within the individual school sites matters (Krzysztof, 1980; DuFour, 2012).

As public servants, district leaders are called upon to be good stewards of resources. With tightening budgets, it is in the best interest of administrators to analyze their systems for coherence and ensure that each action undertaken by the team is moving in step with the vision, values, and overall beliefs of the organization (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009). When there is a lack of coherence, faculty are forced to make decisions about which competing initiatives are worth completing (Madda, 2007). This can cause resources like staffing, time, and money to be used less efficiently and the connections within the overall system to diminish (Kedro, 2004; Krzysztof, 1980).

According to Forman, Stosich, and Bocala (2017), “Developing a strategy requires not only a vision for the instructional core but also a plan of action for the professional learning and collaboration required to realize this vision” (p. 118). Narrowing focus to a smaller set of goals, clarifying strategies, and developing collaborative cultures focused on the mission of the school system are all ways that internal coherence can be developed (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

One important factor in the development of a coherent, strategic initiative across a school district is the establishment of a baseline analysis that shows where a district currently is in regard to proposed change initiatives. Childress, Elmore, Grossman, and King (2011) referred to this process as conducting “an analysis that reveals any gaps between what people know how to do and what the strategy requires of them” (p. 10). Measuring the current perceptions, values, beliefs, and prior knowledge of staff who will

be part of strategy implementation helps district leaders better understand the steps that must be taken in order to achieve coherence within buildings and throughout the district (Bubb & Earley, 2010; Earley & Porritt, 2010; Stake, 1967). This measurement requires districts to closely examine “the skills and knowledge that people need in order to successfully implement” a new strategy (Childress, Elmore, Grossman & King, 2011, p. 10).

In addition, this perceptual data can help district leadership see where discrepancies may lie within different demographic groups such as across buildings, levels of schooling, or educator groups. Identifying baseline measurements and making a plan for unifying those differences is key because when individual beliefs about systems, processes, instruction, or expectations differ, the chances of a discrepancy “between the goals of the system and the actions of individuals within the system” are likely (Forman, Stosich & Bocala, 2018, p. 93).

This study utilized a baseline survey to explore what happens as a district develops their strategy for implementation of professional learning communities. This included analyzing the current beliefs and perceptions of staff in order to better inform the development of a plan of action for the professional learning and collaboration of their teachers. The baseline survey that was used helped identify the current beliefs and practices of faculty regarding professional learning community practices that currently exist within the research site. That information was analyzed for areas of coherence and incoherence in beliefs. Through the survey and subsequent analysis, the researcher was able to gain better insight into how one district attempted to move from a baseline implementation of an initiative to a system of internal cohesion aligned with the basic

tenets of professional learning communities. The study's significance derives from exploring one district's efforts to identify areas of disparity in their implementation of professional learning community structure, processes, and beliefs in the hopes that other districts working through strategic change may benefit.

Methodology

The research questions in this study were explored through the use of a non-experimental descriptive research design. Quantitative data gathered through the course of the study was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Quantitative Design

A survey was utilized to gather quantitative information regarding staff perceptions of current professional learning community implementation. A survey method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to "provide a quantitative description of trends, attitudes, and opinions" of the staff perceptions within the district research site (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018, p. 147). Besides looking at the data from a holistic district standpoint, using a survey method allowed the researcher to compare data across school sites and within staffing groups such as teachers and administrators. Open-ended questions answered by participants during the survey process added depth to the scaled perceptions shared by staff members.

Delimitations

This study was conducted in one school district in a Midwestern state that, as of the 2018-2019 school year, had a total of 244 school districts of varying sizes and demographics (Nebraska Department of Education, 2018). The convenience sample of

certified staff in one school district was also a delimitation of this study as the results are not generalizable to other school districts.

Outline of the Study

Due to the increasingly complex nature of work in school systems, coherence is necessary to bring about large-scale implementation of change initiatives. School districts that carefully consider developing coherence in change initiatives through the lens of the instructional core, the theory of change, the environment, and the five outer elements stand a better chance of seeing success in their implementation process. Chapter One introduced the problem, described the theoretical framework used as the basis for the study, described the study's significance, purpose and research questions, and briefly described the methodology. Chapter Two includes a review of the professional literature surrounding the development of coherence during a change initiative. Chapter Three will outline the quantitative research design, participants surveyed, and methodology used. Chapter Four will showcase the results of the study, including data analysis for each question and interpretation of the results. Finally, Chapter Five will conclude the study providing a summary, analysis of the findings, and recommendations for further study and future research.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

The purpose of this quantitative study was to evaluate levels of coherence across current perceptions of staff regarding professional learning community implementation in a Midwestern school district. Chapter 2 includes an introduction to the research regarding coherence. This chapter begins by describing what coherence is and why it is important. Following sections include a summary of the five elements that emerged from the research regarding how to achieve coherence as well as information regarding best practices within professional learning communities. The concept of professional learning communities will be defined in more depth and an analysis of what coherence looks like within the context of professional learning community implementation will also be explored. Throughout the chapter the literature studied will tie back to the PELP theoretical framework described in Chapter 1.

Coherence Defined

The term coherence was originally used within the field of sociology to describe the link between organizational structure at the global level and its relationship to structural features at lower levels (Krzysztof, 1980). The concept was later adapted for use in the business sector to evaluate organizational alignment and structure (Fombrun, Tichy, & Devanna, 1984; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1997). For the purpose of this study, coherence is defined as “the shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work” being completed during a strategic change initiative (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 1).

Why Coherence is Important

The development of coherence within a school district has become increasingly important as so many different initiatives, policies, and practices vie for leaders' consideration. The onslaught of competing priorities means that district leaders are asked to make choices about what to pursue, what to abandon, and what should be held for later consideration (Bryk, Bender Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). The PELP Framework can help leaders better understand both the importance of coherence development and the many facets that must be considered when making reform decisions.

Situated in the center of the PELP Framework is the instructional core, the heart of the framework representing the interactions between teachers, students, and the content. When a desired district strategy is being implemented, it typically targets one or all of those three elements in an attempt to improve student learning. The researchers behind the PELP Framework posit that each reform decision made at the district level can have an effect on the instructional core and, in turn, student learning (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011).

Working towards coherence during a change process offers school districts the opportunity to develop "consistency of purpose, policy, and practice" (p. 1) as they strive to improve learning outcomes for students (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Developing consistency in practice, internal agreement, collective commitment to organizational goals, and alignment of district resources, although challenging, has been argued to improve learning outcomes for students (Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, 2018; Bryk, Bender Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Elmore, 2004; Fullan & Quinn,

2016). Developing the level of coherence needed to move student learning forward demands careful consideration of a number of different elements within an organization.

Approaching Coherence

Achieving coherence within an organization, especially a school district, is no easy feat. A wide number of factors representing every facet of the organization must be

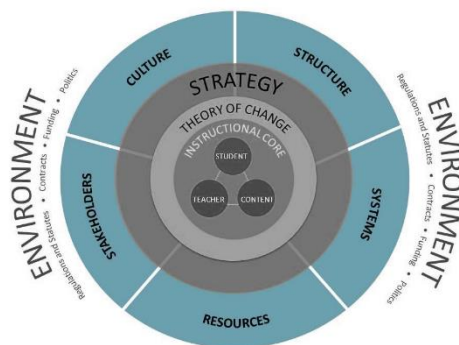


Figure 2.1. Organizational Elements of PELP Framework

considered as a district works towards coherence. Within the PELP Framework, success for a districtwide strategic change is

developed through careful consideration of five organizational elements: culture, structure and systems, resources, stakeholders, and the environment (Childress, Elmore, Grossman & King, 2011).

Culture. Within the education sector, there are many different ways to define culture. For the purposes of this review, Edgar Schein's (2017) definition of culture was used:

The culture of a group can be defined as the accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration; which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation

to those problems. This accumulated learning is a pattern or system of beliefs, values, and behavioral norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness (p. 6).

Culture, and in turn, coherence, within a school system during a change initiative is built through the development of accumulated, shared beliefs as together the organization learns how to implement a given strategy (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Knecht, 2019). Words like together, shared, accumulated, and norms become important to this conversation. Cultures that can support coherence work are dependent on shared learning, shared beliefs, and shared purpose. This becomes the foundation on which other elements are later aligned.

Many educational systems have had long histories of people working hard in isolation (Knudson, 2013). The idea being that as long as people were working hard, they should be allowed to do things the way they wanted to and their efforts should be valued regardless of the results achieved (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). This type of thinking can lead to incoherence in strategy implementation as staff develop their own ways to solve problems that may be out of step with the shared learning or shared beliefs of the organization (Sawyer & Rimm-Kaufman, 2007).

In order to move away from isolationist practices and to cultures primed for coherence work, Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King (2011) called for districts to “establish a culture of collaboration, high expectations, and accountability” (p. 6).

Collaboration. Achieving the level of collaboration needed to move a school system closer to its stated objectives, and a district closer to internal coherence during a change initiative, will be difficult if staff are working in isolation, without vision or

mutual accountability (Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Schein, 2017). Collaboration through the development of a sense of shared purpose as well as guiding vision, values, and shared trust among members is necessary to move towards coherence (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). The development takes day-to-day interactions that push a staff towards a sense of coherence across the culture (Blankenstein & Noguera, 2016). Each small interaction builds to create the larger picture of a school or district's culture and, if moving in the same direction, those interactions can build coherence across the system.

High expectations. In addition to developing a strong degree of collaboration, leaders should guide the development of high expectations through the creation of collective commitment as they work towards building coherence within their educational communities (Schein, 2017; Blankenstein & Noguera, 2016; Knecht, 2019). The loftiest goal of a leadership team within a coherent organization should be “to transform the relationship between leader and followers so that unity of purpose and mutually shared goals energize and motivate participants” to meet high expectations (Muhammad & Cruz, p. 17, 2019). Staff need to see meaning within their work that encourages them to push forward with an initiative even on the hardest days (Blankenstein & Noguera, 2016). Once shared norms, values, and vision are firmly in place, expectations, in the form of collective commitments, can be developed to hold members of the organization accountable to each other (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Bolam, et. al., 2005).

Accountability. At the district level, developing a culture of accountability in service to the implementation of a new strategic initiative is critical. Staff members at all levels must know what elements should be consistently implemented and where there is room for individualization at the building-level (Lotto, 1983; Chapman & Fullan, 2007;

Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). The development of internal accountability must be assessed at each district with careful consideration given to the size of the school district, the decision-making power of individual schools, and the level of district support provided to each building (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011).

Structures and Systems. Structures and systems form the tangible elements of a change initiative. They are the “roles and responsibilities, reporting relationships, teams, accountability mechanisms, compensation arrangements, resource allocation methods, organizational learning processes, and training programs” (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011, p. 6). In short, they are the things people can see and often the things most emphasized when considering coherence within an organization (Kruse, Seashore Louis, & Bryk, 1994).

Coherence and Alignment. All too often coherence within the context of implementation of a strategic initiative becomes confused with alignment (Honig & Hatch, 2004). The terms coherence and alignment are not interchangeable, though alignment does have an impact on a district’s overall coherence. Coherence is the “shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 1). Alignment, on the other hand, builds upon those shared understandings to “describe organizational mechanisms and processes that cross boundaries (e.g. between district and schools, or between classrooms) and allow these understandings to emerge” (Zuckerman, Campbell Wilcox, Durand, & Schiller, 2018, p. 4). Coherence and alignment, therefore, work hand in hand, though one refers to the shared learning while the other refers to systems and processes that are built upon that shared learning.

The challenge in navigating between coherence and alignment comes through understanding that alignment should work in service to the development of coherence. If the aim is to develop coherence through shared mission, vision, values, beliefs, and professional learning in regard to a change initiative, the mechanisms that schools choose to utilize should support that development.

As districts are implementing change initiatives, it becomes crucial that they analyze their systems and processes for outdated or incoherent pieces (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). Often, new strategies are implemented on top of outdated systems, leading to fragmentation of efforts and a lack of structural support for the new initiatives (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). Eliminating or aligning current systems and structures to support the new strategy should be done as part of the coherence-building process (Zuckerman, Campbell Wilcox, Schiller, & Durand, 2018).

A focus on accountability. When school systems and policymakers abandon the messy work of building coherence and focus solely on alignment measures, a focus on accountability can emerge as alignment of structure and process becomes the focus instead of shared understanding and vision (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). This focus on accountability “uses standards, assessments, rewards, and punishments as its core drivers” instead of the capacity building of all staff in service to the new strategy being implemented (Fullan, 2011, p. 8). Top-down, design-based mandates coupled with punitive accountability systems have been widely used in recent years with the intent of promoting organizational coherence and increasing student achievement (Fullan, 2011; Muhammad & Cruz, 2019).

It is difficult to build systems-wide coherence, though, on the premise that punitive accountability measures, such as rewards and punishments, will result in change. Daniel Pink (2011) calls this the “carrots and sticks” approach to change, with force being the “stick” and incentives being the “carrot” (p. 18). Neither of these approaches positively influences change because people are often driven by more than rewards and punishments (Fullan, 2011; Muhammad & Cruz, 2019). The challenge is in building collaborative cultures with staff that are deeply invested in the core mission of the change initiative and committed to seeing the strategy through successful implementation (Hargreaves, 2009; Fullan, 2011). In developing common understandings through shared learning, school districts can move to “coherence instead of mere compliance with administrative directives (Blankenstein & Noguera, 2016, p. 123).

Resources. Determining how resources are allocated during a change initiative is a key factor in the success or failure of a strategy. Although money is often considered the top resource during a change initiative, human and technology resources also play a critical role in the implementation of a new strategy. Consistent allocation of these resources in service to the goals of the organization, and the strategy being implemented, is important (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003).

Human resources. When you consider that districts typically spend 80% of their operating budget on the employment of their staff members, it becomes all the more crucial to consider this important resource during a change initiative (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). Within the PELP Framework, the instructional core is at the center of all strategy implementation considerations. In this core, teachers play one of the

critical roles and their professional development during a change initiative is crucial to the success of that initiative (Cohen & Ball, 1999; Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011; Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, 2018). Understanding the professional learning needs of the teaching staff allows a district to identify gaps in learning, consider what implementation of the new strategy will require in terms of capacity-building, and develop professional development plans that support teacher learning in alignment with change (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Financial resources. An important aspect of coherence development, particularly in this period of fiscal cutbacks for public education, is the opportunity to engage with a process that brings about real change at minimal monetary cost (Garcia Torres, 2019). As districts work to develop coherence during a change initiative, financial resources become an important consideration (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). Aligning financial resources in support of a new strategy communicates a district's commitment to the change and "improves the likelihood of reform success and sustainability" (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008, p. 327). Careful consideration should also be given to financial equity as schools and departments attempt to implement a new strategic initiative. Ensuring that financial disparities do not create a barrier to coherent implementation between affluent and less affluent schools is important to the success of a given strategy (Buczynski, & Hansen, 2010; Darling-Hammond, Hylar, & Gardner, 2017).

Technology resources. Within the PELP Framework, technology resources become a focus in the context of supporting a change initiative by providing the infrastructure necessary for a school district to complete annual benchmark assessments,

process student data, and ensure that district staff are able to perform the administrative tasks required of them (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). In addition, technology should be able to provide real-time data that aids in the decision-making necessary to evaluate strategy implementation and success (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005). Technological systems that are not able to support the work of a school district in these ways should be updated so as not to hinder the success of a proposed initiative.

Stakeholders. Stakeholders both inside and outside of the organization play an important role in the implementation and success of any district initiative. According to Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King (2011), “teachers’ unions, parents, students, school boards, community and advocacy groups, and local politicians and policymakers” (p. 11) as well as district staff are all considered stakeholders. Although stakeholders often disagree about strategy implementation or measures of success, it is important that the relationship with each group is considered and managed in a way that builds coherence for the strategy (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011; Zuckerman, Campbell Wilcox, Schiller, & Durand, 2018). Stakeholders can easily champion or disrupt an initiative depending on how the relationship between them and the school district are managed. Clear, consistent communication with stakeholder groups about the strategy change and what can be done to support it is important (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003).

Environment. The fifth organizational consideration for strategy implementation at the district level is the environment (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). This includes “all of the external factors that can have an impact on strategy, operations, and performance” including “various funding sources available (both public

and private), the political and policy context at the city, state, and national levels, the collective bargaining arrangements in place, and the characteristics of their particular community” (p. 12). Although district leaders have precious little control over these environmental factors, they must be cognizant of their impact as they can have sweeping implications for strategy implementation.

If managed well, school district leaders can utilize the influence of these external factors to their advantage. Particularly in the case of politics, relationships matter and school leaders who are able to harness the power of those relationships stand in a better position to see success in the initiatives they implement at the district level. Honig and Hatch (2004) called this process of working with the external demands of the environment, in particular policies and their makers, “crafting coherence” (p. 16). Managing the external, environmental demands of the school district is critical to the successful implementation of any change initiative.

Professional Learning Communities

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, and Mattos (2016) define professional learning communities as “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 10). Within the literature surrounding professional learning communities, five characteristics emerge as being the foundation of the work: shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration, and the promotion of group and individual learning (Stoll, et. al., 2006; Kruse, Seashore Louis, & Bryk, 2009).

Shared values and vision. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) categorized the creation of a shared vision as part of the “intangible assets” (p. 100) of a school. In high-achieving school districts, this purpose gives context to the “shared ideals and beliefs about the core mission of the school,” (p. 100) offers clarity to the complex nature of teacher work, and helps staff consistently strive towards the strategic goals of the organization (Forman, Stosich & Bocala, 2018). The development of shared vision is particularly important for unifying the organization and preventing individual autonomy from overshadowing the goals of the school (Kruse, Seashore Lewis, & Bryk, 1994).

Operating from a shared set of norms also helps staff know and understand the expectations of their work within the school (Krzysztof, 1980; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Hall & Simerall, 2017). Expected behaviors of team members are clearly outlined and each individual works to hold others accountable to those norms. A shared value base also helps the team identify what they hold in the utmost regard when considering their work with students, their colleagues, and the community (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005). Those values can then be used to develop a shared vision for the school and collective commitments for learning.

Collective responsibility. This shared vision also drives collective commitment among staff members to be accountable for student success. Moving from “a culture of compliance to a culture of commitment” (p. 5) involves each staff member taking the initiative to work towards the shared norms, vision, and values of the organization (Williams & Hierck, 2015). In truly collaborative organizations, the focus is not on complying with a set of policies, procedures, or mandates, but in living out the shared

commitment of the organization's members (Fullan, 2011; Blankenstein & Noguera, 2016).

This component of professional learning communities is reinforced by a feeling of shared obligation among staff members who see themselves as responsible for holding all members of the school community accountable. This sense of mutual accountability promotes not only growth and commitment among individual members, but also of the organization as a whole (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Dufour, Marzano, & Reeves, 2009). This "collective responsibility" also "supersedes administrative accountability" (p. 34) and ensures that staff will strive to carry through on initiatives, regardless of the leader in charge. (Hargreaves, 2009).

Reflective professional inquiry. The idea of collaborative communities as arenas for reflective professional inquiry is not new. In fact, Dewey (1929) noted the importance of collaboration, inquiry, and learning in his work, writing about the development of problems of inquiry through the analyzation of data related to educational practices. Schools are saturated with data related to their work. From assessment scores to attendance counts to simple demographic numbers, there is no shortage of statistics within school systems.

What is most often missing, though, is the opportunity to really delve into those data points, reflect on how those points came to be, and then find ways to either move, change, or keep the data points moving forward (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005). When teachers are provided the time and space to delve into those problems of practice, they have the opportunity to address problems and co-create solutions. As Brown & Duguid (2002) stated, "For all information's independence and extent, it is

people, in their communities, organizations, and institutions, who ultimately decide what it all means and why it matters” (p. 18). The data alone does not hold meaning, rather it is professional educators’ interpretation of the data that gives it significance (Earl & Fullan, 2003).

Reflective professional inquiry allows educators the space to analyze data and decide why certain pieces matter to their work moving forward. Fullan (2002) went so far as to say, “Information is machines. Knowledge is people” (p. 410). All of those data points are useless information without people to analyze them and make subsequent decisions about practices. Learning organizations that invest in this element of collaboration give time for teachers to sift through all of the available data and decide which pieces are needed within the organization moving forward based on its shared vision and goals (DuFour, 2015).

Deprivatization of practice. An important piece of reflective professional inquiry is the deprivatization of practice. This involves allowing teachers the ability to witness and reflect on the teaching of others (Bryk, Camburn, & Seashore Louis, 2007; Seashore Louis & Marks, 1998). This observation experience is then used to analyze and provide solutions for common difficulties within the educational setting.

There are a number of ways to make teaching more public and less private. Among them, learning rounds, peer coaching, and joint planning. Each of these opportunities encourages teachers to make their teaching more visible to their peers by inviting colleagues into classrooms. Opening classroom doors to each other aids in the process of converting individual knowledge to shared knowledge across the group, gives teachers new ideas for solving student needs, and allows for discussions that can be used

as part of active reflection on teaching practices (Kruse, Seashore Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Seashore Louis & Marks, 1998; Bryk, Camburn, & Seashore Louis, 2007; Dufour, 2009). Those observations can lead to stronger relationships among staff members as they “trade off the roles of mentor, advisor, or specialist” (Bryk, Camburn, & Seashore Louis, 2007).

Collaboration. Collaborative work is at the heart of professional learning communities. Collaborative teacher teams are formed by identifying “educators who share essential curriculum and thus, take collective responsibility for students learning their essential outcomes” (Buffum, Mattos, & Malone, 2018, p. 58). These teams can take the form of grade levels, departments, vertical curriculum groups, or interdisciplinary teams (DuFour, et. al., 2016). No matter the type of team utilized, the purpose of the collaborative team time is to share student learning outcomes in an effort to see increased levels of achievement in line with the vision, goals, and commitment of the organization (Buffum, Mattos, & Malone, 2018; DuFour, et. al., 2016).

This purpose becomes critically important in differentiating a collaborative team from a work group. A work group within a school system might discuss how to reach consensus on any number of topics outside the scope of student learning and achievement. Examples might include who to book for the next all-school assembly or what type of potluck to host in the future. Collaborative teams, on the other hand, are focused on conversations that directly impact student learning. These conversations define essential learning outcomes for students, monitor student learning regarding the agreed-upon outcomes, identify and develop plans for students who need intervention and enrichment, and provide an opportunity for staff to learn from and with each other

regarding their teaching practice (DuFour, et. al., 2016; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Many & Sparks-Many, 2015).

The work of building collaborative communities who are ready to take on deep conversations about student learning takes time. “Supportive relational conditions” (p. 18) like vulnerability, trust, shared norms, and collective accountability don’t develop overnight and are essential to the success of collaborative groups (Abbott, Lee, & Rossiter, 2019). Relational trust emerged from the research as being particularly important to the development of collaborative relationships across professional communities.

Relational trust. Trust between staff members came up at numerous points in the literature, forming the bedrock of a successful school community that can facilitate collaboration. Feltman (2009) defines trust as “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person’s actions” (p. 7). Schools cannot achieve the desired level of collaboration, reflective dialogue, and deprivatization of practice they are seeking without developing a sense of social-emotional safety among their staff members (Kyndt, Verclairen, Grosemans, Boon, & Dochy, 2015). Just as in the case of students, teachers must have their need for safety and security met before they can feel comfortable sharing difficult situations, changing their practices, and seeking feedback from colleagues (Kyndt, Verclairen, Grosemans, Boon, & Dochy, 2015; Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011; Seashore Louis, 2006; Miranda & Jaffe-Walter, 2018).

The literature was clear that many school leaders forget the importance of trust in developing a strong school culture. Too often, the creation of collaborative structures is driven by changes in processes rather than development of trust. As Williams and Hierck

stated, “Culture eats structure for lunch” (p. 46, 2015). This focus on the structure of the community, in particular the scheduling of team times and shared planning, rather than the building blocks indicates a move towards a culture in which trust is often viewed as an afterthought and too much weight is given to the organization of the structures themselves (Steinhoff & Owens, 1989). Trust cannot be built through simply incorporating common planning time or crafting a one-day professional development experience. Seashore Louis (2006) reasoned that deep trust that leads to change for students and creates “intellectual ferment” (p. 485) requires time and focus. By not confronting trust as an important component of building a strong community, administrators miss the opportunity to create lasting cultural change and jeopardize the potential success of school initiatives (Seashore Louis, 2006; Brown, 2018).

Promotion of group and individual learning. The promotion of group and individual learning could also be called continuous shared learning or organizational learning. Continuous shared learning “requires that knowledge have a shared social construction common to all members of a school organization” (Seashore Louis, p. 480, 2006). This type of learning requires that all teachers within the school community participate in learning alongside their colleagues. Rather than developing teaching practices in isolation, continuous shared learning offers teaching staff the opportunity to bring their individual experiences and knowledge to the table while simultaneously learning from the individual experiences and knowledge of colleagues (Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005; Abbott, Lee, & Rossiter, 2019). This collaborative learning helps ensure that the continuous learning of staff

members as individuals and within the group is being aligned with the overall purpose of the organization, or the coherence of the change initiative.

Coherence in Professional Learning Communities

In recent years, the concept of a professional learning community has fallen victim to vocabulary misuse and the foundational elements that support success have fallen by the wayside in favor of top-down mandates (DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Reeves, 2016). Too often, the design of professional learning communities overshadowed the emergence learning that could have taken place. In some spaces, teacher innovation, creative problem solving, and collective commitments have been replaced by a focus on punitive accountability measures in the form of things like meeting minutes and district leadership mandated, rather than staff-directed, goals (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Through the use of the word “process” (p. 10), the definition used within this study highlights the emergence thinking that is necessary for a school district to implement professional learning communities (DuFour, et. al., 2016). Similar to coherence building, professional learning communities represent a process that grows and changes over time rather than a product that can be built solely through alignment. A combination of both coherence and alignment are needed for successful professional learning communities.

One way to get back to the core of professional learning communities is to focus on the foundational elements that drive this work. According to DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, and Mattos (2016), there are three key concepts that “drive the work of a PLC” (p. 11). They are a focus on learning, a collaborative culture and collective responsibility, and a results orientation (DuFour, et. al., 2016).

Focus on learning. Within the professional learning community literature, a focus on learning is based on the idea that “the fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure that all students learn at high levels” (DuFour, et. al., 2016, p. 11). With this core purpose in mind, educators within a system develop a vision, clarify the commitments of each member of the organization in order to take collective responsibility, and use results to identify progress (DuFour, et. al., 2016; Bolam, et. al., 2005).

Collaborative culture. A collaborative culture and collective responsibility centers around the idea of the team “working interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable” (DuFour, et. al., p. 12). The key here is the collaboration is intended to impact student achievement, not merely planning together (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). In order for this to take place as intended, coordinated professional development is needed to provide all staff members with a depth of understanding regarding the skills and strategies needed to be collaborative team members (Forman, Stosich & Bocala, 2018). Asking teams who have formerly operated in isolation or through limited true collaboration without giving them the appropriate level of professional development could limit the development of a collaborative culture.

Results orientation. The final big idea is that of a results orientation which is used to help the professional learning community measure the effectiveness of their efforts and determine plans based on tangible results (DuFour, 2012). This process becomes cyclical as new data is gathered, analyzed, reflected upon, new strategies attempted, and new data gathered again based on strategy implementation (Stoll, et. al., 2006).

Achieving coherence within the structure of professional learning communities requires administrators to exercise both management and leadership. Accountability for results coupled with the development of collaborative cultures and shared vision are key.

Summary

The study and application of coherence thinking involves many organizational elements including culture, structure and systems, resources, stakeholders, and the environment (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). Each of these interconnected elements plays a role in the success or failure of a new strategy implementation. Disregarding one element can have far-reaching effects on the outcome of a change initiative.

Though this research study fits within the broader context of coherence, it truly targeted one small facet of the entire process. The intention of the professional learning community implementation survey was to establish a baseline for what will be necessary to enhance the greatest resource of any school system, its people. Taking a closer look at the current perceptions of professional learning communities in contrast with the necessary skills and knowledge required for successful implementation of the practice revealed gaps “between what people know how to do and what the strategy requires of them” (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011, p. 10). This closer look at the resources area, particularly the human resources component, represented one very small way of beginning to analyze district work for areas of coherence or incoherence.

Chapter 3

Profile of Data Collection and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore how one urban, Midwestern school district approached the task of developing coherence during the adoption of a new strategic initiative, in this case, professional learning communities. Current research indicates the need for coherence throughout the process of district change initiatives. While research and frameworks have been developed that describe what coherence is and why it is needed, few, if any, studies have explored the degree of coherence within certified staff perceptions of a change initiative prior to full implementation. This baseline analysis considered the staff perceptions of professional learning community implementation with examination of the results across buildings, staffing groups, and the district.

Procedures

The data source for this study included certificated staff employed by a public, urban, Midwestern school district.

Participant selection. This study utilized a voluntary sample of certified staff in a local public school district. Study participants were asked to complete the survey as part of the regular continuous improvement process of the district. The surveys were administered at the end of the 2018-2019 school year and served as part of the evaluation process related to the professional learning community implementation initiative at the district level. The survey was sent to all certificated staff members in the school district research site. This equated to approximately 270 teachers and 20 administrators. Of those roughly 290 surveys, 188 surveys were returned. With a response rate of roughly

65%, the participant sample represents a significant portion of the district. The returned surveys came from 6 administrators and 182 other certificated staff members representing a variety of grade levels, content-areas, buildings, and job assignments. Six elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school were represented as well as the district's central office.

Data access. The researcher requested approval from the Institutional Review Board through the University of Nebraska at Omaha as part of the research process. In addition, the researcher gained permission through the participating school district approval process to access the professional learning community implementation baseline survey data.

Data Collection

The data used as part of this study was archived data generated during the district research site's regular school improvement and accreditation cycle. The survey was given as the district began to address feedback from the most recent accreditation visit which documented the need for implementation of professional learning communities. The district curriculum office utilized a survey developed by Solution Tree to gather baseline data regarding current teacher perceptions of professional learning community implementation (PLC Navigator, 2019). The survey was chosen by the district curriculum office because of its alignment to the foundational elements of a professional learning community.

As the study focused on current staff perceptions of implementation, a survey was the best tool to gain baseline insight regards staff beliefs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The survey was tested with two administrators, one at the building level and one at the

district level. Based on their feedback, the survey was altered for terminology and question structure.

Once finalized, the survey was shared by the district curriculum department to all certificated staff during the last work week of the 2018-2019 school year. The survey was administered through Google Forms via a link given during department and grade level collaboration time. All certificated staff were asked to complete the survey during their department and grade level collaboration time on a professional development day at the end of the 2018-2019 school year. Department and grade level leaders were provided the following statement to share with participants during the collaborative time, “Please go to this link and follow the directions indicated on the Google Form independently. This will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.” The survey link stayed live for five days in the event that someone was absent and wanted to complete the survey later. Reminders were sent through email and communicated in-person during grade-level and department meetings through the survey window.

As part of the district work, staff responses to the survey were compiled to provide data related to individual questions or sections. The spreadsheet of submissions was shared only with the district curriculum department. Individual building scores were distributed to respective building administrators to view responses and sort data for confidentiality. The survey data representing individual building information and district-wide information was presented to individual building principals via emailed PDFs. Individual principals were not given access to other buildings’ data.

Description of Instruments

The instrument used for this study was a survey that was used to provide feedback to the district curriculum department at the research site. It was derived from the curriculum department using the PLC Navigator (2019) survey as the foundation. The data from this measure was accessed as part of this study.

After participants identified their building and position as certified or administrative staff, the survey directed them to 26 statements across four sub-sections, Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose, Building a Collaborative Culture Through High-Performing Teams, A Focus on Results, and Defining Professional Learning Communities. In twenty of the questions, staff were asked to select from a five-point Likert scale to what degree the statement currently applies to their perception of their work within professional learning communities at the district site (see Figure 3.1). The scale used included responses of “1. We have not begun to address this issue.”, “2. We are talking about this, but have not taken significant action to make it a reality.”, “3. We have begun to do this, but at this stage of the implementation process, many staff approach the task with a sense of compliance rather than commitment.”, “4. We have moved beyond the initial implementation and continue to work our way through the process. Support and enthusiasm for process are growing.”, and “5. This practice is deeply embedded in our culture. Most staff members are committed to doing this and believe it is an important factor in the collective effort to improve our school.” Three of the questions allowed for additional comments at the end of each section. The final question allowed participants to define professional learning communities in their own words.

The Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose section accounted for twelve of the survey questions and represented staff's perceptions of their work with standards, curriculum guides, learning expectations, assessment, and intervention. The section entitled Building a Collaborative Culture Through High-Performing Teams accounted for six of the questions and considered staff's perceptions of the structure and work undertaken in collaborative teams within their buildings. A Focus on Results accounted for seven of the questions and focused primarily on staff perceptions related to goal setting and common assessments. The final section of the survey was one open-ended question that asked participants to define a professional learning community in their own words. The survey statements in each subsection are listed below in Table 3.1. Scores were totaled for each subsection as well as for the entire survey.

Table 3.1
Survey Item Statements by Subsection

Category	Statement
Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose	<p>We work with colleagues on our team to build shared knowledge regarding state standards.</p> <p>We work with colleagues on our team to build shared knowledge regarding district curriculum guides.</p> <p>We work with colleagues on our team to build shared knowledge regarding expectations for the next course or grade level.</p> <p>Collective inquiry has enabled each member of our team to clarify what all students must know and be able to do as a result of every unit of instruction.</p> <p>We continually work together to identify policies and procedures that encourage learning in areas such as homework, grading, discipline, and recognition.</p> <p>We work with colleagues on our team to clarify the criteria by which we will judge the quality of student work and practice applying those criteria until we can do so consistently.</p> <p>We identify the specific standard or target each student must achieve on each of the essential skills being addressed by the</p>

	<p>formative assessment.</p> <p>We monitor the learning of each student on priority standards on a weekly basis through a series of team-developed formative assessments that are aligned with district and state assessments.</p> <p>We provide a system of interventions that guarantees each student will receive additional time and support until they are successful.</p> <p>Students are required, rather than invited, to devote extra time and receive additional support until they are successful.</p> <p>We have developed strategies to extend and enrich the learning of students who have mastered priority standards.</p> <p>Please note any additional comments related to Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose.</p>
<p>Building a Collaborative Culture Through High-Performing Teams</p>	<p>We are organized into collaborative teams in which members work together interdependently to achieve district, building, grade, or department SMART goals.</p> <p>We are provided time during the contractual day and school year to meet as a team.</p> <p>We develop and adhere to team norms.</p> <p>We use collaborative time to engage in collective inquiry on questions specifically linked to gains in student achievement.</p> <p>Each team is called on to generate and submit products, which result from work on four critical questions related to student learning (What do we expect students to learn? How will we know they are learning? How will we respond when they don't learn? How will we respond if they already know it?).</p> <p>Please note any additional comments related to Building a Collaborative Culture.</p>
<p>A Focus on Results</p>	<p>Each of our teams has identified a SMART goal that aligns with one of our school goals.</p> <p>Each member of the team has access to feedback/results regarding the performance of his or her students on team, district, and state assessments.</p> <p>We use common assessments to identify students who need additional time and support for learning.</p> <p>We use common assessments to discover strengths and weaknesses in our individual teaching.</p> <p>We use common assessments to help measure our team's progress towards its goals.</p> <p>For each of the academic and affective goals we have identified for students, we ask, "How do we know if our students are achieving this goal?"</p> <p>Please note any additional comments related to A Focus on</p>

	Results.
Defining Professional Learning Communities	Define a professional learning community in your own words.

Analysis and Strength of Claims Made

Main research question. The overarching research question of this study was focused on how school districts achieve coherence when adopting a new strategic initiative. Specifically, the researcher wanted to know how a baseline analysis of staff perceptions might showcase areas of coherent and incoherent thinking regarding a change initiative. Surveys were analyzed for perspectives that highlighted areas of coherence or incoherence to the key elements of the change initiative, in this case, professional learning communities. Particular attention was paid to the last survey statement where participants are asked to “Define a professional learning community within their own words.” Answers from this question were analyzed using descriptive statistics to extract common words or phrases across all respondents. Those extracted words and phrases were compared to the foundational elements of professional learning communities defined in Chapter 2. The answers from this question were then compared to answers given for questions 1-20 for areas of similarity. Through all twenty-one questions, the information was analyzed in comparison to the core elements of professional learning communities described in Chapter 2. Within the following sub questions, the researcher attempted to find areas of coherence and incoherence across the district, with particular focus on the differences between buildings and staffing groups.

Sub-research question 1. The first sub-question focused on the perceptions of certificated staff members regarding the current implementation of professional learning communities at the district and building levels. At the building and district level, this question was displayed using descriptive statistics to represent frequency counts of all survey data collected on questions one through twenty. Measures of central tendency (including mean, median, and standard deviation) were generated for each survey section. In addition, box and whisker plots representing the mean data were developed for each of the first three subsections of the survey (Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose, Building a Collaborative Culture Through High-Performing Teams and A Focus on Results) to analyze areas of coherence within and across subsections.

By putting data for each of the eight buildings as well as the entire district side-by-side, the researcher was better able to see patterns in the data and areas of coherence both at the building level and across buildings. If the district were approaching coherence within a particular subsection, the researcher expected to see similar mean data points across all buildings. The researcher expected to see standard deviations close to zero for each building and the entire district if coherence is evident. All building names were masked by naming them “School A,” “School B,” etc.

Sub-research question 2. The second sub-question compared the perceptions of administrators to other certificated staff regarding the current status of professional learning community implementation within the school district research site. For questions one through twenty, descriptive statistics including measures of central tendency and validity were used to analyze the data in each subsection from both the administrator and other certificated staff perspectives. Coherence was visually

represented using box and whisker plots generated for both administrators and other certificated staff members. The researcher attempted to identify patterns within the data that suggested either coherence or incoherence. If the district was approaching coherence within and across staffing groups, the researcher expected to see a clear pattern in the data with similar mean data points as well as standard deviations approaching zero for each subgroup.

Organization of the Study and Future Steps

This quantitative study focused on the perceptions of staff members at the outset of implementation of a districtwide change initiative. Through the study, the researcher hoped to answer the following research questions: (1) How does one urban Midwestern school district achieve coherence during the adoption of a new strategic initiative? (2) What are the perceptions of current implementation regarding professional learning communities at the district and building levels? (3) How do the perceptions of teachers and administrators differ regarding the current status of professional learning community implementation?

The organization of this study included receiving consent from both the Institutional Review Board and the participating school district, accessing the professional learning community survey data previously gathered by the school district, and analyzing the data for areas of coherence across buildings, professional groups, and the district.

Chapter 4

Analysis and Findings

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the perceptions of staff members in an urban, Midwestern school district regarding implementation of professional learning communities as a districtwide strategic initiative. The study explored how baseline perceptual data might be analyzed for patterns of coherence and incoherence in regard to implementation of a new strategic initiative. The chapter begins with a description of the response rate from the survey and an overview of the demographics of the participants. This is followed by an analysis of the data gathered from the survey in accordance with each research question.

Response Rate

The school district utilized for this research study employed approximately 290 certificated staff members at the time the survey was given. Those certificated staff members included classroom teachers, specialists, counselors, school psychologists, and administrators. The survey was distributed by the district curriculum office to all of the approximately 290 certificated staff members. Of those distributed, 188 surveys were returned. This resulted in a response rate of roughly 65%.

Demographics of Study Participants

The survey distributed by the district curriculum department asked for two pieces of demographic information. The first piece was the participant's building. Participants who worked within multiple buildings were allowed to check all that applied. 16 participants identified themselves as working in more than one building. Table 4.1 represents the number of participants per school. Those that identified more than one

building were included in the counts for each building they identified with. Survey results from one central office administrator were excluded from Table 4.1 but included in the subsequent data analysis and discussion.

Table 4.1
Participant Representation by School

School	Number of Participants
A	24
B	17
C	21
D	28
E	16
F	19
G	29
H	49
Entire District	188

The second piece of demographic information collected through the survey was the role that the participant plays in the school district with “Certified Staff” and “Administrative Staff” being the two options. Of the 188 participants, 182 identified as Certified Staff and 6 identified as Administrative Staff.

Analysis of Research Questions

The overarching research question of this study was focused on how school districts achieve coherence when adopting a new strategic initiative. The analysis of the data collected during the baseline implementation of the survey in this study was

considered first from the angles of the sub-research questions before concluding with the main research question.

Sub-research question 1. What are the perceptions of current implementation regarding professional learning communities at the district and building levels?

Results. At the district and building level, perceptions regarding current professional learning community implementation were analyzed for each of the three subsections of the survey: Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose, Building a Collaborative Culture Through High-Performing Teams, and A Focus on Results. Box and whisker plots were generated for the data at both the building and district levels, with one plot representing each building and the entire district within a given subsection.

Exploring the data through the lens of box and whisker plots allowed the researcher to better analyze the distribution of the data (Tukey, 1977). The configuration of box and whisker plots allowed the researcher to see the distribution of the data split into quartiles with the middle 50% of the data, the interquartile range, represented by a box, and the upper and lower 25% of the data displayed through whiskers extending from the box. The median of the data set is displayed by a line splitting the interquartile range, the box, into two sections where half the scores within the interquartile range are greater than the median and half are less.

The mean of means was used to calculate each building's average score within each subsection. In order to calculate the mean of means, each participants' responses for each question were assigned a point value from 1 to 5 with 1 being "We have not begun to address this issue.", 2 being "We are talking about this, but have not taken significant action to make it a reality.", 3 being "We have begun to do this, but at this stage of the

implementation process, many staff approach the task with a sense of compliance rather than commitment.”, 4 being “We have moved beyond the initial implementation and continue to work our way through the process. Support and enthusiasm for process are growing.”, and 5 being “This practice is deeply embedded in our culture. Most staff members are committed to doing this and believe it is an important factor in the collective effort to improve our school.” The points for each question within a subsection were averaged to arrive at a mean score for each participant for each subsection. Those mean scores for each participant within each subsection were then added and averaged to find the mean score for each building and the district as a whole.

Trends and patterns regarding the coherence or incoherence of staff perceptions of current professional learning community implementation emerged by looking at the mean of means as well as the standard deviation, overall range, interquartile range, and median scores from the building and district-wide data.

Learning as our fundamental purpose. For the section surrounding Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose, a few buildings appeared to show patterns of coherence more than others. For example, the data from School B ($m=2.8$, $sd=0.552$) suggests the most cohesion in this area as evidenced by the smallest standard deviation of any building within the data set. School H ($m=3.2$, $sd=0.822$) on the other hand, appear to show the least cohesion within this area as shown by a standard deviation larger than that of any other building or the district. School C and D also showed signs of cohesion as evidenced by 50% of their scores falling within the smallest interquartile range (0.8) of any of the other buildings. At the district level, mean responses ranged from 1.3 to 4.9

with 50% of the responses concentrated between 2.8-3.9 indicating a lack of coherence across the district as a whole.

When the mean scores for each building regarding Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose are considered, the data begins to look more cohesive in this area. Three of the eight buildings have the same mean score ($m=3.2$) and five of the eight buildings are within one tenth of a point from each other (3.1-3.3). School E ($m=3.8$, $sd=0.681$) had the highest mean score of any building suggesting greater knowledge in this area compared to that of the other buildings.

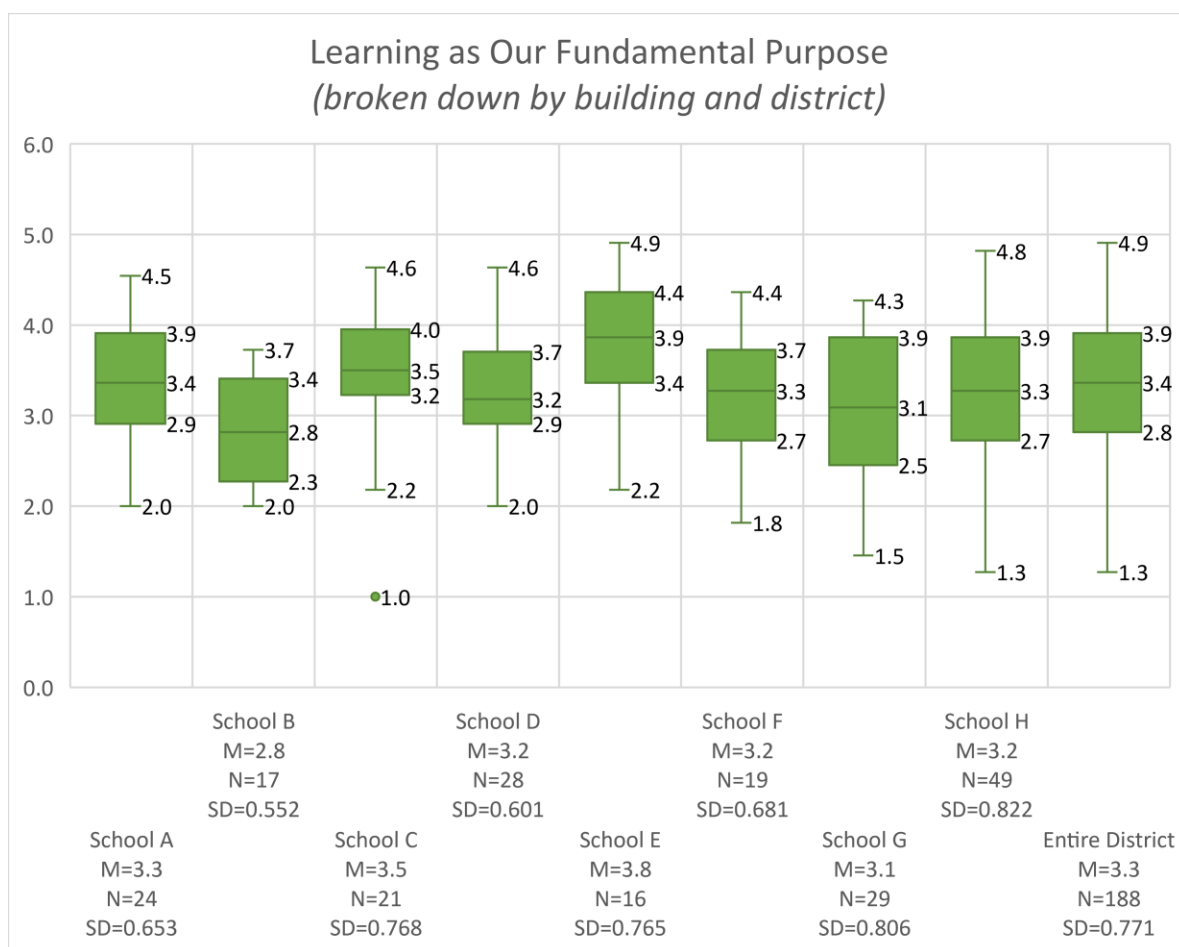


Figure 4.1. Box and Whisker Plot for Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose Disaggregated by Building and District.

Building a collaborative culture through high performing teams. In the area of Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams, the buildings' mean data appeared more similar though the larger standard deviations suggest that the data is less cohesive than the first subsection.

For example, the building with the smallest standard deviation in this case is School G ($m=3.7$, $sd=0.703$). This standard deviation is larger than the previous subsection's smallest standard deviation (School B, $m=2.8$, $sd=0.552$), suggesting that the data for many buildings in this area is less cohesive than in the first section. School A ($m=3.2$, $sd=0.942$) on the other hand, appeared to show the least cohesion within this area as shown by a standard deviation larger than that of any other building or the district. School G also showed signs of cohesion as evidenced by 50% of their mean scores falling within the smallest interquartile range (0.8) of any of the other buildings.

Of the three subsections of the survey, the mean scores for Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams are the most cohesive across buildings. The range of means in this area runs from 3.2 to 4.0, with all but one of the means being between 3.2 and 3.7. Three of the eight buildings had the same mean score (Schools A, C, and D; $m=3.2$). School E ($m=4.0$, $sd=0.846$) had the highest mean as well as one of the highest standard deviations and one of only two outlier data points. This suggests that within School E roughly 75% of survey participants, those in the upper three quartiles, feel confident in their building's implementation of a collaborative culture while the lowest quartile holds a much different perspective.

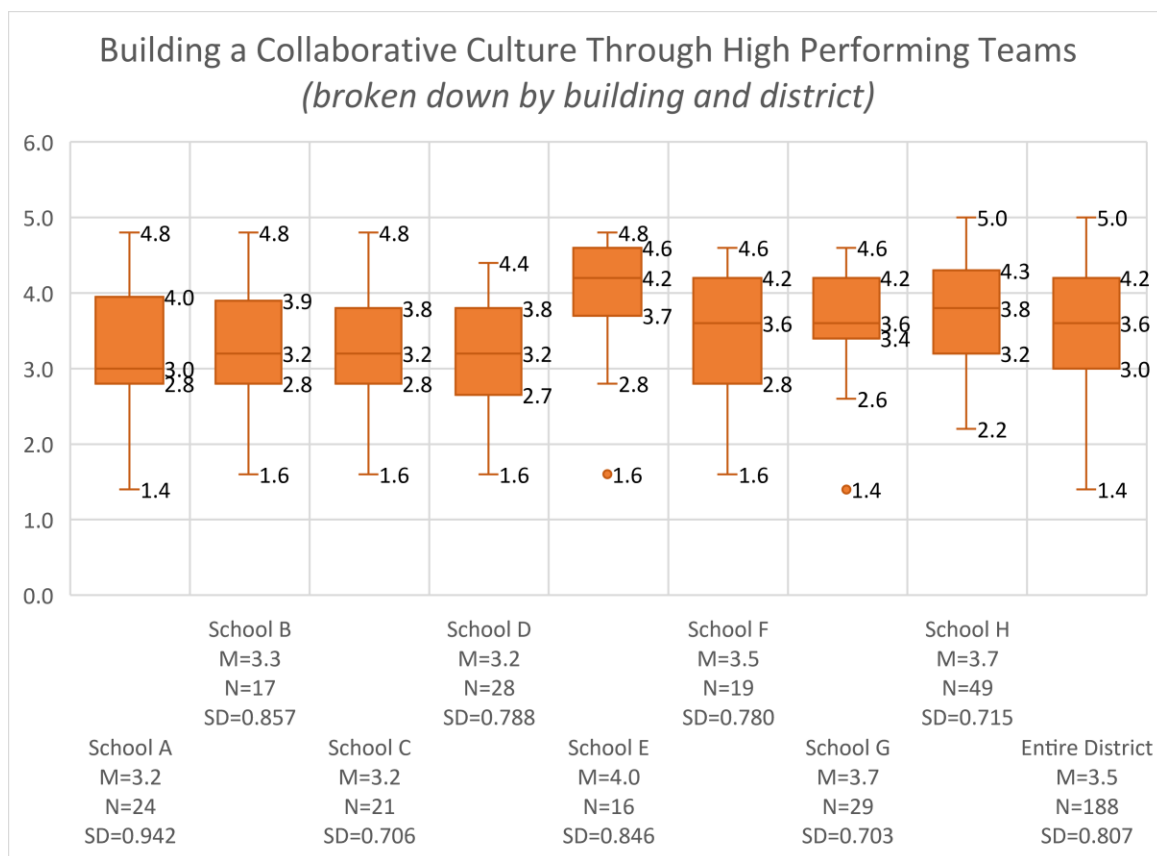


Figure 4.2. Box and Whisker Plot for Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams Disaggregated by Building and District.

A focus on results. In the area of A Focus on Results, the building-level data showed the least amount of coherence across the eight schools. This pattern of incoherence can be found by looking at the high standard deviations within this data set as well as the wide ranges within the data at each building. Neither the building-level data from Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose nor Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams Schools showcased such a wide range in scores.

In looking at standard deviations, School E ($m=3.8$, $sd=1.086$) appeared to have the greatest level of incoherence in this area as evidenced by their high standard

deviation. It should be noted, though, that the standard deviations for all buildings were high ranging from School D ($m=3.2$, $sd=0.836$) to School C ($m=3.1$, $sd=1.010$).

Schools D, E, and H had the greatest range of data with School H matching the district range encompassing mean data points from 1.0 to 5.0. School A and F also had larger ranges within the data set spanning 1.3 to 4.8. The smallest range was found at School B where the mean scores for A Focus on Results fell between 1.3 and 4.3, though the standard deviation for School B was not one of the lowest suggesting that though the range of scores was smaller the distribution of the scores was greater.

Considering the wide range of scores noted in the box and whisker plot, the mean scores were closer than one might assume. The range of means in this area ran from School B ($m=2.7$) to School E ($m=3.8$), with the other six buildings' means falling between 3.1 and 3.4. The district mean also fell within this range at 3.3.

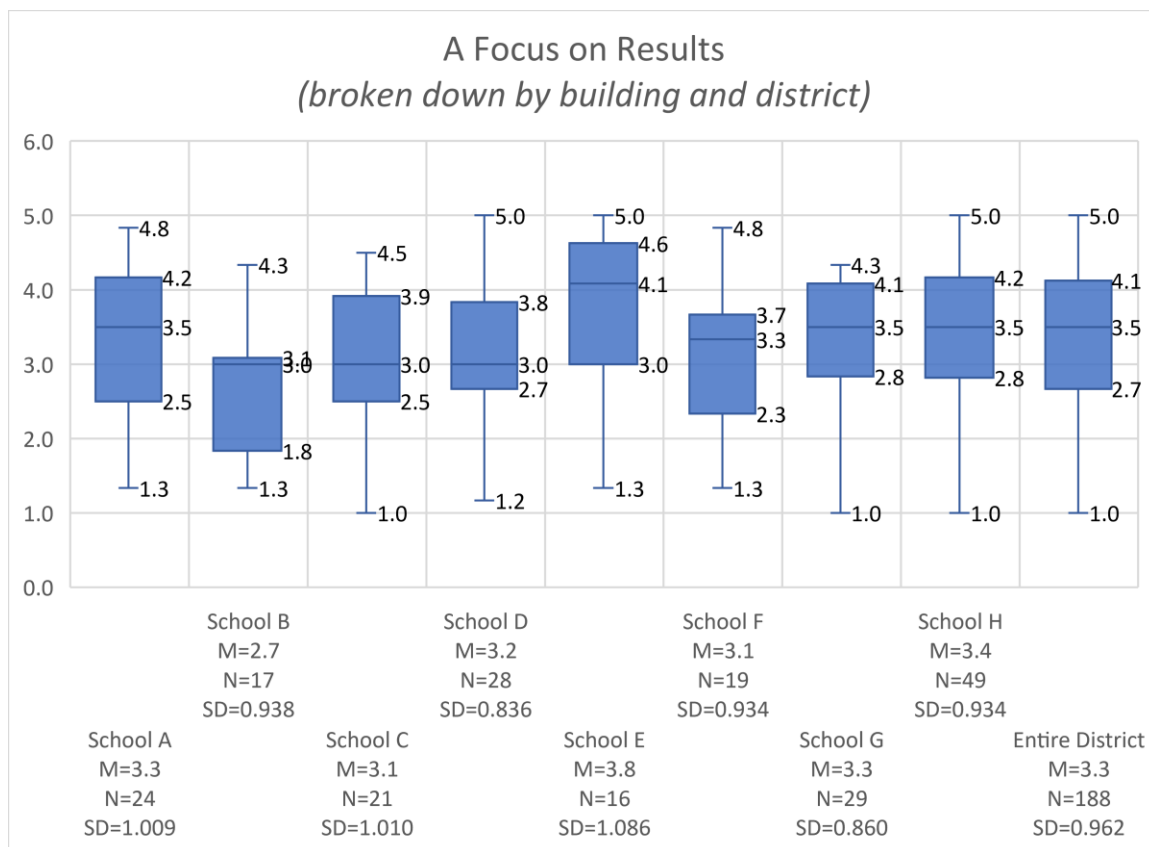


Figure 4.3. Box and Whisker Plot for A Focus on Results Disaggregated by Building and District.

Across the building data, School B consistently had some of the lowest mean scores of any buildings, though they also had some of the smallest ranges of data in each subsection as well as some of the lowest standard deviation scores. The low mean score for School B suggests the staff do not believe that current implementation of the processes is in place as strongly as other buildings while the smaller standard deviation scores indicates that the team may have more shared beliefs about their position within the work. School E, on the other hand, consistently had the highest mean scores for each subsection, though their standard deviation scores were some of the highest. The high mean suggests that there may be high belief in the level of current implementation of

professional learning community components while the wider distribution suggests that not every staff member may be in agreement with those beliefs.

Sub-Research Question 2. How do the perceptions of administrators and other certificated staff members differ in regard to the current status of professional learning community implementation?

Results. Results for sub-research question 2 were calculated similarly to sub-research question 1 with the exception being that instead of disaggregating data by buildings, the data was divided by staff group. The results for Administrative and Other Certificated Staff within each subsection of the survey are listed below.

Learning as our fundamental purpose. For the section surrounding Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose, the data between Administrative and Other Certificated Staff varied widely. Not only were the ranges of data significantly different with the range for Administrative Staff being 1.9-3.7 and Other Certificated Staff being 1.3-4.9, but the mean scores were also different with the Administrative Staff score ($m=2.6$) being significantly lower than that of Other Certificated Staff ($m=3.3$). This difference in mean scores for this section suggests that Administrators feel less strongly about the implementation of professional learning communities.

The standard deviations for the data set suggest that while Administrators ($sd=0.605$) feel as though the level of implementation is not as high, they are more unified in their thinking than that of the Other Certificated Staff ($sd=0.766$). Their lower standard deviation indicates more coherence across the Administrative Group than the

Other Certificated Staff group, though it is important to recognize the vast difference between the number of participants in each subgroup.

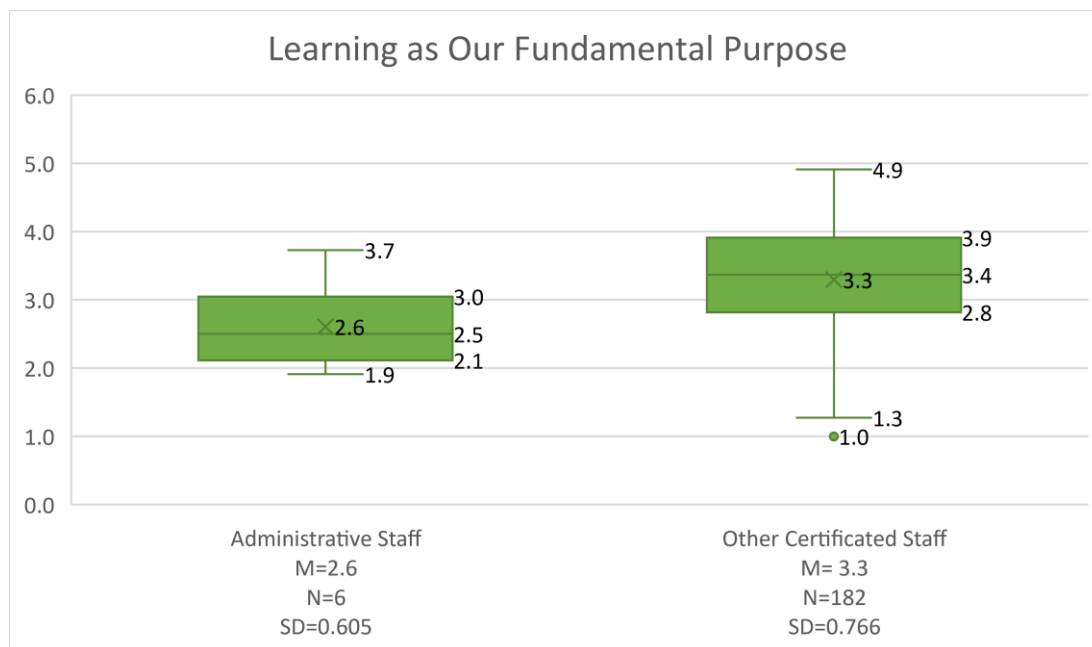


Figure 4.4. Box and Whisker Plot Representing Mean Data for Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose Disaggregated by Administrative and Other Certificated Staff.

Building a collaborative culture through high performing teams. For the section regarding Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams, the data between Administrative and Other Certificated Staff was more coherent with more similar scores for the mean and standard deviation. The mean scores for the two groups were closer than for the previous section suggesting that Administrative and Other Certificated Staff may be more coherent in their thinking in this area. What is interesting to note is that, as a group, Administrative Staff appeared to be less coherent in their thinking regarding Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams. This can be seen through the larger standard deviation score in this area (sd=0.746).

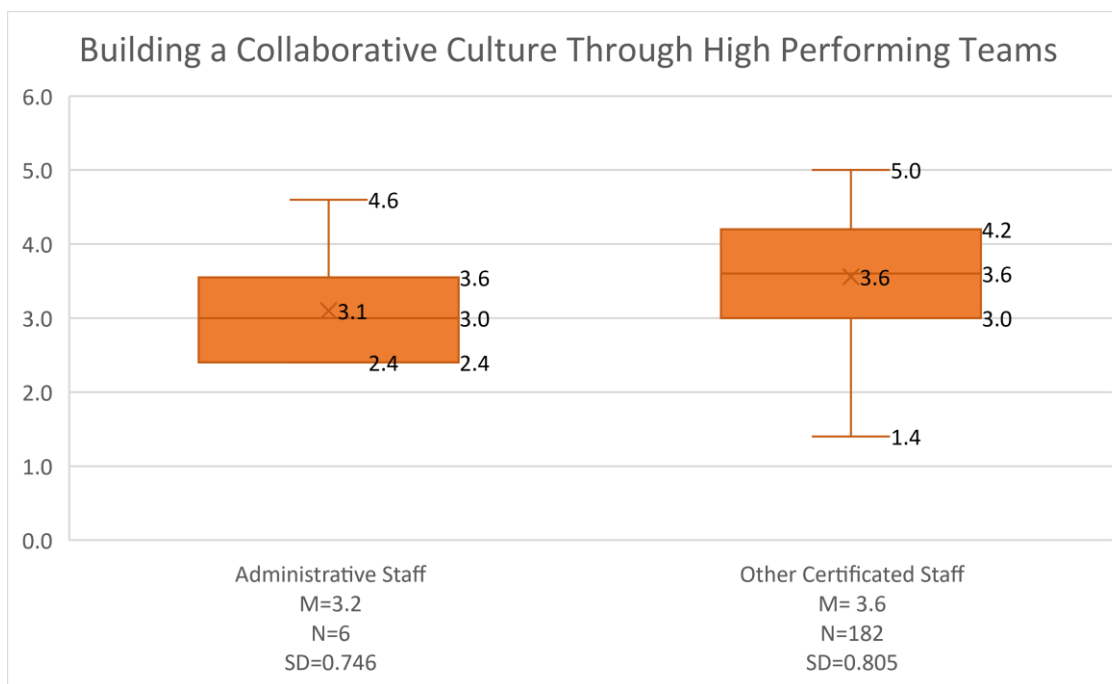


Figure 4.5. Box and Whisker Plot Representing Mean Data for Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams Disaggregated by Administrative and Other Certificated Staff.

A focus on results. For the section regarding A Focus on Results, the data between Administrative and Other Certificated Staff did not seem to suggest coherence. The mean scores for the two groups were marked by a difference of six tenths of a point. Administrative (sd=0.687) scores in this area were more coherent than Other Certificated Staff (sd=0.962) as shown by the significantly smaller standard deviation. When looking at standard deviation scores, this area seemed to be the least coherent for Other Certificated Staff.

By looking at the mean scores, the researcher was able to identify an area of possible coherence. In looking at the box and whisker plot, 50% of the Administrative scores fell below the mean score of 2.7. The data suggests those three administrators were very coherent in their thinking in this area with a small range of scores from 1.8-2.4.

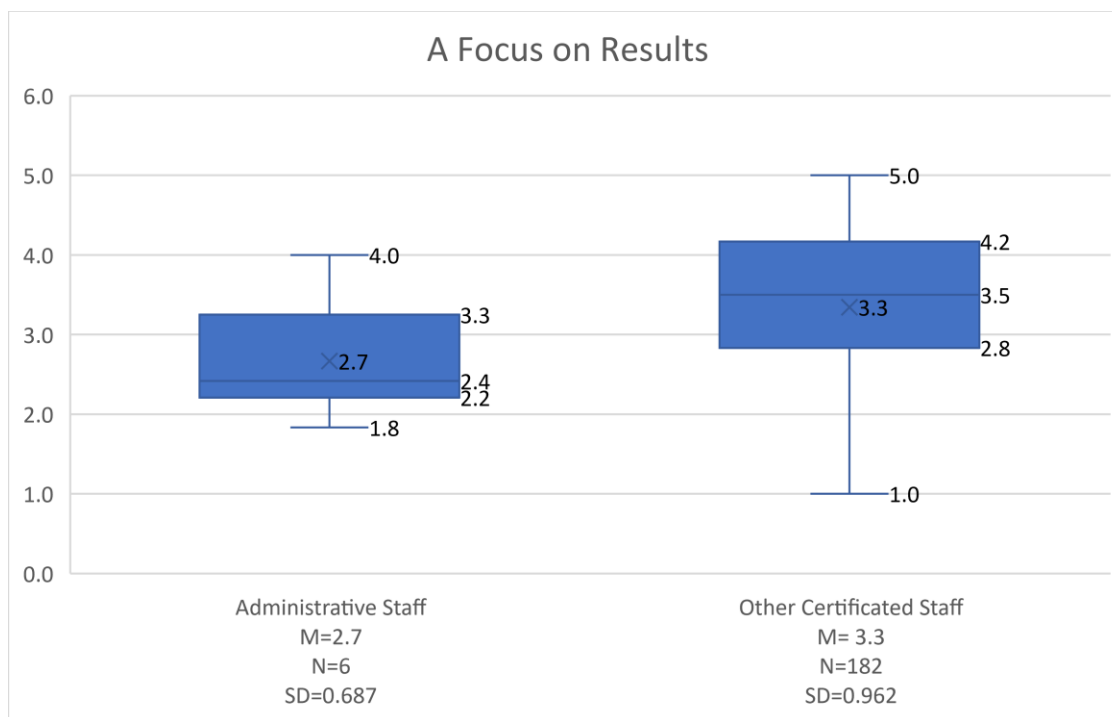


Figure 4.6. Box and Whisker Plot Representing Mean Data for A Focus on Results Disaggregated by Administrative and Other Certificated Staff.

Main Research Question. How does one urban Midwestern school district achieve coherence during the adoption of a new strategic initiative?

Results. The analysis in the subsequent sections regarding the sub-research questions highlighted areas of coherence and incoherence specifically related to the three key areas of professional learning community implementation: Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose, Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams, and A Focus on Results. This analysis revealed that the school district data was particularly incoherent in the area of A Focus on Results. In addition, discrepancies existed at the building level with some building-specific data showing areas of more coherence than others. A lack of coherence was also seen when the survey data was disaggregated by Administrators and Other Certificated Staff. The wide range of data in

each section suggested that there are patterns of incoherent thinking within each staffing group in regard to each of the three sections.

The last statement of the survey where participants were asked to “Define a professional learning community in their own words” offers additional insight to the development of coherence within this district during the strategic change initiative. The definition of a professional learning community used for this study was “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, and Mattos, 2016, p. 10). Table 4.5 highlights some of the keywords extracted from the 188 definitions shared by survey participants utilizing the keywords of the definition utilized in the study as a base. Words like “group”, “team,” and “collaborate” were also analyzed across definitions due to their importance in the professional learning community research described in Chapter 2. Of the 188 definitions provided by survey respondents, very few included the words from the definition of professional learning communities provided by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, and Mattos (2016). This suggests a level of incoherence regarding how the term professional learning community is defined within the school district as opposed to the definition found within the literature described in Chapter 2.

Interestingly enough, the words “group” and “team” appeared frequently within the definitions provided by respondents with 130 of the 188 survey participants using one term or the other. 57 of the 188 participants defined professional learning communities within the context of teams while 73 participants defined them within the context of groups. The literature supporting professional learning communities clearly delineates

the difference between work groups and truly collaborative teams. The number of participants who either utilized the word “group” or nothing at all to define the gathering of colleagues suggests a lack of understanding as a district regarding the differences between work groups and collaborative teams.

Table 4.2
Key words extracted from survey definitions for professional learning communities

Key word	Number of Respondents Who Utilized the Word in Their Definition
<i>Ongoing</i>	0
<i>Process</i>	2
<i>Recurring</i>	0
<i>Collective</i>	4
<i>Inquiry</i>	1
<i>Action</i>	3
<i>Research</i>	1
<i>Results</i>	5
<i>Students</i>	75
<i>Group</i>	73
<i>Team</i>	57
<i>Collaborate</i> <i>(also collaboratively</i> <i>or collaborative)</i>	69

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Discussions

This chapter begins with a summary of the study followed by a review of the literature that formed the basis of the study and a description of the conclusions reached based on the results of the data analysis. The chapter will conclude with considerations for further research and implications for educational leadership.

Summary

Given the ever-changing landscape of school improvement, this study was significant in its attempt to shed light on the importance of the development of internal coherence during any new districtwide strategic initiative. Coherence within a school district during implementation of a strategic change can be developed through careful consideration of a number of elements including culture, stakeholders, structures, systems, and resources (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). This study took a closer look at the impact of the resources component during the outset of a strategic initiative. In particular, this study focused on the perceptions of a school district's greatest resource, its people, regarding current implementation of a change initiative.

The purpose of this quantitative study was to explore how one urban, Midwestern school district approached the task of developing coherence during the adoption of a new strategic initiative, in this case, professional learning communities. The overarching research question was, "How does one urban Midwestern school district achieve coherence during the adoption of a new strategic initiative?" This exploration was conducted through the lens of a baseline survey conducted by the school district research site exploring staff perceptions of current professional learning community

implementation. By analyzing baseline data regarding staff understanding and perceptions of a proposed change, district leaders have a better opportunity to respond to changes in ways that bring coherence to the entire system (Bubb & Earley, 2010; Earley & Porritt, 2010; Stake, 1967). The data gathered through the survey was disaggregated by both building and staffing groups to allow trends and patterns to emerge. These patterns were analyzed for areas of coherence in relation to staff perceptions of professional learning community implementation.

Review of literature. As school district leaders grapple with identifying priorities for improvement and developing strategies for change that meet those prioritized needs, a careful look at internal coherence becomes necessary. The development of coherence within an organization extends far beyond the consideration of alignment of systems and structures (Zuckerman, Campbell Wilcox, Durand, & Schiller, 2018). Coherence reaches towards developing shared beliefs, values, and understandings among the individuals that are called to carry out the work of a strategic change (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). If there is not a level of shared beliefs, values, and understandings among the staff tasked with execution of the strategic change, there is a greater likelihood that the vision espoused by district leadership will not be lived out in the actions of the staff implementing the change (Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, 2018).

Research design. This study was conducted using quantitative methods to analyze archived data generated through the school district's regular school improvement and accreditation cycle. The district curriculum office provided a twenty-one-question survey regarding professional learning community implementation to roughly 290 certificated staff members and received responses from 188. The survey utilized a Likert

scale to quantify staff perceptions of the professional learning community implementation process within three areas: Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose, Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams, and A Focus on Results. A mean score was generated for each section of each survey participant's responses. The calculated means were then used to find the mean of the means for buildings and staffing groups.

In addition, each survey participant was asked to provide their own definition of professional learning communities. This definition was also analyzed against the definition provided within the literature in Chapter 2. Descriptive statistics as well as box and whisker plots were used to analyze the data for patterns or trends that might indicate coherence. The findings were presented in Chapter IV.

Conclusions

Sub-research question 1. The first sub-research question explored the perceptions of current implementation of professional learning communities at the building and district levels for each of the subsections of the survey.

Building-level data. At the building level, a few patterns emerged that warrant further exploration. Of particular note were Schools B and E. Across the building data, School E consistently had the highest mean data suggesting confidence in the level of implementation at the building level, though they were not always the most coherent building in terms of range of scores. School B seemed to be most coherent in their thinking about their present level of implementation with the range of scores overall and within the interquartile ranges consistently being one of the smallest across the three subsections of the survey.

District-level data. At the district level, the data remained incoherent throughout with wide ranges of scores and high standard deviations indicated at every level. The most coherent area for the school district was Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose followed by Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams. A Focus on Results was the least coherent area for the district as a whole.

Coherence within subsections. Of the three subsections, Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose emerged as one of the most coherent with stronger pockets of unity seen there than within other subsections of the survey. The lowest standard deviation score of any within the survey (School B, $sd=0.552$) was recorded within this section.

In analyzing the data, A Focus on Results came through as the least coherent subsection of the survey. This was evidenced through the high standard deviation scores recorded here with most coherent score being School D ($sd=0.836$) and the least coherent score being School E ($sd=1.086$).

Sub-research question 2. The second sub-research question explored disaggregated the survey data in another way by asking, “How do the perceptions of administrators and other certificated staff members differ in regard to the current status of professional learning community implementation?” The results of the data analysis in this area indicated that the mean of the administrative and certified staff data in the area of Building a Collaborative Community Through High Performing Teams was closer than that of the data found in the other two subsections of the survey. This suggests that there may be a greater degree of coherence between the beliefs of the administrative and certified staff in this area as compared to the other two.

It is also important to note that there were areas in which the perceptions of administrators regarding professional learning community implementation differed. In this case, the mean data for administrators regarding Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams and A Focus on Results had a wider range than that of Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose. Building a Collaborative Culture Through High Performing Teams also had the greatest standard deviation scores. This data suggests that administrators may not be coherent in their beliefs about the current implementation. Further study would need to be conducted to better understand whether the differences in administrator perceptions were based on their feelings about the implementation process at the district level or within their own building.

Main research question. The overall goal of this study was to explore how one school district achieved coherence during the adoption of a new strategic initiative. By exploring the data from a baseline implementation survey, the researcher was able to better study one component of the movement towards coherence.

Through comparisons of the definitions provided by survey participants and the definition found within the literature that will be used by the school district (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016), it was clear that there were patterns of incoherent thinking between what survey participants believed a professional learning community to be and what the district, and the literature, envisioned as a professional learning community. Very few of the 188 survey participants used the main keywords from the definition for professional learning communities that the district will be using. In addition, less than half of the participants included words in their definition related to key ideas from the literature including “students,” “team,” and “collaborate.”

Considerations for Further Research

This study explored the coherence of staff perceptions related to the current implementation of a new strategic change at the district level. Through data analysis, the researcher revealed that while some pockets of coherence existed within the district, there were more areas in which incoherence dominated. This can be seen by comparing the box and whisker plots generated for each subsection of the survey as well as looking at the standard deviation for each building or staffing group.

When compared, the section entitled, A Focus on Results, illustrates data that is far from coherent with higher standard deviations scores than any other subsection. It would be helpful to further analyze the data within this subsection to identify if the survey responses from particular questions was more coherent for some questions than others. Pinpointing specific questions that seemed to illicit the most incoherent thinking could better help the district move forward with professional development targeted at these areas.

Within the context of the PELP Framework, this research represented a very small starting point in the overall landscape of the study of coherence during a strategic change initiative at the district level. Further research is needed to analyze this data from year-to-year to see how trends change as the district research site more closely focuses on the implementation of professional learning communities. Additional experiences that develop a shared understanding of professional learning communities might alter participants' responses to the survey and thus yield different results when analyzed for coherence.

Since this was a study within one school district at one point in time measuring one element of the coherence framework during the implementation process, further study regarding the development of coherence within the other framework elements should be considered. Collecting and analyzing data related to the other elements of the PELP Coherence Framework including culture, structure, systems, stakeholders, and the additional types of resources would provide additional insight to the implementation of a new strategic initiative at the district level (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). Similar analysis could be conducted within this district research site to identify areas of coherence and incoherence in regard to the other areas of the PELP Coherence Framework. This small study into the resources component of the framework was a mere starting place for much more research.

Implications for Educational Leadership

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) put it best when they said, “Change in education is easy to propose, hard to implement, and extraordinarily difficult to sustain” (p. 1). Developing coherence before, during, and after the implementation of a strategic change initiative is no different. It is easy to propose that a school district work towards achieving coherence during a strategic initiative. It’s much harder to put forth the effort required to continue that work during implementation and nearly impossible to continue the same level of commitment in regard to the change through consecutive years. This difficulty is one reason why the pendulum swing of change discussed in Chapter 1 becomes so common. The continually moving landscape of education encourages district leaders to engage in a series of practices in order to move towards sustainability of a proposed initiative.

The school district participating in this study was just beginning its journey in professional learning community implementation. The gathering of baseline perceptual data regarding current implementation of professional learning community practices and beliefs represented an important first step in the process towards becoming a school district that embodies the practices of a true professional learning community. This next section includes a list of recommendations for practice that may be helpful to not only the school district research site, but also to others who may be on a similar journey towards coherent change during implementation of a strategic initiative. The following recommendations are divided into areas to consider before, during, and after implementation of a new strategic initiative.

Before the initiative. Giving a baseline survey such as this prior to the implementation of a new strategic initiative, offers many opportunities for educational leaders to better define the environment in which the new strategy will be adopted. By analyzing the data from the survey prior to implementation, school leaders have the opportunity to engage in a number of actions that can better support the development of coherence surrounding the strategy. A few of those actions are communicating survey results with stakeholders, including baseline data in strategic planning, identifying necessary resources, and identifying and addressing the differing beliefs that may exist between staffing groups.

Communicate with stakeholders. Once survey results have been collected and analyzed, it's important that those results are communicated to all stakeholders who will be affected by the proposed strategy. Clarity regarding the communication of information is key to building the shared understandings that underpin coherence (Brown,

2018). Providing stakeholders with a clear picture of the district's current reality and the impact that the proposed change can have is critical (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009). Clear communication of data from the outset also helps individual buildings monitor their own progress towards a strong depth of shared understanding regarding the proposed work. Without baseline data to rely on, it will be more difficult for building and district staff to gauge progress towards goals.

Include baseline data in strategic planning. Including the results in strategic planning documents as a baseline for where the district began their work serves as another opportunity to communicate the importance of the work with stakeholders. Baseline surveys such as this one also offer the opportunity for district leaders to identify areas of incoherent thinking that could serve as areas for strategic improvement in regard to the proposed change initiative.

In the case of this district research site, A Focus on Results would be an area to further explore and potentially include as a key consideration for strategic planning. By making elements of A Focus on Results a priority in planning, district leaders can monitor changes in perceptions over subsequent years as additional resources are applied to move towards coherence.

Identify necessary resources. Baseline surveys such as this one help illuminate areas where incoherent thinking might be dominating. By shedding light on those areas, district leadership can work to identify resources that might close the gaps for staff and help them move towards more coherent thinking in terms of the strategy. It also provides the opportunity to analyze where other resources might need to be reallocated in order to better support the implementation of the proposed strategy. When district leaders are

working with a finite amount of resources, it is important that they are allocating them according to the areas of greatest need or areas that have the greatest opportunity to influence the work of the instructional core (Hall & Hord, 2011). As was mentioned earlier, there may be areas where resources have been allocated that are no longer in service to the goals or needs of the organization. Redefining the resources necessary to support strategy implementation is an important component for successful implementation.

Identify and address differing beliefs across staffing groups. Through the results of this survey it became clear that beliefs among staffing groups varied widely in regard to certain aspects of the current level of professional learning community implementation. Of particular note were the discrepancies that existed between the six administrators.

As school and district administrators are the leaders of the change, it stands to reason that their beliefs must be more coherent before moving forward with the proposed initiative. If the most influential people in the organization are not leading the change in the same way, it will be incredibly difficult to build coherence at the building level and across the district (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Differing beliefs and levels of understanding regarding the initiative could result in incongruence within actions undertaken at each building site.

During initial implementation. The work of districts during implementation of a strategic change is critical to the development of coherence overall. Keeping the results of the baseline survey analysis in mind can help districts move towards more coherent thinking during the implementation phase. Focusing on elements such as professional

development and the needs of individual buildings can go a long way towards supporting the level of shared understanding necessary to develop coherent thinking throughout the organization.

Professional development. The results of the baseline survey highlighted areas of incoherent thinking or beliefs in the area of professional learning communities that could be strengthened through additional professional development for staff. Starting small would be one recommendation towards building more coherence across the district. Pinpointing one of the professional learning community areas from the survey to focus on would be a first step towards achieving greater coherence.

This researcher's recommendation would be to provide the professional development necessary for each member of the district to come to a better understanding of what a professional learning community is within the context of the district and the associated literature. At present, the definitions provided by staff through the survey represented many differing views of what a professional learning community is. Developing a greater level of shared understanding for the strategic change initiative could go a long way towards more coherent thinking across the district as a whole. It will be hard to move forward as a school district when there is a lack of coherence surrounding the very definition of the intended change (Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, 2018).

This professional learning also represents an important next step for the district research site in terms of the data collected within the subsections of the survey. While the mean of the means for the district data was closely related, it is clear from the standard deviation scores that additional work needs to be done within the area of A

Focus on Results. Giving more professional development time and space to that area could enrich the work of the professional learning community as a whole.

Professional development is also not limited to other certificated staff. The survey data showed that there were levels of incoherence within the administrators as well. Providing quality professional development to those tasked with leading the strategic change will be crucial to building coherence across the district. If administrators are holding differing beliefs regarding the change, it is almost certain that there will be discrepancies between what the district envisions as a strategic change and the actions that are undertaken within buildings (Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, 2018).

Consider individual building needs. When a school district's leaders adopts a new strategy, they are giving direction for what should be given focus and what should be abandoned (Goleman, 2013). In the case of larger school districts operating from multiple buildings and levels of schooling, strategy implementation must be viewed through the context of each school site. Though the overall strategy being implemented remains the same for each school, the nuances of how it is implemented may be adjusted slightly to fit the needs of the building context including staff and student needs. One of the benefits of being able to study the perceptual data within the context of buildings is the opportunity to see patterns that can help define what the nuances for implementation might be. These patterns can then be used to better pinpoint the extent to which targeted professional development may be necessary within a building.

Within the context of the school research site, there were many instances where targeted professional development could be beneficial for schools. For example, data from Schools A and H routinely represented a wide range of thinking within each section

of the survey. Additional professional development related to the change initiative may be needed in those sites to balance the degree of incoherence that was shown through the data. On the flip side, School B was often coherent in their perceptions of the strategic change even if the mean scores for some of the areas were lower than other buildings. The smaller range within School B may mean that they will need slightly different professional development from other buildings, particularly Schools A and H. Deeper analysis into the specific questions asked by the study may further illuminate areas to target for professional learning both districtwide and at the building-level.

After initial implementation. The period after the initial implementation is arguably the most important as this is often the phase that gets lost during a change initiative. When staff members talk about the pendulum swinging, they are referencing critical decisions that have been made in the post-implementation phase. This is the space where the excitement of a recently implemented initiative begins to wear off and a district must make a critical choice to sustain implementation without veering off-course to another initiative (Schmoker, 2016). Districtwide coherence for a strategic initiative can only be approached if there has been ample time and space given for the change to truly manifest in classrooms (Cambone, 1995; Corcoran, 1995; Donahoe, 1993). Without that time and space, it's a long shot whether true change will occur that results in lasting improvement for the staff, students, and curriculum within the instructional core (Childress, Grossman, Elmore, & King, 2011).

Strategic planning. As school districts grow and change from the initial implementation of an initiative to more sustained use, it's important to consider how this change will manifest itself in future district strategic plans. In order to keep the swinging

pendulum of changing ideas at bay and to build coherence in future years, it's critical that district strategic planning involve resource allocation that supports the continual development of the change initiative. Without careful consideration and focus moving forward, it would be easy for the implemented strategy to fall to the wayside as so many other strategies have in so many school districts across the nation (Collins, 2001; Schmoker, 2016). Maintaining "fierce devotion" (p. 9) to the priorities of a school district is incredibly challenging, but essential for the long-term success of a change initiative (Schmoker, 2011).

Educational leaders allocate resources to the things they consider important and those allocations communicate to the rest of the district where the focus should be. If resources, particularly in regard to planning and communication, are not being expended to the continual support of the strategy, there stands little chance of the strategy successfully moving far into the post-implementation phase.

On-going professional learning. The definition for professional development provided within the Every Student Succeeds Act makes clear that skill development for staff should be "sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused" (ESSA, 2015). The word "sustained" becomes key in the context of efforts to build coherence after implementation of a strategic change. No change implemented will be successful without continued, sustained efforts to develop the shared understanding of the people implementing the change. Too often, changes in behavior as educators are not due to a lack of will, but a lack of understanding about what the change requires of them. As Hall & Hord (2011) stated, "Change is learning. It's as simple and

as complex as that” (p. 6). Staff need the opportunity to develop their understanding of the nuances of an initiative over time.

It’s also important to consider the role that degradation, a situation that occurs when “well established knowledge is lost” (p. 234), can play in the sustainability of change initiative (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). As staffing changes, it can be easy to lose the energy that was generated during the initial implementation phase as well as the knowledge base that grew with the initial staff who were part of the change adoption. Leadership changes and high levels of staff turnover can all play a part in erasing the knowledge base that is vital to the success of a change initiative (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). To combat the possibility of degradation, district leadership must actively work to help incoming staff members develop the shared understanding necessary to maintain coherence.

Annual survey. Consider making this survey an annual measure of the perceptions of professional learning community implementation. By measuring the data annually against the initial baseline perceptions, district leaders should be able to see patterns in thinking. This would be particularly useful as a formative check to measure the impact that professional learning for staff might be having on the overall perceptions of professional learning community implementation (Hall & Hord, 2011). In addition, continued measurement could provide new insight as to what it needed next in regard to professional learning for staff within the context of the change initiative (Bubb & Earley, 2010; Earley & Porritt, 2010; Stake, 1967).

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