TOWARD STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE CENTRAL OFFICE

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**TOWARDS STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**
**IN THE CENTRAL OFFICE**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| Acknowledgements | .......................................................................................................................... | ii |
| List of Tables | ................................................................................................................................ | x |
| List of Figures | ................................................................................................................................ | xi |
| Abstract | ................................................................................................................................ | xii |

## Chapter 1. Introduction to the Study ................................................................. 1
- Knowledge Gaps & Emerging Views .................................................................. 2
- Rationale & Purpose .......................................................................................... 4
- Research Questions ............................................................................................ 5
- Contribution to the Field ................................................................................... 5
- Limitations of the Study .................................................................................... 6

## Chapter 2. Review of the Literature ................................................................. 7
- Introduction ......................................................................................................... 7
- Sociological Foundation ..................................................................................... 9
  - Organizational Culture & Climate .................................................................. 10
- Districts as Reforming Organizations ................................................................ 12
  - Relevancy to Student Learning .................................................................... 12
  - District Workforce ......................................................................................... 14
  - District Reform ............................................................................................... 15
  - A Missing Link in Reform Efforts .................................................................... 18
- Organizational Sciences & Management Framework ....................................... 18
  - Strategic Human Resource Management ....................................................... 19
    - Definition & Origin of SHRM ...................................................................... 19
    - Theoretical Conceptualizations of SHRM ....................................................... 21
      - Four Major Perspectives ....................................................................... 21
      - Common Threads Among Perspectives .................................................... 23
    - Empirical Evidence for SHRM ................................................................. 24
      - Private Sector ......................................................................................... 25
      - Public Sector ........................................................................................... 26
    - Learning Organizations ............................................................................... 30
    - Continuously Improving Organizations ....................................................... 32
    - High Reliability Organizations .................................................................... 33
  - Human Resource Management in School Districts ........................................ 36
    - Theoretical Foundations of HRM in Districts ............................................... 36
    - Empirical Evidence of HRM in Districts ....................................................... 39
      - HRM & District Improvement .................................................................... 39
      - A Developing Literature of HRM in Districts .............................................. 42
3. **RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY**

   Research Methodology .................................................................................. 45
   Design of the Study ......................................................................................... 47
   Site Selection .................................................................................................... 48
   Participant Sampling ....................................................................................... 49
   Data Collection ............................................................................................... 50
   Interviews ......................................................................................................... 51
   Observations .................................................................................................... 53
   Documents ....................................................................................................... 55
   Data Analysis & Interpretation ........................................................................ 56
   Issues of Validity & Credibility ....................................................................... 59

4. **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS** ................................................................ 61

   Section I: Setting of the Study ....................................................................... 62
   District ............................................................................................................. 62
   Central Office ................................................................................................. 65

   Section II: Defining & Conceptualizing Strategic ......................................... 66
   An Administrative Definition ......................................................................... 66
   Foresight .......................................................................................................... 67
   Cognizance ...................................................................................................... 67
   Focus ............................................................................................................... 71
   Consistency ...................................................................................................... 76
   Pre-emptive Planning ..................................................................................... 77
   Long-term Planning ......................................................................................... 78
   Proactive Decision-making ............................................................................ 82
   Knowledge-based Innovation ......................................................................... 86

   Aligning to District Goals .............................................................................. 89
   Increase Student Achievement ..................................................................... 91
   Eliminate Achievement Gaps ........................................................................ 93
   Maximize Resource Efficiency ...................................................................... 96

   Section III: The Act of Being Strategic ........................................................ 100
   Silos to Systems: Organizational Structures, Policies, & Procedures ......... 100
   Human Resource Functions ............................................................................ 101
   Recruitment and Hiring ................................................................................. 103
   Placement ........................................................................................................ 111
   Professional Development ............................................................................. 117
   Retention ......................................................................................................... 125
   Evaluation ....................................................................................................... 134
   Towards Being Strategic .............................................................................. 146
   Role Clarity ..................................................................................................... 148
   Organizational Efficiency .............................................................................. 151

   Attributes of Strategic Leadership ................................................................. 155
   Shrewd Decision-making ............................................................................... 158
Process of Making Strategic Decisions.................................158
Reactive vs. Proactive Decision-Making..............................168
Candor in Communication..................................................175
Honesty and Openness.....................................................175
Achieving Clarity..............................................................180
Guiding Perception..........................................................185
Building Authentic Relationships.......................................187
Importance of Establishing Authentic Relationships...........188
Keys to Building Authentic Relationships.........................192
Empowering Human Capital...............................................200
Empowering Leaders.......................................................201
Making Purposeful Groups...............................................204
Structured and Focused Flexibility....................................207
Focused but Flexible.......................................................207
Persistent and Innovative.................................................210
Creating, Innovating, and Reflecting.................................212
Big Picture.................................................................213
Reflexivity.................................................................214
Section IV: Environmental Layers and Players......................217
Core.................................................................................218
Internal Environment......................................................219
Peripheral Environment...................................................223
Governing Bodies............................................................224
School Board.................................................................224
State and Federal Governments.......................................226
Administrative Body........................................................228
Input.................................................................................228
Implementation...............................................................230
Instructional Body............................................................231
External Environment......................................................235
Clientele.............................................................................235
Students.............................................................................235
Parents..............................................................................237
Interested Parties............................................................239
Media................................................................................239
Greater Community........................................................242

5. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS....................247
Discussion..........................................................................247
A Definition of Strategic....................................................250
What About the Environment?..........................................252
Painting a Strategic Picture...............................................255
A Systemic Foundation......................................................255
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Selected District Statistics</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>NCLB Adequate Yearly Progress Results</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Attributes of Strategic Leadership</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Environmental Layers &amp; Players</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TOWARD STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE CENTRAL OFFICE

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Dr. Jay Paredes Scribner, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore how human resources are managed, what human resource management can look like, and what organizational issues, tensions, and ambiguities are likely to surface as a district central office moves toward being more strategic with their human resources. The research design was an exploratory case study of one Midwestern school district completed over the course of two academic years. The district studied was a mid-sized district in a more liberal municipality with a somewhat diverse population. Using knowledge of successful district attributes as well as organizational management theories of strategic human resource management and high reliability organizations, the researcher explored: (1) what it means for a district to be strategic and (2) how a district goes about being strategic (what it looks like), particularly regarding their human resources.

Findings of this research project indicated that defining strategic in this district was done two different but mutually reinforcing ways. Strategic meant having foresight, pre-emptively planning, and using knowledge-based innovation as a leader, but at the same time it also simply meant aligning everything to district goals. Findings also indicated that the act of being strategic in this district focused on two key elements: systemic functions and strategic leadership. As the district portrayed, acting more strategically means moving from silo-ed or compartmentalized functions to more
systemic structures, policies, and procedures. At the same time, these systemic organizational structures and procedures cannot be strategic alone; strategic leadership guides strategic behaviors. As elicited from this case study, there are six attributes of strategic leadership that leads to strategic behaviors: shrewd decision-making, candor in communication, building authentic relationships, empowering human capital, structured and focused flexibility, and creating, innovating, and reflecting. Findings also indicated that various environments, both internal and external to a district, hold influential roles in the strategic functions and actions of district leaders.

Implications for these findings are both research and practitioner-based. This study is simply the first in a multi-phase project that will attempt to view the entire district system from central office to classroom in order to understand how decisions and management functions at the central office impact instructional capacity at the classroom level. Such insight will allow future research to better understand what it means for districts in general to be strategic and ultimately develop a tool for practitioners and researchers both to utilize in order to assess the strategic and non-strategic behaviors occurring in districts in order to aide them in improving their management of human capital. Better human capital management would allow greater organizational efficiency and success in reaching district goals, including those revolving around student success.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The biggest tragedy in America is not the waste of natural resources, though this is tragic. The biggest tragedy is the waste of human resources.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

The current era of accountability coupled with a budget-crunching economic situation finds school districts across the country under increasing pressure to develop the most efficient and effective organization capable of fostering student achievement. School districts play a critical role in achieving desired student outcomes through supporting the teacher workforce and managing their human capital. Because human capital development is understood to lead to increased instructional capacity and greater student learning (Odden & Kelly, 2008), district level human resource management is a vital component of success in the current educational climate. Unfortunately, the role that human resource management (HRM) plays in district improvement and ultimately student learning has been overlooked or taken for granted. Without more knowledge of what is known as the district ‘HR black box’, it is impossible to determine what a successful strategic system would look like that could develop and maintain an effective improvement plan.

Typically, elements of HRM are examined separately such as professional development, teacher recruitment and induction, or compensation. But rarely are they considered holistically (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & Johnson, 2007; Supovitz, 2006). Recently, researchers have begun to explore and acknowledge the strategic role that
HRM can play in increasing student learning and closing the achievement gaps (e.g., Odden & Kelly, 2008; Rebore, 2007; Scribner, Smylie, & Mosley, 2008). These authors have begun to push thinking beyond conceptualizations of district HRM that treat HR functions as discrete “silos” (separate individualized pieces) or as “hub and spoke” relationships between HR functions and district goals (Scribner et al., 2008), and have begun to explicate how HR functions can be integrated into all aspects of district management and leadership activities to successfully develop human capital that supports teaching and learning throughout the system (Odden & Kelly, 2008).

Knowledge Gaps & Emerging Views

Much needs to be explored in order to gain a better understanding of SHRM and district reform, as there is presently only a modest amount of research to develop this conceptualization. Webb and Norton (2009) make the case that strategic human resources administration should be a “foundational function for an educational program” (p. 3), on par with other organizational functions. However, little empirical literature exists that describes and assesses the use of various approaches to HRM in school districts. Not only is there little regarding the use of various approaches to HRM, but there is also a need to explore the understanding of how school districts become strategic and act strategically with regard to HR. Even the private sector still lacks exploration in this arena, only providing hints through some case study findings.

Many district reform concepts or theories have previously focused on one main element, (such as structure, function, or alignment), and separated these structures or functions as if they were simply separate issues to be dealt with or individual functional
entities within the district (Childress et al., 2007; Maclver & Farley, 2003; Supovitz, 2006). These elements are all important, but taken individually provide limited understanding of district reform and improvement. However, combining these elements within the context of human resource management in a more systematic and comprehensive manner would allow for much greater understanding of district effectiveness. A viable way of obtaining this new clarity is to utilize the organizational-based framework used in this study, based most extensively on the theory of strategic human resource management. Also incorporated into this framework were elements of high reliability organizations (HROs) and continuously improving organizations (CIOs), which show great similarities to the goals and functions of school districts, but whose potential benefits have yet to be fully applied to district improvement efforts. By incorporating elements of both high reliability organizational theory and continuously improving organizational theories, an arguably more useful and comprehensive framework was utilized to further knowledge in the uncharted territory of district operations that can provide insight to functions of high performing districts.

Finally, current HR literature does not address the kinds of individual and group behaviors that support SHRM or the place of culture or climate within a systemic reform effort. Without a greater conceptual framework to utilize in qualitatively researching a district and the HR system within it, findings would still simply be interesting elements or silos that are not pieced together in a way to view the system as a whole. These are all problems which the present study helped remedy by way of investigating human
resource management systems and district decision-making occurring at a school
district.

**Rationale & Purpose**

Educational reform literature is a rapidly advancing area of interest as schools
and districts attempt to meet the incredible demands placed upon them by a changing
society and an accountability-driven government system. However, the scholarship to
date has typically focused more narrowly on a) *pieces* of district reform, such as a new
curriculum or a new professional development initiative, b) *schools* as the level of
analysis or c) have provided little practically applicable connections for administrators to
utilize in improving their own organizations (Honig & Copland, 2008; MacIver & Farley-
Ripple, 2008). This makes for a gap in the literature and its actual usefulness for two
reasons: first, districts hold a powerful card in system-wide reform, and second,
research that provides little practical guidance diminishes the chance for successful
reform. By focusing simply on ‘silos’ or *departments* of HR management, we have yet to
develop a picture of HR management in action and how it actually effects the capacity of
human capital in the district. The present study worked to fill that knowledge gap by
gaining insight into the HR ‘black box’ and provide understanding of how human
resource management at the district level is conceptualized and utilized. To clarify, in
this study I defined human resources not as a department but the process and structure
of how people are supported as resources of an organization, defining human resources
in the broadest sense of the term.
The purpose of this study was to identify and explore how human resources are managed, what human resource management can look like, and what organizational issues, tensions, and ambiguities are likely to surface as a district central office moves toward being more strategic with their human resources. Broadly, I examined the content and context of district structure and decision-making, particularly with regard to the impact on or support for human resources and human resource management.

**Research Questions**

To understand how human resources is conceptualized and managed as well as what issues and ambiguities surface as the central office tries to become more strategic, some specific research questions were addressed, two of which guided this study:

1. What does it mean for a district to be strategic?
2. How does a district go about being strategic? (What does it look like?)

Both of these questions focused particularly on human resources, as defined above.

**Contribution to the Field**

The proposed study contributed to the business management, organizational theory, and education reform literatures. By answering the research questions, this study aided in the definition of strategic practice in one district and provided insight into both the inner workings of the central office as well as the HR management system of school districts. The outcome of this study provides input for districts and scholars alike that will be utilized to better understand the use of strategic HR management in districts. Such an understanding allows for prominent steps toward a practical measure
from which to improve district human resource management systems and identification of strategic practice, which as of yet there has been little guidance to do so.

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study arose from both method and theory. One limitation was the use of a single case study. A multiple case study design would have allowed for greater examination of the research questions across similar districts and thus greater validity. However, an exploratory case study of one district over two academic years provided greater depth of knowledge within the specified time frame and still allowed for a wealth of information on a topic that has very little to date. Another limitation of the study was the lack of connection to district outcomes. Much of the current literature ties particular HR functions in districts to organizational outputs like teacher performance or student achievement, which can be very telling when looking at impacts of decisions and management systems. However, this was not within the scope or purpose of this study.

However, we cannot overlook a great strength of this study. The knowledge gained from this study will help to lay a foundation for studying these areas of educational organizations more broadly and empirically, as well as set the stage for drilling down into one curricular area to see how central office decisions impact instructional capacity. Notably, with this work completed in one district, not only can researchers start creating more breath of data qualitatively but also this foundation will permit more quantitative empirical work to begin as well.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Districts as organizations are only able to reach their ultimate goal of maximizing student learning by way of their human resources, but the role that human resource management (HRM) plays in a district’s improvement has certainly been taken for granted. Building, supporting, and sustaining the instructional capacity of these human resources is a topic prompting great concern in educational literature, as clear guidelines on how to achieve greater instructional capacity have yet to be developed.

As Scribner, Smylie, and Mosley (2008) described, building the capacity of a district workforce can be compared to building the capacity of a baseball team, where rosters are formed, players are prepared, data is provided for game-time decisions, players are continually managed and trained throughout the season, and external as well as internal environmental factors affect the management of the team. With this analogy in mind, the topic of this study focused upon the processes, behaviors, and structures in an organization that allow the players to be managed in a system most benefiting the ultimate goal: student learning. The organization in this particular study was a school district, which will be shown to hold the greatest leverage to impact instructional capacity at all levels of the district structure.

This review of the literature will provide the background, conceptual framework, and knowledge-base for the present study. To begin, I will provide a very broad theoretical framework from the sociological concepts of interactionism and social
constructionism to explain the interconnectedness of organizations such as districts.

Also providing a theoretical foundation for this study is the literature and theory of organizational sociology. Such a foundation will include the concepts of culture and climate, which inherently affect all organizational structures. Following will be a more specific focus on the foundational literature of districts, beginning with a conceptualization of districts as organizations which must understand their workforce or human capital as a vital component to their ultimate goal of student learning. Literature on district human resources will be discussed, particularly regarding their recognized elements and impact on both human resource management and instructional capacity. Historical trends in district reform will be highlighted, most particularly as they pertain to human resource management, and a transition will be discussed illustrating the missing link between the historical district reform efforts and conceptual models for more strategic district reform. A synthesis of the literature on the particular organizational management framework utilized in this study will follow, being mostly conceptualized via strategic human resource management theory, but containing additional components of continuously improving organizations and high reliability organizational theories as a way to provide a more coherent and appropriate framework. Finally, a discussion of the current empirical literature on district and central office environments followed by a rationale for the present study and guiding research questions will complete the literature review.
**Sociological Foundation**

Supovitz (2006) identifies three central views regarding the concept of organizational learning, one of which centers around the idea that learning arises from the interactions of individuals within an organization. This view arguably originates from Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism and Berger & Luckmann’s subperspective of social constructionism that serve as foundational theories for this study.

George Herbert Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism, as discussed by Blumer (2004) is very involved but boils down to the idea that there is a “complex interdependence of self and society” that means social reality is “comprised of acts, interchanges, and associations” that all are founded on social interaction. Thus, individual as well as organizational meaning is produced through the interactions of individuals via actions, reactions, mutual adaptation, etc. including all language and mannerisms (Herman & Reynolds, 1994). A basic goal of interactionism is to communicate with others as well as understand that the individual holds the power to change society from a lower rung on the social hierarchy instead of being manipulated from those more powerful above them. With this theoretical perspective, this study of a school district’s human resources also becomes a study in human interaction and dynamic meaning-making via the district workforce contained in the administrative positions at the central office level. As the literature provided in this review will support, this interactionism view of meaning-making will also include internal and external environmental factors and thus the interaction of not just the human resources
within a district making meaning but also those social actors within and external to the district who impact district organizational actions as well.

Social constructionism derives from the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) who argue that all knowledge is developed and sustained by social interactions. A major focus of this theory is to determine the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the ongoing, dynamic process of perceived social reality, including how their understandings are institutionalized and traditionalized. Using Berger and Luckmann’s theoretical argument, school districts and those individuals within them are constantly socially constructing both their individual and group knowledge through their interactions and institutionalizing those understandings. Such understanding of how a district creates and institutionalizes knowledge correlates to the organizational literature by way of organizational culture and climate theories, both utilized as part of the conceptual framework for this study.

**Organizational Culture and Climate**

The social construction of knowledge as described by Berger and Luckmann can easily be connected to the concept of organizational culture, as defined by Schein (2004). According to Schein, organizational culture is both a dynamic process of meaning-making developed by interactions with others as well as a set of routines, structures, rules and norms that guide behavior. These understandings and behaviors are considered one of the most difficult organizational attributes to change but one of the most important to understand and utilize when trying to implement reform. Therefore, the present study of a school district and the aspects of the human resources
within that district had to account for this concept of organizational culture. The social interactions, constructions, and cultural norms and behaviors, based upon this theoretical and conceptual framework, impacts the construction and utilization of human resources within a district and thus were part of the data collection and understanding of district functions. Very similarly, the concept of organizational climate was also taken into consideration in this study.

Organizational climate, like that of culture, is important to understand regarding an organization’s overall environment. Whereas culture tends to be something passed on from older to younger members of a social group, climate is often defined as recurring patterns of behavior, attitudes, and feelings that characterize life in an organization (Denison, 1996). Cultures are generally deep and very stable in nature while climate is often less so and thus easier to change. Denison identifies climate as being more in line with the organizational vision and values, which is often subject to change based upon the current organizational leadership and structure. When studying an organization’s human resources, as important as culture is to understand how meaning is socially constructed and sustained, climate is also important in order to determine the attitudes and feelings regarding these understandings. Climate also allows a greater understanding of how leadership and structure within the organization are affecting the human resources component and changing the climate over time. Regarding the earlier baseball reference, culture can be related to the historical traditions and norms expected to be handed down from legends to rookies (or veteran to novice educators) whereas climate is more the attitudes and feelings that
characterize the general aura of the team based upon the current manager, owner, (Superintendent, School Board, etc.) and structure of the club (or district) at the time. Both culture and climate influence the players within the ballclub organization, much like both influence the human resources within a district organization, as this study investigated.

**Districts as Reforming Organizations**

In order to make the conceptual connection from the discussed sociological foundation to the more organizational sciences or management focused framework used specifically for this study, a foundation of knowledge on school districts as organizations must be laid. District organizations and their relevancy to student learning as well as the workforce support within such an organization must be understood, as well as the knowledge base regarding reform efforts towards improving this very specific type of organization.

**Relevancy to Student Learning**

Much of the literature on educational reform to date has focused on the school level, neglecting the capacity that districts or central offices hold to design and implement system-wide reform. As Supovitz (2006) argues, administrators are ceding their instructional authority to school leaders who potentially pass it on to individual teachers. The “result of this vacuum of instructional leadership at the district level is huge variability in the quality of learning opportunities children receive from school to school and from classroom to classroom” (p. 2). If reform is based at the school level, districts as organizations fight a losing battle to try and maintain themselves as an
organization, as the power for change is held among the branches of their organization instead of at the epicenter. Although some literature claims that district policy does not influence instructional decisions like that of school-level policies, Anderson and Togneri (2005) disagree. They found substantial research in their own review of the literature to support an association between variations in teaching and student performance with district policies and actions, not just school-based ones. District policies directly influence school policies which impact instructional decision-making processes for teachers, both directly and indirectly. In fact, MacIver & Farley-Ripple (2008) were able to mine four characteristics of high-performing districts that were linked to student performance from their review of the studies conducted to date: 1) rationality without bureaucracy, 2) structured district control with school autonomy, 3) systems perspective with people orientation, and 3) strong leadership with active administrative team.

Turning back to the baseball metaphor, we can look at this another way. School-level reform is much like trying to reform a ballclub by giving each individual player the power to determine the best improvement methods. Each player will choose to focus on what they feel is the best way to improve the ballclub; maybe the pitcher is going to work on his curveballs and the 3rd baseman his tagging skills. But what good does that do if the actual goal of the ballclub is to win more games by improving the batting averages of their players? The same applies to schools developing their own well-intentioned reforms. In the ballclub a more effective idea would be developing a cohesive reform effort at the manager or owner level that could bring the ballplayers together in one unified vision of improvement towards an organizational goal, much like
the central office can do in a school district as opposed to disconnected school-based reforms.

**District Workforce**

Within the district organization are many smaller systems that impact the overall district goals and structures, one being the management of human resources or human capital. In his work on human resource management (HRM), Rebore (2007) argues that the goals of the human resource function are to achieve the objectives of the school district and help faculty maximize their potential and develop their careers. He identifies eight “essential” dimensions of the human resource function in school districts—human resource planning, recruitment, selection, placement and induction, staff development, appraisal, compensation, and collective negotiations. Rebore alludes to the concepts of fit and flexibility—two concepts addressed later in this discussion—in his treatment of several of the eight dimensions described above. For example, he contends that districts should recruit and select personnel consistent with a broader district vision. Staff assignments to schools should be made in consideration of balancing staff among buildings, individual staff preparation and experience, and working relationships. And, professional development should be provided based on assessments of needs for all staff.

Recent literature (Odden & Kelly, 2008) agrees with Rebore on general concepts, but focuses more specifically on utilizing the management of these human resources (which Odden & Kelly term ‘human capital’) to increase student achievement by improving instructional practice and workforce effectiveness. To do so, Odden and Kelly
argue the essential dimensions of human capital are similar to the eight listed by Rebore, but focus more on management and development of personnel than appraisal and negotiations (2008). Their conceptualization also lends to the ideas of fit and flexibility discussed below, as they focus on the management of human resources strategically or holistically instead of individual silos of structures and processes within the district.

**District Reform**

Supovitz (2006) contends that historically, school reform has taken three approaches: 1) adopting a range of curricula with training on new materials, 2) utilizing external school reform models, or 3) developing a new vision of instructional quality and focusing efforts around that vision. Supovitz, however, offers a fourth potential approach, one that articulates and enacts a ‘unifying vision’ of instructional quality while also maintaining a level of flexibility. This approach focuses less on a school level and more on the district as a system. System-wide improvement of this sort revolves around a specific vision, employee capacity, utilization of data, and continual refinement.

Newer district reform movements have begun to focus on human resource management or human capital that districts such as New York #2 and Los Angeles have successfully shown through their reforms of instructional quality (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Smylie, Miretzky, & Konkol, 2004). Part of this reform movement also involves a shift in focus regarding the role of the central office within the district. Historically the literature has contested the benefits of a centralized district system over that of a
decentralized system. However, the latest conceptualization of the district is that of a ‘nesting’ visual where schools are nested within districts, nested within states, nested within federal systems, which requires no need to choose between decentralized or centralized as long as the district vision and strategic mission are being effectively carried out in schools (Childress, et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Hightower, 2002). This nesting model has shown empirical success in some case study districts and has been supported by empirical work on resource allocation from school to classrooms by sociologists (Gamoran, Secada, & Marrett, 2000). There are other organizational context models offered, but this nesting model has shown great potential particularly when looking at resources, which this study will focus on, just most particularly on human resources.

The next step in the process, as Odden and Kelly (2008) support, is to add the strategic element (where human resource management functions are aligned both vertically to visions and goals and horizontally to other HR functions, etc.). While language of strategic practice is surfacing more frequently in education literature, Rebore and others (e.g., Seyfarth, 2008) do not go very far in exploring the strategic and systemic integration of the various dimensions of human resources described above nor the flexibility required to meet changing demands from the environment. Foley (2009) gets the ball rolling by offering a framework for “smart districts” that is based on the knowledge of effective central office practices but also incorporates some strategic human resource elements. His framework involves the following key functions: lead for results and equity, focus on instruction, manage human capital, use data for
accountability and continuous improvement, build partnerships and community investment, and align infrastructure with strategic vision. This framework is one of the closest conceptualizations of pairing SHRM concepts with district effectiveness knowledge to which this study could critically compare data and results.

Some researchers have gone a step further and recently contributed to theorizing about what strategic human resource management (SHRM) in school districts might actually look like (Webb & Norton, 2009; Young, 2008). For example, Webb and Norton make the case that human resources administration should be a “foundational function for an educational program” (p. 3) and comprises three major components: human resources utilization, human resources development, and human resources environment. Echoing SHRM literature in organizational theory, they argue that HR is not merely a supportive function, but should be integrated and on par with other organizational functions in a systemic way. Strategic references in recent HR literature include competency-driven organizations of human capital in which employees are hired, assigned, and reassigned according to organizational mission and need (Smylie et al., 2004; Webb & Norton, 2009). Young (2008) situates human resources within a strategic planning framework in which “policy makers” evaluate human resource alternatives and make the optimal choices given internal and external constraints. But even with the new advances in district reform, there is still a missing link between historical reform and new conceptual models for strategic reform that this project aided in addressing.
A Missing Link in Reform Efforts

Most of the educational reform concepts or theories of the past have focused on one main element, such as structure, function, or alignment, and separated these structures or functions as if they were individual silos within the district (Childress, et al., 2007; Supovitz, 2006). These elements are all important, as the literature has described, but taken individually provide little useful district-wide reform or strategic utilization of resources because of their inherent fragmentation (Hightower, 2002; Supovitz, 2006). Instead, these individual elements of reform must be brought together as a system-wide reform effort at the district level. Also, the crux of a school district lies with its human resources as discussed above, so focusing upon human resource management within the district allows for a more effective and efficient workforce, and thus improved student learning. To obtain this type of reform requires a focus on strategic management and practice, something the literature has only begun to examine. The present study, however, looked at one district as a potential system instead of silo-ed functions, and focused on the strategic management and practice of human resources within the district, adding new information and perspective to what we already know.

Organizational Sciences & Management Framework

The framework for a study such as this must include not only a foundation of sociological theory and the knowledge base on the organization in question, but also more specific elements from the organizational sciences. Thus the framework providing a bridge to more practical elements of understanding to base my research and data upon came from multiple, yet complimentary pieces. In order to look at the human
resource components of school districts I utilized the following organizational theories:

1) strategic human resource management, 2) learning organizations, 3) continuously improving organizations, and 4) high reliability organizations.

**Strategic Human Resource Management**

**Definition & origin of SHRM.** Strategic human resource management (SHRM) takes the traditional function of human resource management (including such practices as recruitment, retention, training, etc.) and combines it with business strategy. By doing so, SHRM makes more explicit the linkages between organizational HR practices and organizational goals, reflecting a more flexible usage of human resources in order to achieve those goals and gain coveted competitive advantage (Wei & Lau, 2005). Three key features of SHRM are fit (components of an organization being consistent or congruent with one another), flexibility (an organization’s ability to adapt to changing demands), and principle-based practices (as opposed to activity-based). However, an exact definition of SHRM has for many years been elusive among scholars, allowing for a lack of clarity between human resource management (HRM) and SHRM while scholars attempt to develop their own conceptualizations of SHRM (Martin-Alcazar, Romero-Fernandez, & Sanchez-Gardey, 2005; Wei & Lau, 2005; Wright & McMahan, 1992).

The origins of strategic human resource management vary in particulars, but come generally from the academic and practitioner-based literature from the private sector. Most of the academic literature on SHRM has been published in the last 30 years, but Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, Andrade, and Drake (2009) trace the origins back even further to the 1920s when labor economists and industrial relations scholars (e.g.
John Commons) were discussing groundbreaking concepts. Companies deemed progressive at the time were adopting new HR practices regarding labor management that resembled a strategic approach, seeing labor as a cooperative investment in a human resource instead of a commodity to be controlled. From the 1920s to present, the majority of advancements in SHRM discussions have come from an interplay of actions taken by progressive private-sector companies and conceptualizations drawn by academics in business, human resources, economics, and other fields of study.

As SHRM has evolved from early progressive corporate decisions, new points of origin have developed in various fields. For example, the origins of SHRM in the public sector was much less understood than the private sector until the 1990s when Comptroller of the US GAO, General David Walker, introduced the term ‘human capital’ into the federal vocabulary (Nathanson, 2005). Soon after, President George W. Bush included a Strategic Management of Human Capital initiative in his management agenda that sparked a buzz of strategic planning, human capital, and strategic management-focused activity at the federal level, beginning with a 1999 internal OPM study (OPM, 1999). Such federal activity also shone spotlights on similar activity occurring at both the state and local levels.

However, a consistent conceptualization of SHRM in the public sector is still more difficult to find than in the private sector. Vocabulary, conceptualizations, and studies in the public sector use a variety of terms, such as ‘strategic public personnel administration’, ‘strategic human capital management’, ‘strategic human resources management’, ‘strategic planning’ and ‘decentralization,’ to describe similar ideas
(Farazmand, 2007; Mesch, Perry, & Wise, 1995; Nathanson, 2005; OPM, 1999; Tompkins, 2002). Unfortunately, a clear delineation among these terms is elusive, even though the authors seem to intend differences in meaning. I illuminate some of these issues below as I explain the theoretical conceptualizations of SHRM and empirical evidence for SHRM from both the private and public sector as well as how it all ties into the idea of school districts as organizations.

**Theoretical conceptualizations of SHRM.** As with any organizational theory, strategic human resource management has a great deal of literature devoted to conceptualizing its elements, uses, and components. Within that literature are four perspectives of SHRM, which I will describe. But surprisingly there is also much agreement on some basic conceptual elements of SHRM, most notably what could be called the common threads among various SHRM perspectives: fit, flexibility, and principle-based decision-making.

**Four major perspectives.** SHRM theory is represented by four perspectives: universalistic, contingency, configurational, and contextual. The universalistic perspective, or the ‘best practice’ approach, asserts that some HR practices are superior to others (Colbert, 2004; Delery & Doty, 1996; Martin-Alcazar, et al., 2005). On the other hand, the contingency perspective argues that there are no best HR practices per se. Instead, strategic HR practice depends on ‘contingency variables’ such as the internal and external environments that must be taken into account when developing HR policies (Colbert, 2004; Delery & Doty, 1996; Martin-Alcazar, et al., 2005). According to Colbert, the concern is to align HR practice with organizational strategies as opposed to
mere internal alignment. For example, while a training program might reflect best practice within the universalistic perspective, it may or may not be the best option given an organization’s strategic goals or external demands.

Delery & Doty (1996) explain that the configurational perspective differs from the contingency perspective by focusing concern on the “pattern of multiple independent variables” and how these patterns relate to the dependent variable, as opposed to the contingency perspective concern with the relationship between different independent variables and the dependent variable (p. 804). In essence, the configurational perspective “acknowledges system interaction effects – that the whole may be more or less the sum of the parts” (Colbert, 2004, p. 345). The configurational perspective opens up the black box of the universalistic and contingency perspectives—perspectives which rely on linear relationships—to allow an examination of the complex and interactive system that is HR functions (Martin-Alcazar, et al, 2005). Furthermore, the configurational perspective incorporates the idea of equifinality—achieving the same goals with different combinations of policies that could be equally efficient—while at the same time rejecting the idea of finding best practices assumed by the universalistic perspective (Delery & Doty, 1996; Martin-Alcazar, et al., 2005). This is the perspective used in the present study, as it correlated well with the other theories supporting the conceptual framework as I will discuss later.

Finally, the newest SHRM perspective emanating from the European model of HRM is the contextual perspective. This perspective offers a shift toward a more global viewpoint applicable to a multitude of environments. SHRM becomes something more
than managerial decisions, but instead is considered a part of a greater social system that is both influenced by and places its own influences upon HRM strategy. “Strategies are not just explained through their contribution to organizational performance, but also through their influence on other internal aspects of the organization, as well as their effects on the external environment” (Martin-Alcazar, et al., 2005).

**Common threads among perspectives.** The concepts of fit, flexibility, and principle-based action are integral to each of the four SHRM perspectives. Fit generally refers to the extent to which one component of the organization is consistent or congruent with another component, which is commonly agreed to increase the efficiency or effectiveness of the organization (Smylie, Miretzky, & Konkol, 2004). This idea of fit is divided into horizontal and vertical. Vertical fit refers to multiple relationships: between an organization’s strategy and objectives, between an organization and its external environment, and between an organization’s human resources and both its strategy and objectives (Green, Wu, Whitten, & Medlin, 2006; Smylie et al., 2004). Horizontal fit more simply refers to an internal alignment or consistency of HR practices; essentially their ability to mesh in a coherent system (Delery, 1998).

Flexibility is generally understood to be the ability to adapt to ever-changing demands from both internal and external dynamic environments (Wright & Snell, 1998). Scholars such as Wright, Snell, and Weick argue the necessity of flexibility in organizations so they may address challenges in a fluid way that may enhance performance and/or prevent catastrophe. To some, flexibility is seen as conflicting with
or on the opposite end of a continuum from fit. There has been much conceptual
debate about the necessity of fit and/or flexibility, but amidst each new wave of debate,
new scholars insist that to create sustainable competitive advantage, flexibility and fit
must be achieved *simultaneously* (de Pablos, 2005, as cited in Lengnick-Hall et al. 2009;
Wright & Snell, 1998).

Finally, principle-based HR practices explicitly organize HR functions around
organizational goals and aim to foster actions, behaviors, and even cultures that support
the success of these principles (Ericksen & Dyer, 2005). Oppositely, activity-based
practices are less goal-centered and more typical of many organizations where HR
functions occur as each new idea or initiative occurs, unattached to greater
organizational goals and systems. Principle-based practices and decisions are much less
debated in the literature than fit or flexibility, as it is generally agreed that principle-
based practices lead to more promising results since they are better able to foster the
type of structure in an organization that can support successful change towards greater
goals than activity-based practices (Ericksen & Dyer, 2005).

**Empirical evidence for SHRM.** Empirically, strategic human resource
management is conceptualized most broadly as a theory utilized in an effort to increase
organizational *performance*. The literature is rife with empirical studies linking SHRM to
organizational performance, but also replete with methods and studies focused on
*intended* HR strategies instead of what is actually being implemented. Although the
private sector holds a much greater expanse of empirical studies, the public sector is
gaining momentum in developing their own set of empirical study and conceptualizations, as I will explain.

*Private sector.* Empirical studies from the private sector hail most prominently from the corporate, health, and service organizations, focusing greatly on the relationship of SHRM practices to individual outcomes such as employee satisfaction, or organizational outcomes such as profit margin. Studies focusing on individual (more psychologically-based) outcomes have found relationships between HR practices and employee attitudes, satisfaction, and turnover, such as Boswell’s (2006) study that found organizations implementing SHRM practices had a strong correlation to employee understanding of strategic objectives and their level of understanding of how to contribute to those objectives. Boswell also found employees to have a greater individual sense of belonging, attitude, job stress, and retention within an organization implementing SHRM practices, something education organizations can appreciate.

Regarding organizational outcomes, the empirical literature has found positive relationships between SHRM practices and both *perceived* as well as *actual* performance levels at both the HR professional level and the greater organizational level (Anderson, Cooper, & Zhu, 2007; Green, et al., 2006). However, these performance relationships can be contingent upon different factors, either internal or external, which have sparked examination of questions that might better explain what specifically it is about SHRM that affects organizational performance. One such study found the concepts of intellectual, human, and social capital to be part of a complex system influencing organizational performance while another found top management network teams to
provide a mediating relationship between HR practices and firm performance (Collins & Clark, 2003; Youndt & Snell, 2004).

Private sector empirical study has also provided evidence showing the focus on intended HR practices in the literature is problematic, as previously discussed. For example, Khilji and Wang (2006) found a distinct difference between intended and implemented HR practices in the banking industry. They not only found a large gap between what an HR department intends to occur and what is actually implemented, but also a strong relationship between this inconsistency and organizational performance. It turns out that minimizing this gap results in higher employee satisfaction and consequently higher organizational performance, as an employee with high satisfaction with HR management, not HR practices, translates into improved organizational performance. This intended versus implemented distinction reflects the gap between strategic planning and strategic action in organizations. We lack vital understanding of how organizations are utilizing strategic planning versus action or recognizing and potentially aligning their intended and implemented HR practices. The present study is the first step in focusing on this issue in districts by first examining the ‘intended’ elements at the central office in order to pave the way to compare with ‘implemented’ practices at the school level.

Public sector. As discussed in theoretical conceptualizations, the public sector utilizes varied terminology to describe SHRM, such as ‘strategic management of human capital’ or ‘strategic public personnel administration’. Studies regarding SHRM in the public sector focus more upon whether and how it is being implemented more than the
outcomes of its implementation. These studies often emanate from state or local government entities, as the smaller governmental systems of states seem to have the ability to test and develop trends that may later influence personnel policy at the much more splintered federal level (Battaglio & Condrey, 2006; Seldon, Ingraham, & Jacobson, 2001). In fact, SHRM has been ‘found’ being implemented at various levels of state government, showing an emphasis on service and workers, more flexible selection and classification systems, and a performance-driven culture focused on the organization’s goals (Seldon et al., 2001). More recent studies have found a number of state and local governments using a form of the SHRM model, suggesting that strategic reform in the public sector is indeed possible and shows promise for being more than a passing fad. But such a model requires internal competence, external support, and an incremental process that allows actors to gain respect and confidence in the HR department. (Battaglio & Condrey, 2006; Choundhury, 2007).

Studies on HRM in the federal government often explore SHRM either in an attempt to ‘find’ it or measure its presence in governmental agencies, additionally determining its effect on agency effectiveness or efficiency. This is similar to productivity in the private sector, but more often focused on viewing employees slightly differently, focusing on them as a form of human capital more than simply a part of human resources. During the Clinton administration, the Office of Personnel Management (1999) found better than expected alignment between their personnel management system and strategic goals and mission, but with many areas for improvement, such as increasing the amount of HR representation in the planning
process and viewing HR holistically instead of as ‘silos’ of function (both common themes in theoretical and empirical literature). However, little was truly determined about progress, a common trend in the literature (e.g. Nathanson, 2005), which means there is very little knowledge about what is truly occurring strategically or even how effective SHRM is as a concept for federal practice.

Other federal studies have explored the quality of metrics developed by agencies in an effort to improve their scores on Bush’s SMHC initiative or another feasible measure of HRM performance: federal accountability frameworks (Nathanson, 2005; Vandenabeele & Hondeghem, 2008). However, both efforts of showing the public sector as successfully using SHRM are problematic since similar forms of measurement are often just not possible in a non-corporate arena. In fact, the latest study focuses simply on studying the measures themselves instead of what the measures can reveal about the use of SHRM (Vandenabeele & Hondeghem, 2008). Thus, the public sector has come no further than the private sector in devising a system for successfully measuring the use of SHRM or arguably even a way to commonly identify SHRM in practice, except through more simplistic constructs developed from the SMHC initiative. What has been concluded, is that the public sector may be intending to implement the SHRM model when actually only bits and pieces are being utilized, suggesting not only a lag behind the private sector in usage of SHRM but also a lack of understanding of the model itself.

As discussed, more needs to be understood regarding how school districts manage their human capital before they can achieve greater capacity and effectiveness.
By focusing simply on ‘silos’ of function, we have yet to develop a picture of HR management in action and how it effects the teacher workforce. SHRM uses a more holistic perspective to explore a system of human resource management and find how it all aligns with greater district mission and goals, which is very appropriate for organizations such as school districts. Unlike some organizations, the greatest organizational mission in a district is at the heart of all functions (whether it is acting that way or not), which is to succeed in educating students. A district organization must accomplish this goal in a very dynamic environment with an incredible number of internal and external factors playing upon decisions in a system that relies most heavily on its human resources for success. Thus, a framework designed primarily from SHRM is very appropriately structured for just such an organization because of its focus on aligning all resources to the greater goal, taking into account various environmental demands, and focusing on an organization’s greatest resource, its human capital.

SHRM theory alone is a powerful management theory and potential framework. How I define SHRM in this study follows closely to what is considered the ‘configurational perspective’ where ‘system interaction effects’ are acknowledged, which allow for a more complex system analysis, much like the ballclub example above (Colbert, 2004; Martin-Alcazar et al., 2005). Additionally, this approach assumes equifinality – more than one configuration of policies or practices could be effective in any given setting for achieving the same goals – while rejecting a common educational idea of ‘best practices’ for unique patterns of HR practices (Delery & Doty, 1996; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009). Throughout the expanse of literature on SHRM and the calls
for strategic HRM approaches the conditions necessary in order for strategic action to take place and the social processes that support SHRM have been sparse if not forgotten. To move beyond structures and outcomes this study took the configurational definition of SHRM and incorporated three other organizational theories to create a more holistic and applicable framework for the dynamic and unique nature of school districts. Thus I looked to theories on continuously improving organizations (CIs) and high reliability organizations (HROs), as a supportive addition to the SHRM-based management framework, all under the umbrella of organizational learning.

**Learning Organizations**

Central to any framework involving strategic human resource management is the idea of learning organizations, as an organization cannot strategically reflect upon and improve its human resources without the ability to learn and develop in a dynamic environment. Perspectives on organizational learning are three-fold, ranging from the idea that organizations foster individual learning for the purposes of the organization, to using social interactions to foster and share learning, to embedding learning in the rules and routines of the organization (Supovitz, 2006). Fostering individual learning for organizational purposes essentially argues that individuals learn in order to improve the organization. Incorporating the idea of single versus double loop learning, this view sees individual learning as occurring on behalf of the organization, encapsulating traditional forms of professional development (which seek to improve job skills).

The second view of organizational learning ties into the sociological framework of this study, interactionism and social constructionism. This view posits that people
make meaning through interactions that allows the organization to learn, taking the
lotus of learning from the individual to the organizational level (Supovitz, 2006). This
viewpoint borrows heavily from the work of Senge (1990) who focused on the five
“disciplines” of a highly effective business, such as team learning, shared vision, etc.
Based on this view, organizational learning in districts would incorporate the concept of
communities of practice or professional learning communities (see Honig, 2003;
Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999) with a multitude of teams and supportive
relationships across the district connecting knowledge and perspectives in order to
continuously improve the organization (Honig, 2008). This develops more closely with
elements of systems thinking and strategic management, further discussed below.

The final view of organizational learning revolves around the idea that people
learn through institutional systems which guide their routines (Supovitz, 2006). This
view is conceptualized as a more structural model of learning that posits an organization
can learn as a distinct entity separate from the learning of the individuals inside the
organization, rooted in Frederick Taylor’s work on scientific management. Simply,
through this view an organization learns expressly through infusing improvement
techniques or methods into rules and procedures. However, it is difficult to imagine a
human capital-oriented institution, such as a school district, as an organization which
can learn separate from the learning of its workers. Thus, the second view of
organizational learning will be the one utilized in this study. By utilizing the concepts of
SHRM, such as fit, flexibility, equifinality, and principle-based decision making,
organizations can work towards the outcome of being a successful learning
organization. Such a learning organization can then become continuously improving and highly reliable, concepts that warrant further discussion to better understand the complexities of truly becoming a learning organization.

**Continuously Improving Organizations**

Organizations that can tackle challenges, learn from those challenges, and then incorporate that learning into their organization’s institutional knowledge are those organizations which can sustain reform efforts (Supovitz, 2006). Those organizations which can continually learn can also continually improve; only organizations with this kind of momentum are capable of sustaining any long-term improvement. Supovitz argues that this continual improvement is accomplished by embedding the values of improvement into the practices and ‘cultural fabric’ of an organization via deep learning that can stand the test of leadership turnover, an oft-times killer of reform efforts. Again, the idea of culture being instrumental to organizational improvement surfaces in the frameworks and foundation of this study.

The concept of continuous improvement is not new, and by no means originated within the realm of education, but it has long since made the cross-over to school reform and leadership literature. Continuous improvement made its way into the district literature through the recognition that schools must find a way to organize themselves for success in a constantly changing environment with little certainty. As Fullan (2005) describes in his text on educational sustainability, leadership at the district level must focus on ongoing learning. To gain the ability to transform educational institutions in response to dynamic environments, learning systems must be developed
as a way to bring about continuous improvement. This requires an ongoing assessment of the success of policies and strategies. Developing a set of practices and strategies, even if strongly aligned to greater organizational purposes, cannot remain fixed in a dynamic organizational environment, such as that surrounding a school district.

In order to maintain sustainability, Fullan (2005) argues that ongoing improvement is required. Strategies with successful track records need to be re-assessed to determine if they will continue to bring success in the future, will help districts achieve higher levels of performance, or increase outcomes. Sustainability is considered to be the ultimate adaptive challenge for an organization and thus is most certainly not the maintenance of the status quo. Instead, sustainability is finding new points of entry into already identified problems and continuously digging deeper into current and future challenges inherent in organizational activity (Supovitz, 2006).

Continuous improvement (and thus sustainability) as applied to a school district organization was part of the structures and systems around human resource management that is explored in the present study.

**High Reliability Organizations**

Similar to continuously improving organizations, but with very useful differences, are those organizations labeled ‘high reliability organizations’. We turn to the theory on high reliability organizations (HROs) to move toward an understanding of the conditions and social processes that support strategic organizational systems. In the literature HROs are organizations that cannot fail without grave consequences. Nuclear facilities and aircraft carriers are two common examples whose success is measured in terms of
their ability to avoid, or “permanently delay” failure (Ericksen & Dyer, 2005, p. 916). It doesn’t stretch one’s imagination to consider school districts as HROs in which failure has dire consequences for the children served.

The HRO literature offers several examples which could extend to school districts. First, HROs are obsessed with reliability (i.e., meeting objectives) and infusing the drive to meet objectives in all aspects of the organization. As Roberts and Bea (2001) argued, HROs celebrate reliability much more so than productivity or efficiency. Second, HROs spend significant energy gaining “contextual clarity”—developing the ability to see the big picture and how the systems’ parts work toward those goals (Ericksen & Dyer, 2005, p. 918). Clarity also reflects the organizations’ and employees’ understanding about how individuals’ knowledge contributes to the larger mission. Third, HROs develop cultures comfortable with contingency planning built on qualities such as facileness and fluidity, implemented in ways like overstaffing critical roles for quick response to new organizational demands. Accountability to the system is another strategic element of HROs, meaning clarifying roles, being accountable for responsibilities inherent in roles and fostering a “problem finding” culture (Ericksen & Dyer, 2005; Roberts & Bea, 2001).

Human development and employee security are two final strategic characteristics of HROs. Focusing developmental activities on core processes and procedures is par for the course in HROs. Training and development are targeted and can be reorganized to respond to new and unforeseen challenges. Importantly, training and development reinforces learning in one’s area, but also in connected activities.
Informal learning is fostered to encourage and reward continuous learning. Finally, HROs spend vast amounts of energy on recruitment and selection to minimize employee turnover. A critical point of HROs is that employees are rewarded, not punished, for raising concerns and pointing out errors, and rarely do HROs rely on outsiders to perform core activities. HRO theory has even been applied in school effectiveness studies by Datnow & Stringfield (2000) who found reform efforts were more effective when educators worked to “co-construct highly reliable reforms” (pg.183).

Ericksen and Dyer (2005) have already coupled SHRM and HRO theory in an effort to conceptualize the conditions which support strategic practice. To further their work, the present study then combined the characteristics of HROs with those of continuously improving organizations to develop the ability to see beyond structures and processes and gain sight into the beliefs, actions, and cultures that develop those organizational elements. By then coupling these two organizational theories with an SHRM-based organizational management frame, a greater idea of conditions and processes can be determined while also increasing the clarity or application of SHRM components in a context that is not so different from school districts – one where failure means dire consequences. In fact, HRO and CI theories are quite pertinent to school districts because of their focus on improvement, goals, and dealing with dynamic environments. Taking these two organizational theories and combining them with the idea of strategic systems, particularly in regards to human resources, allowed for the development of a well-rounded framework capable of highlighting key elements of successful district strategy with regards to their human capital.
Human Resource Management in School Districts

The private sector continues to develop empirical research linking strategic human resource management to organizational performance while the public sector strives to find cases of SHRM in action. Meanwhile, literature on school districts shows some lag, as it is just beginning to expand a focus on the role human resource management plays in district improvement, both theoretically and empirically.

Theoretical Foundations of HRM in Districts

Theoretical conceptualizations of human resource functions in school districts are often discussed in a ‘silo’-ed manner, where one function is examined separate from others. However, Rebore (2007) takes a more comprehensive view by first identifying eight ‘essential’ dimensions of the human resource function in school districts—human resource planning, recruitment, selection, placement and induction, staff development, appraisal, compensation, and collective negotiations. The role of these dimensions is ultimately to improve student achievement through development of the teacher workforce, always focused on the broader district vision and assessment of workforce needs. Building upon this general assessment of human resource functions, the theoretical understanding of HRM in districts typically conceptualizes HRM more as the management of human capital than human resources, as the focus is often upon all activities and polices affecting the capital held by individual intellect, experience, knowledge, etc. rather than simply typically understood human resource functions (Sigler & Kashyap, 2008).
Further theoretical understanding typically views the role of human resource management as investing in and developing human capital while aligning that investment with certain HR practices which will improve student achievement. Henemen & Milanowski (2004) presented a framework which aligned HRM practices to a teacher performance model which was further aligned with student achievement goals, all based upon HR practices such as recruitment, selection, mentoring, professional development, etc. All this hinged upon findings in the private sector regarding HRM practices which affect organizational performance through employee competency. However, more recent studies have considered this type of conceptualization to be more management of human capital than human resources simply because of the way HR departments often don’t actually oversee some human capital-type functions. A report put out by the New Teacher Project also conceptualizes the teacher workforce as the human capital that must be addressed, more than the human resource functions, as they highlight the need to tightly couple evaluation measures to other human resource functions like professional development and retention in order to ensure the best quality teachers are in place to effectively engage in student learning and success (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009).

Wurtzel & Curtis (2008) of the Aspen Institute developed a human capital (as compared to resources) framework with the same product or goal as every other framework – the success of the students – as well as the widely accepted constant that it is the workforce capacity of administrators and teachers that effects this success more than any other factor (see also Rumberger & Connell, 2007; Waters, & Marzano, 2006).
However, they borrow greatly from SHRM theory by emphasizing alignment of mission and practice, dropping a piecemeal approach of HR functions for a more systematic one, understanding interrelationships which create a comprehensive system, and even incorporating horizontal and vertical alignment concepts. Sigler & Kashyap (2008) have moved even further towards current SHRM theoretical conceptualizations as they discuss the Annenberg Foundation’s framework for district success of human capital which stresses a need to examine human capital management - how it extends beyond simply human resources and who is responsible for it. The same basic role of human resource management exists – to support the workforce in order to improve student success, but with additional elements such as looking at both internal and external relationships, emphasizing human resources as a key function of the organization, restructuring the central office architecture, and making sure human capital management functions are incorporated with the greater human resource functions.

The next step, as Odden and Kelly (2008) support, is to add the strategic element. The language of strategic practice is beginning to surface more frequently in education literature (see Sigler & Kashyap). However, the literature at best scratches the surface of exploring the strategic and systemic integration of the various dimensions of human resources described above as well as the flexibility required to meet changing demands from the environment (e.g., Rebore, 2007; Seyfarth, 2008). But it is this ‘strategic’ element that is often seen as most crucial in literature from the private sector for achieving the goal of HRM – organizational effectiveness (a.k.a. student success).
Empirical Evidence of HRM in Districts

Empirical studies abound regarding particular district HR functions, such as hiring, compensation, etc. but studies utilizing a comprehensive view of human resource management, especially ones incorporating human capital functions like professional development or mentoring, are only beginning to develop as a body of literature. However, there is a general consensus that at least certain elements of human resource management play a key role in student achievement, the standard of success most often used by districts.

HRM & district improvement. Studies investigating human resource components’ effect on school success found: successful districts have integrated systems of teacher recruitment and professional development that were strategically tied to the districts’ goals for improving teaching and learning (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003), comprehensive and strategic systems of human resource management were most effective in promoting “deep” instructional improvement (Elmore, Peterson & McCarthey, 1996), and more comprehensive strategies for recruiting, developing, and transferring out teachers, pursuant to a particular vision of the school, led to school improvement (Louis & Miles, 1990). However, these studies all used the school as the unit of analysis, which only allows for an assumption of district effectiveness or improvement.

Literature connecting central office functions - such as human resource management - to organizational effectiveness (measured typically by teacher effectiveness or student success scores) are mostly anchored in ‘silo’-ed practices, such
as recruitment (e.g. Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, & Wyckoff, 2007), selection, hiring, or professional development, independently of one another (Smylie & Miretzky, 2004). The studies that do examine multiple HR practices, though few in number, tend to report positive results. For example, successfully reforming districts were found to utilize integrated teacher recruitment and professional development systems which were aligned with district goals (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). More recent case studies of urban district improvement efforts also include dividing the central office in a way more geographically accessible to all schools, assessment systems providing leaders with real-time data, training for principals to improve their leadership capacity, and professional development for central office staff (Honig & Copland, 2008). Although these studies do not address the amount of success, they show rare data on the practices some central offices are taking in an effort to improve their district performance. At the school level, those schools adopting a more comprehensive HRM approach also saw greater improvement (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996; Louis & Miles, 1990). Again, many studies have been completed at the school level, with district level research lagging behind. We can hope from the path led by the private sector that even district organizations can see improvement, based upon empirical studies of school results, and then use the results from this study as a launching-off point to begin linking central office functions as a whole to district effectiveness.

More comparable in recent empirical work, at least regarding the district as the unit of analysis, are comprehensive case studies of reforming districts that highlight and link the usefulness of certain human resource management practices to general levels of
improvement. The most widely recognized case studies come from District #2 in New York and San Diego Unified School District in California where massive reform was undertaken in an effort to turn around districts that were labeled as failing. By way of linking a somewhat comprehensive human resource management system with instructional improvement, New York #2 brought about change and found their method merely adapted during reform efforts in San Diego. Components of this HRM system included recruitment and hiring, intensive professional development implementation and monitoring, active teacher evaluation, eliminating ineffective teachers, collaborative working relationships, providing leadership opportunities, and setting up a teacher incentive program—all focused on institutionalizing a district-wide instructional framework and achieving student learning standards (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Elmore & Burney, 1998; Hightower, 2002). Evidence from both District #2 and San Diego is varied, as some suggested instructional improvement, greater student achievement, and district administrative improvements while other evidence suggested the improvements varied substantially by schools or didn’t remain consistent over time, potentially caused by a lack of flexibility (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Hightower, 2002; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006).

Other case studies highlighting human resource management often are more descriptive in their functions with more of an assumed link to district effectiveness or improvement. Five high poverty districts showing improvement in student achievement were studied by Togneri and Anderson (2003), who found that very similar strategies were used to improve instruction, developing from such HRM functions as guiding
instructional improvement through district vision, putting data systems in place to assess strengths and weaknesses that personnel were trained to utilize, and developing coherent, vision-centered professional development practices. Mini-case studies including Boston Public Schools, Aldine Independent School District, and Long Beach Unified School District have highlighted effects of different approaches on district effectiveness. ‘Silo’ structured HR departments, unbalanced hiring authority between upper and middle management, bureaucratic or over-autonomous districts, or communication gaps promoted mismanagement and hindered district improvements. However, meetings with colleagues as well as across organizational levels, acculturation of district vision and goals, shared leadership, and interrelationships both internally and externally were part of successful HR reform systems that showed increased district effectiveness (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & Johnson, 2007). But what does it mean for these districts to be strategic in their human resource function that led to these successful reform systems and what does it look like as a whole? These are questions this study addressed.

A developing literature of HRM in districts. Often because of the spotlight on individual functions instead of a strategic plan focused on the district’s instructional vision, program funding is haphazard and lacking alignment, making efficient use of funds and reform sustainability very difficult (Bowers, 2008; Childress et al., 2007). Even though district reform literature highlights the use of data-based decision making, adequate databases and associated training in districts are lacking. Districts often lack a system-wide database for teachers to utilize in making classroom decisions and/or do
not provide adequate and practical training for personnel to appreciate the usefulness of such data (Childress et al., 2007). To make matters worse, the central office is often distracted from the instructional vision by managerial tasks, stakeholder projects, or external factors, making coherence a problem, particularly regarding human resource systems (Elmore, 1993; Supovitz, 2006). Unfortunately, the question of how these district troubles fall into the overall strategic HR system still lingers, and without some answers to that question methods for improvement will be very difficult to develop, which is partially what provided the need for the present study.

A newer development is tying human resource management to such theories as learning organizations and continuously improving organizations as well as incorporating the aspect of culture into investigations. In fact, Supovitz’s (2006) study of Duval County, FL schools highlights successes and failures of HR practices focused on the core mission of teaching and learning (such as data-based decision making and workforce capacity building), which led him to conclude that districts must evolve into continuously improving and learning organizations. Learning organizations are what can sustain reform or achieved effectiveness, thus an advantageous goal for districts (Fullan, 2005; Supovitz, 2007). However, Honig (2008) highlights the great unanswered question of what it means for a district to ‘learn’ or how a district becomes a learning organization. Part of that question involves the culture found at the school. Multiple case studies have found a supportive culture, or lack thereof, was certainly a factor in the success of both district reform efforts and human resource management strategies (e.g. Childress et al., 2007). Supovitz (2006) not only provided examples from Duval
County schools showing the consequences of a lack of attention to culture, but concluded culture to be part of the design of a successful district of the 21st century.

Through the literature on districts and human resource management, both theoretical and empirical, one can certainly draw connections between human resource management strategies and district effectiveness or improvement. The lines often are not as clear or linear as further research could provide, particularly when looking at HR as a comprehensive management system instead of silos of functions, as this study did. However, the correlation is strong enough, particularly when incorporating literature from other fields, that the effect of different human resource management approaches on district effectiveness is hard to deny. So although the present study does not go so far as to tie human resource management to district effectiveness, it provides a foundation for further research to do so by illuminating the black box that is the central office and what human resource management looks like, acts like, and is defined as in a strategic manner. This information must be better understood in order to follow the ‘nested model’ path from district function to school function to teacher function and finally to student function in an effort to understand how strategic human resource management effects the effectiveness of a school district at all levels.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

This chapter will discuss the research methodology, design, and methods used in this study to address the research questions outlined in Chapter One. Furthermore, this chapter will discuss the research design and process in detail as well as address the validity and credibility of the study.

Research Methodology

According to Glesne (2006), methodology is a “theoretical framework that guides how we come to know what we know,” including our assumptions about what is important, legitimate knowledge, and worthy evidence for making claims (p.6). The methodology for this study was a combination of grounded theory and case study.

Regarding grounded theory, I utilized Strauss & Corbin’s systematic approach where one seeks to “systematically develop a theory that explains process, action, or interaction on a topic” which is ‘grounded’ in the data gathered from the study (Creswell, 2007, p.64; Merriam, 1998). In this study I used the qualitative research methods of grounded theory in my attempt to explain the way in which a school district both defines and practices being ‘strategic’ in regards to their human capital. Not only were the methods typically associated with grounded theory studies utilized, but this study is the first step in my development of a substantive theory ‘grounded’ in the data, a theory that has “referent specific, everyday-world situations,” and “usefulness to practice” with pertinent categories and properties that illuminate those categories (Merriam, 1998, p.17). Something practitioners will be able to use to better understand and guide their
own organizations. As Merriam (1998) explains, rich description is not the primary focus of grounded theory, so I combine grounded theory with case study methodology in order to also focus on an intensive, rich, holistic description and analysis of a district system to gain an “in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (p.19).

Grounded theory is an inductively derived iterative approach to inquiry, as it involves finding meaning and developing interpretative explanations of that meaning through a data collection process involving repeated collection actions until nothing more is likely to emerge (Grbich, 2007). As Bogdan & Biklen (1992) describe it, such a methodology is like constructing a picture you’ve never seen before based upon the shape it takes as you collect and examine the parts. This means not all of the important questions will even be known at the beginning of the study, as the researcher will continue to learn what those important questions are through continued data collection. Therefore, the aforementioned research questions certainly served as a guide for this study, but this researcher continually reflected upon them and their pertinent importance as I continued through the data collection process.

Using Strauss & Corbin’s systematic perspective on grounded theory as a methodological approach provides a view on both the role of previous literature to inform the study and the manner in which data is collected and analyzed. The use of literature in grounded theory is unique. The more orthodox approach developed by Glaser and Strauss avoids reviewing the literature until core variables or categories have been defined while the systematic approach chosen for this proposed study views
literature as a means to inform the researcher and validate my analysis (Grbich, 2007).

With the support of Strauss & Corbin’s approach to grounded theory, I utilized literature on districts as organizations, district reform, strategic human resource management, and organizational theory to assist in the development of my interview protocols, making sense of data in the later stages of coding as categories took shape, and certainly as I was developing conclusions from the data.

**Design of the Study**

Glesne (2006) brings to light one of many quandaries involving qualitative research, particularly with regard to study design: categorization. In this study, categorization of the study design was a quandary, as there was no single device or method to point to but instead a blending of sorts. To best address the research questions and truly understand the way a district functions as an organization, I employed what can best be described as Yin's (2009) case study method utilizing some qualitative tools, specifically those from grounded theory (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Yin (2009) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its own context, particularly when boundaries and context are unclear, relying upon multiple sources of evidence that must be triangulated. This type of approach offered the structured flexibility to focus on the district central office, but also figure out how the central office was defined and how it interacted with other boundaries as well, all while allowing the researcher to draw conclusions based on insights gathered during the process. For according to Merriam (1998) the “interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery
rather than confirmation.” (p.19). In determining how a district defines and acts strategic, this study most certainly had to focus on the process, context, and discovery of the research questions in a district.

This study involved a single case blending Yin’s (2009) representative and revelatory rationales, as the chosen case was able to capture circumstances and conditions of a district that was rather representative of the average school district in many ways while also providing some key opportune elements for the purpose and goals of this study. This site also provided the opportunity to analyze a phenomenon that has not previously been studied by researchers - the functioning of a district as an organization around the idea of being strategic, something that an in-depth single case study could produce. Such benefits provided adequate rationale for utilizing a single case in the attempt to answer the research questions guiding this study.

**Site selection.** Yin (2009) suggests that in selecting a case study, the researcher should choose a site with sufficient access to the potential data and likelihood to illuminate the research questions. The site for this case study was certainly based upon this suggestion. Gaining access into the central office is not something school districts often feel comfortable allowing, but the case chosen for this research was very willing and excited about allowing access to the researcher in order to reflect and learn more about themselves as an organization. So access to the central office was part of the selection of this site, but certainly not the only reason.

Besides access, the case for this study had great potential to illuminate the proposed research questions. The school district site had just hired a new
superintendent prior to the beginning of this study, marking a point of change within the district structure and function. This allowed data collection to begin at the inception of new visions and initiatives at the district level regarding organization structures, policies, and practices impacting human resource management. This superintendent also had a reputation for positive change from his work in previous districts, so watching a change-agent with a focus on making the organization more efficient was a prime opportunity for this study. Reputation was also a part of the decision to choose this site. The human resources department in this district had a reputation for working towards district goals and being a part of the central office leadership team. This was a vital component when choosing a district to study because it would be very difficult to define strategic and what it looks like in a district with regards to their human capital if the human resources department and administrator was not an involved member of the central office leadership and knew how to work towards the goals of the district. The timing for studying a district and its ability to be strategic held strong potential at this site for illuminating the proposed research questions.

**Participant sampling.** Given the inductive nature of the proposed study coupled with the structured nature of the case (district), the sampling of participants was done through snowball and purposeful sampling techniques (Creswell, 2007). Since understanding of the case organization and developing theory were the main concerns of this research, it was important to select participants who had theoretically relevant characteristics, particularly regarding information at the district level. The superintendent and his leadership team were the most important to gain as
participants, but a few more were interviewed via snowball sampling from interviews with the leadership team and who they described as being integrally involved in district decision-making.

To understand the district, the primary unit of analysis, involved selecting administrators who were not only knowledgeable in district structures, policies, and practices but also involved in a great deal of district decisions and action. Those administrators chosen as participants for this study were nine: superintendent, elementary education administrator (two different ones), secondary education administrator, curriculum administrator, human resources administrator, facilities administrator, school improvement administrator, and public relations administrator. All of these participants allowed varying viewpoints of district function as well as their individual involvement in how the district operated as an organization. Besides the new superintendent, the majority of these administrators had been with the district for multiple years, some for more than 20 years. However, in the middle of the project, the elementary education administrator retired and a new administrator was hired in his place, thus both of those persons were interviewed to take advantage of multiple views of the district from the same position, but from a veteran and a newcomer perspective (newcomer to the central office, but not to the district).

**Data collection.** Yin (2009) warns that the data collection process for case studies is more complex than other research methods because of a need for methodological versatility and the necessity for ensuring ‘quality control’ during the process. Like most qualitative research, this involves utilizing a variety of methods for
gathering data, most commonly interviews, observations, and data collection (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Yin, 2009). In this case study method where the focus was primarily placed on understanding the actions, decisions, and structures of a school district, I relied on interviews as the primary vehicle for data collection with strong support from observations and document analysis. I was guided by Yin’s (2009) advice to best utilize the data in a reliable and effective manner: using multiple sources of evidence, creating a case study database, and maintaining a chain of evidence.

**Interviews.** In order to maintain what Yin (2009) describes as ‘guided conversations’ (as opposed to structured queries) I developed a combination of in-depth, semi-structured, and open-ended questions to use in interviews for the proposed study. Such an approach means, “although you will be pursuing a consistent line of inquiry, your actual stream of questions in a case study interview is likely to be fluid rather than rigid” (Yin, p.106). This goal involved accepting two main responsibilities as the interviewer: 1. following my own line of inquiry per the guidance of my stated research questions and 2. asking actual (conversational) questions to also serve the needs of the study and promote rapport and greater understanding (Yin, 2009).

Bogdan & Biklen (1992) explain the purpose of interviewing as “gather[ing] descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (p.96). Using this as a guide, I approached the interviewing aspect of data collection as a fluid and flexible process where my main goal was to listen, reflect, and guide conversation, always with the knowledge that questions could be added, changed, or omitted based upon elements of
the interview and theories or variables emerging throughout the process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006). This conceptualization of my role as researcher followed the *naïve* placement involving speaking openly with minimal interruptions and asking questions to probe and guide.

Throughout the interview element of data collection I maintained usage of the constant comparative method to always be comparing and analyzing data for meanings, patterns, explanations, and pertinent developments to further hone my research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 2007). Before this researcher began interviewing participants I obtained a signed “informed consent form” from each participant describing the risks, benefits, and rights of the participant (Appendix A). Participants were asked if they had any questions about the research process and were told they could withdraw from participation at any point in the process. Because of the nature of this study, participant responses and identities were kept confidential by use of generalized titles and a pseudonym for the district. Access to interview transcripts was limited to the researcher, who also served as the transcriber, and the doctoral adviser of the researcher.

In this study I conducted 14 semi-structured initial and follow-up interviews with nine administrators to determine their understanding of what it meant to be strategic, how the district functioned as an organization, and what elements may or may not have been strategic in that process of function and decision-making (See Appendix B and C for sample interview protocols). The interviews were conducted over two and a half academic years, ranged from 45 to 75 minutes in length, and were conducted in the
administrators’ respective offices. Most interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher, but two and a half interviews were conducted using researcher notes and recollection because of a problem with the digital recorder. Interviews with these administrators focused on such topics as general organizational structure, interconnectedness of departments, the role of human resources or human capital in district policies and practices, a broad picture of how the district made decisions, and administrator definitions of what it meant to be strategic.

**Observations.** As mentioned above, interviews were the primary vehicle of data collection for this study but observations were very useful in answering the research questions and developing theory for this study as well. As Yin (2009) describes, observational data collection in a case study design can provide a key source of supplemental evidence that can indicate such things as the climate of an organization, interviewee status within the organization, appreciation of the actual usages of programs and policies, and further depths of understanding into the context of the organization being studied.

Using Glesne’s (2006) observation continuum scale, this researcher was more of an ‘observer as participant’ in order to best fulfill the purpose of understanding more thoroughly the district setting, participants, and their behavior as it is contextualized within these elements. Conducting observations in this manner allowed the researcher to see firsthand patterns of behavior, unexpected experiences, develop a quality of trust and semblance of a relationship with participants, and therefore better develop pertinent interview questions as well as interpret answers to those questions more
effectively and knowledgeably (Glesne, 2006). Deciding which meetings to observe
developed over the course of the study, but certainly those observations helped the
researcher understand the context of the research environment, gain a better
understanding of the organization as a whole and how it functioned, appreciate how
interview topics worked in context, and built relationships and trust with the
participants.

For this study, pertinent meetings were the primary focus of observations. Over
the two academic years encompassing this study, the researcher attended three School
Board meetings, six district improvement plan meetings, a central office leadership
team meeting, and a district public forum to better understand how the district made
decisions and implemented them regarding their human resources. Besides providing
an avenue for better tailoring interview questions to each participant, these
observations also allowed the researcher to observe any consistencies between
responses given in the interview process and how the participants put those responses
into action and context as well as simply observing the decision-making process in
action. The researcher used a lap-top computer to record the observations in all but the
public forum meeting. Typing the observations was the most efficient and credible
manner of collecting the data, for note-taking would not have allowed the researcher to
gather near as much data or as precisely and the researcher felt a digital voice recorder
would have been intrusive and infringed on the privacy of other participants at the
meetings.
**Documents.** Finally, documents were used in this study as a third main tool in data collection in order to “corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (Yin, 2009, p.103) and “provide both historical and contextual dimensions to...observations and interviews (Glesne, 2006, p.68). Further triangulation using document analysis provided insights into priorities, plans, documented strategies, resources, and philosophies the district held pertaining to organizational structure and development as well as strategic management of human capital. There were many types of documents relevant to the district setting and I gathered a variety for the purpose of this study.

School and district state testing performance data was gathered to serve as a measure of the district’s progress towards state accountability measures and any current corrective action in place. District improvement plans (old and new) were used to provide important information about the priorities of the district and how they were re-designed over the course of this study. The researcher also gathered other district structural and functional artifacts such as organizational charts for each academic year studied, a human resource handbook, and all printed school board policies in place in order to gain an understanding of the printed policies and structures for the district.

Various public plans, reports, and presentations were gathered from the district website and school board meeting archives, including a communication plan, facilities plan, and numerous presentations to the school board including district progress towards board goals and superintendent updates on tax levy or budget situations. These were gathered so the researcher could develop some pertinent questions about participant’s functions in goals and programs as well as continue to understand the priorities and
purposes of the district. Printed information, mostly in newsletter or newspaper format, was gathered regarding current district decisions and events or community opinions and involvement in district function to better maintain a current understanding of district decisions and issues, create more relevant questions for participants, corroborate interview information with media-released participant interviews, and create a richer understanding of external environmental opinion and impact on the district. General information about each participant was gathered through website and media print as well. This information was used as background to appreciate the experience each participant had in the district and outside of the district. Such document analysis served as another source for gathering a rich data that helped understand how the school was defined by both participants and external organizational members, better comprehend how school personnel communicated, uncover information about internal rules and regulations as well as compare with interview data for consistency or further inquiries (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Keeping up to date with district events and actions in this way also helped to promote relationships with the interview participants, as they were more willing to elaborate in our interviews when they didn’t have to explain particular contexts or current events and saw the researcher held some sort of interest in the organization.

**Data Analysis & Interpretation**

Data collection and data analysis are certainly not mutually exclusive activities in the realm of qualitative research, and particularly when using case study and grounded theory methods. Thus this researcher followed the general guidelines of constant
comparative method to read, code, and consider emerging categories during the entire
data collection process instead of merely after the data was fully collected (Bogdan &
comparative method in a case study such as this:

In most forms of case studies, the emerging themes guide data collection, but formal analysis and theory development do not occur until after the data collection is near completion. The constant comparative method is a research design for multidata sources, which is like analytic induction in that the formal analysis begins early in the study and is nearly completed by the end of data collection (p.72)

This method is an inductive approach from the realms of grounded theory that takes information from data collection and compares it to emerging categories through data examination, coding, and reworking in an attempt to find connections or patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 2007). Such an analysis works in more of a spiral form than a linear one to finally end up at the development of a theory. As Bogdan & Biklen explain, such a method allows for greater theoretical relevance.

The collected data was analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding procedures, per Strauss & Corbin’s approach to grounded theory. In the initial phase, open coding, the researcher examined the data in order to identify salient categories or concepts to reduce the database to a smaller set of themes or categories able to characterize the process and action of district human resource management and decision-making (Creswell, 2007; Grbich, 2007). This was followed by axial coding, to link each original category or concept to emerging subcategories that could relate or explain the central phenomenon. Information from this coding phase then helped the researcher to begin building or generating a theoretical model of the district process
(Creswell, 2007; Grbich, 2007). Finally, in the culminating coding phase, selective coding, the researcher generated propositions that interrelated the categories developed in the coding process to validate the relationships between core categories and support the generation of themes and relationships (Creswell, 2007; Grbich, 2007). This whole process was aptly informed and guided by the available and pertinent literature on districts as organizations, high reliability organizations, and strategic human resource management as well as other relevant literature as previously described in Chapter Two.

To facilitate management of data and the coding process, the researcher used the QSR NVIVO® software package to manage interview data, field notes, and documents as well as develop categories to aide in emerging themes. NVIVO is a program which aides researchers in analyzing, managing, shaping, and re-working the data being collected in a secure, flexible, and easily manipulated form. This software package has code-and-retrieve capability as well as researcher-developed categories and subcategories linked to coded data units that can easily be queried for constant analysis, reflection, and revision of the data and emerging theory. In addition, researchers are capable of memoing visually next to and linked with the database artifacts, all the while maintaining an audit trail kept automatically by the software to log all researcher interactions with the data (Creswell, 2007; Grbich, 2007). The benefits of using such a tool for this study was the easy access to all forms of data and ability to play with the data through sorting and trying out possible theoretical propositions to a much greater degree than manually possible. All this while maintaining the audit trails
which adds to the trustworthiness of the analysis (Glesne, 2006). The time saved by using such a software package was an asset to the researcher, particularly as the database became larger and more complex.

**Issues of Validity & Credibility**

Validity and credibility in qualitative research is not the same as it is in quantitative or scientific inquiry. In qualitative research external reliability (generalizeability) is not as important as internal reliability (validity). Reliability is achieved often through such action as triangulation. Reliability is better described as dependability, and generalizeability is actually analytical, not statistical (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Yin, 2009).

Since qualitative researchers strive for deep understanding in their work, they are most concerned with whether they ‘got it right’ or developed an accurate portrayal and/or theory (Creswell, 2007). In order to achieve this internal reliability or validity, researchers are encouraged to utilize triangulation. Glesne (2006) defines triangulation as a use of multiple data-collection methods that contribute to the trustworthiness of the data with the purpose of relating data in order to counteract threats to validity. Such triangulation includes not just using multiple data-collection methods but also utilizing multiple kinds of data sources and multiple theoretical perspectives, as was utilized in this study.

As Creswell (2007) describes, qualitative research is less concerned with the external and internal reliability of the work than with the dependability that the results “will be subject to change and instability” which can be established through an “auditing
of the research process” (p.204). This requires thick description to make sure that the findings are indeed dependable enough to transfer accurate understanding between the researcher and the participants as well as confirm the accurate value of the data.

Triangulation, prolonged engagement in the site, and utilizing the audit trail provided by the NVivo software were used by the researcher to establish dependability of the data collection process and ultimately the research results.

An oft-cited misunderstanding in validation and credibility of qualitative research involves the generalizability of results. In quantitative research, generalization is typically of a statistical nature, whereas in qualitative research, particularly those using grounded theory and case study approaches, generalization is of an analytic nature. In this kind of analytic generalizability, the researcher “is striving to generalize a particular set of results to some broader theory” (Yin, 2009, p.43). Instead of worrying about generalizing results to a broader population of districts, this study was more concerned with using the findings for theory-building regarding districts as organizations and human resource management as well as how the study could later be recreated or transferred into other settings. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain, a researcher cannot specify the transferability of findings, only provide sufficient information for the reader or future researchers to determine whether the findings are applicable to a new situation.
CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This chapter will discuss the data collected to address the two research questions that guided this study. To accomplish this task, chapter four is divided into four sections. The first section provides a description of the district and the central office in particular. The primary purpose of this description is to give the reader a sense of the major components and recent challenges facing the district as a whole, and the central office in particular. The reader’s awareness of major initiatives and pertinent changes of the district in the first section will assist in understanding and following the description of themes and examples portrayed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

In the second section I specifically address the first research question – what does it mean for a district to be strategic – by describing both how the district leaders verbalize the meaning of strategic as well as how they actually portray the meaning of strategic in the district, which is not contradictory but enlightening. The third section addresses the second research question – how does a district go about being strategic – by describing what being strategic actually looks like in this district, particularly regarding human resources. I discuss in detail two major categories that emerged from this question, namely silos to systems and attributes of strategic leadership. In the fourth and final section I address an influential factor for both defining and acting strategic in this district – environmental layers and players – by describing the multiple layers of environmental players both within and outside of the district that impacts everything the district does as an organization and as a group of leaders.
Section I: Setting of the Study

To explore the strategic or not-so-strategic decisions and actions made by the district and its leaders in this study, it is first necessary to provide background on the current district foundation, policies, and practices as well as recent important initiatives or foundational changes. My purpose in this section is to introduce the reader to elements and issues critical to central office administrators and the district as a whole regarding their organizational structure and strategic capacity. I provide selected organizational and benchmark statistics for the district as well as descriptions of pertinent changes in leadership and important district-wide initiatives underway.

District

Midwest Public Schools (a pseudonym) has been facing challenges comparable to those of similar-sized districts in mid-sized cities in the US for nearly a decade, particularly since the inception of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. A declining economic base, yearly decreases in state and local funding, and increases in state and federal mandates tied to funding have contributed to decreases in resources and increases in concern for how to best position the district to still maintain a high quality of education for their students. The district serves approximately 17,000 students – one sixth of the city’s total population – in about 30 schools, with a few more schools under construction to address continuing population growth (State Education Department, 2010). MPS is the only public school district in one of the larger cities in a midwestern state, though a number of private and religious-based schools are also present, enrolling around 1,500 students. The surrounding city is considered politically liberal and ranked
as one of the top 20 most educated municipalities in the US, serving as both the county seat and location of numerous institutions of higher education, making for a very educated and involved community when it comes to matters of education. The racial and ethnic make-up of Midwest Public Schools is reflective of its community (diverse by state standards): 66 percent White, 23 percent Black, six percent Asian, four percent Hispanic, and one percent Indian, with approximately 40 percent of students qualifying for the free and reduced lunch program (State Education Department, 2010). Currently nearly all schools in MPS are focused on general curriculum, with the exception of an alternative high school and 2-3 elementary schools with a specialty focus, as well as the current consideration of developing 3-4 small autonomous schools with specialty foci and school-based decision-making, potentially increasing the number of specialty schools in the district. Finally, MPS employs about 100 administrators (including central office staff, principals, assistant principals, and directors) and 1,500 full-time teachers (Midwest Public Schools, 2010).

Midwest Public Schools (MPS) tracks district conditions and NCLB progress in its annual accountability report card. Table 1 provides some statistics for the district’s current educational situation and Table 2 portrays the district’s status under NCLB’s Adequate Yearly Progress accountability measure. As of 2010, MPS is at District Improvement Level 3, continuing corrective action, with 25% of their schools in some level of School Improvement (one school in their fourth year of sanctions, one school in their third year, two schools in their second year, and three schools in their first year).
Table 1
Selected District Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected District Measures</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dropout rate</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance rate</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite ACT score</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student to classroom teacher ratio</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student to administrator ratio</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of experience of professional staff</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional staff with advanced degrees</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: MPS, 2010; DESE 2010)

Table 2
NCLB Adequate Yearly Progress Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NCLB Status</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Arts</td>
<td>Not met</td>
<td>Not met (5 out of 9 groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Not met</td>
<td>Not met (6 out of 9 groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Rate</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: DESE 2010)

I initiated this study just as MPS was looking to new leaders both within the
district and the greater community to guide them on a more effective path. The
surrounding community had just voted into office some new public service officials, was
about to replace a long-time mayor, and local institutes of higher education were seeing
some change in leadership as well. More specific to the district, at the beginning of the
2009-2010 school year when this study began, the School Board at MPS had just sworn
in a new President to preside over some newly elected faces replacing half the former
members. The biggest change, however, was the new Superintendent taking over at the
beginning of this study, replacing an interim who had been hired to fill the gap left
behind by a Superintendent who left the position after the community and media made
it clear they were becoming disillusioned with her leadership and had lost trust in
district administration.
This study was also initiated just as MPS was to begin a district improvement process mandated by the state. This process is completed every five years as a way for districts to reflect and revise their long-term strategy for improving educational programs and services. The improvement plan is to be:

“... a “long-range plan” which focuses on the improvement of student achievement. [It] should detail the district’s plan to reallocate resources, redefine or eliminate less effective programs and services, and incorporate any new programs and services identified to produce higher student performance as measured by the [state improvement process evaluation] performance indicators. A [District Improvement Plan] may also incorporate existing programs and services which are effective in producing high student performance. A [District Improvement Plan] is created by a district to serve as a “road map” to the long-range improvement the district hopes to realize over a five-year period” (State Education Department, 2002, p.2).

Central Office

The central office in Midwest Public Schools is housed in two separate buildings on either side of town. The main building is home to the core leadership team (the Superintendent, five Assistant Superintendents, and the Chief Financial Officer) and some of their staff, including public relations and human resources personnel. This is also where meetings with administrators, School Board meetings, and some professional development trainings are held. This building is the primary hub of decision-making and policy within the district. The secondary building houses school improvement personnel including curriculum coordinators, research and assessment personnel, information technology personnel, and other personnel directly under the guidance of the core leadership team. This structure, however, is due to change very soon as the main building will be constructing an addition to allow for all central office personnel to work under the same roof in the coming year.
Section II: Defining and Conceptualizing Strategic

Using the constant comparative method to analyze data collected from interviews with central office personnel, observations of central office meetings, and analysis of district documents, I addressed the first research question, “What does it mean for a district to be strategic?” This section is organized into two subsections: First, I present the reader with how the central office administrators verbalize their conceptualization of strategic. In the second subsection, I explore how the district and those administrators actually practice their conceptualization or definition of strategic, which revolves around their main district goals.

An Administrative Definition

Through interviews with central office administrators I was able to piece together their individual understandings of “strategic” from their statements and actions, as well as pointedly asked them what the word meant to them in order to determine how they specifically define the concept versus how they describe and practice it in context. This was purposeful so that I could examine any differences between specific definitions and contextual conceptualizations of “strategic” by the central office leaders at the heart of district planning.

Through the constant comparison of interview-based data units coded as strategic, particularly in answer to the interview question “What does it mean to be strategic?” themes emerged that described how administrators in the central office pointedly defined what it means to be strategic. Each administrator verbalized the definition of ‘strategic’ differently, but there were certainly common threads
throughout their definitions, which were: 1) foresight, 2) pre-emptive planning, and 3) knowledge-based innovation.

**Foresight.** According to interview data, central office administrators partially defined strategic as having the foresight to plan for the future. As part of the emerging themes of “defining strategic,” elements of the definition came both from administrators discussing what strategic is and what it isn’t. As it turns out from their definitions of ‘strategic,’ there are three key facets to foresight: cognizance, focus, and consistency, as I’ll speak to below.

**Cognizance.** One element of foresight is what I am labeling as cognizance. In this context, cognizance is staying in tune with the district as well as keeping abreast of outside forces or events that will impact the organization. Being mindful of data-based information is certainly part of staying in tune with the district, as well as a general awareness of what is occurring, what is changing, and where things are headed as an organization. Coupled with this self-awareness is being perceptive to what is occurring outside the district that could impact the district, such as state mandates or funding changes, community demands and expectations, etc. What can develop from this cognizance is the ability to make educated guesses about what will happen next. Central office administrators certainly aren’t psychics, predicting the future, but with cognizance they can identify trends, patterns, sort of the ‘body language’ of what is occurring now and might next occur both within and outside of the district, helping them develop the foresight to be strategic.
At the Superintendent level, cognizance means staying up-to-date on what is occurring within the district, what the data is saying about the district’s progress towards its goals, while keeping an eye on community and governmental forces that could impact the district. The Superintendent monitors the position and progress of the district by trusting and utilizing his leadership team, who gather the data that they can then share during leadership meetings. This helps the Superintendent be mindful enough of district information that he can then draw potential connections to activity outside the district. This cognizance of district status also involves being tuned in to the ‘big picture,’ the vision and mission, the long-term, the end goals of the district so the data has a purpose and scale of sorts to understand the current progress of the district. This knowledge of the district helps to guide a perception of how what is occurring and what is about to occur will impact the ‘big picture’ or long-term foundational pieces of the district.

The Superintendent is the face of MPS to the community, and because of this he was in a position to gather information about community feelings, actions, and reactions that could impact the district. The Superintendent worked to foster relationships with community members partly to stay abreast of what was occurring outside the district so that he could anticipate how these developments or opinions may impact the district at some point. At MPS, part of the greater community the Superintendent fostered relationships with and kept an eye on was governmental officials at the state level. These relationships not only kept MPS and its needs on legislators’ radars, but also gave the Superintendent a better sense of when budget cuts,
new mandates, or changes in accountability measures might be on the horizon. The Superintendent at MPS kept communication lines open with legislators, and even invited policy-makers to inform the district publicly on what was being discussed or developed at the state level, as taken from my fieldnotes of a School Board meeting:

“The Senator was thanked for his time and assured by the School Board President that everyone was interested in his “insider view.” He explained that the Superintendent had invited him to come and share some of what he knows, even though he and the other legislators don’t know a whole lot yet as they have just started the budget process in the Senate Appropriations Committee, which he is on.”

By developing these relationships with those outside the district, the Superintendent could make educated guesses as to future impacts on the district. For instance, he developed a sense of when more budget cuts would be expected and how much that might mean in actual dollar amounts in order to prepare his administrators and staff. After four months into the position, he brought to the School Board meeting his perception of state funding for the next year, the best case scenario being no change in the budget, dealing with what had already been cut. However, the realistic scenario was actually going to be between 7.5% and 15%. This cognizance helped him guide the district, particularly regarding how to think through a new bond issue, as well as making educated guesses regarding the management of district human capital. As the Superintendent explained to a legislator about upcoming budget cuts in one of the Board meetings I observed, “I would encourage you to tell your [legislative] colleagues that the earlier the better for [MPS]. The sooner the district knows, the better we can prepare our staff.”
For the rest of the central office administrators cognizance holds a similar meaning, but plays out in a slightly different way. While part of their role is to keep the Superintendent in the loop on district data and information in order to maintain his cognizance, these administrators also have their own mindfulness to maintain. The central office administrators are staying in tune mostly with the aspects of the district that fall under their own purview, but also keeping abreast of forces or events outside the district that may impact their responsibilities. Part of this cognizance involves knowing the expectations that guide their educated guesses, as the curriculum administrator explained in her definition of ‘strategic’: “always remembering the vision, the long term, what will it look like when we’re there.” She continued, however, to point out a barrier to being strategic, which is “not being able to see the end-game...and there are lots of uncertainties in education.”

The central office administrators at MPS, much like the Superintendent, coupled that knowledge of the long term, the vision, the expectations of the district with their focus on actions occurring outside the district impacting their areas of responsibility. The facilities administrator, for instance, had to be cognizant of the current state of schools and buildings so that he could expect potential elements that would need attention, repair, or restructuring, foreseeing what he and his human capital would have to address and making educated guesses as to timelines, impacts on district goals, etc. He also kept an ear to governance forces that could impact his facilities management, such as the state potentially cutting all transportation funding for the district, something he was dealing with just as this study was nearing completion. Similar cognizance
applies to each of the other central office administrators in their own purview as part of
the foresight they described as part of defining ‘strategic.’

Focus. Focus is another element of foresight, as conceptualized by the central
office administrators’ definitions of strategic. There are simple and more complex
pieces of focus as I found it defined in the data. More simply, focus involves guidance
and organization, keeping persons or groups on task towards the goal(s). Leadership
meetings, school board meetings, public forums, etc. must be focused not only in their
creation but also as they are taking place, to remind everyone involved why they are
here, what their goals are, and when they are meandering away from those goals.

On a more complex level, focus is leading others towards the bigger picture.
Focusing others towards narrow, short-term expectations or goals is not part of this
definition of focus or foresight. Focus is broader than that, guiding towards the ‘big
picture’ or the larger district goals. Keeping the organization and the persons within
that organization on a path towards the greater purpose of the district, the end goals.
By illuminating that path, central office administrators defined being strategic through
foresight as using this focus specifically as a filter. As I define it from this data, this filter
separates out information and important topics in a way that makes planning and
reflecting about future impacts a more systemic venture. Instead of being an
outpouring of information, ideas, and possibilities, this focus filters out what may not be
most relevant to the big picture or the district end goals, leaving the most pertinent and
manageable elements remaining. Put quite simply, focus as an element of foresight
looks a lot like good leadership.
At the Superintendent level, focus is a key element of the job, particularly since Superintendents are perceived leaders of districts and thus hold the responsibility to guide the organization to its intended goals. Guiding leadership meetings, School Board meetings, cabinet meetings, advisory meetings, etc. in a way that keeps discussions and decision-making concentrated on district goals is focus. Reigning in tangential conversations or arguments and maneuvering them to more productive (a.k.a. district goal-based) areas is focus. Taking tough decisions-in-progress and pointing out where they do and do not link to the big picture of district expectations or plans is focus. Sifting through all the information gathered at School Board meetings and filtering out what is most pertinent to relay to particular groups of human capital is focus. This is all an element of foresight – focusing on what’s most relevant so that pertinent planning and evaluation can occur.

Regarding the other central office administrators, focus looks very similar to the Superintendent level, just on a slightly smaller scale. Where the Superintendent is working to focus the entire district, the other central office administrators are working to use focus in guiding the groups of human capital that they are responsible for. The financial administrator worked to keep budget-making decisions focused on district goals and what was best for students, as opposed to simply a numbers game. The curriculum administrator, in aiding curricular directors in their decisions worked to focus their thoughts on what is best for students, helping them filter out all the other demands or concerns in their field that may or may not have truly been focused on students. Like a counselor helps patients filter through all the thoughts in their head to
focus on the core issue or the patient’s end goal, these central office administrators
worked to filter through all the information and barrage of feedback in the way of
making the best decisions for students and district goals.

One of the central office administrators defined focus as strategic in our
interview:

“How I would like to define [strategic] is being focused. To have those at
the top that provide the focus for the, all the decisions and provide the
filter for all the decisions that we make. That’s how I’d like to define it
but I can’t say it’s that way. We definitely have goals and we have a
focus, although I think that our focus is sometimes scattered.”

As she described it, part of focus is providing a filter for decision-making, I just take it
one step further by defining focus as an element of foresight. This particular
administrator spoke of a lack of focus in the district, but this was taken from an
interview at the beginning of the project, just as the new Superintendent was taking the
helm. Focus is actually an element of foresight that became clearer after the new
Superintendent had been in the district for a year. His own focus for the district as an
organization provided the guidance for central office administrators to improve their
focus and foresight, working to better guide their own areas of responsibility. As an
example of the simpler points of focus, when the School Board would get stuck on an
issue that wasn’t exactly focused on the greater problem at hand, or when a district
improvement plan (DIP) meeting would go off on a tangent that the Superintendent felt
was less relevant, he would re-focus attention to the greater issues at hand. Sometimes
his refocusing efforts were as simple as keeping the momentum for reflection, such as
the following example from a public comprehensive school improvement plan meeting, taken from my fieldnotes:

The committee was given a long list of potential objectives that had been revised and all agreed that this was a lot to try and take in and look critically at. They weren’t sure how to attack it or what good they could do with it. The Superintendent refocuses them by deciding to send them away with the objectives and let the administrative team clean them up. He said the intent was not to let everyone get what they want with these objectives but to bring up all perspectives and give them a voice.

Particularly when more stakeholders were involved in discussions and decision-making, the Superintendent took it upon himself to focus them on the bigger picture, and sometimes that meant simply stopping conversations in a way that illuminated the lack of focus, but in a non-threatening way. One such example came from another district improvement plan meeting where School Board members and community members were becoming mired in an argument on when to get public feedback on their progress, forgetting the entire point of the brainstorming session. The Superintendent cut short the debate by pointing out their progress was too amorphous at the moment and getting community input could be “like having a discussion on how the Chiefs or the Rams will win a game. We could be talking all day and getting nowhere.” Regarding the ‘bigger picture,’ namely student success, the Superintendent worked to keep decision-making, such as budget decisions, focused on their main objectives and purpose as a district. This wasn’t always going to be easy or popular, as the Superintendent pointed out in a district improvement plan committee meeting where the development of a mission was in progress (as taken from fieldnotes):

Superintendent: The mission should be so well defined we can say when people come to us that something being suggested is not part of our
mission. For example: adult education is a noble thing but is it really part of our mission? With the budget cuts can we maintain it? Like the IBMs of the word – in tough times go back to the mission and use it to determine what to cut.

This focus on the end-goal or bigger picture was a role the Superintendent was very consistent with in various forms of public and private meetings and communications, allowing a path to better foresight.

Central office administrators also worked to provide focus for the people and programs in their purview. As I continued through interviews and observations it was obvious that maintaining a focus on the end game, the main district goals, was harder than one might think in an organization that must work so often to react to all the mandates, pressures, and new developments impacting their everyday functions. The curriculum administrator reflected in our interview that sometimes it is hard to find time to help each of her curricular directors maintain focus individually, but she works to do so as much as possible. The co-directors of the gifted program, newly hired, were working through some necessary issues regarding moving facilities when the curriculum administrator found an opportune moment to focus them on the greater issues, the bigger picture that she realized she had neglected doing with them earlier in the year.

She took the opportunity to remedy that oversight:

“Just yesterday I think, I was meeting with my two gifted co-directors and they’re really mired right now in a lot of operational stuff...so in the midst of these meetings where we talked about the status of all of this relatively short term operational stuff, I said...“did we ever commit to writing long term goals for the program or did we just talk about vision?” I said “between now and January write them down, and let’s talk about them” and I told them “I want you thinking about that right now because, as you know, when you’re mired in the midst of short term operational things sometimes those are the very best opportunities to live your vision
out loud or to walk the talk.” For instance, in the course of this discussion I said “I know one of your goals for the department is to bring together – we have teachers who teach in the primary program K-2, teachers who teach in the gifted program 3-5 at the Center and then secondary teachers who are each individually in schools - and there had been...some silos of those groups and so I knew one of their visions that we had talked about...is to bring that group together in all ways. Well they’d made a comment in talking about the move, that all the secondary teachers kept coming over to help them pack. And I said “that’s a perfect example of how you are using the immediate high stress requirements of the past to promote your vision.”

It was maintaining a focus, from as simple as guiding a meeting towards its purpose to situations much more spontaneous and/or complex, that these administrators considered part of the foresight they defined as being “strategic.”

**Consistency.** A final element of foresight as part of the district administrators’ conceptualization of “strategic” was consistency. Foresight in spurts becomes messy, but consistently staying cognizant of the organization and focusing the human capital within the district helps district administrators prepare for what’s to come. Both cognizance and focus imply consistency, but it is worth clearly identifying. Cognizance of the current organizational situation, as well as what is soon to come, is useful only when done consistently. Checking in every now and again leaves gaps in knowledge and decreases the ability to understand the ‘body language’ of events and governing bodies so administrators can pick up on cues regarding what is soon to come. The same consistency holds for focus. Staying focused implies persistence and steadiness or else focus is lost. Therefore, foresight relies on an element of consistency. At all levels within a district this looks like administrators regularly communicating with their human capital and those affecting their human capital to maintain relationships allowing them
to stay cognizant and provide focused guidance. This looks like staying on top of the data coming in and the communications going out of the district, or at the least each administrator’s designated areas of responsibility, with an obvious trend in the purpose of it all and the manner in which it affects the larger district goals. Without consistency of cognizance and focus, foresight slips closer to the ‘treading water’ situation that many schools and districts work within, limiting the ability to be strategic.

Part of the strategic ability of foresight is the time that can be gained or saved by seeing what is coming in time to react or even be proactive. With this kind of time comes the ability to be flexible. One central office administrator explained that “…being strategic may mean just being nimble, so that we can adapt to changes as they occur.” In initial interviews, central office administrators described a district of inconsistent foresight, which caused confusion and less efficient planning than they expected of the organization. From follow-up interviews a year later, central office administrators spoke of foresight as something the district was working to improve by reflecting on their current situation, their future goals, and more clearly viewing and appreciating what might be coming “ten years down the road.” This focus on planning leads us directly to the second common thread in how administrators defined “strategic,” going a step further and putting that foresight into action through planning.

**Pre-emptive planning.** Pre-emptive planning is a term I developed to describe coupling pro-active decision-making with long-term planning. Central office administrators expressed this pre-emptive planning much like taking foresight a step further to develop long-term plans and use their knowledge in a proactive way. The
long-term planning piece of this element involves the development of multi-year plans but also the consistency to re-examine and re-write them, while the proactive decision-making element involves making decisions with a plan in mind, allowing for efficiency that reactivity can’t always provide.

**Long-term planning.** To central office administrators at MPS long-term planning was a part of the definition of strategic, manifesting itself both in discussions of action as well as physical plans. Communications plans, facilities plans, budget plans, school improvement plans, they all involve thinking multiple years ahead and putting those ideas, goals and expectations on paper. Not only developing a written plan to serve as a guide for the district and those working within it but also to serve as a foundation for making decisions appropriate to the greater goals of the district or the strategic interests of the organization. Just like foresight, long-term planning necessarily involves consistency. Making a multi-year plan, looking at it from time to time, and then throwing together a new plan is *not* part of the definition of being strategic. Long-term planning involves making a multi-year plan that is routinely consulted during discussion, decision, and action, not just put on a shelf as potential reference material. Long-term planning involves reflecting upon that multi-year plan as you are implementing it, thinking about elements that could be done better or what foresight might be gained next time to improve the plan. Finally, long-term planning means then taking the time to work thoughtfully on the next version of this plan, not reinventing the wheel unless absolutely necessary but also not simply recycling the old one. Instead, critically
assessing what worked and what didn’t work and coupling that with the foresight of leaders to develop another plan for the upcoming years.

At all levels within the central office long-term planning involves bringing together committees of persons to discuss the goals for the district and how the organization can reach those goals. On a grander scale, a budget committee obviously works together to develop a budget. At MPS this meant a committee of people, including school board members, community members, and central office administrators coming together, assessing the current budget, budgets from recent years, data on expenses or changes in funding for the future, and any other pertinent information to develop a plan for how to utilize funds in the coming years. The same occurred for such things as facilities management, communications, school improvement, or any other area deemed useful by the district to have a plan in place.

On a simpler scale, each central office administrator had some kind of plan they were in charge of that may even be simply their own plan of attack for personal or professional success as an administrator in the district. This plan included their personal goals with progress markers for multiple years, so that they could keep track of what they were progressing towards, their progress towards those goals, and reflect upon what might need to be changed along the way, as with any long-term goal setting agenda or planning process.

It was the desire of some MPS central office administrators that the district have more long-term plans in place where they were lacking and that those in place be utilized more consistently since the time and effort had been put into their creation.
Regarding the budget, at the beginning of this project, the district most often worked off of plans developed to simply guide through the next year or two. Part of “strategic” to these administrators was having plans in place for 5, 10, or 15 years down the road, which included most notably the budget, as the facilities administrator explained:

“Then something that I learned very early on, which sort of surprised me, is that a district of this size did not have a multi-year budget plan. I walk in the door here and they live year by year…it just was amazing to me that they weren’t looking way down the road or working very strategically to develop what I’m calling a 10 year budget plan. A district of this size has to, somehow, plan for the future and you can’t do it at the end of the road."

Such lack of planning for the future was concerning to an administrator who described his previous experiences with long-term planning in a former district and thus knew the benefits of making a plan of attack to not only guide district decision and action but also highlight any problematic areas in the future. In the second year of this study the central office administrators seemed to impress upon the School Board the importance of having a multi-year budget, because they began working on developing one in budget committees with the help of the Chief Financial Officer.

At the central office administrator level, many of the administrators mentioned a plan they had for their own work to keep them focused and progressing. For the facilities administrator that plan often seemed to be in his head, tied back to what he knew was in the facilities multi-year plan that had previously been developed. For the new elementary education administrator this personal and professional plan was a clearly defined and organized plan of attack on paper that not only had goals for himself that tied back to district goals but also specific goals for each initiative or item on his
plan, correlating to a date for when he planned to achieve that goal. He called it his “scorecard,” which he described as he showed me a detailed spreadsheet in our interview, portions of which I share below:

“And my scorecard looks at student data – reading data - and then the incrementation of the new Language Arts curriculum. So it moves down into a strategy. Then looking at [state test] data, because I certainly do hold myself responsible for students doing well on the [state test]. I want to look at attendance data. I also believe I need to be in schools, doing school business. So currently this is where I am, right? My goal is to have done 315 site visits. So far, when I last printed this out, which was right before Thanksgiving, I had 104 site visits...so... Yeah – so then this is my goal about creating a Professional Learning Team because I do want to...rely on the collective wisdom of these veteran Principals, because I was only a Principal for two years and then now I’m their boss. So, the whole idea is mining their human capital for what they know, and boy they are incredible leaders of each other, you know. We do site visits on each other as well, five times – well four times a year - and then the fifth is a meeting.” [Continues with other examples from his personal plan.]

(Researcher: “And are these formed around the [DIP] goals?”)
“These are. They are all around student achievement. “

(Researcher: “So would you say being strategic is meeting your goals?”). “It’s about – it’s certainly, yeah – it’s about meeting your short term goals and your long term goals. I don’t know if I also showed you that I had like I do a - my ‘runway’ which is right now my 10,000 feet...which is like immediate, not right now like what’s on my runway is right now – immediate is I can see it on the horizon, 20,000 is what’s coming up in the next one to two years, then it’s what’s coming up three to five years...”

As mentioned, part of long-term planning is consistency, consistency to routinely re-examine and generate new long-term plans as time progresses. MPS as a district certainly had some multi-year plans in place, such as a communications plan and a district improvement plan [DIP], a state required 5-year strategic plan. However, part of long-term planning is actually utilizing such plans and appreciating their purpose, which
was not always a routine practice, as the facilities administrator admitted when asked if
the previous DIP plans were actually utilized:

“Well, now, I don’t know that I can say yes on that...Some of my
experience previously is some of both yes and no. Some of that plan is a
very valuable tool, especially when it comes to student achievement,
student outcomes, and keeps you focused on what’s important and
where you’re goin’ and how you’re gettin’ there. And other parts of the
plan are just, not worth the paper it’s written on. So it’s just an exercise
in lookin’ good.”

However, the facilities administrator went on to explain that accountability
measures in place insisted on at least some aspects of plans, such as the DIP, to
be utilized or at least referenced and he has an expectation that their newest
plan will be utilized more because of recent increases in accountability:

“But I do know from what I’ve learned here in my almost 3 years, our
Board expects us to be accountable...and I anticipate and expect that
we’ll have a [DIP] update each year...and if we’re not making progress on
the overarching objectives of the [DIP] then, you know, we’ll be asked to
the carpet and we’ll be asked to explain ‘why haven’t you done this’ and
‘why haven’t you made progress’ and ‘why haven’t you implemented the
strategies’? And so I truly believe that the document that we’ll generate
will be a very viable, useful, meaningful tool that will kind of be our
roadmap for the future. And I plan to use my section that way.”

A previous lack of utilizing the multi-year plans that had been created was something
some central office administrators saw as a possible inefficient practice in the district, as
the facilities administrator admitted. But at least for his own part, he intended to work
better at utilizing these plans as the guide they were intended to be.

Proactive decision-making. Pre-emptive planning as part of the definition of
‘strategic’ involves the ability to make decisions proactively, as opposed to reactively.
This is something that can be difficult to do in such a dynamic and multi-governed system like that of public schools. Long-term plans provide a source of mapped guidance and expectations, which provides the foundation necessary to make more proactive decisions when possible. A multi-year plan lends clear expectations of what the district hopes to accomplish in the future and ideas for how to reach those expectations. Administrators also expressed that long-term plans allow for greater flexibility to make improvements along the life of the plan. With the foundation provided by a long-term plan, central office administrators have clear goals so they can deal with unexpected changes with more flexibility, instead of working from scratch with little sense of direction or strategy. Without the foundation of long-term plans, dealing with change would inevitably involve more ‘trying on’ of ideas or hopping from strategy to strategy in an effort to find something that worked instead of looking at what might best fit in the plan’s goals and using some flexibility to tweak those elements in order to meet whatever change or problem occurs along the way. One trick to this, however, is having people who feel empowered enough to be flexible with the plan, which will be addressed in a later section on leadership.

Proactive decision-making in a district effects efficiency, particularly regarding human resources. Knowing what the plan is, particularly if coupled with foresight as described above, gives context to what resources are available and their long-term purpose. This provides guidance and time to be flexible that reactive decisions do not. When MPS district administrators were forced to utilize their resources, particularly human resources, in a reactive manner it was not as efficient as if they could have
planned for such utilization of resources through proactive decisions - decisions that could have been foreseen through long-term plans. The administrator in charge of data was mired in reactive decisions because there was no plan in place for what to do with all the data collected within the district, as he described in an interview:

(Researcher: “...to what extent is there a plan of data querying...”)
“I don’t think we have a plan as such. Obviously [the state accountability database] is kind of a perpetual ongoing, everyday thing now. Core data used to be once every couple months seems like there’s a required report. We have programmers that write queries...so we can query our data and literally find out anything given just a little bit of notice... So, a plan for data, you know I used to have a data acquisition calendar when I was at [a previous district]. I don’t here because it seems like we deal with it everyday in some way shape or form.”

(Researcher asks about data requests coming in left and right and whether that system is strategic.)
“They’re definitely not strategic..”

(Researcher: “Not systemic or strategic.”)
“No”

(Researcher: “So it’s just: ‘I think we need to know this today.’”)
“Yeah, that’s exactly right...That’s the way it’s happened thus far. Doesn’t seem to be a plan for how we generate or disseminate that information anymore than those required reports that happen, whether it be, you know, ACT reports or [state test] scores, those kind of things.”

So when valid requests for data arrived (e.g. Sunshine law requests) the facilities administrator was forced to stop the daily work of human resources from his own or other departments and assign them to these requests in a very reactive manner that highlighted inefficiencies in the process. However, central office administrators made attempts to preemptively plan when they could, some certainly more than others. The human resources administrator, for example, showed many efforts to use her human capital as efficiently and effectively as she could, and has the results to prove her
effectiveness. One such example is an early retirement incentive she developed to help her plan for the next year (as described from fieldnotes of a School Board meeting):

“[Human resources administrator presents incentive idea to Board] Administrator explains that last year’s hiring process they lost over 47 first-round applicants due to late decisions. Difficult budget scenarios exasperate the problem by causing fear of losing one’s job. She proposes stipend for those planning to retire or resign to give early notification - $1,000 for salaried employees who give notice of leaving by Dec. 15th or $500 for hourly staff. Early notice incentive strategy is to deal with contracts. Teachers want to place selves in best scenario and by managing contracts on front end [MPS] can help them do that.”

This proactive incentive proved to do exactly what the human resources administrator had hoped, allowing her the knowledge to gain flexibility and time necessary to better allocate teachers for the following year, as she explained in a follow-up interview:

“Yes, that was a program that we instituted last year and was very effective in getting us 74 people that came forward and identified that they were either resigning or retiring at the end of the year...by the time we ended last year we had taken jobs [because of budget cuts] from the equivalent of 225 people in the district and we were able to manage most of that through attrition or through job reassignment. There were very few people that we just had to say “we don’t have a job for you anymore.” They changed jobs, sometimes less employment, but still something. And last year, since we were taking another big chunk of people out of the budget, that particular incentive allowed us really to get people realigned and I think I only had to actually go out to one teacher last year and just say “I don’t have a job for you.” There wasn’t any more that I could realign that individual into. So we’re repeating that incentive again this year because it’s been really effective.”

Strategic to these administrators involved efficiency that could be gained through pro-active decision making, which comes easier when long-term planning is utilized. Thus, pre-emptive planning is a part of how these central office administrators defined ‘strategic.’
**Knowledge-based innovation.** The third theme I found regarding how administrators at MPS defined strategic is knowledge-based innovation. Simply, administrators defined strategic as being innovative. However, it also emerged that strategic is actually more than being innovative, for innovation must be tempered by knowledge of the district, both past and present, in order to best guide this innovation.

Similar to cognizance as described above, leaders must have a knowledge and appreciation of the district as it operates presently, understanding the purpose, goals, expectations, and operations of the district in an informed manner. Coupled with this is also an understanding of the past operations, actions, projects, etc. of the district, how they succeeded or failed, and any feedback or repercussions. This is not something that one leader is expected to know, but knowledge that leaders together, functioning in a systemic way, would share and utilize. This may be through discussion, meetings, reports, looking back to past documents, or however they can update themselves. For the Superintendent, particularly a new one, this partly involves looking through whatever district documents, both present and recent past, that might be pertinent: studies that were completed, written reports, meeting minutes, etc. to gather any institutional knowledge that might help develop an understanding of district function. For other central office administrators having and gaining this knowledge is very similar. For those in their position for many years, obviously some knowledge is already gathered through daily working, but maintaining that cognizance is important as well, for everyone does not know everything and administrators work to be informed about
many aspects of the district, not just their own responsibilities, in order to make educated and innovative decisions.

To be innovative is to develop new ideas, come up with potential plans for attacking problems and decisions in new or inventive ways. Such innovation could be constant and even overwhelming if not tempered by knowledge. Simply developing new ideas all the time and coming up with inventive ways to approach an issue becomes less useful when not coupled with the knowledge of the organization, both past and present, to guide or temper that innovation. Also, innovation for innovation-sake is not strategic, for that does not take into account the knowledge of what works, what doesn’t work, and whether or not there has been enough time to warrant judgment on a process or innovation. So innovation can be strategic, but only with the knowledge of what is occurring, what is and has been tried, where the district is wanting to go in respect to its purposeful direction and expectations, etc. This looks the same for any of the central office administrators and even governing bodies like the School Board. Ideally it would even look similar for state-level governing bodies, which administrators in this district implied, but ultimately did not hold out hope for.

An innovative idea regarding math instruction, for example, must be supported not only by the academic expectation of research-based practice, but also must come from knowledge of the district. For MPS this meant having information about past community-based problems with an inductive mathematics curriculum, data on how successful the new math curriculum was, and understanding the potential effects of recent cutting of math coach positions. Any innovation considered to improve math
instruction had to take into account where MPS was with the math program after all those recent changes were made. Even more important was whether or not innovation was necessary at all, or more vital than something else. If the district was in a position of success regarding math scores and student understanding but in dire straits when it came to science instruction or scores, innovative techniques or ideas might have been best tailored to science, not math. Part of knowledge-based innovation is taking that knowledge of the district and using it to determine if innovation is actually useful or just an interruptive whim. A new innovation is not strategic just because it’s new and original; it only has the potential to be strategic when tempered with cognizant knowledge.

The central office administrators in MPS did not see it as strategic to innovate just to innovate or change simply for change sake. Innovation was appreciated and respected, particularly by the new Superintendent, but that innovation had to be supported by the foundational elements of the district, such as district goals and expectations as well as knowledge of where the district was headed. The Superintendent even made a point to foster innovation and spur creative solutions, but always comparing it to important district goals that needed to be addressed. He gave me an example of this in an interview:

“And I understand there’s a concern that if you don’t have a plan you just start throwing stuff at it and see what works, but at the same time I know the systems that are successful are those that recognize and reward innovation constantly in really subtle smaller contexts that doesn’t require a lot of bureaucracy. I did one of those…about a month ago – I told [our elementary principals] – our elementary schools are our really weak spot especially with minority achievement and overall achievement. I said ‘here’s the deal, we’ve got to do better and I don’t
know what you need, but you do. I challenge you to send me a plan and request funding to do something that you think will make a difference for your student achievement this year.' It’s not on the [DIP]. Maybe we’ll put it on but you need to become the innovators and you need to become the leaders in your building to make this change happen.”

On the opposite end of the spectrum, getting stuck in a rut with no innovative risks is not strategic either. These administrators described an oft-seen piece of education decision-making, notably the “if it’s not broke, don’t fix it” or “that’s the way we’ve always done it” syndrome as definitely not part of their definition of strategic either, as the human resources administrator explained:

“…my one mantra that I had as Principal and I hope I have now is: I don’t ever want to sit in a meeting and someone says to me “well it’s been working, why are we changing it?” That I think is the culture of mediocrity…I think that exists every place. If it’s working why try to change it, when the mantra should be “is this the best we can do?” An if it’s the best we can do then fine, you don’t need change for change sake, but if you’re asking yourself “is this the best that we can do” continually then you may just be a good organization and never become a great organization.”

The verbalized definition of “strategic” to administrators in this district involves enough knowledge of the district’s past decisions as well as its present situation to innovate in a way that is both inventive and focused on the needs of the district based on present conditions, past information, and future expectations.

**Aligning to District Goals**

As I constantly compared the data units coded to strategic, it became apparent that how administrators conceptualized strategic in interviews actually differed from how I saw their conceptualization of the term through observations and answers to less pointed interview questions. The definition of “strategic” to these administrators, when
pointedly asked, differed in some ways but ultimately fell into three themes that I previously discussed. But the varied definitions caused me to question how they could be working strategically together with different definitions of the word. However, when taking a researcher’s view of all interviews and observations, further analysis highlighted one very clear and extremely consistent idea of what it means to be strategic that became obvious when focusing on more than simply how administrators specifically defined the term. When I looked past their defining words, past their carefully thought descriptions of ‘strategic’ and put their definitions into the context of what they do each day, there was a very clear and shared understanding of the term. Quite simply, at MPS “strategic” meant to align everything to their district goals in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

As this project commenced, the district had three main goals that had been approved by the School Board five years earlier: 1) increase student achievement, 2) eliminate achievement gaps, and 3) maximize resource efficiency. From interviews, observations, and document data, it was evident that these goals were strongly embedded into the organization as guiding statements. They were on the forefront of each participant’s mind during the interviews, brought up in nearly every observation as guiding principles, and highlighted in many of the documents produced by the district as the foundation or rationale for the document and its purpose. In a more abstract sense, ‘strategic’ could be defined by these administrators as a combination of foresight, pre-emptive planning, and knowledge-based innovation, as explained. But in a very concrete, observed, and even contextualized reality, the definition of strategic for these
leaders was making decisions focused upon district goals, aligning action to district goals, and ultimately meeting district goals, simple as that.

In order to provide a better understanding of what “strategic” means to the central office in this district, following I describe and illustrate how each district goal was being addressed and/or measured by central office administrators.

**Increase student achievement.** From the central office standpoint, increasing student achievement most often meant increasing student test scores. The district itself was evaluated and held accountable by state, federal, and even local entities for student achievement through their successes or failures on standardized tests. It was their results on these tests that often determined, at least to some extent, funding, accolades, and sanctions. For example, they were praised with banners of excellence for outstanding schools and allowed to continue their proven method of success for the most part when their test scores were above acceptable limits (as defined by the government). On the other hand, the district faced consequences for low test score improvement, such as providing transportation for any students in a ‘low-performing’ school to attend a ‘high-performing’ school, if the student so chose, with little to no financial support for the district to complete this task. Thus test scores were where MPS administrators looked to improve when speaking about increasing student achievement.

Administrators described a number of different ways they worked towards increasing student achievement in the district. Two such examples were Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), where teachers could aide each other in problem-solving troublesome areas of achievement, and a program called Assessment for Learning,
which focused on actively involving students in their own learning and assessment as well as adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment. The secondary education administrator shared with me the role of PLCs and assessment in improving student achievement scores:

“You know, what do we do when kids don’t know it? And I think that our vehicle for this is Professional Learning Communities. I think that’s gonna be our focus for the next year. If we can make every building a professional learning community, where teachers are empowered to look at the essential learning of kids, what do kids need to know, what do we do when they don’t know it? How do we know that they do know it? You know? And that’s the other piece of it – common assessments – they’re able to develop those and it’s a process. And...there’s some buildings that have been Professional Learning Communities for a long time and they’re ahead of the game and they’re showing some gains. But strategically and systemically we have got to make that a part of who we are in [MPS]. I think that’s the vehicle. I think that’s the key.”

The data I collected illuminates numerous programs or strategies that the district considered individually strategic. They were used separately from a district strategic plan to each try and address student achievement from different angles, although sometimes used in unison like PLCs and assessments, as the above administrator implied. This was a trend among actions or programs in the district, individually promising elements implemented in an effort to make strides towards this district goal instead of conceptualizing and implementing them comprehensively as part of a greater strategic plan for cohesively addressing this goal. Although there was a district improvement plan that incorporated these programs and was described as a strategic plan, it was really mostly strategic in name. As the facilities administrator already explained, “Some of that plan is a very valuable tool...and keeps you focused on what’s
important and where you’re goin’ and how you’re gettin’ there. And other parts of the plan are just, not worth the paper it’s written on.”

Regarding the definition of “strategic” as aligning to district goals, this first goal was consistently mentioned and seen as how administrators focused their time, attention, and intentions. The human resources administrator illustrated this very clearly in our interview when I asked her what it meant to be strategic: “It means taking a look at the whole and being sure that all the pieces are aligned for the most efficient use of resources to drive our number one goal, and that’s about the classroom and student achievement.” It was very clearly considered strategic to align what the district was doing to addressing this goal.

**Eliminate achievement gaps.** From interview and observation data, the central office, School Board members, and pertinent members of MPS’ community often viewed this particular goal as one of the biggest problem areas. This goal, along with the other two, led the actions of administrators in the central office as they worked towards being a more strategic district. In fact, even the community recognized that the problem inherent in this goal was not a lack of identifying the problem, but a lack of an effective way to address it, as I found from comments made by community members during committee meetings for the district improvement plan [DIP] process.

The largest achievement gap in MPS was between White students and Black students. Previous years showed little to no improvement in closing this gap, so the district was focused on tackling this issue from new angles as this project was in progress. In the first year of this study, this goal was addressed mostly by a common
understanding in DIP committee meetings that it was an area of concern and should be tackled after this process was complete. In the second year of this study, the achievement gap became a more prominent issue when early in the school year it was decided to hold a community forum to address this problem in the district. The forum developed out of a brainstorming session involving the Superintendent and a School Board committee, as the Superintendent described in an interview:

“Well we did the World Café last year to help develop our [DIP] and everyone loved the process. So I told the Board...‘well we need to have another World Café, it’s a good way to connect and engage with the public. Here, let’s talk about 3 or 4 of the ideas that are big. Do we want to talk about the high school and the development of new boundaries and the new elementary school and how this change is going to impact the community? Do we want to talk about student achievement? Certainly our minority student achievement is low and that’s our weak point.’ And I thought maybe the Board would say ‘let’s talk about these boundaries cuz’ that’s gonna’ be a huge change...but as we got talking about it we just kept coming back to our minority student achievement is not good. And I’ve been sharing all the data. I’ve been sharing all the discipline referrals information which is: you’re six times more likely to receive a suspension if you’re an African American than if you are not. And so it just came back with they thought maybe we should have that discussion.”

As it turned out the central office administrators saw this Café as a great success and a first step towards taking more concerted action towards narrowing the gap. When I asked the curriculum administrator how the Café turned out, without hesitation she replied:

“Oh it was fabulous. So it was three times the size of last year’s. Very diverse group of people – not only demographically, but in terms of representing different facets of the community that could really contribute to the problem...And the conversations were – the room just felt so positive and constructive and really like a community joining
hands. It was fantastic. But also very honest.”

Eliminating this gap, or at least attacking it effectively was a high priority to faculty, school board members, and even the greater community not only because it was a prevailing issue but also because, as a district goal, it was considered a strategic move to find a way to start meeting this goal.

A second key initiative focused on this goal of eliminating the achievement gap was by specifically providing role models for students, persons they could identify with. This meant, namely, attracting and retaining a larger minority workforce of teachers and administrators. The human resources administrator partnered with a local University on a grant to address this issue, which is one that has been eluding the district. As she explained it, this grant was to address a pressing problem in a way that could prove very successful, if the right people got on board and the funding was in place:

“And one of those areas that continues to be difficult is the attraction of highly qualified minority candidates. And so we have been gathering data about that and it’s come to light that really the [local University] is not helping us in this process, and so we have brought that data to the University’s attention and said “look, we need to change things and we need your help to change it.”...we are currently in the process of writing a grant in which we’re asking them to collaborate with us on...[because] we have to have a more diversified workforce to meet our student needs. So gathering all of that data about our underrepresented teachers and confronting our local colleges with that data, and asking “how can you partner and help us with it.” That’s certainly been a major focus for me and is really driving my time right now.”

This goal of eliminating achievement gaps was not nearly as consistently highlighted as the other two in interviews and observations, but the central office still made it clear that a conceptualization of strategic most notably involved addressing this goal, and in conjunction with the other two district goals.
Maximize resource efficiency. Of all the goals the central office was aligning themselves to as part of their conceptualization of what it meant to be “strategic,” maximizing resource efficiency was the one most consistently challenged and publicly highlighted at MPS. Because of the steady decrease in budget funds both in recent years as well as in future forecasts, nearly all conversations circled back to fiscal responsibility and resource efficiency in some way. Even without budget constraints, however, this third district goal was being focused upon in order to get the most out of current and future resources, both human and otherwise, in order to become a better functioning organization.

When the Superintendent arrived, one of his first actions was to gain a better understanding of all the human capital, “reassess the organization, figure out what the departments were, and make them figure out the same thing.” By doing so, he hoped to be more capable of improving the efficiency of those resources to make for a more strategic and systemic organization. The elementary education administrator explained this process:

“But what [the Superintendent] is doing is he has done a desk audit. It’s very short, about 10 questions about each one of the [MPS] programs – counseling, home school communicators, Partners, all those kind of different things, and he’s got a pretty short concise overview of the vast majority of our programs. He sat down and had brief conversations, not with all of them, but…[with] whoever the Director or the Assistant Superintendent of the particular program is and I think he is then going to use that to begin to make some judgments about how we’re strategically allocating our resources.”

Upon his arrival, the Superintendent was faced with an organizational chart that caused inefficiencies, administrators who didn’t have a grasp on who worked for them or what
they were responsible for, and job titles with no job descriptions. This was one of the
first areas the Superintendent intended to focus upon in an effort to clarify
responsibility and better maximize his human resources, particularly at the central office
because, as he put it, “It has taken weeks for me to get a straight answer to the question
‘How many people work in your area?’”. In an organization where “80% of our budget is
to people” certainly part of conceptualizing “strategic” for those administrators in the
central office was to maximize their human resources as efficiently as possible, but even
more importantly to do so in a way that simultaneously addressed the other two district
goals.

Unfortunately, addressing this goal was not always a popular process and
sometimes seemed counterintuitive to a definition of strategic as being the alignment to
the three district goals. While strategic meant increasing student achievement it also
meant maximizing resource efficiency. In practice that turned out to mean that dealing
with budget cuts and resource efficiency produced a decision to cut math coaches,
science specialists, and some other teaching positions in the district. This was done as
part of the mantra to keep budget cuts as far away from the classroom as possible, as a
local newspaper explained:

“For the past three years, when the district has slashed its budget to fix
past mistakes and to prepare for state cuts, the common mantra from
district administrators and teachers has been to keep cuts away from the
classrooms to protect student performance. As a result, literacy and math
coaches, outreach counselors and other supporting staff positions have
been eliminated.”
In some ways this seems completely counter to meeting the district goal of increasing student achievement, cutting teaching and instructional support positions, which one school principal pointed out in the same local newspaper:

“[A local principal] remembers a different school district when he became principal...five years ago. Literacy and math coaches helped teachers do their jobs better and assisted students outside the classroom, he said, and more guidance counselors helped students with issues that affected them inside the classroom. It was definitely a kid-centered district,[he] said. Three years of cuts later, coaching positions have been eliminated. Fewer people work in student success centers to help at-risk kids earn credits needed to graduate. And fewer counselors are around to intervene when kids struggle. It’s become increasingly classroom only, [he] said. The priority has been: What can we do to keep any cut away from the classroom? The problem with that is in order for kids to be successful in the classroom, you also need to have some support around them, especially with those kids who have a variety of needs.”

However, in meeting the goal and demands of maximizing resource efficiency, it was strategic to central office administrators, for these instructional support areas were large expenses in the district they thought could be encompassed by other teachers. For example, the jobs of science specialists at the elementary schools that were lost in budget cuts was simply folded into the daily teaching schedule of regular classroom teachers.

In defining strategic as aligning to district goals, sometimes those goals seemed to fight each other and administrators made decisions that worked more for one than another. But in the end they saw it all as a strategic maneuver because they saw each decision as still promoting each goal, even the cutting of certain teaching functions. For example, the controversial elimination of math coaches and science specialists was explained away by the facilities administrator as a way to maximize resource efficiency
because “It was a large sum of money. And elementary teachers are taught to teach all subject matters and most all schools do it that way. But I think in tough budget times it was a luxury.” He reiterated that such a cut to maximize resources would still meet the student improvement goal because “It’s not going to impact the quality of instruction for elementary kids…Same level and same quality I think that we’ve always taught. It’s just that we won’t have the personnel in the classrooms…”

It must be noted here that near the end of this study the district goals were officially changed. During the time of this research study, the district was involved in a comprehensive school improvement process where they ultimately changed the district goals to match the ones designated in the school improvement plans (which were mandated by the state). Thus, the second year of this study, during follow-up data collection, the district had five ‘new’ goals instead of the original three district goals in place for the previous five years that revolve around governance, parent and community involvement, student performance, highly qualified staff, and facilities, instructional resources, and support services. However, even after the official change of goals, district officials still discussed these new goals, their initiatives, and their foci in a way that always tied back to the former three district goals described above. For example, when asked about the change, the curriculum administrator explained:

“I mean the intent of the goals, the vision of the goals hasn’t changed. Our goals used to be increased achievement for all students, eliminate achievement disparities, and maximize resource efficiencies. And our new strategic goals obviously have those things in mind. They are about student achievement; they are about student achievement for all children. And portions of the plan that deal with facilities and resources are obviously intended to use those resources to maximum efficiency. But the language, the form, the structure of our goals is all different.”
Therefore, this researcher holds that the data shows that “strategic” in this district is still conceptualized as aligning actions and plans to the three goals described above.

**Section III: The Act of Being Strategic**

In the previous section I described what it meant for this district to be strategic. In this section I describe how this district actually goes about being strategic by describing what being strategic actually looks like and acts like in this district, most specifically regarding human resources. I also describe what it looks like to not be strategic in the district, as it is this continuum that allows the best view. To accomplish this, the section is organized by two key elements of being strategic as they emerged from data analysis: 1) silos to systems: organizational structures, policies, and procedures, and 2) attributes of strategic leadership.

**Silos to Systems: Organizational Structures, Policies, & Procedures**

When studying MPS’ central office, it became clear through the various data sources that this district was neither functioning as separate silos nor working like that of a system, but had one foot in each camp, so to speak. Elements of the organizational structure, policies, and procedures within the central office, as well as many that reach beyond the central office, are certainly silo-ed, like as many educational organizations of a similar nature. However, this district seemed to be making efforts to become more systemic as it connects these silos in various ways through both human resource functions and other actions aimed at making the district more efficient and effective. These attempts at being more systemic are not part of a great strategic plan, just efforts at being more successful as an organization looking to be more strategic in thought and
action. In order to examine the silo-ed and systemic components of MPS’ central office as it most pertains to human resource management, in the following sections I focus on 1) the functions specific to human resource management and 2) some organizational efforts at moving towards being strategic.

**Human resource functions.** Many of the generally understood functions of a human resources department are in fact what MPS’s human resource department is responsible for, such things as: recruitment and hiring; placement; professional development; retention; and evaluation. In an effort to portray the function of human resources personnel in relation to other functions in the district, it is beneficial to describe how each of these listed functions operates at the central office, and highlight their silo-ed and systemic components. To begin with, I will explain the place held by the human resources leader in the central office administrative team, providing a foundation for how human resource functions are utilized and integrated into the larger organization.

As described in the methods section, one of the numerous reasons this district was chosen as the case study site was because of the district’s reputation regarding their human resources department. In order to see what it might look like to be strategic, I chose to study a district where those most involved with human resources were engaged in district functions at a knowledgeable level and had a reputation for being good at what they do. From the beginning of data collection it was clear that part of the reason for the district’s reputation was because the human resources administrator in this district was routinely involved in the organization at all levels of
structure, policy, and procedure making. She sat at the ‘strategic table’ with the other leaders of the district, both literally and metaphorically. She was a part of the core leadership team who dealt with decision-making, structural, and functional aspects of the district. She was often involved pre, post, and during decision-making involving human resource functions, which was numerous in such a human capital-based organization. She was part of weekly meetings with the leadership team, served as an administrator for one of the district improvement plan [DIP] committees on high quality teachers, and was sought out for information and advice from the School Board on matters of human resources. At MPS, human resources was certainly at the strategic table, with the human resources administrator holding the physical seat. At leadership meetings the human resources administrator was an active participant, involved just as much as the other core leadership team members, as I observed in those meetings. She was also part of more focused strategic groups in the district like leadership committee meetings, such as one with the curriculum, elementary education, and secondary education administrators to “specifically talk about [student achievement scores]. We call it the Achievement Meeting.” These roles in the district kept her in touch with the system as a leader in many respects and showed the district had every intention of keeping human resources part of the greater strategic system of decision-making and action.

Although there was a human resources department within the district that was responsible for certain functions, making them a silo in some ways, the fact that their leader was an integral part of the leadership team connects that silo to other silos led by
other leadership team members, thus making efforts to become more like a system.

The human resources administrator herself reflected on the more separate and integrated aspects of the department functions and described it this way:

“HR is a separate function in the standpoint of the ‘nitty-gritty stuff’, at least [at MPS]. The actual ‘people part’ of doing the job is integrated into everything, such as how best to utilize human resources or maintain quality personnel as those are part of the Board goals. However, there are some things, such as laws and regulations that are handled only by HR.”

Her interpretation of the silos and systems in the district will be compared with the data as I continue. The particular human resource functions that will be highlighted in the following sub-sections are five: 1) recruitment and hiring, 2) placement, 3) professional development, 4) retention, and 5) evaluation.

**Recruitment and hiring.** Like many school districts, MPS had recruitment procedures in place to find and attract a diverse and high quality pool of teachers and separate procedures and policies to hire from this pool of candidates. Their recruitment and hiring structures had elements that were silo-ed, those that were systemic, and those that were a little bit of both. I will describe below a few key components of both recruitment and hiring procedures and where they fit into the continuum from silos to systems.

**Recruitment.** Recruitment was one of the more silo-ed human resource functions in MPS and actually one that seemed to be less focused upon than others. Finding applicants was not typically a problem for MPS, as they are in a popular area of the state with many educated persons, and built a solid reputation in many respects. But they also did not seem to focus as heavily on improving or building upon
recruitment strategies because they have particular policies and programs in place that generally worked and needed little revamping to keep producing the desired applicant pool. The human resources department worked year-round to attract and find teachers through rather typical means like holding career fairs, making college visits, and partnering with higher education teacher development programs to place student teachers in their classrooms as interns. These recruitment efforts were quite separate from other functions in the district, hardly being mentioned in other interviews, or observations of various meetings. In this respect retention is more of a silo, but a silo that is recognized as part of a systemic effort in hiring and maintaining high quality teachers, as I will discuss later. As with many districts, teachers, principals, staff, etc. all did informal recruiting by talking with friends, acquaintances, etc. about their experiences in the district and the district certainly supported and encouraged such word of mouth recruitment. In that way, recruitment was part of the general system because the district had particular programs and strategies in place to attract teachers but had the knowledge that much recruitment also occurred through the informal interactions instigated by their current personnel.

As I mentioned, recruitment seemed to be the least focused upon in human resources. However, the exception was the focus on recruitment of high quality minority teachers. As previously discussed, one of the district’s main goals was to eliminate achievement gaps, and the human resources administrator felt she could help progress towards this goal. In the past the district had recognized their lack of minority teachers as an issue but ways in which they tried to attack the problem were sporadic at
best and not achieving the results they desired. After the district improvement plan (DIP) process began, the minority workforce problem was targeted as an issue that should be addressed more heartily. However, the key initiative was taken on in more of a silo-ed attack, being conceptualized by the human resources administrator and essentially in her hands to push through, for when I asked her how the core leadership team was involved she answered “They’re all working on it from the standpoint of everybody is informed about the project. Everybody believes in the project but the actual work to get it done is falling to me. So if it doesn’t come through it will be on me because I’m the one doing all of the pieces to put it together.” I am not meaning to imply an initiative that is one leader’s responsibility is a silo, but this particular initiative was never brought up by other leaders and I was given a distinct impression that this workforce idea was felt to be a human resources issue by other leaders.

Similar past attempts to address this workforce issue brought similar results in my data. The leadership team knew of some attempts to diversify the workforce and some of them strongly supported these initiatives, but I was given a distinct impression that some felt this was not their issue to be dealt with and was out of their hands when they did not turn out as hoped. Essentially recruitment was left to the human resources administrator and her staff unless she asked for input, had to get approval for something via procedure requirements, or another leader just decided to get involved. For example, prior to the newest Superintendent and the last few rounds of budget cuts, the district had a program to ‘grow’ their own minority teachers, which eventually
ended up being cut. However, while the program was in place the secondary education administrator decided to get involved, as it was something she felt strongly about:

“Now what I do try and get involved with, realizing that the pool of minority teachers [at MPS] is just really, it’s really scarce, as well as it is nationally, we try to work together when we know that there are African American candidates out there to lure them to our school district. Whether that’s recruiting or whether that’s a program which we had to cut called the Minority Intern Program, which was a grow-your-own program that we started with ninth grade students several years ago…”

So the district structures or policies in place for one of their main recruitment concerns was rather silo-ed or sporadic based on interest, even though a more systemic approach could work better on such a difficult issue. However, what was in place system-wide was the structures that supported those with ideas like the human resources director to develop new programs for improving human resources functions like this one. Besides the informal recruitment by other leaders that occurred behind the scenes, that support system for ideas was about as systemic as it got for recruitment. Although we could argue that leaving this particular function to human resources to deal with was in fact systemic, simply as a matter of role responsibilities. Some aspects of hiring functions certainly lean towards that interpretation, as I explain below.

Hiring. Unlike recruitment, the hiring process at MPS had more elements of systemic function than silo-ed function. In fact, the best way to explain the hiring process at MPS is a system of procedures meant to provide consistency and guidance in hiring the best candidates for the district, with some built-in flexibility. Below I describe the systemic functions of the hiring and interview processes and the points in which flexibility or ‘loopholes’ arise that may question the efficiency of the system.
The screening process, the step after recruitment and before hiring, was controlled completely by the human resource department at MPS. Current employees could and did suggest possible applicants for a position or even contact persons they felt could be a good fit for the district. But all they could really do was urge them to apply because all applicant materials had to go through a screening process, as described in fieldnotes of an interview with the human resources administrator:

“HR controls the process of hiring teachers and must make sure that all applicants meet pre-determined ‘quality benchmarks’ before they can be referred to a building principal for an interview. Only those applicants who meet the highest quality benchmarks are chosen to be sent on to building principals for interviews...”

MPS has a strong reputation for being very particular about this screening process, not allowing applications to leave the human resources department until all components have arrived, including transcripts and letters of recommendation. This was simply part of the system in place to ensure efficiency and quality. However, exceptions did occur. This researcher found unexplained loopholes in her own experience as an applicant just before the writing of these results. It turns out that coordinators of an area with an open position can have access to applicant materials, for this researcher was contacted by a gifted coordinator about a teaching position before her letters of recommendation had even been written, let alone submitted as completion of her application materials. When asked about this process, the coordinator stated he took my application materials off of the network application system and would look at the rest of the materials later, completely by-passing the screening process. This was a finding no one in any interview for this project alluded to as even a possibility, sticking strictly to the screening
procedures as the way the system worked. Therefore, the system obviously had loopholes that may or may not have been beneficial to the strategic or efficiency goals of the process.

Once applicants passed the screening process, the hiring structures and procedures for hiring were still quite procedural but also became more collaborative or integrated. This collaboration was still a very consciously and purposefully systemic part of the hiring process. ‘Pools’ of applicants for particular positions were made from the initial screening process, which were then shared with assistant superintendents, coordinators and/or principals, depending on the position. In an effort to be consistent across the district in hiring quality personnel who ‘fit’ with district expectations and goals, all administrators, coordinators, and school administrators were trained in a particular interviewing protocol system with specific questions and scoring mechanisms. This way, when pools of teachers were interviewed for positions that could be filled in multiple schools, every administrator needed not interview each applicant because everyone could see from the interviewing protocol how a candidate scored, knowing they would have scored them in a very similar way, as portrayed in my fieldnotes from an interview with the human resources administrator:

“HR has also put ‘control mechanisms’ on the interviewing process in an effort to standardize interviewing across the district so that the best quality teachers are hired in every building. This involves training principals to review and interview applicants with the same lens or standards that [the human resources administrator] and her staff would use. Therefore, principals are trained in how to screen and interview teachers so that ultimately all principals and [the human resources administrator] would come up with the same interview score if they were all to interview the same applicant.”
These ‘control mechanisms’ were an effort to not only be consistent in hiring but also to make the system more efficient. However, as efficient as the process was, administrators often added that certain aspects they considered to be extremely important were not part of the scoring topics in the interview protocol. The screening protocol looked more at character and philosophies of teaching, only minimally hitting on content of teaching. For example, some questions from the protocol included: “When you have some free time, what do you enjoy doing the most?”; “Change is often scary for people. How do you respond to change?”; “What will (does) provide you the greatest pleasure in teaching?”; or “What four (4) key components do you believe should be included in your lesson plan and what do you need to know in order to design your lesson planning for a class?” In the interviews they could get a sense of philosophy, character, and “what kind of person the candidate is” or could give them “a good feeling about this person [someone who’s] an empathetic human being,” but what’s missing, according to the new elementary education administrator, was more of the content or actual implementation abilities of the teacher they were interviewing, as he described:

“So [the human resources administrator] would probably argue that you can get to the, about the teaching strategies...That’s fine, although we want to know what would literacy look like in your classroom or whatever grade we’re hiring for. Tell me about the components of a math lesson. How do you know that they’re really learning? Those kinds of things are just more specific that we want to know.”
The elements that the interviewing protocol left out certainly meant the best persons for the job may not have been the ones that got through the hiring process. The new elementary education administrator gave me an example:

“There was one person who I know who would have hit a homerun in the [protocol] because she’s amazing with kids, in terms of she really cares about kids, but she’s a terrible teacher. And so when I go and visit that classroom she’s still doing that same kind of just talking, and talking, and talking and the kids are – [sleepy/dazed face]. But then once that class period is over, she’ll be the one who is at your basketball game and she’ll be the one at your family picnic, she’ll be the one who organizes the making T-shirts and sweatshirts and organizes the Fall Festival and all those things she does. She’d be the greatest PTA president.”

Systematically, the consistency the protocol provided was recognized and appreciated by central office administration. They tended to use the protocol as their own version of a screening tool, particularly since it was part of the application process (as a supplemental question sheet all teaching applicants must submit with their application materials). In follow-up interviews, the administrators and principals went beyond the protocol and dug deeper into the content knowledge and the ability of a teacher to actually engage children instead of simply caring about them, like the previous example.

The flexibility built into the system at this point of the hiring process was part of the success of the system. A hiring protocol cannot be the same for every position. Allowing administrators at the central office and building levels to tailor the second step of the hiring process to the position and even the school(s) was also part of the system. In fact, procedures were in place for principals interested in applicants after any initial protocol interviews to have the opportunity to interview applicants in their own manner with their own questions as well, in order to gain a sense of how the applicant(s) fit with
the position and the culture of their particular school. The new elementary education administrator was a former principal who provided one principal’s view of how he used the hiring procedures to hire for his own building:

“So then I screen for the character [using the protocol], so that’s a sieve, and I get a whole pile of people still, and then for content [without the protocol]. Especially at a school like [mine], I didn’t want – while I say to you that we can teach anyone anything, not at my school – go learn that somewhere else. I want people who are coming in with character and the content.”

As this example and more from the data illustrate, MPS tried hard to be consistent while also allowing flexibility to meet individual needs and fits at different levels of district function. In order to be flexible in an effective way, the hiring system was part of constant reflection, mostly by the human resources administrator. She was always looking for any inefficiencies or inequities that might impede hiring the best people and placing them in the most appropriate positions or schools for both the applicant and the district to succeed, which was shown in her reflection on the next HR function, placement.

**Placement.** Placement procedures at MPS was an area of the system that saw much change during the time period of this study, and highlighted numerous systemic efforts within the human resource management functions. As MPS worked to find ways to improve their use of human capital, particularly regarding human resource functions, institutionalized policies were being questioned and changed. I expand upon two policy changes that highlight the placement function as well as the systemic nature of placement in the district: 1) the organization of teacher placement decisions, and 2) incentives for early retirement/resignation.
Teacher placement. During the first year of this study and for numerous years before that, the procedure for placing new teacher hires was akin to draft day in the NFL. All the school principals would sit in a room with the human resources administrator as part of a placement meeting where ‘first round picks’ were given to those schools with the most positions to fill. However, the human resources director had become concerned about the actual effectiveness and even equality of this system and finally decided it was time to change. So before ending the yearly draft meeting she gathered feedback from principals about how well they thought the placement policy (this ‘draft’ meeting and it’s procedure) was working, how they thought it could improve, etc. and simply announced this would be the last meeting of this sort, something different would occur next year that would take into account their concerns with the procedure in place. Her concern revolved around one of her key goals: getting the best teachers in the best possible place for both them to succeed. Focusing on this goal meant she was also focused on the three district goals in the best way she knew how – finding quality teachers and placing them in the position where they could be most effective. Because she was in charge of taking care of placement decisions and policies, as well as coming up with new ideas and getting her staff to help her bring them to life, it could seem like she was silo-ed in her functions. However, as separate as her responsibilities might have been, she was constantly working them into the district system by staying focused on district goals, keeping leadership team members involved in her ideas and processes, and simply keeping the big picture in mind: how what she
was doing was affecting what other leadership team members were doing and ultimately influencing district goal achievement.

Prior to the most recent changes in placement, the hiring and placement of teachers began with a very simple interview process, as one administrator described: “You had these round robin interviews where we interviewed, I don’t know, 30, 40 candidates for teaching positions at the elementary level.” But to make the system more efficient they have decided to move away from this time-consuming and rather inefficient procedure because

“...over the years we’ve built capacity with our principals. We’ve trained them in a particular model...of doing interviews to where I now trust when [Principal A] interviews that teacher that I haven’t seen and [he] gives that teacher a very good, high mark, that...that’s gonna be somebody on my list.”

In order to do this, however, they had to have faith that a new, less central office-controlled procedure would work effectively, meaning they had provided the necessary training for their principals to effectively interview teachers for placement. Taking the time to build the capacity and consistency among principal hiring strategies gave the human resource administrator the ability to then deliver a pool of applicants she felt would best fit each school, based on her extensive knowledge of the schools, their principals, their cultures, and what they were looking for in a candidate. She took that role very seriously and the feedback from others made it very clear she was exceptionally good at keeping that cognizance of what each school and principal appreciated, desired, and needed in their applicant pool. This skill was vital to keeping the system running smoothly.
As this study progressed, changes were being discussed regarding the rather elaborate ‘draft day’ placement meeting that occurred each year to decide the fate of teacher applicants. The former elementary education administrator described the traditional process:

“You came to draft day, it was very much like the NFL, and I have four openings and [Principal A] had six openings at his building and [Principal B had] three openings in [his] building. Well [Principal A] obviously has more need than the two of us, so [he] got the first pick in the draft and I’ve got four openings so I’ve got the second. Sorry, even though you’re a Title I building and teachers are running away from you right and left because it’s a tough place, you get the third pick. And really with [the human resource administrator’s] leadership and building consensus among Principals, we’ve moved away from that model. And we really are trying to make sure that the best teachers are going to the buildings with the greatest instructional needs. Maybe not just the most openings.”

Focusing on the instructional needs was important to the district’s strategic efforts of meeting the three main district goals. Sometimes it was as simple as pointing out a district policy that really wasn’t part of any strategic system or addressing any real district goal, such as student teacher placement. It had been a long-time practice at MPS that if a school had a student teacher in their building they would have “first shot” at hiring the student teacher the next year, if they had an opening available. However, that was not meeting any strategic goal in the district, it was simply a cultural element that had been institutionalized which really wasn’t placing the best teachers in the most effective positions. In the first year of this study, though, this was openly questioned in a principals’ meeting by the human resources administrator and the former elementary education administrator, as he described:
“What we’re saying, and the discussion today was, you know, there’s a reason a lot of student teachers want to go to [more affluent schools]. It’s maybe not quite as tough as [some less affluent schools] and so are we building in a teacher [quality] gap just by that? And so there was a discussion among our principals today about how are you feeling about this?”

The same questions were brought out about the draft day placement of teachers, which was becoming just as encultured and with just as little real strategic purpose. In fact, it came to a point where the human resource administrator had to really force the issue and force principals to see the problem that had developed after it become blatantly obvious, as she described the last placement meeting:

“I watched what happened and who was going where and one telling moment was probably the most – the number one teacher applicant for the district one year wanted to go to a Title I school but the Title I school didn’t have first pick, it was a highly affluent school, and the Principal knowing that this applicant wanted a Title school still said, “that’s not the rules we play by – it’s my turn to get the highest – to get the number one choice and this is who we want.” It was that moment and that group that I then said “this isn’t going to happen again and I’m just putting you on notice the rules are changing next year.”

Thus the human resources administrator was implementing changes that were purposeful in becoming more strategic with placement procedures, keeping in mind how procedures and policies were or were not linking to the larger district goals by getting the best teachers in the best positions.

Incentives. Another aspect of getting the right teachers in the right positions at MPS was a recent policy developed by the human resources administrator that truly highlighted her appreciation of working as a system. The policy was focused upon an incentive for current employees to inform the district early if they intended on retiring or resigning at the end of the year. The purpose of the policy was actually to aide in
recruitment and placement, but overall it was an effort in making the whole system more efficient and effective.

The policy in question was developed by the human resources administrator and approved by the School Board in the first year of this study. As part of the effort to attract quality teachers and have more time to deal with personnel changes, the human resources administrator suggested a policy that would provide a monetary incentive for teachers if they informed the district by mid-December that they intended to leave the district at the end of the academic year. Fieldnotes from a School Board meeting detail the policy and its purpose as described by the human resources administrator:

“In the hiring process last year, [MPS] lost over 47 first-round applicants due to late decisions. Difficult budget scenarios exasperate the problem through people’s fear of losing their jobs. HR Director proposes a stipend for those planning to retire or resign to give early notification - $1,000 for salaried employees who give notice of leaving by Dec. 15th…”

Although intended to give more time to recruit high quality teachers, this policy was also a huge benefit to the placement of human resources. The human resources administrator knew this would be a helpful policy when placing people amidst budget cuts, but was thrilled just how successful it was after it’s first year:

“Yes, that was a program that we instituted last year and was very effective in getting us 74 people that came forward and identified that they were either resigning or retiring at the end of the year, which allowed us to deal last year – by the time we ended last year we had taken jobs from the equivalent of 225 people in the district and we were able to manage most of that through attrition or through job reassignment. There were very few people that we just had to say “we don’t have a job for you anymore.” They changed jobs, sometimes less employment, but still something. And last year, since we were taking another big chunk of people out of the budget, that particular incentive allowed us really to get people realigned and I think I only had to actually go out to one teacher last year and just say “I don’t have a job for you.”
There wasn’t any more that I could realign that individual into. So we’re repeating that incentive again this year. Because it’s been really effective.”

In a district that has been cutting funds to innumerable areas across the organization, passing a policy that actually spends money was a risk, but in the eyes of the human resources administrator, the leadership team, and the School Board, the risk easily paid for itself. In fact, it was easily approved by the School Board the next year as well, to be reviewed on a yearly basis for now. By keeping the bigger picture in mind and not silo-ing her department by function as well as not silo-ing her department in regards to other departments, the human resources administrator could really work with the best systemic outcomes in mind and try to improve the system. However, there are certainly areas of human resource function that were not as effectively working towards the strategic purpose of the district. The area of professional development is one of those areas that is less than systemic, as I discuss next.

**Professional development.** While collecting and analyzing the various data from this study, it became clear that professional development structures, policies, and procedures were some of the most difficult human resource functions to understand in MPS, partly because they were less than systemic. Unlike some of the other human resource functions, it was difficult to find consistent procedures in place for professional development. Part of this problem was the institutionalized procedures and actions that had yet to be either questioned or changed and part of this stems from the flexibility the district gave to individual schools and school administrators to cater to their buildings’ needs and cultures. As I portray some of the major components or
programs of professional development in the district I will be able to illuminate the silos as well as the systemic (both successful and not) elements occurring at MPS. To do so I will focus on two topics that kept arising in this area: 1) distribution and tracking of professional development monies, and 2) professional development opportunities for personnel.

*PD monies.* Professional development funds at MPS were split between district-wide funds and school-based funds, both of which came from the district budget. The district has an amount of money they earmarked for district-wide professional development initiatives, such as training administrators in the interview protocol, as well as money they allocated to each school to use for professional development as they saw fit in their building. At the district level the professional development monies were utilized in a systemic way, while at the school level it was very much a silo, making the whole allocation of funds less than systemic and not altogether strategic. The way funds were utilized at the district level was watched and maintained by the human resources administrator, whom as I’ve described worked very hard to keep her efforts systemic and strategic with regards to district goals and purpose. However, funds at the school levels were utilized in a myriad of different ways that the human resources administrator couldn’t effectively track, leaving a great deal of question as to their systemic or strategic contribution to the district. Some more detailed descriptions of the process will help to illuminate these issues.

In a conversation with the human resources administrator in a pilot interview before the study began, she confided that the way professional development monies
were handled, it was very difficult if not impossible to track what the monies were actually paying for at the school level, as described in my fieldnotes:

“...she admits that when she sits down to see where professional development funds are being spent, she just can’t find it all. It is very difficult to keep control of and see where exactly PD money is being spent because each building in the district doesn’t keep precise records of what they define PD as and what they spend their PD money on. Maybe it goes towards training teachers on a topic in the building’s SmartGoals or maybe it is spent on treats for a teacher community activity...PD also is a very large area that can encompass a lot of topics or activities, so this makes it difficult as well. “

This highlights the silo-ed activity that was occurring at the schools, albeit at the discretion of the district who made the policy for allocating funds. The schools worked as independent silos of professional development as they determined the needs and allocate funds on their own and in a way that the district was unable to track effectively. The only consistent allocation of professional development funds was that each school used a certain amount of those funds to help teachers attend conferences or trainings. This amount differed from school to school and was dependent on teacher application and school PD committee decisions, but district-wide was viewed as aiding in improving teacher quality, and thus student achievement. As with all the allocated school PD funds, even if they couldn’t be tracked very well, there was a district expectation to make PD efforts clearly tied to district goals, as the human resource administrator described:

“ What [the human resources administrator] wants is to be sure that every building and employee see PD as first and foremost leadership development and are focused on making PD a ‘strategic process’. Building leaders need to ask the question: ‘What’s been done, what are we doing, and how is this all meeting board goals?’ This way they can be more clearly focused on what PD they have already done, what they are
doing right now to focus on PD as leadership development, and how is
what they are doing for PD meeting the three School Board goals?”

The intended purpose of the budget allocation was to be systemic by not only providing
an expectation of meeting district goals with those funds but giving schools the
flexibility to meet those goals by understanding their personal needs better than the
district or central office administrators could. The breakdown in the system then occurs
with accountability. Somewhere the check on those expectations is not in place, such as
a district-wide training on how each school defines professional development and what
is productive versus what is not, along with a better way to code funding usage at the
building level. Because of this inefficiency in the system, funding for the majority of
professional development in the district was silo-ed.

Now at the district level, there were also opportunities, expectations, and funds
in place for professional development. However, these opportunities were things that
had been deemed necessary for all or certain groups of district personnel and thus were
carefully tracked and implemented under the watchful eye of the human resources
administrator. These professional development opportunities were most certainly more
systemic than at the school level. The actual effectiveness of such opportunities could
be argued, as any could, but the purpose of them was tied back to the district’s strategic
goals and linked to other elements of human resource functions as part of a system.
One example of this was the interview protocol training given to all coordinators and
administrators at all levels within the district, as previously described above. Again, this
was in an effort to be consistent in hiring and placement practices that would ultimately
determine how effectively the hire could meet district goals and expectations. Other
such district-based professional development opportunities were described by the
human resources administrator, most of which were offered to building administrators:

“We’re continuing to monitor and track the competencies that our administrators have and so we’re offering the opportunities for them to be trained in interviewing skills, for them to be trained in management theories and we’re into our third or fourth cohort this semester of [a management training program], so every Wednesday night we have class with [a local University professor]. We’re also currently working on – we’ve been designing and participating in some workshops on equity and are just getting ready to select a leader to go forth and probably get a significant amount of training in cultural proficiency to come back and to support the leadership of that effort out on the buildings with our Principals and our staff…”

Like many of the human resource functions, as the district tried to be systemic with the implementation of procedures MPS also worked to incorporate elements of flexibility. This flexibility actually allowed the system to work more effectively, or at least that was the intention, as long as the accountability and tracking measures were in place, as the human resources administrator explained:

“So you allow people to make some choice to opt in at various points of when their calendars, schedules and responsibilities would make it more feasible. However, we track when you opt in because ultimately you need all the pieces. So if you’re not directing *yourself* to get all the pieces then we’ll come along and direct *you* to get all the pieces.”

So regarding professional development, funding was actually the most systemic element, and that was really only at the district level. The school level silo-ed itself into individual schools that the district had a hard time tracking and thus couldn’t know if use of those funds was strategic or not.

*PD opportunities.* Regarding professional development opportunities for personnel, there was very little systemic procedures or policies at MPS and even the
silos weren’t very clear. It was a bit of a silo-ed mess with visions of being a system. This obviously stemmed from the less than systemic allocation of funds, as funds tended to drive much of professional development in MPS. Induction programs were the most consistent, though silo-ed in their own right, and other than that unless the professional development was mandated, like the interview protocol or management training, both one-time programs, little was available as part of the district organization, particularly to administrators, and most notably central office administrators. While human resource policy, School Board policy, and even state policy mandated that there be induction programs and ongoing professional development, the implementation of these opportunities was inconsistent, most certainly less than strategic at MPS.

An element of professional development that stood out from interviews was the discrepancy between the development opportunities and expectations for administrators in the district versus those of teachers. First of all, required training consisted of a couple things for administrators and a couple things for teachers, that was it. Administrators, both at the central office and school levels, were required to obtain training in certain district-initiated programs, such as the aforementioned interview protocol and a comprehensive management training program. Teachers, on the other hand, were only required to attend an induction program when first hired and a specific number of state-mandated professional development hours. As part of the induction program for new teachers in the district, teachers were required to attend a welcome to the new school year program and an end of school year session, more as a way to coordinate and facilitate organizational policies and procedures for the year than...
to actually develop their capacity as teachers. The state-mandated professional development hours were met by anything from book study groups to an in-service focused on looking at student test scores, to a guest speaker on closing the achievement gap. This mostly draws from the school PD funding silos in place and the lack of both a clear definition of good professional development across the district and accountability measures to monitor schools’ use of PD funds. Other than these mandated policies, administrators at the central office level made it very clear that their personal development opportunities were few and far between because of budget cuts. The silos between administrator and teacher professional development were clear, and again stemmed from the silo-ed district vs. school funding policies, making the HR ‘system’ lacking in this area.

Interviews with central office administrators provided a very clear view of the support for their own development. This seemed a very important piece of the professional development data, as these are the leaders who developed the system and the strategies in place to guide the district towards their goals and expectations. Yet these leaders were those for whom development opportunities were most scarce. Regarding funding for professional development, there was little in place for central office administrators to advance their own capacity. Many opportunities relevant to their growth that they once had access to became completely out of the question after out-of-state travel was cut out of the budget. For example, the facilities and transportation administrator used to attend a yearly meeting for transportation administrators where he was able to learn new ideas for transportation issues, gather
thoughts on how other districts across the country were developing their transportation programs, etc. But since out-of-state travel was cut in a budget decision, he had to work alone to determine how best to handle situations with no development from that annual meeting to aide him in his progress. Even the human resources administrator described the lack of professional development opportunities for herself and the leadership team, though she made a concerted effort to seek out development on her own:

“You know, I’m seeking it out for myself...Since we’re not traveling out of state I haven’t attended any of the National Conferences on HR, so staying up to speed on the National level on trends and so forth has unfortunately been something that hasn’t happened the last couple of years, so I’m more on the webinars and reading and so forth to try to get that.”

Seeking out their own professional development was a trend for central office administrators, many of whom sought out advanced degrees in educational leadership during their time as an administrator in an attempt to develop their abilities as a leader. The district used to reward such personal growth with a $2,500 yearly stipend for those who had a doctorate, a systemic element in the fact that expectations for high quality teaching was being rewarded and investing in personnel who were developing themselves. However, a year before this project began, that reward was an early victim of budget cuts, as the facilities administrator explained:

“...[my] second year here the doctoral stipend was cut from everybody’s salary. And that was $2500 and so when I was hired, as close to 90, I think it was 90 some, 75 or some administrators a part of their salary was once you reach the doctorate level you get a $2500 stipend. So that was removed from everybody’s salary two years ago. Last year. I do remember, I think the budget savings from however many people had a
doctorate was right at $70,000 last year. So, you know, it’s a nice sum of money.”

A strategic and systemic element was cut in the midst of rather silo-ed budget thinking—what could save the most money and stay the farthest away from classrooms. Just another way the district was decreasing the opportunities for administrators in gaining professional development.

As focused as the district was on finding the right personnel and putting them in the best positions for success, the district has definite areas of improvement when it comes to professional development, particularly involving those at the highest levels of administration who were left with little time and resources to advance their own capacity, unless they chose to seek an advanced degree, which was no longer rewarded. It not only was a very silo-ed structure in multiple ways that I have pointed out, but PD is actually a silo in the illusion of a system. These school silos were being developed to be part of the system of allowing those closest to the knowledge to make the best decisions, with the expectation of strategically meeting goals. However, as found in this project, that was not always the best way to attempt being systemic, and certainly not strategic.

Retention. After comparing data elicited from interviews and observations at the central office, I found MPS to focus on retention in two main ways: through compensation and through culture. MPS worked for years to maintain a competitive salary for personnel to both attract and retain them in the district. They also worked to maintain a positive morale among their employees and foster trust that their jobs were safe, particularly in tough budget times. Through these two main retention foci, the
district worked in both silo-ed and systemic ways, which I will explain by describing the
retention effects of 1) budget cuts, and 2) HR responses to these budget cuts.

*Budget cuts not systemic.* The budget cutting process at MPS was a large part of
the retention process in the district, as the decisions to cut people and programs in
every way affected retention, both through the ability to monetarily retain employees
as well as the culture and morale that incentivized employees to stay in the district. This
budget process was intended to be very strategic and systematic, but in actuality was
only partially so. The Superintendent tried to maintain a clear focus on the bigger
picture and the district goals, but often it just simply came down to numbers and what
cost the most. In fact, it was unintended consequences that I found to be more
strategic than the process was at times, although the retention of MPS employees was
high and has been for years. To describe this less than systemic budget process
revolving around compensation (and ultimately retention), let me explain the
procedures in place for MPS budget cut decisions and what has happened to
compensation efforts in recent years.

In an organization where a large portion of the budget goes towards the human
capital who teach, organize, administer, and staff the classrooms and offices that keep
students learning, drastic budget cuts mean cutting human capital. I was surprised to
find that there was no systemic procedure for how to decide who and what to cut in the
district, except for the clear School Board expectation to keep budget cuts “as far from
the classroom as possible.” Adding to the less than systemic procedure was the fact
that a definition of what was and was not ‘far from the classroom’ was debatable and
not clearly defined. In the two years of this project, making budget cuts was a very collaborative process as the central office leaders attempted to get everyone involved and provide a system of feedback and suggestions from classrooms to central offices. Part of this was done through lengthy school meetings, as the facilities administrator explained when asked to walk me through how budget cuts were made:

“You look at every, every aspect of the budget. And it’s not just us. We’ve brought all, all the district leaders into the process and we had large group meetings. They also had individual building meetings and pretty well anything and everything that was thought of was put out on the table for consideration. But I guess the underlying foundation for every decision is we try to keep it as far away from impacting kids as possible. So...it’s just a free-for-all to be honest with you, and then we get the opinions of all of our Principals and they get the advice from their teachers and so we start to whittle it down as to what do we think we can live without. Where do we think we can cut, again, that has the least impact on students and student learning? So it’s a very involved, involved and very long, and very complicated and a very emotional and very painful and just a difficult process...”

This procedure for getting everyone’s idea on places where cuts could be made affected the cultural component of retention as employees’ opinions and concerns were put into building reports that were then given to central office leaders. Budget cuts then became a communal problem that everyone was asked to tackle, building a sense of community. However, the procedures were more of a complicated system of brainstorming than a focused, concerted effort to gather ideas on what was the most strategic way to make budget cuts that would impact classrooms the least, for I never found a definition of what ‘far from the classroom’ meant and who determined what did and did not impact the classroom. Not to mention, when I asked the facilities
administrator if a ranking of some sort was in place for when more budget cuts would have to be made, the facilities administrator admitted:

“You know, we don’t. And we’ve talked about that to develop a kind of a rubric or some sort of ranking system or hierarchy...I think we have some general ideas and we remember some of the things that we’ve talked about around the table that we’ve chose not to put on the list.”

Not only was the procedure for cutting their human capital not very systemic, but once they had made the hard decisions, MPS didn’t put into place a system for attacking the problem again the next year (if necessary) without starting from scratch.

Regarding compensation more specifically, a factor that influenced retention, it too was subject to budget cut decisions that were less than systemic or strategic in nature. Compensation had not been spared from previous budget cuts and it was a bone of contention among teachers and administrators because of how long it had been on the chopping block. Prior to drastic budget cuts, the district offered a $2,500 stipend for earning a doctorate, as I explained above. That stipend was cut with no one grandfathered in; no new doctorate earners received it and neither did those who previously earned it, affecting numerous teachers and administrators. A policy in place for administrators (who were not on a salary schedule) was that their yearly raises were based on teachers’ incremental raises, as the district facilitator explained:

“If the average teacher raise for this next year is, for example 2%, and it’s going to be like 1.69, somewhere in there, then the maximum that all of us can get, all of the leaders of the district that aren’t on a salary schedule, is the 2%.”
This raise was not cut, but was drastically reduced because of decisions regarding teacher pay, which affected morale and retention decisions among administrators and the central office staff, as the facilities administrator explained:

“You know, myself as an example, I have yet to be paid what I was paid my first year hired. Yeah. And you know, when I was hired as an administrator I was promised, you know, the typical raise is 3-5%, yada yada yada, and you know, that sounded pretty good because I made a life-changing decision to come to work for [MPS] at a negotiated, guaranteed minimum salary. That’s the only reason I came to work here. I mean, that was a very key factor. I wasn’t going to come to work here, take, instead of a 45-50 hour week go to a 75 or 80 hour week, drive an hour and a half to work each day, not be where my kids go to school, and you know, it’s a quality of life decision. But it’s kind of offensive and it really kind of sets a tone and a mental attitude.”

So what was used as a recruitment tool, these raises, now became a problem of retention among leaders within the district, often because of morale, as the facilities administrator explained. In the sense that these raises were both a recruitment and retention tool, you could argue a sense of systems was in place. However, because of the budget cuts made to these raises without any indication of their impact on the human resources system, it was certainly less than a strategic or systemic decision.

More specific to teachers in the district, much occurred regarding compensation, and thus potentially retention. As with many public school districts, MPS teachers operated on a salary schedule approved by the School Board with increases for each year worked as well as increases in pay for additional education credits. However a number of years ago the salary schedule was frozen as a way to cut costs, which was intended to be temporary but didn’t end up that way. As of the second year of this study the salary schedule was voted by the School Board to be fully funded, but as the
facilities administrator explained: “That’s the first time that’s happened since I’ve been here. Now, we have operated the salary schedules this year and the previous year for educational credit for teachers [but not for experience].” When asked why that decision was made, he was very clear:

“Because can you imagine year after year after year not giving teachers the opportunity to move on the salary schedule for experience? What happens is since we allow new hires to bring in, I think, 12 years of experience, you can literally hire a brand new teacher to this district and that person will move on a spot on a salary schedule and be paid significantly more than somebody that has been here for 12 years because that 12 year person has been frozen for two or three. Is that fair? Absolutely not. And it creates tremendous inequities amongst teachers when you don’t allow teachers to move for experience. It really, it’s kind of convoluted so those people have lost that opportunity for experience on the salary schedule forever. So yeah, that’s, that’s bad practice. You don’t want to get in the modality of not allowing your people to move on salary schedules…”

This freeze meant not only did teachers stop receiving raises, but so too did central office administrators whose salary increases occurred in ratio to teacher increases. Such a freeze, when not temporary as it was intended to be, can cause retention issues because of a loss of morale and a lack of trust in the district. So obviously retention efforts as tied to budget decisions were not being made in a very systemic, and certainly not strategic, way when part of the district goals were to have high quality teachers that can improve student achievement and eliminate achievement gaps.

HR responses silo-ed and systemic. When it came to responding to budget decisions that impact human capital, and particularly the retention of human capital, the human resources department had both very silo-ed and very systemic elements. Regarding responding to cuts to personnel, the human resources department silo-ed
itself, viewing itself as the doers, the ones that implemented the decisions. However, when it came to *implementing* those decisions in their department, they were focused on the systemic aspects of their work far more than those who made the budget cut decisions in the first place, thinking of the influence their actions would have not only on the other human resource functions but also on the greater strategic district goals.

One very silo-ed aspect of this human resource function was where the human resources department placed itself, as explained by the human resources administrator. When budget decisions were made that involved cutting personnel positions, the human resources department saw it as their responsibility to respond to these decisions and find ways to best retain these employees or do the legwork to make decisions actually work successfully in the district. Even though she was at the strategic table when these decisions are discussed, the human resources administrator placed herself more as a consultant or the person who just gets the work done to put the decision into place, as opposed to actually being part of a systemic effort to meet district goals.

Regarding a recent decision to cut science specialists, the human resources director provided her role in that decision and how she viewed her responsibilities when that kind of decision was made:

“[A decision like that] has to come back to me, because then it’s like, ok well then what does the contract look like for these people and how do we schedule these people and how do we get the efficiency ratio when these people are going to have to travel between buildings and now this job isn’t going to work the way that it worked before, so then making it all work comes back to me. They conceptually come up with a plan and then I have to put the people in. They pretty well decided ‘this is what we want to do’ and then I got invited in to listen to it and to ask my questions, figure out what concerns I have about it...My job is to serve them. And so if this is what they determine is in the best interest of
serving elementary kids then I have to find a way to make it happen. I’m the one that’s providing all the data and the information and so while I’m not making the decision to cut the elementary Science Specialists, I am the one that is presenting the information...so I’m driving the data about how we differ [from other districts] and what it costs. So I’m driving that, but then it’s the [leadership] team... who are really getting with the program and saying ok then - and then bringing it to the public and saying “ok if we want to have competitive salaries with these other districts then we might not be able to do everything...so it’s a trade off.”

As seen in this description of her job, she very much separated herself from the decisions being made, even though she was quite literally at the strategic table and included in most big decisions, most specifically those impacting human resources. However, her perception of this was very different, particularly when it involved cutting positions.

As opposed to strictly responding to budget cut decisions and implementing those decisions, when focused on her own task and the tasks of those in her department, the human resources administrator was very systemic. What she decided to do as an administrator to make those budget decisions ‘work’ showed obvious reflection on her influence on the other human resource functions as well as district goals. The main way she addressed this systemic retention function, and one of the few ways she could when placing herself as the enactor of decisions, was through promoting a culture of trust and good morale among personnel throughout the district. The human resources administrator prided herself in finding creative ways to maintain as many district personnel as possible, even when positions were cut. For example, in the first year that the early retirement notification system was implemented, she was able to utilize the extra time gained by such notification to give her the means to find an
open position for every single person wanting to remain in the district except for one, as previously described. Those in the district came to trust that she was looking after them and would do absolutely everything she could to keep them in the district. The human resources director, for example, had to come up with creative ways to keep those recently cut science specialists who wanted to remain employed in the district. When the district cut those positions, she went to work retaining as many as possible, keeping in mind their importance to the strategic goals of the district:

“...where I came in was then as all of those [Science Specialists] came out of their coaching or specialist jobs [and] these were our top performers so how did I return them to a job that they wanted in a location that they wanted, because they stepped forward from their previous jobs to take on direction from us. So of course this is a group that you want to do everything you can to take care of. Because you don’t want to establish in your culture that ‘take a risk and then you’re out of luck.’ So, the attrition, the early notice process, allowed – especially last year with the Science Specialists – allowed me to get those 10 people to where they needed to go as quickly as possible so we could determine whether or not we had vacancies to go out and hire and so forth...I’d say that 90% of them got their first choice and the other 10% at least got their second choice.”

The human resources administrator made it clear through interviews and observations that this was not only a matter of efficiently using the resources in the district, which was one of the district’s main goals, but also an informal policy for retaining quality teachers and promoting a positive culture of trust and dependability in the district. To keep the human capital in a district from feeling expendable is one way to retain them, so the importance placed on this morale and culture is part of the systems in place for this retention function. The HR administrator thought of retaining these teachers as not
only what needed to be done functionally but also as a potential influence on future recruitment, continued retention, and overall district goals.

**Evaluation.** When compared to the rest of district human resource functions, MPS structures, procedures and policies were clearer and more documented for evaluation functions than many of the other functions discussed. At the same time, administrators at the central office focused more on the ‘front end’ as it were, working to get the right people into the right positions so that they had fewer problems to deal with later in the evaluation processes. Evaluations were identified as very important to gain feedback and understand how the district and the human capital within it were doing individually and as a group working towards district goals. As I look at the silos and systems in place in the evaluation of both the organization and the people within the organization, I focus on four evaluation areas showing their own silos and systems: 1) district; 2) schools; 3) central office administrators; and 4) principals and teachers.

**District.** The district had in place procedures and policies for the evaluation of the district, schools, administrators, and teachers, each designed for and completed in different ways. The district had numerous procedures for evaluating their efforts towards meeting their goals, from common assessments in the classroom to state assessments of overall student achievement. What guided how they utilized those assessments as an organization was supposed to be their district improvement plan [DIP], which is structured by the state department. There are five key areas on this plan that the district must address, having developed goals and evaluation measures for each of those goals. Each district in the state is on a five year cycle of assessment to evaluate
their district improvement plans and the gains they’ve made towards achieving their plan goals. There is a survey that corresponds with this cycled evaluation, which is meant to gain feedback from both those working for the district as well as those impacted by district function (parents, students, community, etc.). MPS actually made it a policy to distribute this survey yearly as a way of evaluating themselves more often in the eyes of both their internal and external audiences. The School Board helped evaluated the district based on these DIP goals once a year by examining data presented by central office administrators regarding the district’s status on reaching the written goals developed for each plan area.

In the district organizational evaluation process, there was certainly a system involved, taking state accountability measures and using them as the district evaluation measure, having the School Board use this plan as the assessment tool for the district, and utilizing the state improvement survey to gain feedback about their successes or failures more often than even required. In that regard the intended structures for district evaluation were very systematic, for the district goals were developed out of discussions regarding these state improvement processes. However, the silos start becoming visible when you look at how this evaluation material was actually used, or implemented. The DIP was something that the district had always done as prescribed, but did not have the best track record for actually being utilized, as the facilities administrator admitted: “Some of that plan is a very valuable tool...And other parts of the plan are just, not worth the paper it’s written on. So it’s just an exercise in lookin’ good.” The survey that corresponds with the district improvement plan also seemed
silo-ed in that it was done as part of an evaluation system in place but I found no real use of the data besides publishing bits for public information and some informal reflection by central office administrators. It was mostly stuck at the central office level in an accountability pile. In fact, the school improvement administrator admitted to a DIP committee that MPS “[has] completed [the DIP process] every year for last 5 years. But not sure if continuing” (as taken from fieldnotes). Realistically it seems like the most it actually fit into a system of evaluation was the role it played in School Board yearly evaluations of district performance. So there were certainly systemic aspects of district evaluation, most notably from the accountability inherent in the DIP process. But there were certainly silo-ed or simply non-integrated elements of the evaluation process at the district level. You could even argue inefficient use of resources occurred to some extent, such as a survey that seems to be put to little practical purpose, which was certainly not a strategic maneuver towards district goals.

Schools. Evaluation measures for schools in the MPS district were also developed from the expectations of the aforementioned district improvement plan and appeared to be more systemic in nature than the district evaluation process. Central office administrators and coordinators visited schools throughout the year in small groups to keep abreast of activity and needs at the school level, as well as help the school evaluate itself against its school improvement plan. These small groups of central office administrators sat down with the school administrators and discussed their school improvement plan, how they might improve upon the plan, and how well they were working towards meeting their goals in the plan. Since school improvement plan goals
were tied directly to district goals and the school was being evaluated on these plans, this was certainly systemic to some degree. Now whether or not these evaluations were tied to professional development or even funding decisions is difficult to say. In expectation, the school improvement plan guided the decisions of the school, but in reality that was not always the case. Sometimes it was just another “exercise in lookin’ good.” However, when the government evaluates the district every five years, part of that evaluation relies on school improvement plans and progress towards meeting the goals in those plans, so the school evaluation process was very much part of the greater evaluation system in the district.

When central office administrators went out to look through school improvement plans and do walkthroughs in schools, typically the group of administrators consisted of the elementary or secondary education administrator (depending on the school), the curriculum administrator, and the school improvement administrator. So not only was the school improvement and curriculum administrators getting feedback on how the school was meeting their goals but other members of the leadership team were involved as well. The school improvement administrator described the purpose and process of these walkthroughs:

“We are – every school in our district, by November 1, has to provide the district their school improvement plan for the school year that is aligned to the district [improvement plan]. And so basically we start these visits in November after the plans are turned in and we just make that visit to the school, we ask them a few questions – ‘how can we support you? We see that these are the goals and the objectives and the strategies that are in your plan. Is there anything that we can help you with?’ And then we also ask them a few questions such as ‘how was the plan developed? How did you establish your priorities? Tell us about your plan. Tell us how your school is implementing the plan. What steps are you taking to
monitor your plan?’ Just some open-end questions such as that. And then we try to follow up...and then on-call as needed.”

So the evaluation of the school improvement plan was not only part of evaluation procedures but also development functions, whether professional development or facilities development, or anything like that expressed to administrators on this visit. The trick again lies in the actual implementation of this process, for the school improvement administrator was the only one interviewed that spoke to the evaluation of schools in such a specific manner. Others merely mentioned it as a way to keep abreast of what is going on in schools and a ‘monitoring’ device. Other than that a lot of school evaluation involved state test scores because quite simply that was a great deal of how each school would be evaluated and assessed regarding levels of state corrective action as mandated by NCLB (no child left behind). So, somewhat in practice, and certainly by intention, schools were evaluated on their school improvement plans that were based on district goals, but test scores had far stronger implications than the intended evaluation procedures. Unfortunately test scores as school evaluation measures are not very strategic, but something that is a reality none-the-less, thanks to the external environment.

*Central office administrators*. Human capital evaluations had their own procedures at MPS, many of which were documented in the school improvement plan or the district improvement plan. There were printed policies and procedures for the evaluation of central office administrators, school administrators, and teachers in human resource manuals and School Board policies. However, administrators in the central office had some flexibility in how they are evaluated, who evaluated them, and
how they used that evaluation information. Some of these processes were silo-ed, which stemmed from the inherent flexibility in the process, but for the most part the evaluation of central office administrators was systemic.

The Superintendent, as the top administrator in the district, was constantly informally evaluated by those within the district and those outside of the district through media stories, community relationships, appearances in schools or at Board meetings, etc. At MPS, the School Board developed a policy for evaluating the success of the Superintendent, which was then tied to his or her yearly compensation and retention decisions, but the policy was very vague, leaving it up to informal procedures to guide how this was accomplished. The policy is as follows:

“The Board of Education shall meet annually to evaluate the performance of the superintendent and other administrative and supervisory personnel. The superintendent shall be responsible for presenting his/her evaluation, contract and salary recommendations for administrative and supervisory personnel.”

The Superintendent was responsible for presenting his or her own evaluation to the Board, but with no more specifics as to what that entailed, leaving it up to the Superintendent to interpret. However, it is clear that the evaluation of the Superintendent was systemically linked to his or her compensation and retention. As I found from interviews at MPS, the evaluation and hiring of a Superintendent was also linked, strengthening the systemic argument. The Board made clear some of the aspects they were looking for in a New Superintendent during their search were “transparency, inclusiveness, listening to the community…” In School Board meetings, even before his official evaluation, the Board said they were pleased with the new
Superintendent’s progress, informally evaluating him as the year progressed. Regarding MPS’s current Superintendent, he also focused specifically on linking his evaluation to district goals and made it clear that he expected his evaluation to improve or not with the success of the district in meeting their goals, as he explained: “…well for example [the School Board and I are] getting my Superintendent evaluation recreated, and so we put down skills about closing the achievement gap and increasing our racial diversity…” This goal was made to directly link to one of the main district goals: to eliminate achievement gaps. The Superintendent was working in many ways to move the district towards more of a system and his own evaluation was one method of doing that.

Part of the Superintendent’s evaluation was also based on formal surveys given to those who work within the district twice a year in an effort to evaluate how the Superintendent acted as a leader for district. This survey was utilized by the Superintendent at MPS in order to evaluate himself, but also was part of the information presented to the School Board as part of their evaluation of the position. Every other central office administrator completes this same type of survey around the same time (in the Fall and the Spring). Depending on the administrator it was sent to slightly different groups of people. For instance, the facilities and transportation administrator sent his to building services personnel and business services personnel, whereas the elementary education administrator sent his survey to all school administrators and elementary teachers. Some administrators shared all the feedback they received with the groups they sent the survey to while some simply used it for their own knowledge and reflection. These surveys were considered more for the various
central office administrators’ own feedback than formal evaluations, so they had leeway over what was included in the survey and who it might be sent to. Unfortunately, this flexibility in the content of the survey as well as the intended audience made it a very silo-ed function for some, keeping the content and results within their own desired arena, not necessarily having to tie it back to district goals or formal evaluation measures because it was not part of their formal evaluations. Instead it was more of a feedback than an evaluation for those who choose to use it as such. On the other hand, those administrators who choose to link these ‘360 surveys’ to their professional goals and district goals provided a more systemic evaluation of their progress, as those goals were part of their formal evaluation as well, even if the survey itself isn’t.

The curriculum coordinator described the survey process and how she was changing it for the coming year to be more beneficial to her own feedback:

“This year I’m sending one separately to all of our Principals and Assistant Principals and then all of our Coordinators and Directors and instructional staff, because in the past they’ve been blended and I really want to get a view of how my leadership supporting the buildings vs. the staff...”

She would then reach all levels of the district system by choosing to send it to all of these people and thus be able to delineate where her leadership was having more of an effect. In that way, she was making it a more systemic process by not silo-ing herself to only curriculum coordinators or administrators and recognizing she impacted instructional staff as well. One central office administrator, the new elementary education administrator, tried to make the feedback and evaluation system more of a cycle, by sharing his own survey results with those who took the survey so they too can see how he was doing. He was by no means separating himself or giving the impression
that this survey was a simple silo of knowledge he kept to himself but instead gave the impression that he was using and reflecting on the feedback as part of his self-evaluation process, if nothing else. He described his philosophy on this:

“And we just did our 360 evaluation, you know where you send out a list of statements and people, on the Likert scale, vote and then you get your feedback and their comments afterwards. Well, I sent that out to everyone. Which I guess no one has ever done before. I was like, I want you to know: here’s the feedback I got about how I’m doing as a leader.....and they were kind of shocked. Well why shouldn’t you know [how I’m doing]...”

Other than this survey and informal feedback, central office administrators were formally evaluated by the Superintendent, which determined any yearly compensation changes. The Superintendent and leadership team all had written goals that they revised each year that served as the foundation for evaluation of their progress come Spring. These goals were tied to and went beyond the district goals to more lofty personal and professional goals, as the facilities administrator described:

“So, we do set goals at the beginning of the year, we do a mid-year evaluation of the goals, and then we do a summative evaluation at the end of the year to determine whether or not you’re successful in reaching what’s called your stretch goals – something above and beyond that makes your district better and etc. etc. And so if you’ve done an outstanding exceptional job in achieving those goals, then [you get the full raise in pay]. If it’s less than outstanding performance, exceptional performance achieving their stretch goals, then there’s something less than [the full raise]...[The Superintendent], based upon our evaluation, our stretch goals, will determine whether or not we get the [full raise] or [not]...”

In fact, the same process was in place for administrative evaluations at all levels of the district, whether at the central office or the school level, so everyone’s evaluations were in some way tied to district goals.
Principals and teachers. The data suggests that the central office worked to
attract, hire, properly place, and retain quality personnel so that evaluations were not a
focus but more of a means of adjustment. At the school level, school administrators
utilized the same 360 survey as central office administrators to gain feedback on their
performance as a leader, which played a part in their evaluation measures. The surveys,
much like at the central office level, were utilized in evaluations but their purpose was
truly more for feedback so it was by no means the basis of evaluation. Administrators,
including principals, in this district were not allowed tenure, so they must be re-
evaluated each year to determine if they were to remain in the position for the next
year. That evaluation was completed much like the central office administrators
evaluations through meeting goals and stretch goals as described above. Depending on
the school level of the administrator, the elementary education administrator or the
secondary education administrator was in charge of spearheading their yearly
evaluation, based partly on school visits made by central office administrators
throughout the year, including the aforementioned visit regarding the school
improvement plan. So there were certainly systemic elements in the process, regarding
the stretch goals linked to district goals like those at the central office level and the lack
of tenure so that administrators could be annually evaluated in relation to district goals,
but the system was unbalanced. The front-end human resource functions had a
stronger influence and attention in the district, like hiring and placement, than the back-
end functions, like evaluation.
When speaking with the human resources administrator, there was the distinct impression that evaluations of school administrators and even teachers for that matter were not a large concern or a nerve-wracking process because the district put so much effort into hiring the best people for the job, placing them appropriately, and supporting them in that job. But that is not to say it wasn’t taken seriously, for she went to every school to help each school administrator evaluate their staff:

“I’ll have to crunch that in here because I need to see all of them before the winter break to have a serious discussion about the evaluation of every employee that they have and whether or not we have any employment concerns, because if we have employment concerns then we need to be sure that we have their performance improvement plans in place, that we’ve been direct and explicit about what it is we’re not seeing.”

She explained that if there were needs or concerns that should be addressed, then an evaluation could help highlight those, which were then put in a written professional development plan for that employee which could be used to determine resources and development opportunities to address areas of concern. This was very much how teacher evaluation was described as well, except teachers were evaluated primarily by the administrators in their respective schools.

School administrators at MPS were expected to walk through classrooms many times throughout the year to observe what was going on for multiple reasons, one of which involved the teaching style and success of their faculty. Based on walk-throughs, discussions with faculty, and student outcomes, teachers were evaluated yearly by their school administrators, who then reported their suggestions or concerns to the human resources department. Other than the reporting procedures, however, the central
office had very little requirements or mandates for how the evaluation process was to proceed. In fact, the School Board policy was quite vague, saying only:

“The evaluation system shall be performance based and will focus on definable teacher behaviors. The performance-based teacher evaluation program shall be continuous and will provide direction for maintaining and improving teaching skills through professional staff development activities. The district administration shall develop procedures for the effective implementation of the evaluation system.”

The type of professional development offered was varied, as the human resources administrator described when asked what was in place for teachers when they were not meeting evaluation standards:

“Well if you’re a teacher and you’re having trouble with classroom management well then who can we send you to watch? Who can we have come in to dialogue with you about strategies? What professional development can we send you to? Can we help you videotape yourself so that you can see some of the things that you may be doing that contribute, or if you’re clueless to the observation what’s going on in your room, a videotape may show you that someone over here is taking a nap and two kids are texting and you’re just oblivious to that.”

The fact that evaluations worked to identify gaps in teacher and administrator abilities or progress and then immediately sparked improvement plans that involved numerous development options was certainly a systemic structure. However, as mentioned, the system is unbalanced. The data strongly suggests that the central office worked to attract, hire, properly place, and retain quality personnel so that evaluations were not a focus of concern but more of a means of adjustment.

As a compilation of human resources functions, the district for the most part truly works as a system. Recruitment, hiring, placement, professional development, retention, and evaluation link to not only each other but to the greater district goals on
many levels and in many ways. Are there silos in place in some of the functions?

Certainly. But there is more of a system in place than there are silos, which is partly why this human resources system has the reputation it does. There are policies and procedures in place that guide what is done, how it is done, and who completes the human resources functions, but with the flexibility instilled for both reflection and change as well as the ability to tweak the procedure when it would be more strategic to do so. However, it is this flexibility that also makes for some inconsistencies in the system along with some silos. It is a balance, one the district is working on finding, but the human resources functions certainly provide an example on how to work towards being systemic.

Towards being strategic. Through constantly comparing the data on the structures, procedures, and policies of the district as well as how the central office operates, it became apparent that outside of human resources functions, as a whole, MPS functions more in silos, but is making the effort to become more systemic. There are silos of functions separated by department within the central office, but at the same time the departments are expected to work together to achieve district goals and feed off of the other for ideas and more efficient ways of accomplishing their tasks and goals. Before continuing with the themes that emerged in this area, I offer a prime example of efforts to become more strategic at MPS. The year before this project began (also the year before the new Superintendent arrived), the human resources administrator described a terrible inefficiency that stunted district effectiveness and why she couldn’t yet fix the issue, as taken from my fieldnotes of our interview:
“Finance and compensation software packages don’t really work together in [MPS] right now. Currently it is very difficult for [the HR administrator] and her staff to get the data she needs on the district’s human resources. The two software packages in place make things very inefficient, as they require double-data entry: once in the finance/payroll software system and once in the payroll software system. There is no way to run similar reports and keep things up to date efficiently between the two systems, which makes for very inconsistent data. The only way to find errors between the two databases is for [the HR administrator] and her staff to get a printed report once a month from the databases and manually look for errors, such as people listed as employees who no longer work for the district or data inputted correctly for an employee in one database but incorrectly in another. [She] has looked at options for combining the two database packages, but they would cost at least a million dollars, which they just don’t have in the budget. The whole idea would be to be more efficient with cost-analysis, which would save money in the long run, and which a new database system could provide, but they don’t have the funds in the short run and if they did it would be hard to convince the Board that waiting for the cost savings would be better than some funding some other initiative.”

However, quite literally just a few months after the Superintendent arrived he took this problem to the School Board and vehemently supported the need for this to be fixed if the district was to work strategically towards their goals, which worked. The Board approved the expense and a follow-up interview with the HR administrator described how this would make the organization more efficient and strategic:

“Oh I think it will mean much greater efficiency, much better customer service for employees - they’ll be able to look up their own records to check their information on their records, they’ll be able to access things electronically about their records that they can’t now, and then every report we run will be being run from one database. And so I laugh when somebody says “how many employees do you have?” And I’ll be like “well do you want it by our database or do you want it by the business office database?” Because the business office keeps different components and so if you just say “how many W2s do you run for the district?” Well the business office is going to tell you that we run almost 4,000 W2s. Well then that would mean that you had 4,000 employees if
you want to think about it like that. But we never say we have 4,000 employees, we probably say we have about 2,500 employees... So it’s “well who are you talking about” is always the question...Identifying all of those things with two different software packages that accommodates each one of those scenarios in a different way is really difficult for us to plan around and know who we’re talking about. So every year the numbers are like – “well what did we base that off of last year?” you know “When you say new hires – new hires to what? Did we mean new hires that just changed jobs in the district or actually new hires to the district?” So, eventually it will be much more efficient operation between both HR and the business office. [Right now] there’s no check and balance on the system from that way. It’s just one direction, and unless we run a report and discover it, then we’re at the mercy of just knowing that everything is entered correctly on that end because it doesn’t come back to us for a double check.”

Besides this example of a necessary initiative that was certainly working to be strategic for the human resources department, when working towards being systemic, two themes stand out from the data that I will further discuss: 1) role clarity, and 2) organizational efficiency.

**Role clarity.** One of the most difficult pieces of the central office for this researcher was clarifying the roles and responsibilities for each central office administrator. The reason being that the administrators themselves would explain their role, their responsibilities, but then have a difficult time describing how their role differed from another central office administrator when asked to delineate between the two. There was clearly overlap, which when coupled with a lack of clarity became messy. Starting with the Superintendent, he was in charge of district image and culture, organizing and directing the central office, and generally making the final decision on district issues and directions. This was by far the easiest role to clarify in the central office and the other central office administrators showed no lack of clarity on that role
either. Regarding the rest of the central office, each of the Assistant Superintendents had distinguishing titles, such as Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources or Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education, or Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum & Instruction, but the titles were far clearer than the differences in their actual roles and responsibilities, as described in interviews. The lack of clarity stemmed from both overlap and collaboration that occurred among these assistant superintendents, and explained away using the idea of a ‘team.’ The administrators would each ensure they knew what their role and responsibilities were, would state examples, but then when asked how that differed from the purview of another assistant superintendent, it would get complicated, for as the curriculum administrator explained the district was “not silo-ed here, we really work as a team where everyone can participate in all decisions.” As an example, the secondary administrator described the difference between her responsibilities and those of other central office administrators:

“[The curriculum administrator]...her direct people that she supervises are the district curriculum chairs. So, the math people, the science people, she supervises all of them. They work with Principals to implement curriculum. So when they start working with Principals, that sort of overlaps into my area, okay. But she pretty much has the reign on academics although it overlaps with me too. I have the reign on secondary buildings. I work with secondary Principals very closely, not only with the academic piece but also what they need in terms of resources, to be their advocates for that, whether it’s human capital or whether it’s actual resources for their buildings.”

No clearer was the description given by the former elementary education administrator, who simply said there was a sharing of responsibilities because curriculum and instruction was really the responsibility of the curriculum administrator but he’s not willing just to “make sure there’s enough chairs” so there is “a lot of give and take
discussion on all of those areas.” The curriculum administrator offered a similar clarity of responsibilities between the administrators: she explained how she would typically not deal with teacher ineffectiveness, for example, leaving that to the assistant superintendents, unless the ineffective teacher involved a curricular area. The lack of clarity becomes more complicated when I asked the inevitable question of when a teacher wouldn’t be involved in a ‘curricular area.’ Certainly each administrator had their own responsibilities with their own group of human capital that would help them work with those responsibilities, but again, collaboration and overlapping of duties made things difficult to conceptualize clearly. It seems best described as some silo-ed functions working together in an attempt at a ‘system.’

In an effort to break down silos of function in the district, the core leadership team is very team oriented, making role clarity even more difficult. As data from interviews was compared, the leadership team seemed to be finding a balance between functioning as an effective, cohesive team that supports individual responsibilities and working with what could be termed a team mentality, where decision-making and action become more inefficient and separation of responsibilities become unclear, as illuminated above. When asked in interviews about how decisions were made at the central office, each member of the leadership team described that they worked together as a “team” with lots of “collaboration,” for which they were very proud of. So when questioned further about a specific decision and who might have been in charge of making that decision, again it was made as a team. In fact, it was difficult to determine who exactly had the lead authority to do something or make a specific
decision as part of individual responsibilities, as the answer to many questions about how a decision was made was “we decided as a team.” In an effort to be collaborative and break down silos, role clarity became muddled and replaced with the idea of a “team.” So when it comes to organizational efficiency, particularly when attempting to become more systemic, a lack of role clarity is the district’s first issue.

**Organizational efficiency.** Maximizing resource efficiency is one of the district’s guiding goals, as described in the previous section on defining strategic. Organizational efficiency is part of that goal, which is the second issue the district seemed to be working on to become more systemic. Organizational efficiency was something considered strategic in the central office, particularly to the Superintendent, which entailed aiding in improving current structures and procedures like improving role clarity and duplicity as well as making changes to the organizational chart to clarify authority structures.

**Improving role clarity.** As just discussed, the issue of role clarity among the core leadership team was one form of a lack of efficiency in the district. Human capital was one of the most prevalent resources at MPS and thus one of the more difficult to efficiently organize, as the new Superintendent discovered at the beginning of his role and the start of this study. In order to increase role clarity and thus organizational efficiency, the Superintendent worked to clarify the structure of human capital in the district by using ‘desk audits.’ By conducting these audits, clarifying job descriptions, analyzing the purpose and necessity of programs through the desk audits, and then making supervisors aware of what human resources they had available to them, the
superintendent could clarify what human resources were actually available at the central office in one of his first steps towards structuring the organization to become more efficient. By better understanding the role and organization of personnel, the Superintendent could work towards a better appreciation of the system as well as helping those within the system understand how everyone worked together to meet the greater goals.

When the Superintendent came into the district one of the first challenges he faced was understanding how the district worked as an organization in regards to human capital, particularly at the central office level. To begin this process the Superintendent completed what he called “desk audits.” The former elementary education administrator described the process:

“It’s very short, about 10 questions about each one of the [MPS] programs – counseling, home school communicators, Partners, all those kind of different things, and [the Superintendent has] got a pretty short concise overview of the vast majority of our programs. He sat down and had brief conversations, not with all of them, but he’s working through them. Whoever the Director or the Assistant Superintendent of the particular program is and I think he is then going to use that to begin to make some judgments about how we’re strategically allocating our resources.”

The other central office administrators recognized the purpose of these desk audits as a way for the Superintendent to not only better understand the makeup of the district as a new member, but to also get a grasp on how to better allocate resources in a strategic way. Soon after he started, the Superintendent explained his intended purpose, problems he faced in the process, and his ultimate goal for the desk audits, as described in fieldnotes from our interview:
“When he came in he gave one sheet to each department head to write down who their employees were, how many FTEs they had, etc. He wanted to reassess the organization, figure out what the departments were, and make them figure out the same thing. He said, “It has taken weeks for me to get a straight answer to the question ‘how many people work in your area’?” People are consulting various sources of data, their own memories etc.”

What he further found in these desk audits was a lack of clarity in another way, through job titles and descriptions, as described in fieldnotes:

“According to [the Superintendent], the previous superintendent fostered a bit of confusion in the organization of central office functions. He said at least a couple of positions had the title of “director” or “chief officer.” This approach to the creation of central office positions fostered some confusion about who did what, and who reported to whom.”

When even the department administrators did not know how many people worked for them, who they were, or what they did, it was clear to the Superintendent that inefficiencies were rampant in the organization of capital at the central office. So, it was a good place to begin making the system more efficient and more cognizant of those persons working within the system.

Changes in the organizational chart. The Superintendent also made structural changes via the organizational chart, approving his suggestions with the School Board. The purpose was to arrange key central office positions in a way to make their roles clearer in the district system. Such changes included making the facilities administrator the Deputy Superintendent so that there was a clearer line of command when the Superintendent was unavailable. The Superintendent also changed the organizational chart so that the Director of Business Services could be re-titled as the Chief Financial Officer and thus a part of the core leadership team and involved in weekly strategy and
decision-making meetings. The Superintendent felt the core leadership team would be
much better served to have the knowledge of the Chief Financial Officer when making
decisions and strategizing for future actions. One other notable change in the
organizational chart was to the position of the Community Relations Coordinator, which
went from being accountable to one of the Assistant Superintendents to being directly
accountable to the Superintendent himself. The job title, job description, nor the actual
role and responsibilities of the position actually changed, simply the visual placement on
the organizational chart and procedures of accountability. However, this did give the
impression, at least on paper, that the Community Relations Coordinator was
responsible for the entire district and worked directly in line with the Superintendent’s
vision. This change also gave her less administrators to officially be accountable to and
thus more clarity in supervisory authority. These organizational chart changes were of
minor concern at the School Board meeting where they were easily approved.
However, they certainly helped better clearly define roles for those within the central
office, as the new Deputy Superintendent explained:

“Well it has for me. Because, you know, my ultimate responsibility, well I
have many of them as you may have noticed. But one of them is the
budget and when we, when there were five or six of us here in the office
that were quasi-equal we could debate and discuss things budget-wise
and as to whether or not we should proceed or not and sometimes we go
our own different directions and they do whatever they thought they
needed to do. Which, sometimes is just perfectly fine. But, because I
work very hard with [the Chief Financial Officer] to make sure that we’re
fiscally prudent and that all of the various different lines of the budget
are within budget and that we’re in good shape not only for this year but
for years on out, you know, I do say “no” and I can say no and they do
ask. And so, it’s just as it should be. Because, if I’m accountable for
somethin’, if I don’t have any means by which to be accountable by
saying no or by having the authority, then it’s really kind of a...faulty hierarchy.”

By clearly defining roles, or at least starting to, the Superintendent was working towards making the system of administrators clearer, which in turn would help them become more efficient as an organizational system, allowing them to reach their district goals in a more organized and effective manner.

To be noted, each year for the last three years this researcher has been watching this particular district, the organizational chart has changed in at least a few ways. The most recent changes of the Superintendent, however, went further than most by not only changing titles but changing structures and thus the procedures for how decisions were made in an effort to make a more systemic district. This was also in an effort to structure the organization to work more efficiently and transparently to stakeholders such as the School Board. His leadership, even in the short time he has held the position as Superintendent, has been vital to the improvements made at MPS towards being more systemic and strategic. He’s not the only leader that works towards that goal in effective ways, but he is the one that holds the greatest focus and ability to help lead the district out of silos or unbalanced systems into a clearer, more efficient system focused on strategically reaching their goals.

Attributes of Strategic Leadership

This section, focused upon the act of being strategic, has so far highlighted numerous actions, functions, structures, etc. impacting how the district works towards reaching their goals in what they consider to be a strategic fashion. The structures, policies, and procedures being utilized as this district moves from silos to systems are
clearly very important to their definition of strategic as well as what being strategic looks like. The other element so very vital to the act of being strategic that has come out of the constant comparison of data is leadership, specifically strategic leadership. In every interview, every observation, and many documents, elements of leadership within the central office influenced what was being discussed, how things were dealt with, and the ultimate decisions and outcomes. The research question of what it means to be strategic and what that looks like became overwhelmingly answered by the attributes of strategic leadership, how they could be defined and how they were portrayed at MPS. After culling through the data, comparing themes related to leadership and being strategic as a leader, six attributes of strategic leadership developed: 1) shrewd decision-making, 2) building relationships, 3) candor in communication, 4) empowering human capital, 5) structured and focused flexibility, and 6) creating, innovating, and reflecting. Figure 1 portrays these attributes as falling under the district ‘umbrella’ of strategic leadership.
When defining strategic leadership in this data, I must first and foremost clarify that it is driven by principle-based (as opposed to activity-based) action. Meaning, strategic leadership in this district means implementing ideas or initiatives or policies because they follow guiding principles and goals of the organization, with actions to follow suit (as opposed to a more buckshot approach of tying separate actions to separate goals and hoping something will work together). This strategic leadership is portrayed by numerous individual leaders in the central office, but most often it is
highlighted best by the Superintendent as he works to focus the district towards meeting their goals and making necessary changes to do so.

**Shrewd decision-making.** Interview data highlighted many different elements of or procedures for decision-making in the central office, some that could be described as strategic and others more questionable in that manner. The fact that this study began soon after a new Superintendent took over allowed me to identify what an impact a new head leader, particularly an experienced and confident one, could have on a central office and the greater district. Much of the attributes of strategic leadership were highlighted by what he or his leadership team provided as examples of what could be done better, what they were working towards doing better, or what they currently excelled at. Shrewd decision-making just so happens to be one of the attributes of strategic leadership that was more varied when it comes to effectiveness in this district, as the central office worked to be more strategic in their decision-making. However, it was just those struggles within the leadership team that highlight why shrewd decision-making is indeed an element of strategic leadership. I will highlight the strategic and not so strategic elements of shrewd decision-making as an attribute of strategic leadership by focusing on 1)the process of making strategic decisions and 2)reactive vs. proactive decision-making in the central office.

**Process of making strategic decisions.** As discussed in the previous sub-section, decision-making among the core leadership team can be less than efficient at times as they work towards shifting from a more silo-ed structure to that of a system. Therefore, day-to-day decision-making can vary from simple decisions made by each central office
administrator, such as whether or not to allow a student to transfer to another building, to coming together as a team in order to discuss ideas, thoughts, suggestions on topics considered more complicated or with potential for greater consequences, such as whether to in-source or out-source summer school. There are far too many decisions that must be made within a day for all decisions to have a ‘process’ per se, particularly a process involving more than one decision-maker. This inability to make a designed process for every possible decision allows for flexibility in decision-making. It is the leadership of these both flexible and structured processes for decision-making that was key to shrewd decision-making towards strategic action at MPS, and the Superintendent was the main leader guiding those decisions and consequently the strategic action coming from those decisions. To portray this I highlight the leadership in 1) more structured processes of decision-making, 2) more flexible processes of decision-making, and 3) some distinct strategic aspects of leadership the Superintendent utilizes during these processes.

Structured processes. Within the central office at MPS, some decisions were always made collaboratively, with no question as to the process or involvement of leaders, as part of their strategic decision-making process. Most notably, budget decisions and any topic to be brought before the School Board were both collaborative decision-making processes, something that was in place before the new Superintendent arrived, which he continued to support.

Tough budget decisions were a part of life at the central office as well as throughout the district at all levels, though the central office administrators are charged
with making the final decisions. As this study began the district was facing a sizeable budget cut from the state (multiple millions of dollars) and though each central office administrator knew they would have to make decisions regarding what they could cut out of their own administrative budgets and various programs they were in charge of, the clear process for making such strategic decisions was to do so as a team. The Superintendent recognized the value of letting each leader reflect upon their extensive area of knowledge in relation to the programs and district structures they were responsible for. But he also felt no decisions were to be made without the brainstorming and critical questioning he could facilitate in a core leadership team meeting to really evaluate what might be the best possible options for cuts. This process of decision-making facilitated by the Superintendent took the best each leader could give individually and coupled it not only with simply more heads to contemplate consequences and possibilities but also his own ability to keep the team focused on the strategic district goals.

With such enormous cuts looming, though, and with the leadership of their Superintendent’s vision and expectations, the leadership team looked to the rest of their human capital to aide them in their decision-making. These leaders, particularly the Superintendent, saw it as far more strategic to involve everyone who would have the most pertinent information. This way they could get a variety of viewpoints and ideas on how to make difficult budget decisions. The facilities administrator described this budget cutting decision-making process:

“You look at every, every aspect of the budget. And it’s not just us. We’ve brought all, all the district leaders into the process and we had
large group meetings. They also had individual building meetings [with teachers and staff] and pretty well anything and everything that was thought of was put out on the table for consideration. But I guess the underlying foundation for every decision is we try to keep it as far away from impacting kids as possible...and then we get the opinions of all of our Principals and they get the advice from their teachers and so we start to whittle it down as to what do we think we can live without. Where do we think we can cut, again, that has the least impact on students and student learning? So it’s a very involved, involved and very long, and very complicated...”

This process for involving all leaders and teachers in the budget decisions early on became very strategic indeed when controversial cuts were going to be suggested by the core leadership team. Those who would be impacted already had an idea it would be coming, which was no accident, and a very strategic move in maintaining a trusting culture and transparency in the district. For example, when Science Specialists were on the chopping block, the human resources administrator kept in contact with them throughout the process so that it was not a shock, they knew they were potentially going to fall victim to budget cuts but would be taken care of, found another position in the district if at all possible. Even when the media worked up the decision in a less than positive light, the district-wide budget-cut process allowed for much less backlash than if the leadership team had completed the process themselves. That was part of the strategic nature of such a decision.

Another structured process of decision-making involved taking information and areas of discussion to the School Board. The Superintendent had the last say on what was brought to the Board for discussion, but as far as the process involving how information was developed to bring to the Board, that was a very collaborative process. A topic was conceived by a leadership team member or was under their area of
responsibility, they discussed their topic in a leadership team meeting to get feedback, suggestions, and essentially the ‘ok’ from other team members and the Superintendent to continue and then completed their presentation or report with those comments and support in mind. This is a process that was in place prior to the new Superintendent but became less stressful and more empowered since the new Superintendent arrived. Prior to his arrival the leadership team felt it was a stressful process of making sure they were going to say the right thing and not upset the former Superintendent. With the new Superintendent it was a collaborative team effort and more empowering, most certainly a strategic change in leadership style for MPS.

An example of this process was the small autonomous schools initiative the new elementary education administrator wanted to bring before the Board. He started the process by discussing his idea with the Superintendent who supported him in pursuing the process and brainstormed what the schools might look like, what he would have to discuss at the Board meeting, etc. Then, the leadership team helped him flesh out the idea, bring up concerns, etc. He described it quite simply, as quoted from my fieldnotes of the interview:

“An initiative he and the district are working on right now are the small autonomous schools thing which he is presenting to the School Board. He can’t do that on his own so of course the rest of the leadership team is helping him with this initiative.”

After he brought the idea to the Board and presented the concept, the process continues, under the new Superintendent’s leadership. The Superintendent instilled strategic ways of involving the community before decisions were made to gather critical feedback and concerns as well as ‘buy-in.’ To continue with the above example, the
next steps for the small autonomous schools initiative were laid out for me by the new elementary education administrator:

“So our next steps with that is now, we did a Board presentation and there were a lot of questions, and that’s good. And so our next step is to do sort of a World Café-type thing as well with the three schools [to be involved in the process] separately, with families and staff and all stakeholders who are interested in sort of giving feedback on those areas of autonomy.”

After that step the decision-making process becomes less structured and more tailored to the individual project or decision, which has been part of the organizational structure prior to the Superintendent. However, his leadership in how to begin the process in a structured way set the wheels in motion for a collaborative, empowering process that provided for a strong foundation.

*Flexible processes.* From the aforementioned empowering leadership skills of the current Superintendent, flexible processes of decision-making in the district are less confusing than prior to his arrival when there was a fear of ‘stepping on toes’ or upsetting the politically correct agenda of the former Superintendent. These flexible processes have some efficient and some not so efficient elements, which I will highlight.

There was an understanding among the central office administrators, both the core leadership team as well as other coordinators and directors, that they could make decisions that needed to be made but were welcome to ask for assistance or feedback from other team members, given the flexibility to work singly or collaboratively on making decisions in the district. Part of the decision making process was flexible too in that when one leader was not available to make a necessary decision, another leader
could step in. For instance, the public relations administrator described her role when the facilities administrator was busy:

“[The facilities administrator is] the “Weather guy” the “important person” yeah, because he’s our Deputy Superintendent so if like if there’s a bus accident or something like that, usually he’ll be first on the scene and I’ll be here dealing with media. So we have a plan. There’s a whole process in place for if it’s this that happens here’s the order, this is your role, this is your role. So that we can make sure that things are flowing smoothly and that we’re dealing with all the different balls that are in the air when something like that happens.”

(Researcher asks what happens when he’s tied up.)
“Um, well it just depends. If he’s not here then it’s me. So, weather or transportation.”

There was a plan in place, but there was also the flexibility to manipulate duties or take charge when the plan couldn’t work the way it was meant to because of the inevitable situations that arise in a dynamic environment like a district central office. All this was possible because of the trusting and empowering leadership shown by the Superintendent. It was also possible because the central office administrators were confident in their ability to make educated decisions based on the principles and goals of the district. Hemming and hawing on decisions was not something found in this district. Decisions were either made decidedly after considering their correlation to district goals, or support was sought out for making larger decisions as part of a collegial culture of leadership at the central office. Granted, all decisions were not made in the most strategic of processes because of this flexibility in decision-making, which the data showed. In a structure where some decisions were made individually and some collaboratively, and there was no strict distinction as to where that line was drawn,
inefficiencies and confusion were known to occur. One such example came from the new elementary education administrator:

“...I’ve noticed that even with our Superintendent’s cabinet, is that people will be throwing out some ideas but the decision gets made somewhere else. You know, like following the meeting, in an office.”

Like for example...so our gifted center was located over here, it’s across the street from [a local church]. So there are about 40 kids who qualify for gifted services who go to [the church school]. So, they were just walking across the street. Well we just moved [the gifted center] to [a different location], and so now they need a bus. So I was called by a concerned parent that said, “you know, when they’re in your schools they’re Public School kids and so you do get money for them when they spend the day with you in the gifted program, and so we’d like you to consider providing a bus.” So I brought that argument to the Cabinet and there was a spirited debate but it was decided that if we do it for them are we going to have to do it for sports teams, [etc.]? Are we setting a precedent? I said “all right, I just wanted to bring this to you because I certainly know that we want to pass the tax levy and this might be important for families that decide that you know they did right for my kid.” But it was like – No. But then they it was decided ‘yes,’ somewhere after that meeting someone met with somebody and made that decision. So I would say that most of the time the decisions that are made in that Cabinet and they stick but there are other times...

(Researcher asks if he was told how that decision was changed.)

“No. Just all of a sudden I was at the Gifted Center and they said, ‘well Mondays [the church students] come’ and you know – and I said ‘oh, how has not having a bus affected enrollment?’ And they said, ‘oh no they have a bus now!’ And I said ‘oh did they pay for a bus?’ – ‘no we’re paying for a bus.’ [laughs]”

Finding out decisions were made elsewhere had this administrator wondering what else he agreed or disagreed with in leadership team meeting decisions that may or may not still have been as they were decided upon. This lack of follow-through or flexibility with the process, we might call it, can cause not only confusion but doubt. This is certainly an example of some less-than-strategic elements of the decision-making process, which
questions where the leadership breakdown occurred that allowed this inconsistency and lack of communication.

Strategic leadership from superintendent. There are two distinct strategic aspects of leadership the Superintendent brought to the decision-making table since his arrival in the district that changed the efficiency and effectiveness of decision-making. One aspect was the trust he had in his leadership team and the empowerment he worked to instill in them so they could do their jobs effectively. The second aspect was his insistence that the School Board be more involved and informed in the decision-making process and not be left out of the loop simply because they may disagree. It is to these two elements of the process I will now speak.

First, the Superintendent changed the culture of the decision-making process among the core leadership team, for he instilled a feeling of trust among the leadership team, particularly between himself and each member of the team, so that each member of the team felt as though they could make the decisions necessary to their station without potential backlash. This freedom and security allowed for efficiency in the decision-making process because the administrators were not second-guessing how their ideas or decisions would be understood or what the repercussions might be for doing their jobs and making tough decisions, as the facilities administrator described:

“...now that I’ve got to know [the new Super], it’s just really going very very well and I really respect somebody that trusts me to do my job as I’ve always been trusted to do my job for 21 years. And, you know, I hopefully learn and get better at it all the time and I’m human and I make mistakes and I sure don’t know everything yet, and never will. But, he’s just a fun guy to work for. He’s low key. When he walks into a room you can have fun and kid ‘em and it’s not...[the former Super] was extremely formal. Very, I guess, concerned with protocol and those kinds of things,
and you were really worried sometimes when she called you to her office or if you didn’t do something just exactly to her liking, she’d let you know about it. And that’s kind of a tough environment to work under. And [the new Super] is just, you know, ‘maybe we need to think about this’, ‘maybe we can do it this way’. Just has a really good style about making constructive criticism or comments to us and so, yeah, it’s goin’ well. I’m enjoying it.”

Decision-making is less effective if the leaders making the decisions are worried about not being supported by the person in charge, which had been the case to some degree with the previous Superintendent. Making decisions was now less stressful for the leadership team and they were constructively challenged instead of critically questioned.

The new Superintendent also put another stipulation on this strategic decision-making process, regarding the School Board. He wanted them involved in far more discussions that were important to the district development as well as getting them involved in important processes at the beginning of development in order to gather their criticisms and buy-in early on. The former Superintendent instructed the leadership team to only bring things before the Board that they knew would get easily accepted. This was strategic in her vision. However, the new Superintendent did not agree when he came into the position, because it did not follow the principle-based leadership discussed. Only bringing easily passed topics or initiatives to the School Board was not linking to the district goals and purpose simply because not all ideas were being brought up and considered, only ‘easy’ ones. The former elementary education administrator provided a description of the past and present interaction with the Board on this matter:
“We, well, again you never asked a question, you never put anything out there that you didn’t know you were going to have a 7-0 vote [under old Superintendent]. And that’s very, that is not where [the new Superintendent is] at and I think that’s the way that is gonna be successful. You know, we’re gonna probably have a lot of 4-3 votes or 5-2 votes and used to be you got a 6-1 vote you almost felt like it was a defeat and that’s...and of course when you’re operating a school district and you’re only willing to go out there as long as you’ve got a 7-0 vote, it very much limits...Kind of limits what you are willing to discuss. Whereas, if you’re fine with a 4-3 vote, if you’re fine with it even going down, but you had the discussion, you had the discussion in public, and that is just very different from how business has been done.”

Shrewd decision-making doesn’t mean ‘easy’ at MPS under the leadership of this Superintendent. Shrewd decision-making can sometimes be full of discussion, argument, and even ‘failure’, but it means staying open to new perspectives and not being afraid to fail.

There was no set process for how many strategic decisions were made in the MPS district, but there were certainly trends and flexible structures, which could be attributed to the strategic leadership of all the administrators in the central office, but most notably that of the Superintendent. This Superintendent spearheaded efficiency, empowerment, trust, involvement, and focus when working towards making strategic decisions in order to maintain a focus on district principles and goals.

**Reactive vs. proactive decision-making.** A theme that emerged as the data was being analyzed was the idea of reactive vs. proactive decision-making and how that impacted strategic decision-making in the district. How the leadership team, and certainly particular leaders within that team, made decisions can be placed on a spectrum from reactive to proactive. No matter where on that spectrum the decisions were made, however, typically there was a common outcome – learning. As part of
being strategic as leaders and making the district as an organization more systemic, they worked to be more proactive or at least routinize reactivity in the most effective way they could and learned from what worked and what didn’t. Below I will highlight some of the decisions made that were 1) reactive, 2) proactive, and 3) proactively reactive, along with the strategic leadership in play to make them as effective, efficient, and strategic as possible.

*Reactive.* Throughout the budget-cutting process the district had to react over and over again to cuts the state made in educational budgets. Because they had little choice but to react to budget cuts, they started from scratch, pooled their resources, and came up with ideas of how to deal with this requirement – making decisions reactively and thus not as efficiently as possible. As discussed in the first section about the definition of being strategic, being proactive with the knowledge to do so allows more time to make decisions and better allocate resources, being both flexible and efficient. Knowing that simply reacting is not the ideal situation, the Superintendent watched for budget cuts ‘coming down the pipes.’ He also brought in knowledgeable persons from the state government, such as legislators, to talk candidly about what might be happening in the near future at public forums like School Board meetings. Thus the Superintendent took a situation in which the district was forced to react, a less efficient way of working than a proactive process, and trying to make it as proactive as he could by gaining some foresight for what kind or how many budget decisions may happen later.
The Superintendent made a point to keep on top of what was occurring in the legislature, particularly regarding budget issues, so he could better prepare his leaders and the district for what might soon be on the way. He did this not only through keeping a presence at the state capital, but also networking with other Superintendents.

At one School Board meeting he shared that at the latest district administrator conference he attended there was a presentation on state funding projections, which highlighted that the ‘best case’ scenario was no increase in funds and the more realistic scenario was closer to $7 million more cuts in the next year for a district the size of MPS.

The Superintendent also maintained relationships with legislators and found ways to publicly share their information so that everyone was aware of the upcoming decisions that would have to be made, as a way to be as proactive as he could. One Senator he invited to a School Board meeting shared the following forecast (taken from fieldnotes):

“[The Superintendent] invited him to come and share some things he knows – although they don’t know a whole lot yet. Just started budget process (he’s on senate appropriations committee). No one in the capital currently has ever had to deal with a budget situation like this – hasn’t happened in a couple of decades. Fiscal 2011 budget going to be difficult and fiscal 2012 will be worse. Won’t know a lot until the Governor gives his state of the state address and budget recommendations. [Discusses specific revenue streams and needs for education as stated by state education department.] Very few places in general revenue where they can come up with that kind of money. Just don’t know right now, but hopes everyone has appreciation for how serious a situation it is. Cuts will be very painful. Have to be realistic in what dealing with and plan accordingly.”

There were no specific numbers of how much the district should expect to cut and no way the Senator could know that to give them in order to plan. He could just tell them to plan to react, which is about as good as the Superintendent could do in the situation,
but none-the-less, the effort to keep an eye on what might happen and guide his district towards possible scenarios, the closer he could get to being efficient and strategic with his resources.

There are exceptions, though, to leaders at MPS making every attempt at being proactive in reactive situations. When making some of the first budget cuts where all the district leaders and faculty were involved (as previously discussed), the central office administrators were attempting to be proactive in a reactive situation by getting all the feedback early in the process to have time to cull through possibilities and make the best decisions. However, they neglected to be proactive for the next possible budget cuts in a very simple way. After they made the decisions for the current year, I was surprised to find that there was no discussion of what might be cut next, like a ranking of possibilities so to speak, as the facilities administrator admitted:

“You know, we don’t. And we’ve talked about that to develop kind of a rubric or some sort of ranking system or hierarchy. Well, you know we’ve cut 5.6 [million] this year. What if the bottom falls out of the state budget and they pull another half million or 2 million from our budget, what do we do next? I think we have some general ideas and we remember some of the things that we’ve talked about around the table that we’ve chose not to put on the list.”

After he answered the question the facilities administrator, however, did immediately start reflecting on the room for improvement in decision-making. So even though this was an area of lost proactive possibilities, the leadership team worked to be constantly reflective so they could better take advantage of those proactive opportunities in the future.
Proactive. The leadership team and individual leaders within it did work towards being more proactive, as the data presented already suggests, but from the data collected, some were simply more prone to that type of thinking than others. In tight budget times finding proactive ways to improve processes and policies had come from some leadership members more than others. The HR administrator developed an incentive (described earlier) for those who gave early notice of retirement, which was a proactive decision with the purpose of allowing her and her staff more time to plan how to deal with open positions, attract quality teachers, and decrease the number of teachers that might have to be let go for budget reasons. The proactive incentive policy she conceptualized and implemented quite simply gave her and her staff the time to think about how to reorganize people instead of firing them. This proactive step worked very successfully, too. This particular leader had worked in the district for literally decades, and had such a clear grasp on her job and how it fit in with other district leaders and functions that she was very good at looking for ways to be proactive in making human resource functions more efficient, effective, and ultimately strategic.

In general, however, proactivity was not found to be as prevalent as reactivity in MPS. This was not for a lack of reflection or intention so much as simply time. Day-to-day operations of the central office, particularly with the mandates and expectations from governmental agencies to be dealt with, were so numerous and demanding that the leaders were working most often in a reactive mode to simply stay afloat. They didn’t feel as though they had as much time to find ways around this reactive cycle they were in. For instance, there was a great deal of data compiled by the research
department in the district, but the administrator in charge of this department was the first to admit that this data did not all have clear intentions or purpose, nor were there compilations of data to respond to typical requests. Those persons in charge of the data were simply put to work with each new request, taking time away from their typical duties in a less than efficient manner. The interview exchange highlights this reactivity:

“A tremendous amount of data is generated by my office and by the business office. And so, we work very very hard to support the instructional process. Whether it be core data...or comparisons between ourselves and other schools, whether it be [state evaluation process] type question, we just provide, I guess, the rest of the team lots of information, lots of resources. Our numbers literally are changing everyday because as soon as we’ll send in corrections now we’ll have new drop-out information, we have new graduation rate and we’re trying to get a handle on when do we finalize data in this district?”

(Researcher asks when create reports or whatever for certain data, such as mobility rates.)

“Good question, how often do we create? I know it’s readily available and I could ask [a staff member] today what is our mobility rate and she could break that down for me by school. Honestly I don’t know how often we track that, I know we have the information.”

(Researcher asks if there is a plan of data querying, a timetable, etc.)

“I don’t think we have a plan as such. Obviously [state data collection software] is kind of a perpetual ongoing, everyday thing now. We have programmers that write queries through just unbelievable talent and so we can query our data and literally find out anything given just a little bit of notice since we have those kind of folks that work for us. So, a plan for data, you know I used to have a data acquisition calendar when I was at [my previous district]. I don’t here because it seems like we deal with it everyday in some way shape or form. The Board’s always asking information. [Gives various examples.] So those kinds of things just continually get asked for and generated.”

(Researcher asks if these requests just come at him from all directions.)

“They are. They’re definitely not strategic.”
(Researcher clarifies: ‘I think we need to know this today’.)

“Yeah, that’s exactly right. That’s the way it’s happened thus far. Doesn’t seem to be a plan for how we generate or disseminate that information anymore than those required reports that happen, whether it be, you know, ACT reports or [state] test scores, those kind of things.”

What’s most telling about this exchange is that this data collection and reporting was indeed a very reactive process, but one that could easily have been proactive. The administrator himself recognized the lack of strategy in the process and had even worked in a district where a proactive plan was in place for what data to collect and how to report it so that less simply reactive efforts where used. If anything, it was really an example of a proactive decision opportunity that had been overlooked.

*Proactively reactive.* There is a midpoint on the spectrum of reactive to proactive decision-making and action that emerged during the data, what I have termed being proactively reactive. As the district dealt with all the decisions they must make in reaction to state mandates, requests, daily issues, etc. they made attempts to simplify their decisions by being as proactive with them as possible. The Superintendent kept an ear to the ground of the legislature in order to have an idea when more budget cuts could be coming is a case-in-point. The district would still have to react to these cuts, but the Superintendent’s ability to prepare them for the decisions that would soon have to be made allowed them a little more time, and thus a little more ability to be proactive with their decision-making instead of making strictly reactive decisions that must be done quickly and under pressure. Such warning gave other leaders in the district time to come up with alternatives to cutting positions, for example, in such ways as a policy for early retirement incentives.
**Candor in communication.** The data gathered from all sources for this study was crystal clear on at least one attribute of strategic leadership that was being implemented very well, most particularly by the new Superintendent: effective communication. Many of the central office leaders provided insight on strategic communication with regards to human capital within the district and other stakeholders, but none so strongly emerged from the data as that involving the Superintendent. Part of that was obviously his prowess in communicating effectively, but part of the reason this attribute emerged so powerful was also because of the lack of candid communication that was utilized by former leaders in the district, particularly Superintendents. This change in communication style had immense effects on the next attribute of leadership to be discussed, building relationships, but first I will discuss three powerful elements of this attribute of strategic leadership that emerged from the data: 1) honesty and openness, 2) achieving clarity, and 3) guiding perception.

**Honesty and openness.** This attribute of strategic leadership is certainly a strategic element of communication but also links to the idea of transparency. By being open and honest as a leader, one is also providing transparency, which is important in a public organization like a school district. Trust and faith thrive when honesty and transparency are utilized by the key leaders in the district, trust and faith both from those within the organization and from those interested parties outside of the organization. With the more efficient communication that can come from honesty and openness can also come more strategic means to reaching district goals and utilizing the human resources to reach those goals.
As the new Superintendent arrived in the district just before this study began, he walked into a situation where communication had deteriorated between district leaders and stakeholders both within and outside the district. He had much to overcome in order to improve communication among various leaders and stakeholders. He did this by being very open, honest, and candid. In public, through various mediums, he gave his honest goals and opinions. With the School Board he wasn’t afraid to bring up difficult topics and give his candid opinion, and with the media he actually made a proactive effort to give them the ‘inside scoop’ so there would be no sense that the district was hiding anything and the correct information would be disseminated to the public. Because of these strategies he was able to get some great results and improve some breakdowns in communication and trust.

As some of the central office administrators explained, the most recent Superintendent was an interim and had health issues, making his presence sporadic and thus communication less than consistent. He was dearly respected as a long-time educator in the district but his lack of physical presence simply meant there was little communication, and little communication can imply a lack of openness on the part of the district. The Superintendent prior to the interim was there for a number of years, but her communication style was less forthright and accessible than the current Superintendent, particularly as her time in the position came to an end. During the last year or two as Superintendent she actually became more and more closed off from communication, particularly with stakeholders outside of the central office. The media unfortunately took her dwindling communication as a big problem and there became a
‘firestorm’ of media around her, as one administrator relayed: “The editorials against
[her were] crazy, it was actually crazy.” Another administrator described her as “in a lot
of turmoil. And she spent most of her time just puttin’ out fires. And so it’s difficult to
be strategic when the editor of the [local newspaper] is all over you doing nasty
cartoons in the paper and all she was trying to do was to survive from day to day...”
Such prior circumstances meant the new Superintendent had some communication
problems to face as he came into the position, and he did so partly by opening up the
lines of communication at all levels and with all stakeholders, as well as taking an
approach of honesty and candor from the very start.

From the start of his time in office, the new Superintendent was open about
what he was doing, why he was doing it, and what his purpose was for both himself as
Superintendent and for the district as an organization. It didn’t go unnoticed. The
curriculum administrator described him as such:

“He is a very open communicator and he uses technology to
communicate, so I think it’s fair to say that both the public and the staff,
both his internal and his external audiences, would say that he has made
communicating openly from the Superintendent’s office a real priority.”

In some of his first correspondence with the media after he took the position, the
Superintendent spoke quite openly about what he expected from himself, even in the
district’s own quarterly report. He also spoke very candidly with me as a researcher
regarding what he anticipated coming into the job, how he viewed the purpose of
communication, and why he desired honesty and openness as a communicator. He
considers such open and honest communication as just part of the job:
“My job is to create enough communications that that voice starts to be heard and problems start to get solved at a much more democratic level. And of course part of that was also why they hired me cuz’ they had sort of a model that wasn’t nearly as collaborative and open and that people didn’t like it and so when they hired of course all the groups they put together that interviewed me were lookin’ for a communicator... “

As part of this openness the Superintendent prompted his leadership team to change the way in which they communicated with the School Board. Prior to his arrival the leadership team often made sure that anything they brought to the Board for a vote would be accepted nearly unanimously, which was due to the leadership and communication style of the former Superintendent, as the former elementary education administrator explained: “… you never asked a question, you never put anything out there that you didn’t know you were going to have a 7-0 vote...and that’s very, that is not where [the new Superintendent is].” The current Superintendent insisted that there needed to be an open line of communication with the School Board and ideas or concerns should be aired openly in order to have intelligent discussions. His goal was not to get a unanimous vote but to get everyone involved and thinking about things, no matter the vote outcome. This provided more open lines of communication between the Board and many of the leadership team members that had not previously existed.

The facilities administrator described the situation:

“Everything that was brought to the Board was second-guessed, was re-worked, and basically spit up and just discarded. And that’s because the Board didn’t have a lot of faith, and that doesn’t mean all of them, but several of them didn’t have a lot of faith or trust in the [former] Superintendent.”

After the new Superintendent had been in the position for a year the facilities administrator explained:
“...it’s working because [the Superintendent] does a really good job again relating and conveying his message to the Board. The Board, with respect to [the new Superintendent’s] leadership, they have complete confidence in [our] leader.”

There was no question that the relationship with the School Board was most certainly changed in a positive way with the open and honest communication style of the Superintendent. There is no question that building trust and communication with the district’s governing body made decision, action, and resource management far easier for district leaders ever since. It also did not go unnoticed or appreciated by the other members of the leadership team. The former elementary education administrator said about the Superintendent, “... one of the things that I am impressed early with [the new Superintendent] is, there’s just certain things he’s gonna say it this way and like it, don’t like it, but we’re not gonna sugar coat it. And I’m liking that a lot.”

The current Superintendent also made a point to proactively engage the media and School Board in news and ongoing discussions in order to keep lines of communication open between the district and it’s more external stakeholders. He also focused on this line of communication with the media in order to ensure media outlets disseminated correct data and didn’t start a firestorm, sensationalize, or misinform. The Superintendent explained it this way:

“I knew it was going to be a media rich world here and everyone just kept warning me about it. I just kept thinking surely it can’t be that bad. And it’s really not. The media reports what they see. I don’t – that’s probably what media is supposed to do. As long as they report it accurately I’m ok with that. And I think we’ve done a better job by being proactive. And if there’s something that someone’s going to pick up on a text message or something I’m going to send out a press release in advance of it just – If I know it’s going to come out I’m going to hit up so everyone has the same information just like we had this little vandalism. I was driving to
[another district] when I got the phone call and well everyone gets excited at first and I said ‘I want a press release just send it to every agency.’ It was vandalism, this is what it said, we don’t know who it is, let’s not let this get any legs. And it didn’t. It got reported in the press, all the press had it. Vandalism is not anything unusual and we’ve done that on several cases and it’s really worked well…”

Such open communication made for more effective use of people and time as Board members were more willing to ask for advice and counsel from central office administrators than they were previously, utilizing their educated leaders more effectively and purposefully, and there was less confusion from improper media reports than had sometimes occurred in prior Superintendent years.

_Achieving clarity._ As discussed in the silos to systems section regarding roles and responsibilities in the central office, clarity was not always a strength of the MPS district. However, as part of the leadership of the Superintendent, he worked to gain clarity, particularly among the human capital in the district. Building such clarity is part of strategic communication because with clarity in communication comes trust, faith, and communal knowledge that all supports the common goal of meeting district goals as strategically as possible. MPS’ Superintendent worked to do this by involving and updating the human capital in the district in various ways that ensured they were all receiving the same message from the same person (the Superintendent most times) and understood what was going on in the district. Of course, clarity was hard to maintain in a district with so many people, so the Superintendent continued to work on improving the communication cycle so there would be more efficient dissemination of information and feedback that was also clear and consistent.
The new Superintendent worked to achieve clarity from the very start as part of his open and honest communication style. He did so not only by making some structural and procedural changes as described in a previous section, but also through finding ways to keep all human capital involved and updated on district action, ongoing decision-making, upcoming events, and important changes. One of the most referenced ways in which he did this was through Friday podcasts updating all employees in the district on current discussions, facts, upcoming issues, etc. The curriculum administrator detailed the videos:

“And he does the same thing internally. He has this little video camera – Smart Phone – whatever it is – and he video tapes messages to the staff frequently. And is so comfortable – they aren’t rehearsed – it’s a way to keep people informed. “I want you to know that we’re going to have a discussion in the finance committee meeting next week or tomorrow and these things are going to be discussed.” When, in a different less immediate way of communicating, staff might have read it in the paper – ‘oh my gosh they’re talking about cuts or they’re talking about whether they’re going to give us raises or not.’ Or they might have gotten an email, but not everybody reads it... so he uses it as a way to communicate, to forestall rumors, and I think people really appreciated that.”

Feedback from these videos was overwhelmingly positive; employees felt involved and important topics were made very clear by way of the Superintendent himself speaking about them directly to each employee via podcast. At a leadership team meeting the human resources administrator shared just how well the videos had been going, as taken from my fieldnotes:

“Clear from principals yesterday that the video broadcast is working out ‘tremendously well’ because everyone is getting same message from him rather than filtering down. Coming across very well.”
So with these video podcasts the Superintendent was able to achieve his goal of being consistent with his message to all administrator and thus build better clarity in communication because everyone knew they got the same information and it came from the leader himself.

The Superintendent also worked to achieve clarity for his human capital by ensuring all administrators fully understood what happened at each School Board meeting and the implications for themselves and their own staff. By doing this himself he eliminated any inconsistencies, concerns, or misconceptions that could occur about important topics discussed at Board meetings. The secondary education administrator illustrated what happened at those meetings:

“...after every Board meeting...the following morning before it hits media or anything...all the Principals and District Coordinators come over to central office. We have a huge joint meeting that starts at 8:00 in the morning and [the Superintendent] walks them through every decision that was made, why it was made, etc. about the Board meeting so they know exactly what happened at the Board meeting. They have the opportunity to ask questions because communication in a district this large is huge.”

When asked if this was something the district had always done she explained that “...for the most part, we’ve always done it. There were a couple of years when [the former Superintendent] didn’t do it and I think that’s part of the communication breakdown that happened...” Not only was honesty and openness part of what the Superintendent did to heal the communication breakdown from a former administrator, but he also worked on getting the human capital involved, informed. All of these efforts were at least partly a venture to make sure not only did everyone have important information but that it was as clear as possible. With such clarity there was less concern and less
confusion about what the district was doing and thus a greater ability to be strategic in managing human resources.

Achieving clarity in this district, however, was not always as efficient as many administrators would have liked. Many central office leaders commented that there were numerous inefficiencies in their use of time and effort because of how information was disseminated or more particularly how feedback was gathered from the district. There were many ways in which the greater community stakeholders could provide feedback or voice concerns to those at MPS, from calling principals to talking with Board members to posting on media blogs, but not all of them were the most efficient way to handle particular issues. The secondary education administrator explained a communication inefficiency or breakdown that occurred because of a lack of clarity either in information or in who the information should be addressed to:

“...the public feels very comfortable going to [the Board] and they by-pass everybody to go directly to Board members. They by-pass the teacher, they by-pass the Principal, they go directly to Board members through email. And then it comes back to us, you know, and that’s not the most efficient way to handle problems. They get the Board members’ email and they email about things that could be handled so much better at the building level and so much more efficiently. And without so much intimidation. Because the minute a teacher knows that someone’s talked to a Board member, that’s intimidating. You know, no matter what’s happened and, you know the teacher should be intimidated, and that’s very intimidating. [But the Board] can’t respond to every issue, so they will back it down ...to me if it’s something that’s secondary, and then I’ll...But then we have to back it back down through the ranks and that’s not efficient. You know when the parent could have so easily have given the teacher a call or emailed the teacher and could have settled the thing...usually it’s like a misunderstanding...it could have been settled immediately. Whereas, you wait several days to get it back down to the teacher level and by that time the teacher is intimidated cuz it’s gone to a Board member and, you know, it’s not efficient.”
Such communication from the community took a lot more time to gain clarity of the situation at hand while also instilling fear, inconsistencies, etc. along the way. Much like the ‘telephone game,’ there were too many people involved when there should have been an easy phone call to one person to handle the problem and in the meantime the whole situation could become misunderstood or overly complicated. It was things like that which made the Superintendent still see many ways for the communication in the district to become simpler and clearer. Part of that comes from dealing with external audiences, which will be talked about in a later section. But concerns that would be voiced through such inefficient cycles as blogs or the above example were diminishing as the Superintendent worked to achieve greater clarity through his own open and honest communication with those both within and outside the district. He made it very clear that any Board member with questions or concerns was welcome to contact any member of his leadership team to discuss an issue or gain clarity and insight on a topic, as he explained in an interview:

“I trust these people and I will tell the Board Member: ‘feel free to call any of my Assistants when you have questions. I’d love for you to call me but really if it’s about this or that just call that individual. If you send him an email send me a copy just so I can know you’ve had that communication.’ And I tell my Assistants if you need to send something to a Board Member...you don’t have to send every email...just let me know. I trust all of you in here to do the right thing and have proper communication with the Board.”

This trust in his team not only allowed greater efficiency since all communications did not have to go through him, but it allowed for instant clarification by those most knowledgeable in a particular area. The Superintendent developed a culture of honesty
and openness via simple communication decisions and the confidence he held in his team.

**Guiding perception.** From analyzing the various data gathered in this study, candor in communication is not simply being open, honest, and clear. It also entails elements of guiding perception. A leader’s decision to be candid in itself is a way of guiding stakeholder’s perceptions of the district as being open and forthright, eliciting a culture of honesty and building a foundation for more trusting relationships. But there are more ways to guide perception in a manner that benefits a district, which the Superintendent of MPS was working to do. Through his communication style he worked to guide perception regarding what the roles of administrators were as well as guiding public perception regarding the success of the district at any given point.

The Superintendent at MPS was very candid in what he said. “Like it, don’t like it, but we’re not gonna sugar coat it” as one administrator described him. Or as another administrator described his approach:

> “You know, he’ll say this and that and sometimes he’ll say things that maybe he shouldn’t say but it’s, it’s truly genuine and honest and people respect and understand that. And it’s worked very very well for him and I think for the district...”

No matter the reaction, the current Superintendent wanted the district’s human capital to perceive the central office as honest, approachable, open, and with clear direction as seen through his decisions to create video updates, be honest with the School Board, etc. However, he also recognized that with honesty also came temperance. Just because he felt the School Board should not be treated with kids gloves, only telling them things they want to hear, did not mean he felt they should be consulted on
everything either. Through his communication he guided their perception of the central office and the purpose of his leadership team as well. By empowering his leadership team and making it clear to the School Board that these leaders were worthy of being consulted, the Superintendent helped them perceive their job as School Board members in the way the he wanted them to – namely, that they were not always in charge and needed to consult members of the leadership team before making decisions. Under the previous Superintendent this was not the perception of the leadership team, and mostly because of a lack of candid communication that then broke down trust between the Board and leaders at the central office. It all comes back to open, honest communication and perception is certainly part of that.

The way in which the Superintendent broached a topic or involved persons in discussions was also his way of guiding perception, but more specifically about the position and success of the district. By being honest and transparent about budget situations, through such examples as previously stated, the Superintendent guided public perception of the district. At the end of this project, the district was doing just fine, had over a 20% fund balance (nearly three months of expenses) and was in a better financial situation than many other districts, which they were very open about. Being this open about the current district financial status and the budget problems coming down the pipeline instead of trying to gingerly step around budget issues drew a certain perception of the district and those working within it: namely, they knew what was going on and they were capable of dealing with it. This perception guided again that trust and faith in the district that had been diminished by the communication and
leadership of previous administrators. By sending out Friday video podcasts to faculty and administrators within the district the Superintendent guided their perception of himself and the central office as well. He showed himself and his office to be honest, open, accessible, and inclusive. All of this made an impact on the culture and climate of the district, which effects human capital productivity as well as the ability to better manage human resources.

It is through this candor in communication that MPS’ new Superintendent was most well known. He made a great deal of changes in his short time but when asked what administrators felt was his greatest strength, it was communication. And the greater community certainly took notice. Not even a year after he took the position, a local newspaper wrote an article about him being the “great communicator” who’s presence in the schools “represents what teachers, Board members, and residents say they enjoy most about the new superintendent: his communication skills.” Because of how successful he was with communication it was easy to see what an impact this could have on the strategic management of a district. Along with communication, the Superintendent and his core leadership team also portrayed other attributes of strategic leadership, as I have and will continue to describe, but candor in communication was so refreshing to this district that it started a strategic ball rolling to fix some problem areas and pave the way for more efficient and ultimately strategic elements.

**Building authentic relationships.** It is through efforts at open, honest, and clear communication as a leader that another very important element of strategic leadership can thrive, building relationships. As interviews and observations were analyzed, it
emerged from both point-blank statements to observations of interactions that building relationships was key to being strategic in this district as a leader. It was from these relationships that human capital was engaged, empowered, focused, and then better utilized to act strategically with regards to decisions, policies and procedures focused on the district’s definition of being strategic: reaching those district goals. To portray this attribute of strategic leadership I will discuss the data regarding the 1) importance of establishing these relationships, and 2) three keys for building these relationships.

**Importance of establishing authentic relationships.** Essentially, as central office leaders establish, build, and maintain relationships with those pertinent to the district, they build a culture of support and trust. This cultural improvement aids in more efficiently and effectively getting jobs done and getting people involved in useful ways, which in turn allows the district to better use their time and resources towards meeting their main district goals. Thus, these relationships are extremely important to build in order to be strategic. It is the leaders within the district that work very hard to not only build their own relationships but help other human capital in the district build relationships as well. If leaders at the central office can help principals build relationships with staff, students, and parents they can more effectively run their school, which in turn helps meet the main district goals.

At MPS central office administrators worked on building relationships in a variety of ways throughout their daily operations and as a part of their work towards meeting district goals. It was the Superintendent who gained the most attention for this simply because his relationship-building was more public than many others. With his savvy
communication skills he was quite good at building relationships, but many on his leadership team were too. Central office administrators made it very clear in their interviews that their interactions with the leadership team, those who work directly for them, as well as those that hold them accountable (such as the School Board, parents, and community members) were a very important part of their work. Observations and document analysis supported this as well. As the new elementary education administrator put it: “The overarching goal has to be, it’s about – broadly, it’s student achievement. But it’s about relationships.” Without building strong relationships with the human capital within the district and stakeholders outside of the district it becomes harder to meet district goals.

Building better relationships with stakeholders that hold the district and central office administrators accountable meant the Superintendent and his leadership team at MPS could make better use of their time and get more accomplished. The Superintendent made a concerted effort to proactively involve pertinent stakeholders in the required comprehensive district improvement process [DIP] in order to do just that, make the process that much easier in the end. The school improvement administrator expanded on the Superintendent’s purpose, as taken from my fieldnotes:

“This was their 3rd [DIP process] and it was done very differently – one thing [the new Superintendent’s] presence changed. She thought his idea on how to do it was “pretty brilliant, actually.” Before they had a community member on the committees in “name only”... She would have never thought to put a School Board member on the committees, but it was true that it is easier to get the ‘nay-sayers’ on board from the beginning. And it really worked out well. [The new Superintendent] involved the Board to increase their understanding and make the process easier later down the road.”
Not only was such a maneuver a strategic move of efficiency and transparency but also a way to further the relationships between district leaders and district stakeholders. Building this relationship was in part to also build more trust between leaders and stakeholders and improve stakeholder confidence in the district as well as simply making acceptance of the school improvement plan go that much smoother, a very strategic move. Because of such efforts to improve district leader relationships with School Board members, the leadership team stopped worrying about ‘stepping on toes’ or presenting only things the Board wanted to hear and instead simply stated the facts, stated their opinion, and opened it up for discussion without worrying about consequences, making the whole process run more smoothly.

Building relationships with those who worked within the district and thus under the supervision of central office administrators was also very important at MPS. Not only did these relationships mean everyone was kept up to date on what was happening at various levels of the district, but it also helped keep the district running more effectively. Each district leader worked to cultivate these relationships with their own human capital, many through regular meetings, like the curriculum administrator relayed:

“I meet with everyone who reports to me monthly, formally, because we are so spread out and we are, you know, all in different buildings and people are running a thousand miles an hour doing their work; leading professional development with teachers, writing curriculum, observing classrooms, so…I have a scheduled time to sit down with everyone who reports to me. In order to give them time, first of all, to share what they’re doing, part of it is just honoring their work.”
Building relationships with coordinators, school administrators, and faculty was very important for making them feel important, appreciated, and generally improve the culture of the district.

Central office administrators also worked to help school administrators build relationships with teachers, parents, and students because the entire district runs on relationships and the more trust and confidence human capital within the district could build with those outside the district, the more they could accomplish. The new elementary education administrator prided himself in his ability to cultivate these relationships when he was a principal so he now works with his elementary principals on developing their own relationships with parents, as expressed in my fieldnotes:

“Really tries to work with families and give them a voice and make them feel heard. When he was a principal he would sit down and join hands with the student and the parent (and say no, we’re not going to pray, separation of church and state) but say to the child that your mom can’t break this bond between us because we’re a team, and I can’t break this bond (b/w kid and mom) because you’re a team and you can’t break this bond (b/w him and parent) because we’re working as a team, etc. And by the time they were through they all felt better. Did this most recently with a principal and a student and their parent and seemed to really go well. But wants to make sure that the parent and student don’t see him as the person to go to, but the principal, so he said he had to run (and principal looked shocked) and let them continue. He wrote the principal a note as he left that they needed to see her/him as the resource/leader so he needed to leave and let her finish with the communication.”

Not only were the central office leaders aware of the importance of themselves building relationships with stakeholders and their own human capital but also the importance of fostering the skills to build those relationships with the personnel that they supervise, the ones most in contact with the students and parents for whom the district works to provide successful experiences.
**Keys to building authentic relationships.** As the compiled data illustrated innumerable examples of district administrators working to build relationships among all the environmental layers and players (see later section for detailed description of these) both within and outside the district, three key elements involved in building these relationships emerged: 1) transparency, 2) accessibility, and 3) trust. From data analysis, it is the first two elements, transparency and accessibility, that built the third, trust. Trust is what made these relationships so vital to the district as it worked to strategically meet its goals and utilize its human capital.

**Transparency.** Since the Superintendent arrived at the district at the beginning of this study, he focused on building strong relationships at least partially through placing importance on being transparent, both as a leader and as a district. Because of his communication skills and style, speaking honestly and openly and expecting the same from others, he made the district seem more transparent to both employees and outside stakeholders. Numerous administrators in the district described him as “down to earth” with nothing to hide. He himself joked at being so transparent, making himself seem even more ‘down to earth’ by making cracks about how he’s not smart enough to hide anything:

“There’s not a thing I’ve got that’s worth me being real private about and – because if you’re private about it it’s probably not the right thing to do. If you can’t talk about it with people then I’m nervous. I just – I don’t think I’m smart enough to do that, one. I just don’t think I could ever pull something devious off like that if I wanted to.”

Part of being transparent is being open and honest in communication, which I discussed above. For the Superintendent it was also illustrated in the data through his willingness
to share his opinion openly and with little concern for reactions. During a meeting with administrators, teachers, and community members about the district improvement process and also at a School Board meeting, the Superintendent very flatly stated that difficult decisions were going to have to be made and they may very well not like what he had to say or what he would have to do in order to work towards their district goals but that was simply the truth of the matter. Not only was this open and honest communication, as I’ve discussed, but it also showed just how transparent he was with his focus, his opinions, and what he would have to do in the future. This transparency was something he was known for and in fact ties to the second key in building relationships in this district: accessibility. Because of such transparency, it is easier for the Superintendent to seem accessible. Not even two years into his position, the greater community made it very clear they appreciated his communication style and relationship-building, as he was voted “favorite local educator” in a city-wide annual ‘best of’ competition published in a local magazine:

“Since taking the reins of the [MPS, this] Superintendent...has dedicated himself to...getting to know our people and the community – in depth and personal. No ivory tower administrator hiding behind closed doors, he has made himself highly visible in numerous public meetings and in the media. With almost 30 years of experience, [the Superintendent] brings a calm confidence to the often tumultuous world of school politics.”

His transparency fostered relationships far and wide both within and outside the district that made guiding the district towards its strategic goals that much easier.
Accessibility. In order to develop purposeful relationships, the data from this study made it very clear that to be strategic a leader must be visible and seen as accessible by the very people they work to build relationships with. To be accessible as a leader in a school district a common theme was to be ‘seen’, particularly in the schools. This relates not just to the Superintendent but also to the rest of the leadership team. Those people who work for and with the leaders want to know they are valued enough to have some time from the leaders and that the leaders are interested enough in their work to visit them and see what they do. Even if a leader isn’t physically present, providing a means by which to make it seem as though they are accessible is just as important. Part of building that accessibility typically involves physical presence, but it can also simply involve attention in some form as well as being knowledgeable about people, their positions, and their work. Following I illustrate how some of the leaders in the district made themselves accessible to both those within the district and stakeholders outside of the district.

Many of the central office administrators made a concerted effort to not only meet with those who directly worked for them on a routine basis but also to be seen out in schools. The facilities administrator, for example, felt it was very important to make routine visits to schools to better understand what physical condition each of the schools in the district was in. He also was very conscious about riding school buses and being present at the transportation center so that the bus drivers and the company they contracted with saw him as involved and accessible:

“Sometimes central office people might just sit in their own little world and not be out and about. I was out on busses, I was observing busses, I
was at bus stops, I was at schools, I was at the bus barn, meetin’, talkin’ to people. I was always visible, watching, checking, talking, you know, actively participating in what they did. They’d never seen that before here at [MPS]. Somebody from central office, you know, what are they doin’ out here? They’re too good to be on a school bus. Not this guy!”

This visibility meant not only that he saw what was going on but that he was seen as more accessible and relatable. To be accessible for many of the other Assistant Superintendents meant to be available and meeting with the staff and coordinators who worked directly for them but also to be present in schools as well. They worked to meet with school principals, do “walk-throughs” of school buildings and observe classrooms not only to gain better understanding of what is happening at the school level but also to show a presence, be available to school administrators and teachers. The school improvement administrator, for example, did walk-throughs in schools at least once a week, meeting with principals and teachers. She also attended many meetings and trainings that her curriculum coordinators were in charge of to be of assistance and show teachers she is an accessible resource. Just before our interview she was at one such curriculum coordinator’s training event:

“…our teachers received their Language Arts materials for the first time and so that was a training that I participated in and helped with. I got there at seven o’clock to help the curriculum coordinator organize a ton of material. Each teacher got a huge box of materials and we had to get those into all the rooms and organize them. And then I was there helping clean up and helping during facilitating from room to room, just making sure people had everything they needed, and to grab [the Language Arts coordinator] when a room had a question. So I really do try to be that hands-on-leader and get in there with our folks who are really working hard to make sure they support our teachers.”
This took up a lot of time in the schedules of these leaders, both within the workweek and on their own time, but they saw it as key to building the necessary relationships for making the district successful.

In this study much of the most discussed aspects of accessibility revolved around the Superintendent. As the local magazine stated above, he made a very concerted effort to be visible and approachable. The Superintendent made a point to constantly get out in the schools, talking to teachers and working with students, because “…it’s a large system, [but] it’s still the Midwest. They want the superintendent to be in their schools, to be at their functions so that they can talk to me, and plus they believe that I know what’s going on.” On top of being accessible to teachers and faculty, the Superintendent also found ways to be accessible to the greater community as the face of the district and it worked from the very start, as a local news article described:

“…[the Superintendent] had the crowd of 100 or so laughing, clapping, and complimenting him…[A Principal] said [the Superintendent] has been available, visible, and approachable. Those three things have led people to believe that they can follow him…”

As part of this effort he accepted numerous invitations to speak at meetings across the community and even outside the city for organizations such as Kiwanis or Boys & Girls Clubs, or as a guest speaker in courses at one of the local colleges. As for these events, he was “…probably doing 2-3 presentations a week. You’re working 30-60 people at a time but you figure that over 2-3 years you really get a public personality.” Along with these engagements, he wrote articles for the local business magazine on topics of leadership or management, got involved with a variety of activities from entering local cooking competitions to co-hosting the annual Christmas charity drive with his wife. He
made a point to keep his image as one of approachable, with help from his public relations coordinator. He had a very clear purpose for his public relations coordinator from day one:

“...I told [the PR coordinator] when I came here ‘you’re going to help me get out in front of the public and to look normal and to look fun and to look, how do I want to say – creative and innovative and that kind of stuff.’ And so when we find options we just go for it. Just like this burger challenge [referring to a city burger challenge he won and got his picture in the local magazine for]. It’s stupid but it’s sort of fun and it sort of made me look fun and I rolled down the hill on a ball for the gifted and talented fund raiser. And we sent that out to the staff, you know – I said something and we did a little video clip with it and they thought that was funny. So things like that are intentionally taken advantage of.”

Part of that accessibility piece is also being accessible not just physically to these community members but also mentally accessible, knowing how to engage them in a way they appreciated, as he illuminated in our interview:

“...this is still a rural Midwest type of feel to it. You know, you don’t have – when I go to the Rotary and talk they want me to talk in a certain way. They don’t want the dissertation and the statesman up there, they want someone that just lays it sorta out and say what you see and be honest about it and take some questions.”

He knew that accessible to one group may not be accessible to others and tailored his presence to each group of people or event.

Such efforts received nothing but positive feedback from the community (e.g. ‘favorite local educator’ award) as well as those within the district, particularly teachers who told him they were very pleased to see him but it’s a “new experience” for them. This accessibility had similar feedback for other central office administrators, particularly the elementary education administrator who worked to be more visible than his predecessor, which showed in his 360 survey feedback: “So in my evaluations
already I’m getting ‘we’ve never seen somebody this often!’” It was through promoting their efforts at transparency, visibility and making themselves seem approachable that the leaders in this district worked towards building trust. Building trusting relationships meant the human capital within and outside the district felt like part of a culture of collaboration, communication, and common goals.

*Trust.* As mentioned above, it is the previous two elements of building relationships that the data showed to foster trust. By being transparent and accessible, it is easier to promote trust among those you are trying to build relationships with, particularly in such a political system as public schooling. With trusting relationships in place the district leaders had less crises and unpleasant situations to deal with simply because less controversy takes place. Then, when there are fires to put out or controversies to deal with, the district leaders can deal with them more openly and calmly. Below I highlight how this occurred and what it meant for MPS in particular.

As previously mentioned, one of the situations the new Superintendent stepped into as he began the job was a district environment that had seen a decline in trust between the levels of the organization. Through the aforementioned elements of candid communication and building relationships through transparency and accessibility, the district leaders worked to restore the trust from both district employees and members of the greater community. Most vital to functioning more effectively as a district, work with the School Board became more open than it once was, because central office leaders were now trusted to be honest with the Board after the Superintendent helped to build a trusting relationship with them. The Board
themselves wanted to improve this relationship and hoped to do so through the hiring of a specific person for the Superintendent position, as the new Superintendent relayed:

“...part of that was also why they hired me cuz’ they had sort of a model that wasn’t nearly as collaborative and open and that people didn’t like it and so when they hired of course all the groups they put together that interviewed me were lookin’ for a communicator, a collaborator.”

The building of such trust led the district to deal with situations differently, more openly and calmly, particularly with a leader repeatedly described as so ‘down to earth.’ When compared with events that occurred before the Superintendent’s arrival, potential controversies were more contained. As an example, before the Superintendent arrived there was a long, drawn out debate about the math curriculum used in the district that topped media outlets for a long time and finally ended when the district gave into community pressures to change the curriculum, but not before media articles painted a less than positive picture of district administrative processes. After the new Superintendent arrived there was a change in Language Arts curriculum that had the potential for just as large a media storm and public concern, but the trust and openness that had occurred between the two time periods prompted a different outcome. The Superintendent again supported the administrators to be candid and honest with the public about what was occurring so that, good or bad, the correct information was being reported. The debacle cleared up very quickly, the district continued with their original plan for the curriculum change, and the media dropped the story with little more said, and work could go on without interruption.

The relationships being built and the culture it promoted seemed to make more time for the human capital in the district to deal with important issues and day-to-day
priorities instead of spending time mending relationships, fixing problems with media or community perceptions, or working on defending themselves in order to get back to the issues at hand. They involved the community proactively in developing new ideas for meeting district goals, further fostering those relationships, and thus worked more effectively and strategically as both individual leaders and a district as an organization.

Empowering human capital. Another attribute of strategic leadership that emerged from the data is empowering human capital. A strategic leader, as found in this data involves not so much managing human capital but empowering human capital. Granted, management is a vital component of a well functioning district, but strategic leadership goes a step further to empower those who work to get the job done, make decisions, have faith in their own abilities, and are given the leeway to do so. A key component of empowering others is instilling in them a sense of trust, knowledge and appreciation that the leader trusts them to do their job and do it successfully. Empowerment also involves the leader giving his or her human capital the tools, resources, and support they need to get their jobs done. Without the trust, resources, and support, empowerment is simply delegation and management. The data highlighted that leaders who worked to empower their employees did so because they saw the benefits as not only helping the district run more effectively and efficiently but also to make their own and others’ jobs more manageable. As MPS’ Superintendent said: “In short, empowerment creates employees who become engaged in the bigger picture of the organization.” Two forms of empowering human capital as I developed
from the data include empowering leaders as well as making purposeful groups, which I discuss further.

When speaking with district administrators at the central office, many of them stated one of their goals in working with their human capital involved trying to empower those who work for and with them. Through observations I watched how they interacted with and listened to those around them, noticing their efforts at empowering those leaders who not only worked for them on a regular basis but also those they may simply be working with temporarily in a committee or group sense. Part of empowering human capital in this district also involved making purposeful groups of people to accomplish goals, going back to the idea of becoming more like a system than individual silos. Making purposeful groups involved bringing together persons with a useful variety of knowledge for different purposes. Not to silo them but to bring multiple insights into decision-making and entrust them to bring new and potentially effective ideas to the table to meet district goals.

**Empowering leaders.** Many of the district administrators at MPS made it very clear that part of their focus was empowering those who worked for them in an effort to first and foremost be the best district they could be but also in an effort to make their own responsibilities manageable, for they appreciated that one person can only do so much. With a strong sense of ‘team’ at MPS, it was not surprising to find from the data that these administrators felt empowering employees was a more successful leadership style than demanding, micro-managing, or simply delegating. Although, if the need
arose it was clear they could and would easily delegate or micro-manage if that’s what was called for.

The Superintendent spoke most specifically of empowering his leadership team, for as he described in an article he wrote for a local business publication, “A motivated, empowered employee will advance the mission and vision of an organization on a daily basis. Empowered employees take ownership of their roles and interact with others in more professional and appropriate manners.” This philosophy had a direct effect on the facilities administrator’s ability to do his job, simply because he was trusted to do so as he hadn’t felt before:

“...part of the beauty for the rest of us that are here, and especially myself, is that [the Superintendent] trusts us to do our job and he does not worry about anything that we’re doing. He knows...that we’re very confident and we have a handle on all of the matters that need to be dealt with back at the office or budget-wise or building-wise or food-service-wise or transportation-wise, you name it. So, it’s, I’m really enjoying this year working with him. Very very much so.”

The new elementary education administrator worked more specifically to empower Principals and help them build relationships with their faculty while the curriculum administrator worked to empower all the leaders under her purview by “empowering those people to use what they know and can do and their capabilities in order to impact instruction.” When asked to talk more about how she accomplishes that and why, she gave a perfect clarification as to the how and why of empowering people:

“...at the Central Office level you have to realize you can’t get a single thing done yourself. You simply don’t have the reach. You can get things written. You can write plans. You - but that all just looks like work. The people – action happens through other people. So you can do that by directing or you can do that by empowering. And if you do it by empowering then I think you’re guaranteed a better outcome. That
doesn’t mean there aren’t times that any one of us [might say for instance]...“I want you to think in this direction and not that.” But most of the time it’s about putting the right people in the right places... providing the professional development or the opportunity for collaboration so they can do what they need to do, and then giving them autonomy to do it...sometimes it’s kind of defined autonomy but giving people the trust inherent and not second guessing their every decision.”

One of the district administrators, the HR administrator, did not speak directly about empowering those leaders who worked for her, but data from other interviews and observations showed her skill in doing so. The new elementary education administrator, a former Principal, related that both as a Principal and now as a district administrator he looked to her for mentorship and brainstorming, knowing she would challenge him, give him solid advice, but also help give him the tools to succeed in his ventures because she was “good at what she does, she is open to new ideas, she always has kids as the main focus, etc.” There were not many leaders who directly worked for her under the district structure, but she liked to see herself as the supporting role to the rest of the leadership team and Principals when it came to human resource functions.

In this way she allowed them the freedom and power to do their own jobs because she trusted them to make decisions and come to her for critical opinions and facts on how a decision would potentially impact human resource functions. For example, she described her role as follows when it came to the decision to cut Science Specialists in the district:

“They conceptually come up with a plan and then I have to put the people in. They pretty well decided ‘this is what we want to do’ and then I got invited in to listen to it and to ask my questions, figure out what concerns I have about it, but the bottom line is it would not be me saying or weighing in on it. My job is to serve them. I’m the one that’s providing all the data and the information and so while I’m not making
the decision to cut the elementary Science Specialists, I am the one that is presenting the information that we are the only school district that has elementary Science Specialists.”

Like many of the district administrators, part of empowering other leaders in the district in their minds was giving them the tools, resources, and support they needed to do their jobs, make difficult decisions, and implement policies or programs working towards district goals. Sometimes that may even look like letting others taking the lead and playing the supporting role, like the human resources administrator described.

Making purposeful groups. Part of empowering human capital is also utilizing them in appropriate and efficient ways. As the district worked towards becoming more systemic, district administrators continued utilizing some district structures in place regarding leadership teams or committees. By making purposeful groups of people with specific tasks, the district leaders empowered these people and trusted them with the ability to make decisions on their behalf and become part of the district structure, not only bringing more ideas to the table but also promoting ‘buy-on’ from more players both within and outside the district, again building those relationships. Purposeful groups that were developed within the district included School Board committees, district improvement plan committees, world café meetings with the community, and even leadership team meetings, as I will explain.

There were numerous School Board committees that were in place for many years, such as the finance committee, communications committee, etc. that involved not just School Board members but district administrators and “critical friends” from the community with the purpose of brainstorming issues and policies. These committees
were indispensable for multiple reasons, namely efficiency and buy-in. The facilities administrator accentuated their usefulness as he described why they were developed in the first place:

“It’s evolved in all of these committees – Student Performance Committee – that have at least two and many times three Board members on the committee. So all the really nasty work is done at that level, but with the buy-in of two to three Board members on that committee and then when we come to the Board meeting and present the idea in public, and it’s always presented by a Board member, it’s incredible. I’m going to write a book. It is the best model. And what that does is it takes all of that off of my shoulders and it’s a shared responsibility. And I feel like now my role is more of a facilitator, an organizer, a strategizer, because rarely do...I have this long presentation at a Board meeting anymore.”

The Superintendent continued these purposeful groups with fervor both within the district and outside of the district because of the success and efficiency of their design. In fact he took their construction and used it to complete another daunting task, the DIP process.

The Superintendent, as mentioned, decided to tackle the district improvement plan revisions by making five separate committees, one for each goal area, consisting of teachers, administrators, school board members, and community members, in order to gain not only diverse perspectives and ideas but also to garner buy-in at an early stage. He empowered each group to make all the decisions for their assigned goal, including how to structure the meetings, when to meet, and how to develop their final strategies for each goal. This was in an effort to “get the ‘nay-sayers’ on board from the beginning” and make the process easier for everyone involved, and as it turned out at least one of the central office administrators considered the idea “pretty brilliant.”
The Superintendent also instigated the making of purposeful groups completely outside of the district in order to tackle difficult district issues such as the achievement gap. In his first year the Superintendent suggested a “World Café” to get input from the community on the goals being made for the new district improvement process, which garnered a great deal of constructive feedback from the community, even though there was some concern from an academic perspective. An academic scholar in attendance shared his concern about the lack of actual objectives being used by the district to serve as goals and markers for progress. Despite the potential lack of quality objectives, the practice of the world café attempted to empower the community and help them feel like they held a voice in district decisions.

Within the district, the Superintendent continued meeting with his leadership team, as was in place before his arrival, but empowered this group to meet and make decisions even in his absence, trusting them to know what they were doing and consult him when they felt it is necessary. He essentially “flows in and out” of meetings with the leadership team, trusting them to take care of the business at hand while he handled other district responsibilities. Other district administrators developed purposeful groups when they deemed it useful in order to gather feedback, brainstorm an idea or issue, or make decisions with input from various district stakeholders or viewpoints. This too empowered leaders within the district so that the district could work more efficiency, effectively, and ultimately strategically. It is this attribute of leadership that really works to take the relationships built and put them to use for the
district in a functional way for the efficiency of the district as it works to meet its strategic goals.

**Structured and focused flexibility.** When drawing out attributes of strategic leadership from the data, the concept of flexibility kept emerging from the discussions with and actions of leaders in the district. It was not just flexibility, however, but a type of structured flexibility that was not flexible to the point of confusion but flexible with a clear focus that was deemed strategic in this organization. This idea of structured flexibility is not simply being adaptable, though that is part of it. It also involves freedom on the part of leaders to be flexible enough to let others take the lead and work on new ideas but provide them with the structure to be successful. The structured part is vital because too much flexibility becomes wishy-washy or willy-nilly and causes confusion and tangents. As I went through the data, part of the structured and focused flexibility is also being persistent with innovation, though not in a bullish way. The persistence in innovation is tempered by the focus provided and the openness to adaptation or new ideas that might improve the innovation. However, again there is an element of temperance so adaptation does not become too yielding or elastic. It is a fine line, but an important line. The following discussion will help distinguish between the nuances of this attribute as I show how the district leaders utilized structured and focused flexibility as well as the persistent innovation element.

**Focused but flexible.** The central office that the new Superintendent came into was too flexible in some ways. As previously mentioned, the former Superintendent developed job titles that overlapped, had positions in the central office with no job
descriptions, etc. that made roles unclear and the organizational chart confusing. Thus, the new Superintendent enacted his “desk audits” to make sense of it all because “It has taken weeks for me to get a straight answer to the question ‘how many people work in your area’?” Essentially the former Superintendent was too flexible with the organizational chart, which caused confusion and inefficiency since so many people didn’t understand their job description or what human resources they had to help them in their position. This was one of the first things the Superintendent tackled when he entered the job so that the organization would be clearer to everyone and could work more effectively. As a leader, in fact, the new Superintendent was very flexible, but focused. He was open to new ideas and better ways to get things done, allowed his team the flexibility to take a policy or procedure and make it better without strict oversight, such as supporting the human resources director when she wanted to develop a new retirement incentive policy. But with that flexibility he also provided structure. As discussed in a previous section, he worked to make some of the structures and policies of the district more efficient, more systemic, which in turn allowed leaders to be more flexible around those structures because the focus was clear, the expectations were clear, and their roles were becoming clearer.

Other central office administrators under the new leadership of the Superintendent were able to work off his support and deal with problematic inefficiencies. If the Superintendent had not focused on structuring the organization better, making it more consistent, but maintaining malleability in thought and action, other central office administrators would not have been so easily able to fix the
inefficiencies in their own areas. The new elementary education administrator, for example, walked into a situation where the former administrator had been rather fickle about the transfer policy in the district making it more of a ‘guideline’ that he could manipulate than a ‘policy.’ As the new elementary education administrator described:

“...I got a call recently and it said “I want to go to [a particular elementary] School.” I said “Oh, do you live in the [school’s] neighborhood?” “No, but I’m in so-and-so’s rotary.” “Great! But if you move to the neighborhood you can go there.” “Yeah, but I know so-and-so and I was like, I guess that worked in the past...And that’s what I like about our boss [referring to the Superintendent] is that...I truly believe that he is a progressive at heart and really believes in doing what’s right...”

The media also picked up on this problem when the new elementary education administrator made a very public structure to the transfer policy in order to be consistent, as quoted from a local newspaper story:

“[The elementary education administrator] took initiative in seeing the district more strictly adhere to the [transfer] policy, with the support of the school board and administrators. For years the district granted transfers liberally...but that was contradictory to district policy, which says transfers should only be approved if there is educational need.”

Those within the organization as well as those outside the organization appreciated the structure and consistency as well as the flexibility to innovate or allow for equity or extenuating circumstances, for he still was going to “take into account things like if a student wants to finish an additional year or if they have a sibling at a certain school.”

Better structuring of a policy like this meant the organization had clear goals, foci, and priorities but didn’t close itself off to innovation and improvement. That’s part of being strategic.
**Persistent and innovative.** Another element of this structured flexibility that emerged from the data is the idea of being persistent and innovative, a structured flexibility in and of itself. It is not being blindly persistent. It is being resolute and determined with ideas and innovation but tempered with the focused structure of not only district goals but also an openness to constructive criticism. It is intelligently limber determination towards change. The new elementary education administrator most pointedly portrayed this. He, much like the Superintendent, had dozens of ideas for ways to improve the district and worked through them to find the ones that he felt would be the most effective, most pertinent, most doable and focused on them with a very structured self-evaluation sheet of how he was going to complete each one, what timeframe he had to do so, and what his end goal was with each one. Many of these ideas were very innovative, at least compared to what had been done previously in the district. Two such programs were a small autonomous schools initiative and a special college-prep summer program for gifted students that worked to address a piece of the achievement gap, as he described:

“And then [this] is a program I do. It started two years ago with [the gifted program] to immediately talk about that problem with how few students of color or free-and-reduced-lunch kids are in our gifted program. So, it’s a summer program and its 15 kids, and they spend the entire summer school with the gifted teacher and they get – it’s based on the work by Richard Rothstein from Columbia University who talks about, he kind of talks about an Enrichment Gap contributing to the Achievement Gap. Because rich or upper middle class kids they go on summer trips, they go to national parks, they go to museums, they read or they’re read to, and our poor kids, they may increase their capital, their social capital, but it doesn’t translate into upper mobility, right? And so this was, so these kids that participated they got chess lessons, and swimming lessons and tennis lessons and golf lessons and trips to [a local farm] and met with naturalists at [a state park] and went on campus and
worked in labs, and then they spent a week at [a local college] in the afternoons and they would spend each day for five days in a different major, and then they got College 101, so we talked to them about financial aid with their parents and then did a graduation at the end of that week where [the local college] said that “if you get into [the local college] we will give you a scholarship.”

Innovations like this were part of how the district looked to new ideas, typically based on research, to address problems and district goals. This particular administrator was full of new ideas so innovation was not a problem and he didn’t easily take no for an answer, so persistence was not a problem either. Where he got help from the Superintendent in particular, was with focus, the temperance of this structured flexibility attribute of strategic leadership. The Superintendent took this attribute of strategic leadership and added his own form of restrained focus to help the new elementary education administrator not get so ambitious or so innovative as to throw off the strategic progress of the system. When this administrator, for example, showed the Superintendent his long list of initiatives and ideas as part of his personal scorecard, the Superintendent made it a point to help him focus on one or two that might best meet district goals for that year, providing that structured focus to his persistent innovation.

With innovation, though, comes naysayers and challenges. The new elementary education administrator recognized this but didn’t let down, persisted, to see his innovative ideas at least brought to the level of discussion with pertinent persons. He shared the following as how he visualized his persistence:

“I like, gosh, we were just reading this book Running All the Red Lights ok, and so the whole idea is that you get up to a red light and you can decide if there’s urgency you’ll run it, or you’ll make a right on red, or you’ll just
sit and wait. I never sit and wait. I’m always looking for just a different way."

This could be very problematic if such a strong leadership style came with blind persistence. However, he described his persistence in ways that highlighted more of a focused flexibility. He was always focused on the goal, the idea, the innovation, and ultimately helping students. But with that focus he was flexible as to how he might actually make things happen with the innovation. It may not play out the way he expected, just as long as it played out in some way, he was adaptable because he knew to be successful it’s vital to adapt.

**Creating, innovating, and reflecting.** Among the attributes of strategic leadership that emerged as part of data analysis, the last one I’ve identified in this study reflects the ability to be creative and innovative while maintaining the reflection and humbleness to critically evaluate one’s creativity and leadership. The administrators at the central office serving as the main focus of this study provided a number of examples of how this attribute played into district function and leadership as the organization worked towards being more strategic. As discussed above, innovation is something that was seen through such leaders as the Superintendent, the human resources administrator, and the elementary education administrator, among others, as they worked to develop novel ideas to old and new problems as well as find ways to be proactive in district effectiveness and efficiency. All of this while maintaining some flexibility to various people, affects, or situations and reflecting on their work. This leadership attribute speaks to two key elements in particular: seeing the big picture and reflexivity, which I will discuss more in depth.
**Big picture.** Seeing the big picture provides focus, guidance, and consistency for those helping the leader make decisions and run the organization. But it is even more than that, seeing the big picture and reminding those the leader is working with of that picture, that purpose, that goal, is also challenging their thinking to go beyond today or this one item and put it in context of the bigger idea or purpose. This means promoting creativity, innovation, and essentially reflection in yourself and others as a leader. It also brings out clearer expectations while questioning the ‘tried and true’ or ‘institutionalized’ way of doing things that may simply be tradition and not focused on the strategic goals of the organization.

In the MPS district the big picture was provided most distinctly and consistently by the Superintendent. As the new Superintendent began his term at the start of this study, he made a point to remind others what the goals were they were working towards when decisions were being made like these regarding budget cuts. He kept bringing attention back to the district goals that were to guide district leadership and action. He worked to provide a clear, focused direction for the human capital in the district as well as the community outside the district. By keeping such a clear focus on the big picture or “bread and butter” goals he called them, the Superintendent made various stakeholders challenge their thinking on issues they felt important – reminding them to think of it in terms of how it might actually meet district goals, not in how important it was as an issue itself. One such example came up during talks of what the district mission should be in a DIP committee meeting, as taken from my fieldnotes:

“Superintendent – The mission should be so well defined we can say when people come to us that something being suggested is not part of
our mission. For example: adult education is a noble thing but is it really part of our mission? With the budget cuts can we maintain it? Like the IBM's of the word – in tough times go back to the mission and use it to determine what to cut.”

The Superintendent made it very clear how the big picture must come into play as well as how important providing structure through a district mission would help keep everyone focused on that big picture. In fact, he took some difficult steps as a newcomer to the district when he questioned elements of the district that may have been taken for granted as the only way, or the best way simply because it was what had always been done. The suggestion to look at cutting science specialists is a prime example, as the curriculum administrator described:

“Science Specialists at our 4th and 5th grades had been here since before anybody could remember. Maybe 40 years...it really took an outsider, it took somebody, [the Superintendent], or anybody who hadn’t grown up in that system to question it. But of course once he questioned it, it was like there’s no other district in the state that has – everybody teaches Science. What do you mean your 4th and 5th grade teachers can't teach Science? Everybody does it. It was like to him – to us it was to anybody who had been here, normal to have Specialists. To everybody else in the world it was very unusual.”

This perspective was at times controversial because it was indeed innovative or at least to those used to the district tradition or history, but it was a way for him to promote reflection in others and potential innovation during challenging decision-making times. This reflection was something he also expected from others as well.

**Reflexivity.** District administrators in the central office all showed a form of respect or appreciation for the ability to critically reflect upon their own and others ideas and actions through interviews and observations. Some most certainly utilized this attribute more than others, but all displayed at least some feeling of import for
being reflective as a leader and its impact on others. Part of this reflexivity is humbleness, the ability to know you’re not always right, which some of the leaders portrayed more than others. Part of this is also critical thought, questioning, seeing different perspectives or ideas in order to challenge your own or the traditions of the organization. In every sense of the word, there was reflection occurring in this district by most if not all of the central office leaders, some were just more attune to it than others. Either way, it was a vital attribute of strategic leadership and this idea of creating, innovating, and reflecting because without reflection upon creation and innovation it is hard to stay focused towards those strategic goals and make productive strides toward them.

Even in the middle of my interviews some of the district administrators were actively reflecting upon their thoughts and actions as leaders in the district. In fact, after I had interviewed a few administrators one of them said, as I was thanking her, “My pleasure. [Two other administrators] were right, it’s fun! Causes each of us to be very reflective, anyway. You know, we don’t often stop and think about these things.” Which, based on the data, for some administrators that was a fairly true statement, but for others, including the administrator I quoted, they really do reflect often on their actions. Sometimes they even found the time to reflect upon the greater district functions and organizational attributes. But I found that they really looked to the new Superintendent to focus on that and help each of them find a way to do so themselves amidst the day-to-day firestorm that is public education administration. Some central office leaders even reflected as part of a daily routine.
These administrators reflected in their own ways and some even reflected on how to better be reflective. For example, the facilities administrator had a long commute to and from work, which he used to reflect, particularly on the big picture since that is the area he had the least amount of time to focus on daily, as he explained:

“It’s also hard to be strategic when it seems like...all we can do is just work as hard as we can work in our 10, 11, 12-hour day and have very little time to reflect and to think or to plan because to be strategic you’ve gotta’, you’ve gotta’ get away from what you’re doin’. You’ve gotta’ see the big picture, you know, as they say, you’ve gotta’ be up on a balcony and look at the patterns that start to develop and I get to drive 45 minutes to work and to home and so that’s my thinking time, my strategy time and it’s very beneficial to me actually. If I’m active...I run everyday at the end of the day...and so that’s my thinking, my strategy time, I talk in a tape recorder on the way home and but during the day here, you know, today started, I got here at 7:30...I have meetings all day long - solid. I have 30 minutes for lunch then my boy, who’s a freshman, has a football game tonight. So, you know, it’s gonna be a pretty fast-paced busy day, but little time to be strategic except that think time that I make myself have everyday.”

Another administrator, a year after our first interview, was very excited in our follow-up interview about her new method for reflecting and innovating that she took from some elaborate system another administrator had in place for his reflection. So in the second year of our study she excitedly told me about this new system when I asked her how she knows if she’s being strategic or not:

“I wish I could say that I daily ask myself that, but I actually have started this year keeping a little – when [the new elementary education administrator] joined the staff in July he had all this complicated series of notebooks and I have really gone electronic. I don’t keep anything – you know if I take handwritten notes in a meeting I scan them and I’ve really – and I thought you know, but one of his little notebooks seemed to be just for thinking so I started that too and I really like it. This really is just my thinking journal. So I’ll – in the middle of a meeting, maybe, I’ll have a thought that’s sparked by the meeting but doesn’t have anything to do with the meeting – or home at night when things occur to you or
whatever. So and most of this is strategy. Nutty ideas...outside the box thinking, that sort of stuff, or self-reflections on my own work. And then I go back and read it because I try not to write to do’s in here because that’s not the point. The point is a place to incubate ideas and then I’ll go back and read them. Some of them I’ve done and some of them I haven’t. Many of them I’ll write down overnight and then race in here and talk to somebody else about – ‘what if we try this and what if we try that.’”

These various reflective practices used by the central office administrators provided not only a calm time to think but also allowed them to really challenge ideas and innovate new ones. This can even be so beneficial as to come to the point that they “race” back in to the office the next day to talk to someone about a new concept, innovation, or way of improving the system towards meeting their strategic goals. The reflexivity allows for creativity and innovation, which a strategic leader needs in order to work towards and meet the larger organizational goals. But it’s not the only attribute of a strategic leader, for as this section described, five other attributes of strategic leadership helped MPS as a district work towards it’s definition of being strategic and making itself the “best school district in the state,” as stated in their organizational vision.

Section IV: Environmental Layers & Players

From the first interview through the last document, the impact of various environments on the decision, actions, and functions of the district was indisputable. The more intriguing part of that discovery was how many layers of environments could be developed, instead of the rather typical internal versus external dichotomy. As the district central office is my unit of analysis in this study, I conceptualized the environmental layers around the central office, exploring how they relate to, involve, react to, and integrate themselves with various players both within and outside the
district. It is the subtle to obvious interactions with and involvement of these various players with the core leadership team that delineates the four environmental layers: 1) core, 2) internal, 3) peripheral, and 4) external.

Figure 2
Environmental Layers & Players

Core Leadership Team:
Superintendent
Assistant Superintendents

Internal Environment
Leadership Team:
Superintendent
Assistant Superintendents
Specialized Administration:
Central Office Administrators/Coordinators

Peripheral Environment
Governing Bodies:
School Board
State & Federal Government Agencies
Administrative Body:
School Administrators/Principals
Instructional Body:
Teachers/Instructors

External Environment
Clientele:
Students
Parents
Interested Parties:
Media
Greater Community

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of how I interpreted the data using a layered sphere figure. The center of the sphere is the Core, meaning the core leadership team. The leadership team consisted of the Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendents, as they worked typically as a team to make major decisions and take pertinent actions affecting the district. Although the Superintendent was the
designated leader of this team, they functioned more as a team with a leader than a leader who looked to a supporting team of assistants, thus they as a whole made up the core. As the curriculum administrator explained: “[we work] in the collaborative team kind of structure that I’ve talked about. We have a staff meeting weekly and that’s where we vet everything...” This core leadership team was also considered the core because they were in-tune to or included in every major decision impacting the district, even though sometimes that role simply meant they were the last to examine and potentially approve a decision or action that might have developed originally in a district department or committee. As the entirety of Chapter 4 has described this team and how it functions, I will say little more specifically and instead discuss the other layers according to their influence on the core and its ability to be strategic.

**Internal Environment**

The internal environment consisted of the core leadership team along with specialized administrators in the district. These specialized administrators included coordinators for each curriculum area, professional development coordinators, research coordinators, public relations coordinators, etc. To anyone outside the central office building, these specialized administrators were considered ‘central office staff’, but to those administrators within the central office, they were considered slightly differently, called by their building name as a group instead of central office personnel. Each of these specialized administrators also reported to one of the core leadership team members, as portrayed on the organizational chart, so there were distinct differences
between these administrators and the administrators that made up the leadership team.

Even though some of these specialized administrators were housed in a separate physical location (though this is to change in the next year with the building of an addition on the main central office building), they were generally part of central office administration because their work, decisions, and actions, were done at the central office level as opposed to the school level, as they were typically only present in schools for site visits, consultations, etc. like that of central office personnel. They were also looked to for support and guidance from school-level administrators and personnel, much like the core leadership team, but actually would often be contacted before any of the leadership team would on matters because they were sort of the middle management on curriculum areas and program areas, such as science, math, or school improvement.

Regarding their interaction with the core leadership team, these specialized administrators often worked with the central office administrators on initiatives, strategies, etc. for the district instead of at the school level. However, their decisions and actions, though sometimes made in conjunction with the core leadership team, was focused more specifically on their particular area of responsibility, such as science, research, or professional development. The core leadership team used them as their support, their focused intelligence on the multiple responsibilities each leadership team member had in their purview. The leadership team members made strategic decisions about programs, curriculum areas, etc. based off the information that these specialized...
administrators gathered and reported to them, whether it was numerical data, feedback, observed practice, etc. Without these specialized administrators the leadership team would have been missing a big part of their cognizance about the district. But also, these specialized administrators were the hands of the leadership team in many ways as well. For example, the curriculum administrator and the elementary education administrator worked very hard to be in schools as much as possible, but they were only one person. Their curriculum directors or professional development director could get into schools more and help teachers and administrators with concerns, improvements, etc.

As support personnel for central office administrators, these specialized administrators’ decisions and actions typically had to be approved or verified by one or multiple members of the core leadership team. Some decisions and actions they were empowered to make, such as how to help a struggling teacher. Others, though, they were also empowered to make, but more like spearheading something that would then go to the core leadership team for discussion and approval. For example, changing the curriculum for math would certainly be spearheaded by the math coordinator, but he would not have the authority to finalize that decision. Something like that would be taken to the leadership team to discuss and evaluate before ever being brought to the Board for consideration. These specialized administrators were also held accountable by the core leadership team for their particular piece of district function, and the coordinators often saw one or more of the core leadership team members as their ‘boss.’ For example, the school improvement administrator spoke throughout our
interview about the curriculum administrator being her boss or supervisor and how she looked to her for guidance and approval on decisions and actions she was accountable for.

In a way this structure was silo-ed, as each of these specialized administrators had a distinct purpose that they were held accountable for. However, in another sense they were part of a greater system. In a district this big the system worked only when people were clear about their role in the system but also felt empowered and trusted to work with others at all levels of the system. Many of these specialized administrators collaborated with themselves as well as leadership team members on certain ventures or problems. The clear line of authority and delineation of roles was necessary to diminish confusion so that the system could work effectively. As an example of the system structure, these specialized administrators were not involved in the leadership team meetings, but were often utilized as specialized persons of knowledge for the team to turn to when making difficult decisions. This means sometimes they were indeed brought into meetings with leadership team members to aide in discussion and decision-making, as the school improvement administrator described:

“I tried to make myself - when [the new Superintendent] first came and we knew that we were going to need to revise the DIP, and so you know that was a great opportunity for him to see what my role could be in that process to support him, and so pretty much from the very beginning, you know, he called me over with all of their meetings in planning the process and, yeah... I think I’ve been utilized in the same capacity as everyone else so - you know I don’t sit in on the Cabinet meetings that they have every Tuesday, which is absolutely wonderful. I mean that’s – I respect their roles and who they are and what they need to do and that is their meeting and that’s fine, and whenever they want to invite me that’s great to. But what I do – so I don’t go to the Cabinet meetings on Tuesdays, but every Thursday [the curriculum, elementary, secondary,
and human resource administrators] have their weekly achievement meetings...and I have been a part of those for the past couple of years.”

The strategic nature of this middle management level is tricky. The leadership team utilized their knowledge, expertise, and proximity to school leaders and teachers to certainly aide in decision-making. However, this was one of the more silo-ed portions of the district. At the leadership team level, if one team member were to be absent the others could step in pretty easily because of their knowledge of each other’s work and their team mentality. However, these specialized administrators were just that, specialized. The math coordinator could not just step in for the science or language arts coordinator. The school improvement administrator could not just step into the public relations administrator’s job or vice versa. In a district this large such overlap was not part of the system, so in that respect at least this part of the district was more like a system of silos that interact. But because of the leadership at the central office level at least that silo-esque system was typically led toward strategic district goals in a consistent manner.

**Peripheral Environment**

The peripheral environment is a very complex layer. The players in this layer were not as involved as the internal environmental players in MPS’ district decision-making but were not as removed as the external environmental players. They were all certainly involved in the communication cycles or feedback loops in place within the district, but not so tightly as the internal players and not so loosely as the external players. Most unique to this environmental layer is that the three bodies within this layer have very different degrees of impact on the district and have very different
functions in the district organization, but all still in a peripheral way: 1) governing bodies, 2) administrative body, and 2) instructional body.

**Governing Bodies.** The governing bodies of the district are tricky to categorize and describe in relation to the core leadership team. Consisting of the School Board as well as state and federal government agencies, each of these governing bodies had a great deal of influence on district decisions and were included in the making of district decisions, but could also be guided and manipulated regarding what they were told, how they were included in decisions and action, and how they were generally involved in district affairs. The School Board and the government, both having governance properties over the district, were also utilized and involved in very different ways from each other. Essentially, the district leaders were far more proactively involved with the School Board while they were generally reactively involved with the state and federal governments.

**School board.** The School Board as a governing body was directly involved with district functions, policy making, and actions. They in fact had to approve or disapprove new policies, changes to the budget, hiring requests and suggestions, new goals and initiatives, etc. That was a large part of their purpose. Thus, what the internal environment did was greatly influenced by what the School Board had approved or how the School Board would react. Even how leaders chose to involve the School Board or take action in spite of the School Board was part of their strategic plan to get done what needs to be done to make the organization move towards their strategic goals. Therefore, how a core leader chooses to involve or interact with the School Board can
very much influence how smoothly the district runs. This interaction even went so far as to impact how those within and outside the district view the success or accessibility of the district. It can be a very difficult body to balance as a core leader, but one that is essential. As previously described, the former Superintendent only told the Board what they wanted to hear, brought up things for discussion she knew would get passed unanimously, and eventually ended up fostering mistrust between the Board and the core leadership team. The new Superintendent on the other hand was very open, honest, and willing to bring any policy to the Board for discussion and it worked to the district’s benefit, for trust was growing and more decisions and actions were occurring because of it. He also worked to proactively involve the Board in activities and functions like World Café’s, DIP committees, etc. to maintain those positive and fruitful relationships not only with the core leadership team but also with the external environment, so the external players saw the progress of the district and involvement of the governing body.

However, it was not all a bed of roses. This governing body could really impede strategic movement even with the strong proactive relationship-building the Superintendent and his leadership team worked to foster, as the Superintendent reported in our interview:

“I love my job but boy, sometimes Board members just irritate the hell out of me. Well I work on building that trust and I told the Board President today that I’m just through with two Board members. I’ve done everything possible to reach out, to offer information, but at the last Board meeting they came and dropped something on all of us without calling the Board President and telling him it was an issue or concern they had and they surprised us with it. I said ‘well they don’t respect me so too bad. ‘ I’m just going to do my job...just the way it is
because you can’t try to please all the Board members - at some point. But I mean most of them you can. Still 90% of our decisions everyone agrees on. But those little ones you just have to say I won’t please them but in January or February when they evaluate me you suspect probably those two Board members will evaluate me less strong because I didn’t support their viewpoint of how something should have been handled. And the other 4 or 5 will support me and you know, we’ll move on.”

But part of being a leadership team member was knowing how to handle this governing body, particularly the Superintendent who handled most issues with the Board. And part of his strategy was just to know when enough was enough and work around it, having faith in the other relationships he had built and moving on towards district goals.

**State and federal governments.** The state and federal governments, on the other hand, were far less directly involved in daily action, function, policymaking, etc. than the board at MPS. However, their presence was felt constantly, a key difference between them and the School Board as governing bodies. Although the School Board certainly made their presence known, the governmental body was absolutely constantly present in all decisions and actions made in the district. The internal environment constantly felt the presence of the state and federal government agencies through such things as making sure they didn’t break any state and federal laws, ensuring that decisions they made and actions they took aligned with mandated goals (like NCLB), reporting required data for mandates and evaluation purposes, or simply staying cognizant of what it meant if they didn’t meet mandated goals and must deal with federal sanctions. And frankly, often this governing body was far more disturbing to strategic action than the School Board. For example, the district has some schools in level three corrective action from NCLB sanctions, which meant they had to bus
students from one school across town to another school if that child so chose, without federal funds to support those transportation costs. In many ways for the district this was not a strategic use of their resources, but a mandated one.

The state and federal government presence was also felt, particularly recently, through budget decisions. It was mostly because of federal and state budget cuts that the district was constantly “tightening our belts,” “trimming the fat,” and brainstorming ways to make resources more efficient. The way in which the internal environmental players interacted with the state and federal government was far more reactive than their interaction with the School Board, whom they could be more proactive with since they had more flexibility in working with the School Board than with mandates sent down the chain by the state and federal government. One of the only ways the district had to actually try to work proactively with state and federal governments, to get their message heard and their concerns taken to heart, was by making pleas to the legislature, calling coordinators at the state education office, and making relationships with governmental officials to keep their needs and concerns heard. The core leadership team had one member who served as the official representative to the legislature, the facilities administrator: “You know, I’m the Legislative Liaison for the district, I make visits to the capital on a regular basis and meet and discuss with legislators our priorities.” But the Superintendent also worked to develop relationships with legislators and state education officers, brought in legislators to School Board meetings, etc. to again build those relationships with key players. Keeping on top of what these environmental players were doing allowed for more strategic reaction time
and building those relationships fostered more listening of concerns and gaining potential allies, a definitively strategic move when trying to deal with budget cuts, mandates, etc. At least with the School Board the internal environmental players could work a little more collaboratively when there were issues, via School Board committees, meetings, and fairly consistent interaction. With the governmental body it was more difficult to find ways to act strategically because there was little wiggle room, but that simply meant the core leadership team worked more on the innovative side of action and how best to work around the difficult stipulations provided by this governing body.

**Administrative Body.** The administrative body at MPS was made up of school administrators, basically Principals and Assistant Principals. As I combed through the data, this body of school administrators best fit into the peripheral environment because they were not as closely involved with the decisions and operations at the central office as the internal environmental players, but they were certainly more involved in decision-making for the district than the external environmental players. This is not to say that they were not involved in decision making on a regular basis, for at MPS they actually were. But their decision-making involvement could still be categorized more as input and implementation than truly being involved at the heart of the process.

**Input.** The input of the administrative body was often gathered as part of an administrative feedback loop for many district decisions or policies. These school administrators were consistently involved in central office functions through leadership meetings, School Board de-briefings, professional development opportunities, etc.
However, they were generally invited to these meetings or required to attend as part of their duties. It is not that they were part of the day-to-day decision-making process that the core leadership team works within, but that is not to say that they weren’t integral to the process at MPS because they certainly were. Decisions were often made with the “input” of these Principals, and sometimes decisions or initiatives came about as an idea that even began with one of these administrators or his or her staff. But all of that came back to the leadership team to talk about, discuss, and ultimately make the final decision. Most often input from these school administrators came either from direct contact with the elementary or secondary administrator (whichever was in charge of their school) or through the monthly meetings they attended after a School Board meeting where they talked with the Superintendent and then split up to meet with their school level administrator. The new elementary education administrator described one of these monthly meetings with all the elementary principals in the district:

“So we talk about things that affect all Principals and then split up into our elementary and secondary groups. Then the way that I’ve organized our elementary groups is in four Professional Learning Teams. There’s a data team, there’s the exceptionalities…there’s the family community, and there’s curriculum and instruction. And above that is an advisory team, I originally called them leadership but really it’s advisory. I never really asked them how they felt about the name actually. And that’s made up of almost a leader of each of these four teams. So the whole idea is that I don’t lead all these teams. It’s got to be Principals taking on ownership. It came as a direct feeling of frustration and I just thought, I just knew we weren’t moving anywhere. I would go to these monthly Principal meetings as a Principal and it would be a lot of ‘sit and get’ and they’d say “oh we’re going to do a book study” but the book study would always be last on the list and so we’d never get to it. OR ‘what do people think about this’ and we’d spend all this time on whether or not we should do the Papa John’s fundraiser as opposed to really talking about curriculum instruction or active engagement and those kinds of things. So now these four teams, they meet all together but then at the day after
the Principal meeting they bring any action items that come to the whole group for a vote. So like, the Communication Team – they said ‘you know we really want to know at our family events, who is coming to our family event and who isn’t coming so we can really be more strategic in how we attract families.’ [Goes on to discuss how they decide to attack this problem].”

Obviously principal administrators have the opportunity to bring up their own issues and problems towards meeting strategic goals, but it was generally facilitated by a member of the core leadership team and ultimately the decision was made by that core team, not the principals. In fact, sometimes the principals really were more involved by giving feedback than anything else. For instance, a decision being made at the core leadership level was often simply worked over with principals as a form of feedback, not as a team effort like the leadership team would engage in. The small autonomous schools initiative being developed by the elementary education administrator is one such example, was he described:

“Oh, in terms of, well Principals give me feedback and I seek out the feedback, I seek out their honest criticism, especially for this small autonomous school thing. I presented this to the Assistant Principals on Thursday and it was a very spirited debate... It was a great argument. So, but it’s was great feedback.”

However, these administrators were also given a lot of leeway when it came to what happened in their own schools, as long as those decisions and actions were in line with the decisions made by the central office.

**Implementation.** MPS may have given these administrators the flexibility to make decisions that effect how their schools and faculty function, but with that also came accountability. These administrators were held responsible not only for the functions of their schools but also for the proper implementation of decisions,
initiatives, and programs created and approved by those in the internal environment. In essence, these school administrators were the ‘street-level administrators’ of the district, in charge of taking care of things at the school level as decided by the central office administrators, putting those central office decisions (made to meet strategic goals) into motion. Central office administrators also used these street-level administrators to filter information to school personnel, enact initiatives and goals in their schools, and coordinate a host of school functions, all tied back to district goals and expectations. For example, part of the purpose of the monthly meeting following the School Board meeting was not only to keep consistent and clear communication flowing but also to entrust the information and decisions made at the Board meeting to the hands of administrators so that they could then share that information with their school faculty and guide implementation of decisions with their faculty. These administrators did the leg work and in return were involved to a certain extent with decision-making, but as facilitated by the core leadership team.

**Instructional Body.** The instructional body at MPS consisted of those persons who were teaching and instructing, having daily contact with students for the purpose of educating. While developing these environmental layers it seemed counterintuitive that governing bodies, school administrators, and instructors could all be considered as the same environmental layer, as there is an inherent hierarchy of accountability. However, when developing environmental layers from the viewpoint of the core central office team, their interactions, and their decision-making for the district, it indeed emerged that the peripheral environment was composed of these three bodies, just at
slightly different levels within this layer. Along with the governing bodies and the administrative body, the instructional body was by no means as closely involved with district-based decisions and actions as those within the internal environment but they were certainly more involved than those in the external environment. The governing body was more closely related to the internal environment, as seen in Figure 2, because of just how much impact they had on district decisions. The administrative body is next because of how involved they were with district decisions, and the fact that they were utilized in the district as middle-level leaders between district administration and the instructional body. Therefore, the instructional body of the peripheral layer is furthest from the internal environmental layer and closest to the external environmental layer because that was how they were utilized within the district – still part of the district internal feedback loop, but not integrally involved in internal district decisions.

The instructional body had the closest contact with students and arguably the biggest impact on student achievement among the district’s human capital. They were the street-level bureaucrats of MPS, the vital implementers of programs and initiatives developed at the central office to meet district goals. They were in the classrooms every day implementing the policies put in place by players at other environmental layers and seeing the ultimate pros and cons of district policies and functions as they related to student outcomes. The trick with this position is that as implementers who saw the student-level effects of many decisions, they were also those with the least consistent input streams back to those who made the ultimate decisions, the central office leadership team. Typically their input was gathered through multiple channels,
few of which were direct. The central office leadership team only typically met with teachers when they actually visited classrooms or were contacted directly by these instructors with comments or concerns. Teacher feedback was more typically brought “up through the ranks” via school administrators and coordinators. These teachers and instructors reported most directly to the administrative body within the peripheral environment but also provided feedback to and reported to certain district coordinators, particularly if they taught in a specific curricular area, such as science or math, because these curriculum coordinators made a point to have meetings with their instructional staff throughout the year. For those teachers there were two consistent avenues of feedback, through coordinators who then reported to the curriculum administrator or through school administrators who then reported to the elementary or secondary education administrators. For MPS this was considered a strategic way to work with all of their human capital because there were defined avenues of communication for feedback and information dissemination. But as the Superintendent’s arrival highlighted, it was more than that. This instructional body felt more involved and appreciated when they actually saw the core leadership team members, particularly the Superintendent. That then built a culture of trust and appreciation, which meant better capacity for meeting district goals. The Superintendent’s presence in the classrooms of this instructional body was a “new experience to them” because “they want the Superintendent to be in their schools, to be at their functions so that they can talk to me, and plus they believe that I know what’s going on.” The Superintendent “wants to be seen and wants them to know that
I’m interested in what they’re doing” because he knew that this would produce results by improving the culture of the district and the instructional body’s perception of the central office, which prior to his arrival was viewed more as a separate delegating entity, which inspires few to work to their greatest ability in meeting strategic goals.

When delineating this instructional body from the external environment in MPS, this body most certainly had a voice, and the central office made a point to gather their input, but typically they did so only at the persistence of the instructional body or the discretion of the internal environmental players. So in this way, they were most certainly external to the internal environment. But these instructors were also included in decision-making, at least for their individual schools and sometimes as preliminary input for central office decisions through staff meetings, district correspondence, administrative filtering of information, etc. that the external environment was not privy to. For example, when large budget cuts were going to be made, schools had faculty meetings where the faculty themselves came up with ideas for cutting programs in the district that were then taken to the central office leadership team to examine, an instance of gathering input from the instructional body in order to make district decisions. Their feedback, as opposed to that of the more external environment was more directly disseminated in many ways. However, as other parts of this chapter have illustrated, their input could have been elicited even more in some instances to work strategically towards goals that weren’t being affectively met.
External Environment

As shown in Figure 2, the external environmental players are those furthest from the core. These players are those who, even though they were more consciously involved with the new Superintendent, were still mostly ‘informed’ or ‘invited’ to be included in decision making or functions of the district, not part of the daily system of decision or strategy-making. This environmental layer can be split even further into two components that interacted differently with the core leadership team, but still were external to decision-making in the district: 1) clientele, and 2) interested parties.

Clientele. After constantly comparing data from interviews, observations, and even documents, it became clear that students and parents were treated much like clients in a provider-client relationship at MPS. Much like a business organization, the district worked for their clients and evaluated their success a great deal by client successes. In MPS’s case those successes were most often student test scores, graduation rates, etc. The students were the main clients, but the parents as guardians of these students were clients as well and sometimes far more vocal ones. The core leadership team worked to provide quality services to these clients in various forms, all centered around the district goals, two of which directly utilized student successes as evaluation markers. Sometimes, however, the nature of the relationships meant not all ventures were as strategic as they would have liked.

Students. Students were overwhelmingly regarded as the main focus of the district by leaders and teachers alike, as portrayed in the district’s new mission: “To provide an excellent education for all students.” With that in mind, students were still
discussed and involved much like a client would be, as opposed to an active player in district decision-making. Student success may have been at the heart of the district’s purpose as well as a primary marker of success, but students themselves were not nearly as involved in the district functions and decision-making processes as anyone in the core, internal, or peripheral environmental layers. At best they provided input, but truly only through certain avenues. It was through mostly such things as student advisory groups and annual surveys that students provided feedback to the district. Otherwise it was their test scores and assessment outcomes that provided the most feedback and impetus for change or action to the district, and that was on a far more impersonal level than feedback from the former environmental players. In this instance students were not providing feedback as students so much as representatives of the success or failure of district functions. This was a far different relationship than even the peripheral members had with district decision-making. This was certainly not an accident, for the district leaders looked to their educated personnel to give them feedback about student success based on their experience and knowledge of pedagogy, student skills, etc.

These students were indeed involved in decision-making in a small, organized, and intentional way at the district level that delineated them from the parental group. The annual district improvement plan surveys were also sent to students to fill out on various aspects of how they felt the district was doing, but there was no indication that these surveys were a strong source of feedback for administrators besides getting an idea for general morale and climate or any obvious concerns. Besides these surveys, the
students were directly involved in decision-making in the district in one prominent way, student advisory groups. The Superintendent made a concerted effort to gain feedback from students so that he not only saw the administrative and instructional viewpoints of district function but actually got feedback from the clients, the markers of success themselves on how the district was doing, what they thought could be improved, etc. And this worked again on building those relationships in the district as well as providing clarity and accessibility. The Superintendent described these groups in our interview:

“I started advisory groups. I have a secondary student advisory and a junior high student advisory. And to meet with them and say ‘here’s the deal, we’re here to talk about whatever you want to talk about. I will put some things on the agenda but you can refer the questions to me and we’ll put it on the agenda.’ And people have said ‘well we finally thought we’re being listened to. We’ve never had this before.’ I don’t know if they’d never had that before or if that’s just their perception.”

This feedback from the students seemed to be more of a practice in communication, accessibility, and essentially building cultural capital within the district. But that too was strategic, for it can help the district run more smoothly when students feel like they’re being heard and have access to a district leader when they have a concern or idea. Like with any client, they want to be heard and it’s a strategic leader who listens to those concerns. Students were an important part of the external environment on this level, even though they had little actual control over or influence on decisions in the district.

Parents. Parents, too, were treated similarly to clients when it came to the district, but their input on decision-making was really more on a school level in a consistent way and only at the district level when either party made a concerted effort. Essentially, parents were the guardians of students so in turn they were clients as well.
The district worked to provide the best possible environment of learning for students, not just because that’s what was best for the students, though that was key, but also because they must provide for the parent’s expectations and insistence as well. Parents were certainly not directly involved in district strategy, function, or decision-making, but their voices were part of those providing feedback, and sometimes more insistent than others. Environmental players from the internal environment received phone calls from concerned parents frequently, as did members of the peripheral environment. These parents were looking after the best interests of their students, as a voice for those underage clients of the district.

It was through phone calls to administrators, phone calls to School Board members, voting for School Board members, interactions with teachers and students, as well as interactions with the media and greater community that provided parents their means of being strategically involved with the district. But this was mostly all on them as parents to make the effort to contact the district and get their voices heard on an issue. They were really more involved in decision-making at the school level in the district, serving on PTAs, interacting with teachers about particular decisions for their students, etc. At the district level they overlapped quite a bit with the next layer, the ‘interested parties,’ because they were part of those external interested parties, just with more at stake. The core leadership team recognized this, and involved them much like the rest of the community via invitations to serve on district improvement committees, invitations to open forums, etc. To the core leadership team that was what they needed from parents, for them to offer feedback and input in very specific ways
through committees and forums, that was their strategic use of this group. So let’s look more at that the last external group, those interested parties that share much in common with parents.

**Interested Parties.** In an organization where the focus is on students, those persons not directly working for the district or those persons who do not have students in the district can become forgotten in the discussion of a district as an organization. That would be a mistake. The data from this study provided countless examples of how the media and the greater community impacted both the district as an organization as well as the human capital within the district who made daily decisions regarding the function of the district. So we look to the role that these two interested party groups, the media and the greater community, played in the decision-making and actions of the core leadership team towards their strategic goals.

**Media.** As the public relations administrator at MPS said “This is a very media heavy town.” Thus, the media in MPS’s community had a great deal of influence on the decisions and actions of this district, mostly through their ability to inform and inspire environmental players into action. Because of the media’s incredible power to inform and motivate, the core leadership team tried to proactively involve them in many different ways and at various functions, particularly since the new Superintendent arrived. The district extended an invitation for the media to come to multiple school activities, School Board meetings, public forums, press conferences, etc. to keep them involved in a productive manner. It was precisely the fact that central office administrators often determined when and how to involve the media that the media is
most certainly an external environment. They can’t simply be part of district personnel and neither would they want to be, for their function is to report what is going on as an external entity to the rest of the environmental players. They were by no means part of the internal decision-making or strategic functions of the district or provided their input to district leaders in a collaborative way. However, the media’s actions certainly had an impact on district functions, both positively and negatively, thus why they are part of the environment layers.

The media in this community included multiple television, radio, and newspaper outlets that were consistently covering news involving the district, its students, parents, and personnel. This meant that everything the district did was under scrutiny. An example of a problematic media involvement was actually one that the core leadership team had little control over and was forced to react to as best they could, the local newspaper blogs. This media outlet became a particular problem because of how the School Board responded to this external environmental source. The secondary education administrator described the problem:

“If you have 8 or 9 hits about an article [on MPS], that’s a real red flag to [the school board]. Well just think about all the people that didn’t hit there, you know. Yeah, so. Anytime there is a school article they’ll say comments and they’ll...Yeah. To give you an example, we looked at the data regarding the DARE program and the fact that the research showed that the DARE program is not really something that keeps kids off drugs. You know, is it a good program? Yeah. Does it build relationships with officers? Yeah. But when we, when the school district had to pick up additional money for the school resource officers, like we had to start paying half their salary this year, and those officers were out of those buildings so much because they were doing DARE. We looked at the research and we looked at the model and the fact that we’re paying all of this money and we said we need our school resource officers in our secondary buildings because they are our largest buildings, they are our
buildings where we have our most challenges and they don’t need to be going out doing DARE. We can pick up the curriculum pieces of that in our Health with kids. Well, our Board said what will come of that, what will the community say? What will...well let’s give ‘em the research. And so when we put that our there the first thing that some of them did, not all of them, they went to the blog to see what the blogs were saying. And fortunately the blogs were saying at that time ‘oh I had DARE when I was in high school, never did me any good. They were more than overwhelmingly in favor of getting rid of DARE. But had they not been, you know, it would have influenced the decision and we might still have DARE and have a model that’s not efficient.”

The media itself was not influencing district decision-making, but they were the spark that instigated action from other environmental players that did in fact impact decision-making and the leadership team’s ability to work strategically.

Knowing that the media would cover anything and everything to do with district functions, the district central office had set itself up in a way where everyone knew that those uncomfortable with ‘media skills’ could divert attention to more comfortable persons, such as the coordinator for public relations. The core leadership team trusted its human capital to interact with the media and the public but they were also ready to shield them from such attention if needed. The public relations administrator described the media interaction process during situations that could be problematic and how the district worked to proactively forestall any issues:

“You know if we’ve – especially in crisis situations. That’s the biggest time where that kind of thing is important, because what kind of words are going to scare parents? What kind of words are going to be truthful to what’s happening? Do we have enough information to say what we want to say yet? Or if we say that will it be wrong? And so those are all things that we have to think about any time we have a crisis situation...we have to take the things that we say and how we present them very seriously because we want to make sure that the message is coming across clear and concise and that parents are getting the message, our community is getting the message about what’s happening.
Often times the schools will direct the media back over here, immediately. So once that happens usually there’ll be several people that will be coming in or trying to find me if I’m not here, saying ‘okay here’s what’s going on and this is the situation’ because we know immediately that media will hear it on the scanner. I mean there’s no time lapse between, so we have to be very quick to be able to answer the questions that they have because the worst thing that can happen is for there to be something happening and no one knows that something is happening. So we have to be very quick to share information quickly, to make sure that the information that we’re sharing is accurate, so that we aren’t miscommunicating with people or sharing information that – also information that may be detrimental to completing an investigation down the road.”

There was a lot of thought, planning, preparation, and strategy involved in working with the media so that the district could function as effectively as possible. Because each time a backlash from media occurred that meant something else had to be dealt with before the work of district function continued, which slowed things down and compromised relationships, efficiency, and efforts towards meeting strategic goals. As part of this strategy with the media, the district invited them to contact district leaders and cover events occurring within MPS so that they could relay that information to the greater public and more quickly facilitate information to that influential environmental group, as I speak to next.

**Greater Community.** The greater community may or may not have students or family members directly involved in the district as an organization, but each person in the greater community had a stake in the success or failure of MPS and thus were involved in the function of the district in some way or another, although most certainly on an external level.
Members of the greater community, as individuals, all pay taxes that help maintain the district, they vote for School Board members and taxy levys that run and fund the district, and they all have some sort of relationship with those persons, entities, or organizations that partner with the district in many ways. These individual persons had far less direct impact on district decisions or functions and thus less influence on the work towards district goals, but we cannot forget that they DID have an influence in some way. Mainly through the media outlets, these individuals in the community learned about the district, how it was functioning, and who was in charge of those functions. This is why the core leadership team worked so hard to proactively engage the media, so that all these voting and tax paying community members had the true story of what was occurring, reported correctly, and thus were better informed voters. The district learned the hard way when a tax levy didn’t pass that the greater community can have a detrimental effect on district function when they lose faith in the district. But the Superintendent worked on the communication breakdowns and the core leadership team worked hard to change the general impression of the district as well as inform the public through the media, public forums, press releases, and community events just how important the levy was and their work paid off when the levy passed the second time it was proposed. Many times these more general community members can be forgotten when focused on the environmental players closer to the core, but the Superintendent worked to keep these players involved, or at least make them feel involved and informed, which proved successful to the leaders’ abilities to guide the district towards its goals, with the funds to do so.
Organizations in the greater environment were also vital to MPS’s function and success, although again in a more external way than other entities. The district, much like the other external environmental players, tried to proactively involve these organizations but also had to react at times to their influences as well. Through such programs as Partners in Education, businesses within the community partnered with schools to provide services, money, or time. The public relations administrator explained the program:

“And then we also have another branch that is Partners in Education which is a program that we’ve had for now 27 years in our district and it pairs businesses and organizations with schools and programs within our district to kind of share resources, work together to accomplish goals when it comes to student achievement – those kinds of things.”

These partner organizations may not have directly impacted decision-making by bringing them to the strategic table, but the presence of those partnerships and the persons involved with those certainly had a better avenue by which to be involved if they so desired, through interacting with district personnel, getting involved with the media, etc. In that way they put ideas in heads, were a buzz in the ear of leaders they interacted with, etc. Just being in the schools provided them with more influence on decision-making. The district’s desire for them to provide this partnership also influenced decisions because decisions must be made to do what was necessary to keep these programs and at the very least leaders had to keep building these relationships to maintain these organizational partners which provided great resources that helped administrator and instructional faculty succeed in their functions.
Local institutions of higher education played an even larger role in district decision-making and function than some other organizations simply by way of their partnerships with schools, teachers, and central office administrators. These institutions partnered with the district to place student teachers in some of the schools, serve as knowledgeable persons and partners in implementation for various grants, offer educated persons to serve as ‘critical friends’ in district planning and improvement meetings, provide professional development classes for administrators or teachers, and more. Through these various inlets, higher education institutions could gain a strong and fairly consistent voice in the district. However, these were typically invited opportunities or at the very least opportunities instigated by the outside organization but okayed by those within the district. Sometimes this was informal, such as simply asking a professor to serve on an improvement committee, and sometimes this was a more formal process, such as making student teachers go through the human resources hiring process. Thus, these higher education organizations from the greater community were external to the district but had ways to become involved in a manner that affected district function. The human resources administrator offered a prime example of how the core leadership team proactively involved these higher education institutions to help meet district goals through a grant focused on one of the district goals:

“And so we have been gathering data about [attracting highly qualified minority candidates] and it’s come to light that really the [local university] is not helping us in this process, and so we have brought that data to the [local university’s] attention and said “look, we need to change things and we need your help to change it.” How much the [local university] wants to take that on is still probably a question to me. It’s difficult to sort of light a fire someplace but we are currently in the process of writing a grant in which we’re asking them to collaborate with

245
us on, initially it isn’t asking them for any dollars at this initial state because I think they feel they are unsure about what they can do and I’m not sure that they see the same passion that we do for what – that we have to have a more diversified workforce to meet our student needs. So we’re in the process of writing a grant. So gathering all of that data about our underrepresented teachers and confronting our local colleges with that data, and asking “how can you partner and help us with it”.

This not only provides an example of how the core leadership team worked to proactively involve partnerships with higher education institutions, but also how these partnerships could be difficult to manage. This in and of itself influenced the district’s ability to be strategic towards it’s goals because higher education institutions had their own processes and goals that the central office administrators had to work with if they hoped to get the expected partnership benefits. But those benefits could be remarkably useful when the partnerships worked out.

The data I gathered in this study highlight that in a public educational system such as the ones we have in the United States there really is no person or entity that is completely unable to affect the decisions and functions of a school district. Even those considered external to the district have ways of being involved that influence a district’s ability to be strategic.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

As this researcher once described with her co-authors (see Scribner, Smylie, and Mosley, 2008), a school district and its workforce can be compared to a baseball team. Rosters are formed, players are trained and prepared, data is gathered and consulted for game-time decisions, players are continuously managed and developed over the season, and various persons and organizations both within and outside the ballclub affect the management and success of the team. Unfortunately, in many ways there is more knowledge of how best to manage the workforce of a baseball team for success than there is on how to successfully manage a district workforce.

This study was completed in an effort to lay a better foundation for remedying that lack of knowledge and help better manage our district ‘teams’ for success by addressing a few key areas of missing wisdom. Prior to this study, research was just beginning to develop a knowledge-base of districts as organizations and the system of workforces within them. Individual human resource functions have been examined, schools as systems have been investigated, and more general ideas of human resource management have been discussed, but little is known about how to strategically manage a workforce in a district organization. How do we expect school districts to reach lofty goals and accountability mandates if they don’t know what it means to be strategic in a district or how best to strategically manage their largest and most valuable resource: their human resources?
Therefore, this study served to lay a foundation for learning much more about how districts can strategically manage their human capital systemically as a highly reliable and continuously improving organization would. This was done through an exploratory case study of one district completed over two academic years that focused on two key research questions: what does it mean for a district to be strategic, and how does a district go about being strategic? By answering these questions for one district the foundation could be laid to better glean the same kinds of information from many other districts in order to compile a thorough understanding of how a district is strategic with their human resources and what that looks like. Based on the data compiled from the study this chapter will serve three purposes: 1) discuss what strategic means and looks like in the studied district, 2) illustrate conclusions from the findings, and 3) provide implications for practice and research.

Discussion

This section will serve as a discussion of the theoretical implications from this study, as guided by the aforementioned research questions. I will first discuss a definition of strategic followed by a discussion of the various environments influencing the district that answers some big questions about being strategic. Finally, I will offer a discussion of what being strategic actually looks like based on the studied district. Drawing from the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter Two, this section intends to provide additions to the literature surrounding districts as organizations as well as highlighting the importance of this study in offering a definition and picture of strategic in a school district.
The theoretical framework conceptualizing this study really works to guide the discussion and conclusions drawn from the findings. In fact, there are many relationships that can be drawn between the strategic definitions and behaviors of the district studied and the organizational theories framing this study. When looking back at those framing theories and their place in this discussion, we can view them in the following way: strategic human resource management (SHRM) theory provides the management and structural elements that are considered strategic, through horizontal fit, vertical fit, and flexibility (Delery, 1998; Smylie, et al., 2004; Wright & Snell, 1998). High reliability organizations (HROs) provide a guide to the behaviors that allow for successful and sustainable organizations based on human resources, using characteristics such as reliability, contextual clarity, contingency planning, facileness, fluidity, accountability to the system, and generativeness (Ericksen & Dyer, 2005; Roberts & Bea, 2001). Continuously improving organizations focus on the systems of continual learning that are flexible enough to provide sustainability of a school district (Fullan, 2005; Supovitz, 2006). Pulling all of these theories together I will lay out a theory-building discussion based on the findings from MPS (Midwest Public Schools) regarding what it means to be strategic, the role played by environmental players in being strategic, and finally what strategic looks like in a school district. For a key gap in the literature this study worked to address is how do we as researchers or practitioners know strategic when we see it? Empirical studies such as this one can help paint that vital picture.
A Definition of Strategic

As discussed in the literature review, research and literature to date cannot offer a clear definition of strategic, particularly as it applies to school districts and their management of human resources. The best to date offer ideas on and characteristics of ‘high performing districts.’ From the present study I can provide a definition for consideration. At MPS, strategic simply meant to align decisions and actions to the three school board approved district goals in order to successfully meet these goals. More specifically, strategic meant to meet these district goals by using foresight, pre-emptive planning, and knowledge-based innovation, as described in Chapter 4. This researcher recognizes that in a different district this definition might need to be altered, but there would most certainly be some pertinent commonalities.

From the literature, what is known about defining and being strategic, particularly in a school district, is so general that it could benefit from some specifics offered in this study. Thus, we need to unpack this definition of strategic a bit to provide more useful theory-building on this topic. First and foremost, strategic means to have very clear district-wide goals that are disseminated clearly, consistently, and continually across the district and are particularly well engrained in the minds of district leaders and decision-makers. As Datnow & Stringfield (2000) highlighted in their research on school reform, the first condition of a highly reliable school system was “a finite set of clear goals” (p.186). From this goal-centered foundation leaders can align their decisions and actions more successfully. Much like the principle-based element of SHRM, to be strategic a district aligns themselves to their main goals (their principles),
organizing their actions and functions around those goals, as opposed to making action-based decisions. Every decision and action made by district leaders must first involve reflection on how it is aligned to and will help meet those clear district goals. As described in Chapter 4, at MPS an example was the adult education program. As useful as this program was for the community, when tough budget decisions had to be made, the Superintendent pushed leaders to really reflect on how this program met any of the three main district goals. Ultimately the answer was that it didn’t. Constantly linking back to and reflecting upon the relevance of decisions and actions to each district goal is strategic. Like it or not, doing something because it feels good or may simply support external constituents but does not support district goals is not strategic.

In addition to meeting those district goals MPS highlighted that strategic means meeting those goals in a certain way – with foresight, pre-emptive planning, and knowledge-based innovation. Foresight allows the ability to see what might be developing in the near future that can affect decision-making. Keeping close tabs on developing state mandates, potential budget-cuts being proposed, etc. all while staying focused on those district goals is having foresight. Pre-emptive planning means being as proactive as possible when making decisions and actions so as to limit the amount of reactive decision-making. An example would be developing clear research guidelines and purposeful questions for the wealth of data districts collect these days and having a plan for how to put that data to use towards district goals. Pre-emptive planning also means making clear, written, long-term plans from which to build off of. Facilities plans, five or ten-year budget plans, communications plans, etc. that layout timelines for
maintenance and updates to facilities, how money can be saved and spent given certain scenarios for the future, or simply what the plan of attack is for communication crises like weather cancellations is strategic because these plans lay a foundation for clearly defined action. These plans also provide support for the final element of the strategic definition: knowledge-based innovation. Knowing the current function and status of the district, what has been done successfully or un成功fully in the past, and using that knowledge to develop innovative solutions and programs to meet district goals is strategic. At MPS developing an early notification of retirement incentive in order to proactively prepare for recruiting, placing, and retaining staff in the next school year is knowledge-based innovation. Highly reliable organizations also utilize foresight, preemptive planning, and knowledge-based innovation in an effort to maintain their reliability, respond to issues before they become problems, and create new ways to attack a problem based on a thorough knowledge of the organizational system, just as MPS did (Ericksen & Dyer, 2005). Each of these three elements shared by a school district and highly reliable organizations tie back to the simple definition of strategic: to meet district goals.

**What About the Environment?**

As described in Chapter 4, there are many environmental players involved in the decision-making and action of school districts. Players external to the district as well as those more internally involved influence the leadership and function of a school district in many different ways, both negatively and positively. External players involve those external to the core decision-making persons, such as parents, students, the media, and
tax-paying community members. Those players on the periphery (being more involved than external players but less so than internal players) include governing bodies, school-level administrators, and teachers. Finally, internal players include all those making the daily decisions, functions, and management actions for district human resource management, namely the Superintendent and his core leadership team as well as district-level coordinators such as subject area coordinators, research directors, and professional development directors.

These environmental players have a far greater influence on district decisions and actions regarding human resource management than the literature has implied. The interactions between the district and these environmental players are key to being strategic. In fact, it is how district leaders, structures, and functions adapt to and plan for these interactions that separate the strategic from the non-strategic. Strategic districts learn to proactively involve environmental players in a way that most benefits that definition of strategic previously described: meeting district goals. Reactivity (as opposed to proactivity) results more often in extra ‘fires’ to put out, relationships to mend, miscommunication to correct, and thus less effective use of human resources and management of those resources. Proactivity allows for more flexibility and adaptability to the environment and thus a better chance at being successfully strategic.

The idea of being *successfully* strategic prompts some big questions that arise from the study of being strategic, the first of which is: can a district or district leader be strategic and *fail*? Along the same lines, can a district or district leader succeed and *not* be strategic (or *accidentally* be strategic)? The answer to these questions boils down to
one vital element, the environment. As discussed, the way in which a district and its leaders interact with the environmental players both within and outside the district core decision-making group plays a large role in how strategic (or not) a district is.

So, can a district or district leader be strategic and fail? Yes! Taking what we know about MPS as a district and learning how they define and act strategically does not guarantee that they will succeed in meeting their district goals. There are environments at play that can hinder their ability to succeed if and when they don’t plan for and/or react to the influences of these environments in beneficial ways. Adaptability is a huge component of being strategic simply because of environments. A district that doesn’t adapt to its environments successfully is a district that will have a much harder if not impossible time succeeding. But even being adaptable, sometimes the environment can cause a district to fail. The No Child Left Behind legislation has made MPS, for instance, look much less successful in their goal to improve student achievement, even though they are working to adapt to this governmental environmental player. The key when a district or district leader fails is what they do next to get back in the game and work towards being strategic again, adapting to those constant environmental forces.

What about being accidentally strategic? Or succeeding and not being strategic? Again, yes, that is possible. Like it or not luck is involved in running a district. District structures and leaders can accidentally adapt appropriately to environmental layers and players in a way that lets them succeed. However, is this sustainable? No. Strategic structures and behaviors allow for sustainability, as I will address further below. So one accidental strategic action does not a strategic district make. Because of that we need
to know what actually makes a district strategic. What does it look like? Following, I attempt to paint that picture so that we might better identify strategic when we see it.

**Painting a Strategic Picture**

Knowing what strategic means is the first vital component to understanding what being strategic looks like. Taking the data gathered from MPS and building upon the theoretical framework used in this study, I will attempt to paint a picture of what strategic looks like and how a district acts strategic. Such a picture can add elements specific to school districts that is lacking in the literature and research to date to help us as researchers and practitioners know just what strategic looks like when we see it. Instead of focusing on strategic planning as much educational research on strategic behavior does, I focus on strategic *action or behavior*. This information can help us understand what it means to be strategic in a school district and how to become even more strategic.

**A systemic foundation.** How does a district become strategic? What does that look like? As this researcher saw from the MPS data, to begin with a district must first lay a systemic foundation from which strategic leadership and behaviors can thrive. By foundation I mean the structures, processes, and policies in place that set up the basic functions of the district as an organization and inherently structure human capital action. A systemic foundation, particularly with regards to human resources, then means structures, processes, and policies that work together in a non-siloed or non-compartmentalized way to reach the district goals in an efficient and effective manner.
Such a foundation includes: 1) a human resources system, 2) focus on human capital 3) efficient organizational structures, and 4) highly reliable roles.

A human resources system provides the necessary structures, processes, and policies that work together towards district goals in a systemic way. This means first and foremost that the human resources director and thus the HR department are at the strategic table both literally and figuratively. The human resources director must be part of decision-making and the human resources functions inherent in an HR department must be taken into account when decisions are made, not as an afterthought or sidenote. This is really all part of the SHRM characteristics of fit and flexibility. A strategic district has an alignment between its goals and the strategies used to meet these goals, particularly the human resources functions that fit into those strategies. A strategic district also has found fit between its organizational functions and its external environment, as previously discussed. Regarding horizontal fit, a strategic district has aligned and made consistent the practices, processes, and policies of the human resources department and those practices that affect human capital in general, ensuring they work in a coherent, systemic way. And most importantly in a dynamic organization like a school district, the structures, processes, and policies have an inherent flexibility so that they adapt to the changing needs and influences of environmental players discussed above. A foundation is built then not only with the processes, structures, and policies aligned within the human resources department but also along and through all district departments, for human resource management is a culture that must permeate all departments and functions in order to be strategic.
A systematic foundation also involves a focus on human capital. This is really a nod to the structure expectations built into a highly reliable organization. By focusing on human capital as part of a district’s organizational foundation the district can instill in their human capital the culture to make SHRM successfully integrated into decisions and actions, fostering the strategic behaviors necessary to succeed. This focus on human capital involves first and foremost getting the right people in the right places, focusing heavily on the ‘front-end’ of HR functions just as an HRO would. Focusing heavily on purposeful recruiting of high quality candidates for each position, developing hiring processes that are consistent and focused on the district goals, and making placement decisions based on the best fit between candidate and school cultures instead of simply based upon need is part of a systemic foundation where HR functions are tied to each other as well as to district goals as the foundation itself focuses on human capital to subsist. This focus on human capital also involves developing the workforce once they are hired and placed in order to continuously improve the capital that then will continuously improve the foundation. Part of this means giving employees the security of knowing their jobs are safe from cuts and they are an investment in the district organization, not a temporary hire. This allows a sense of not only security but promotes employee investment and ownership of the district organization and its actions towards reaching strategic goals.

The third element of a district’s systemic foundation as elicited from MPS data is having efficient organizational structures in place. This involves a focus on management structures in particular. Making sure the organizational chart is clear, truly
representative of the lines of authority in place, and providing the necessary paths of accountability required of school districts is key. Also paramount in this efficient organizational structure is ensuring that job descriptions and job titles are clear, representative of the actual work being done, and understood by not just those holding the title but everyone else in the district. As an HRO ensures each worker understands their own position as well as others they may have to work with or even take over at some point, a school district too much have clear organizational structures of workforce positions in order to be efficient. Inherent in this is the HRO idea of generativeness that keeps the organization striving to be more diligent, facile, and fluid over time. Taking as much knowledge as possible out of successes and failures and experiences in order to collectively learn as a workforce to constantly improve and adapt (Erikson & Dyer, 2005). Although HRO literature does not nearly address the external environment to the importance highlighted in this project, the ability to adapt to environments is most certainly a part of having an efficient organizational structure.

A fourth and final component of a systemic district foundation is having highly reliable roles. As alluded to in discussing efficient organizational structure, role clarity is imperative. Part of having an efficient system is having a foundation that clearly defines roles for all human resources positions, most notably those decision-making positions at the central office level. Those with clear roles understand their own responsibilities as well as those of others and can make decisions more rapidly without having to guess whether or not they have the authority to do so. Such role clarity also offers the ability to collaborate with others as part of team, because the team doesn’t become a mush of
vaguely defined roles but instead can be a melding of ideas and functions as part of the district structural foundation. However, role clarity must be coupled with the problem-finding culture of an HRO, where though roles are clearly defined all persons within those roles understand an issue is never inherently “not my problem.” As a person in the system they take ownership in finding a problem and helping to solve the problem, potentially being fluid and facile enough to flex their own responsibilities with those in other positions to collaborate or even take over other roles when environmental influences necessitate. It is this balance that makes for highly reliable roles and part of a systemic foundation. Knowing your place but also having the knowledge and understanding of how to be fluid in order to best meet those district goals.

**Strategic leadership behaviors.** Once a systemic foundation is formed, to be and act strategic, a district like MPS must focus on behaviors of their leaders. Having a foundation is certainly vital, but to be strategic a district must promote strategic behaviors in its human capital to get the strategic action it necessitates. This involves, quite simply, strategic leadership. There is a myriad of research and literature on elements of quality leadership, I address the leadership attributes that most relate to what it means to be and act strategic, as seen at MPS. Each of these attributes may be found in a guide to quality leadership, but when coupled with the definition of strategic (meeting those district goals) and a systemic foundation to build off of, then it becomes strategic leadership. Strategic leadership behaviors as seen at MPS include: 1) making all leaders *strategic* leaders, 2) embedding the system into the district, and 3) turning barriers into buttresses.
As specifically defined and described in Chapter 4, this study elicited six attributes of strategic leadership: shrewd decision-making, candor in communication, building authentic relationships, empowering human capital, structured and focused flexibility, and creating, innovating, and reflecting. Each of these attributes is important in guiding human capital towards strategic action, particularly once a systemic foundation has been developed. Together they form a strong addition to HRO literature, adding a leadership aspect that is not addressed in HRO theory. Critical among all six of these attributes is linking leadership back to district goals, the definition of strategic in a school district, as shown by MPS. All six attributes focus on human capital at the heart of the organization and the inherent balance between fit and flexibility, which strengthen a systemic foundation and a culture of SHRM in a district. Therefore it is vital to ensure that all leaders are strategic leaders, not just one or two at the top of the organizational chart. When all leaders are strategic in their leadership then many positive results can occur: greater strategic action by more human capital, more widely dispersed continuous improvement or generativeness among levels, departments, and functions of the district, and finally a greater chance at sustainability because one leader is not the sole guide to strategic action. That way the organization can sustain leadership change while being more coherent and consistent in its leadership.

A second element of strategic leadership as part of being a successfully strategic district is embedding the system into the district. Being a strategic leader involves reflecting upon the current foundation and strengthening it to be even more systemic if
necessary. As the Superintendent at MPS did when he first arrived, a leader assesses some of the more foundational elements and looks for ways to make it clearer, more efficient, and essentially more systemic. Once that is addressed, that system must be embedded into all layers of the district and thus embedded into the understanding of the human capital in the district as well. A systemic foundation is itself a strategic attribute of a district but must be continually improved upon and adapted through the actions of human capital, which are guided by strategic leaders. For example, having candid communication and building authentic relationships as a leader promotes a focus on human capital and problem-finding culture that is part of a systemic foundation. Those leadership attributes then aide in embedding this systemic foundation as they promote human capital involvement and trust in leadership and the district as an organization. This then promotes a cycle as more involved human capital now understand the systemic foundation and their place within it as well as having the trust to be guided towards future strategic action.

Finally, strategic leadership behaviors involve turning potential barriers into buttresses. As previously discussed, various environmental players have a great deal of influence on district decisions and actions in a variety of ways. This means these environmental players can either be a buttress or a barrier to strategic behavior. Each of the six attributes of strategic leadership identified in this study play a part in the strategic interactions with environmental players across the district that can truly buttress strategic action. Strategic leaders use their environmental players to their advantage, proactively involving them when it would be most strategic, or giving them
the most honest but purposefully chosen information when necessary. It is a balancing act that can be balanced well using these six attributes of strategic leadership. The same can be said for the culture and climate of a district, leaders can make them a barrier or a buttress, because essentially culture and climate are part of your environmental players, just the internal ones. These strategic leadership behaviors can help to repair a less than beneficial culture or climate and then bolster it to the point of actually being a support for strategic action. A positive culture and climate based in strategic leadership, and actions can truly aide in maintaining strategic behavior by making it all simply a part of the cultural fabric of the district.

**Conclusions**

After all the data presented in Chapter 4 and the discussion provided above regarding what it means to be strategic and what that looks like in a district, I now present my conclusions. The data gathered in this study was voluminous and elicited many insights and thoughts to ponder as well as connections to theory and literature. I offer three conclusions to consider as the main takeaway points from this study.

1. **Strategic change does not happen in a vacuum or even in a predetermined way**

   Study or work in education long enough and you realize that educators have a tendency to work in vacuums, whether that be their classroom, their school, or even their district. Call it autonomy, call it decentralized management, call it what you will but it’s a vacuum of sorts. This does not promote strategic change. As the data from MPS showed on multiple levels and in multiple ways, strategic change happens within and among numerous environmental layers and players that influence, promote, or
hinder change. Before the new Superintendent arrived the district was having difficulty promoting any kind of change, let alone being strategic about it, because the relationships with the peripheral environmental School Board players was not working. This filtered out to the external environment of parents and the greater community who began to lose faith in the district leaders and a media storm that highlighted this breakdown in communication and trust. But starting with a ‘truce’ of sorts with the interim Superintendent and the hiring of the new Superintendent, these relationships started on the mend and change could take place. The central office leadership team was empowered to take care of their responsibilities, develop new and innovative ways of improving the system and policies, and those outside the district offices saw accessible, transparent leadership that strove to rebuild those broken relationships. Only with the mending of these relationships and the proactive involvement of the community was strategic change able to take place. A new district improvement plan developed to refocus the district with the help of external environmental players and difficult decisions were made that would not have occurred under former leaders because of the controversy they would have brought from the greater community.

The theory on strategic human resource management emphasizes the necessary vertical fit between the organization and the external environment, which is key to strategic change. Schools and districts are given a lot of room to figure out the best way to run their public organizations but the taxpayers, the governmental agencies, the interested parties outside of the district can help or hinder their strategic behavior in numerous ways that must be not only appreciated but utilized as part of their plan to
promote strategic change. SHRM theory doesn’t quite illuminate the various levels of environmental players that negate a vacuous idea of strategic change, but it does stress the importance of an external environment. HRO theory doesn’t quite impress upon the reader just how important external environments are, but there is an implied importance of anything that could impact the organization. HROs are reliable no matter what. But they are in their own highly reliable organizational vacuum of sorts, which may be partly where this study can add to the HRO literature, particularly in light of the most recent earthquakes in Japan. Nuclear plants are considered highly reliable organizations with terrible consequences if they fail, and the external environmental impact from the earthquakes shook them to their core, quite literally. With all the valuable input HRO theory can offer to educational change, district organizations can also add to highly reliable organizational theory and stability by providing examples of the impact of external environments on the reliability of organizations.

The data from this study also suggested that predetermined ideas of change and reform couldn’t translate into true strategic change precisely because of the environmental factors at play. This comes back to the SHRM idea of flexibility and the HRO concepts of fluidity and facileness. A prescribed or predetermined effort at reform would have to have a great deal of flexibility and fluidity built in to allow each district to tailor it to their environmental players, both internal and external. The Superintendent at MPS could be considered a change-agent, but he knew that coming in and blowing apart the culture of the district and/or not dealing with the external environment in a productive and proactive way would forestall change. He was flexible and promoted
that flexibility with a structured focus that helped guide strategic behavior, which brings us to the second conclusion from this study.

2. Strategic leadership drives strategic behaviors

One of the most vital conclusions drawn from this study is how important leadership is to strategic behavior. So much of the MPS data illustrate the role that leadership played in the behaviors, decisions, and actions that drove the district towards their goals, both in some strategic and some not so strategic ways. Most importantly, those attributes of strategic leadership identified truly drove the strategic behaviors of other leaders as well as the rest of the workforce. It is also important then to speak to how SHRM and HRO literatures did not address this component in the success of the organization.

Because of the leadership change at MPS as this study was beginning, it was easy to see what a difference a change in leadership at the district can make. When the Superintendent arrived at MPS there was already a leadership team in place that certainly held some attributes of strategic leadership as described in Chapter 4, he just added to the pool and helped guide the leadership team more strategically themselves. The new Superintendent empowered his leadership team to make the necessary decisions and innovations to improve district policies, such as the early retirement incentive policy, the continued push for long-term planning, etc. He also challenged those at the school level to work more diligently and strategically towards district goals by essentially daring them to develop ways to address one of their district goals and promising the funds to support their ideas when they came up with them. This
leadership drove administrators within the district to behave more strategically. Their focus was clearer, their goals were clearer, the external environment was more positively involved making strategic action easier, and the district leader was accessible and transparent so the culture was strengthened as the climate improved. Members of the leadership team also provided this strategic leadership for their middle-level leaders, such as the relationship-building the new elementary education administrator focused on as he took over the position. Without these leaders to guide, support, drive, and empower the workforce, the structures might be in place and the policies for strategic behavior might be there, but no one is leading the district workforce. The best plans could be on paper among the most strategic of systems, but someone must guide the people in how to utilize those plans and systems.

It is that precise leap from plans and systems to leadership that this study can add to the literature on HROs and SHRM. I argue that HRO and SHRM literatures do not address leadership adequately, particularly after the data provided from this study elucidated the importance of strategic leadership in guiding strategic behavior. HROs have an amazingly reliable system in place for training, developing, and providing clear expectations for their workforce, as well as the problem-finding culture necessary to implement necessary values and expectations. However, someone has to guide these systems and structures, lead these workers through the new challenges to promote strategic behavior. In an ideal HRO it might be possible to have such a perfect strategic system in place with the culture to support it that each new worker is guided by all the other workers and the system is so strategic a leader isn’t as vital, but that leader is still
important to initially drive these behaviors as well as continually deal with the external environmental players like governmental entities, which is not addressed in HRO literature. SHRM literature also neglects to highlight leadership functions adequately. Because SHRM relies so heavily on fit and flexibility, there must be leadership there to guide the strategic behaviors necessary to find fit and provide the structured flexibility necessary to continuously maintain that fit. I argue it is not the system that guides strategic behaviors, though it is important, but it is in fact the strategic leader that guides strategic action as he or she helps break down silos into systems, provide a model of strategic behavior, and serve as the strategic compass of the organization for both internal and external environmental players, much like the MPS Superintendent did for his district and leadership team.

3. *But, structures and systems provide a foundation for strategic leadership to thrive*

   The data from MPS clearly highlighted the importance of strategic leadership to promote strategic behavior and change, but strategic leadership alone is not going to work. As the theoretical framework and data from MPS describe, strategic structures and systems provide a solid foundation that allows strategic leadership to thrive.

   The new Superintendent at MPS may have provided a very needed leadership role to help guide the district at an opportune time, but his leadership and that of his leadership team would not have been so successful or even noticeable without the structures and systems in place at MPS. The MPS district had structures in place that provided necessary guidance and expectations, such as the School Board approved district goals. The systems already in place by previous leaders were also important,
such as those put into place by the human resources administrator for recruiting, hiring, and placing teachers in a way that best fit the schools and the district needs. Obviously at one point or another leaders had to build and tweak these structures, but it is those structures that can provide a foundation for new or simply improved strategic leadership to thrive. For example, the Superintendent at MPS came onto the scene and was able to mend relationships with environmental players, provide open communication, and focus the district so well because of the structures and systems already in place that provided a collaborative team of leaders as his ‘cabinet’, a technology system that allowed him to utilize his video updates to keep Principals and teachers in the communication loop, and policies in place that kept media involved to a degree that the Superintendent could simply tweak these structures to improve communications and better involve the community by advertising public forums, district events, etc.

The leadership team at MPS also utilized the structures in place to thrive as strategic leaders. The human resources administrator was able to use the district structure and culture of improvement and central office administrator responsibility roles to take the initiative and change the ‘draft day’ teacher placement policy when it no longer was working towards district goals. Her strategic leadership was able to work because the organization had the pieces in place to allow and foster that type of leadership. SHRM theory highlights the structures of an organization that need to be in place, like fit and flexibility, which must be guided by leaders, but at the same time provide the groundwork for new or greater strategic leadership to improve upon. HROs
are the same way, even though they speak little to leadership specifically. However, they have numerous structures and encultured elements in place that keep the organization running smoothly in a way that a strategic leader could thrive. A culture of collaboration, problem-solving, and reliability in place allows a leader to take those attributes of strategic leadership and work more successfully because they have supports for their work and don’t have to take the time to lay the groundwork to be strategic. They can hit the ground running. In the case of MPS, the new Superintendent and his leadership team had some cracks in the foundation to repair before they could thrive, and probably still do, but the strong foundation they had to begin with, cracks and all, did provide a good start for the strategic leaders in the central office to begin making strides towards their district goals.

Implications

Based on the discussion and conclusions provided, there is a great deal of information that can be provided to foster further thought, practice, and research. Below I offer implications of this study for both practice and research.

Practice

The study completed in this dissertation was intended to not only add to the literature on HRO and SHRM organizational theories but more importantly to add information to practice. Because this study was based in the central office, the implications for practice are most pertinent to those in the central office as those in charge of guiding and making decisions for a district. So, the implications for practice
are organized as what Superintendents can learn from this study and share with their leadership teams.

First and foremost, Superintendents need to know what it means to be strategic and what that looks like. Districts as organizations are incredibly dynamic entities with lots of demands and expectations coming at them from inside and outside the organization. Superintendents need to understand what being strategic means so that they can understand what their goals are and what it means to succeed strategically. Even more practical, though, is what being strategic looks like. There much literature available offering general prescriptions for being a successful district, like MacIver & Farley-ripple (2008) described, such as a systems perspective with people orientation or a strong leadership with an active administrative team. But what does that look like? What does being strategic involve? Chapter 4 and the previous discussion section offer some specific insights that Superintendents could take away and work from. Indeed, there is so much a Superintendent could learn from this study. Below I very briefly offer seven essentials Superintendents should know or be aware of when trying to understand what strategic means and looks like. If they take nothing else from this study, Superintendents should know:

1. *The important role and influence of environmental players*

As described in numerous ways throughout this dissertation, environmental players at all levels of the district and outside the district hold key functions and influential roles that the leaders must not only understand and appreciate but learn how to use to the district’s strategic advantage.
2. The importance of culture and communication

Culture in a district as described above can make or break the success of the leaders and the organization. Embedding HRO principles in the culture of the organization is what makes it highly reliable, just as a district can do. But communication is vital in maintaining and/or improving a culture. As the former Superintendent learned at MPS, a lack of communication can work to destroy most certainly the climate of the district but also have negative effects on the culture.

3. The six attributes of strategic leadership

The six attributes of strategic leadership described in Chapter 4 can offer a lot of food for thought to Superintendents as they look to their own leadership. These most certainly may not be all encompassing in every district but can offer some ideas for how to improve communication, empower human capital, work with environmental players, etc.

4. Structures are important, but are vitally linked to flexibility and leadership

Superintendents can appreciate the strategic leadership that most certainly guides behaviors and their own role in that, but structures lay the foundation of their leadership and must be mended first. The Superintendent at MPS addressed organizational charts as well as role and authority structures before he could be more strategic as a leader. This was all done with the flexibility to adapt, as an HRO would.

5. When a Superintendent alone changes a culture, stability is vulnerable

The Superintendent at MPS was a key change-agent and was able to change the climate of the culture with his communication and honesty. However, because he was such a
vital change-agent to the climate and ultimately the culture, the stability of the district is potentially vulnerable to another leadership change.

6. *Getting the right people in the right position is crucial to the system*

The human resources administrator at MPS knew a key element to having a strategic system hinges on its human capital. In fact, she was able to make some very strategic changes in the district because she was using systems-thinking, tying everything back to district goals. Getting the right people in the right places, both teachers and administrators, provides another piece of that strong foundation for strategic action.

7. *Fluidity, facileness, and flexibility should be coupled with clarity and structure*

As HRO and SHRM theories strongly support, a strategic and reliable system must be flexible, fluid, and facile to adapt to change and foresee problems. However, this must be coupled with clarity in roles, clarity in goals, and structure. Elastic elements must be disciplined in some way so as not to become confusing or counterproductive.

**Research**

This study was always intended to be merely one piece in a greater puzzle. These results and conclusions are only the first phase of a multi-phase project that intends to get to the heart of what it means for a district to be strategic and what it looks like at *all* levels of district function, from the central office to the classroom. This first piece looked specifically at the central office to find out how strategic was conceptualized, understood, and *intended*. Now the second phase of the project will be to gather data at the school administrator and teachers levels to see what strategic means across the district hierarchy. This serves two purposes. First, the second phase
will illuminate the relationships between strategic action and instructional capacity. In other words, how does strategic (or not-so-strategic) district action affect instructional capacity? Second, looking at the school and classroom levels will focus on the intended vs. implemented problem described by Khilji & Wang (2006). Does what is intended to be strategic and intended to occur at the central office level actually get implemented as intended at the school and classroom levels? Or is there a disconnect somewhere that could offer insight on what strategic does or does not look like in a district organization?

After research is completed on the second phase of the study, illuminating as much as possible from one district, further research can be undertaken. The in-depth study of one district will then allow for comparison with more districts to see where various types of districts vary or offer commonalities. Different sizes of districts could be compared. MPS was a rather mid-sized district, so completing similar research in large urban districts as well as small rural districts could certainly provide a spectrum of strategic function. What strategic means and looks like when the number of human resources involved changes could be drastically different. Different types of districts could be examined as well, including what strategic looks like in private districts, in districts with charter schools or small autonomous schools, etc.

For this researcher, the ultimate goal of all this research is to eventually develop a practical tool for researchers and practitioners alike. This tool would allow the evaluation of a district regarding its strategic behavior, structure, function, and leadership. This would not be so much an accountability tool as a means of district improvement and development. If districts could know what it means to be strategic,
what it looks like, and where they might fall on a strategic spectrum of sorts, they could very well improve function and better meet their district goals. There are districts out there that don’t even realize that human resources means more than just the department or that they need to be at the ‘strategic table’ with the rest of the district decision-makers. A tool that could help them see the lack of strategic function in this idea could offer a means for self-assessment, reflection, and ultimately support in aiding them in reaching their goals.
REFERENCES


State Education Department. (2010). *Public School Accountability Report*.


APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form
Exploring Strategic Management of Human Capital in a School District

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study on strategic human resource management. The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of how districts manage their human resources and the structures, policies, and procedures that develop the district’s capacity to support instruction.

Your participation is voluntary. If for any reason you wish to decline to participate in this study, you may do so at any time. Your confidentiality will be strictly protected. On any transcripts and observation notes your name will be deleted and replaced with a number. Only project staff will have access to the master list that matches your name with the number. The audio files from interviews will be transcribed by one of our project staff or a university transcriptionist. As soon as the transcriptions are complete, all files will be securely stored. The master list also will be destroyed at the completion of data analysis.

Interview data will be collected using open-ended, semi-structured interviews that are expected to last 45 minutes. An initial interview will be conducted with the potential for one or two subsequent follow-up interviews over the course of the academic year. Interviews will be recorded to ensure accurate data collection and to facilitate data analysis.

Benefits of the study will include a better understanding of the human resource policies, procedures, structures, and functions that aide in the development of a district’s capacity to support classroom instruction. Potential risks are limited and relate to exposing less than strategic decisions made by the district. However, confidentiality of participants and the district will be strictly protected.

Please feel free to ask any questions during or after your participation in this study. If you have any questions at a later date you may call any of the project staff:

Jay Paredes Scribner, Chair of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, 573-884-1708, scribnerj@missouri.edu.
Heather L. Mosley, Doctoral Candidate of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, 573-884-6658, hlmtg2@mail.missouri.edu.

For questions regarding the use of human subjects in research, please contact the UMC Campus IRB Office at 573-882-9585.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand this statement, have received a copy of the statement, and are willing to participate in this study. Thank you again for your time.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________
Print name: ___________________________
APPENDIX B

Superintendent Initial Interview Protocol

Goals – General & Academic

- What are the district’s overarching goals over the next few years?
- What are the district’s academic goals for the next few years?
- How do you personally aide in the attainment of those goals?
- What challenges do you face in meeting these goals?
- Where is the district now? Where do you go from here? How?

Strategy

- What are your goals, objectives, or strategies for the district?
- How does the district go about developing these? Process? Who’s in involved? How do they work together?
- What is your role in developing district and/or department goals?
- Over time, how will goals and objectives be reassessed?
- What types of data and information is used to inform decisions? Internally? Externally?

Specific Examples to Point to

- What is happening now?
- What initiatives are currently being planned or implemented that you can point to?
- What are they designed to accomplish?
- How often do you reconsider, evaluate, or change major initiatives or directions?

Functions

- What are the key functional units?
- How should they work together? How do they work together?
- How do you work with the HR administrator to meet district goals and objectives? Is HR at the ‘strategy table’ for all decisions?
- What HR functions are most important for district success and reaching district goals? Why?
- How are new goals, initiatives, rules, information, etc. disseminated throughout the district? Feedback?
- What is most strategic about the district now?
- How do you define strategic?
APPENDIX C

Sample Central Office Administrator Initial Interview Protocol

**District Goals**
- What do you understand to be the district’s overarching goals over the next few years?
- How do you personally aide in the attainment of those goals?
- What challenges do you face in meeting these goals?
- Describe your strategy for supporting the pursuit and attainment of district goals.
- What goals do you have that are specific to your department? How do they relate to the district’s overarching goals?
- What is your role in developing district and/or department goals?
- What types and amounts of resources do you have to address district goals?
- What initiatives central to your department are currently being planned or implemented that you can point to?
- What are these initiatives designed to accomplish?
- How often do you reconsider, evaluate, or change major initiatives or directions?

**Functions of District/Department**
- What impact do internal and external factors have on your departmental decisions? On district decisions?
- How do you work with the HR administrator to find and retain the right teachers for instructional programs or staff for curricular needs?
- What role do other central office staff and school administrators play in meeting your department goals?
- Tell me about the mechanisms you use to recruit and retain quality teachers and staff for your department. What other departments/persons are involved in these mechanisms? How do they tie to district goals?
- In what ways do the six areas under your purview work together or separately on district and department goals and initiatives?
- What functions are under the purview of those administrators in your department?
- How do you work to develop curricular quality and instructional capacity in the district?
- When a new goal or initiative is developed, how is that information disseminated to the district staff under your purview?

*Curriculum & Instruction*
- How does curriculum and instruction drive the district?
- What curriculum and instruction activities or initiatives do you consider unique that you could share with us?
- What curriculum and instruction functions seem to have the greatest influence on the district? Greatest contribution to district goals? Why?
- What goals or initiatives are in place to support mathematics instruction?
- Tell me about your role in or impact from the recent mathematics changes that have occurred in the district.

- How do you define strategic?
Heather LeAnn Mosley Linhardt was born on September 10, 1979 in Jefferson City, Missouri. She was raised in Holts Summit, MO with her mother (Loretta), father (William), and two brothers (Craig & Samuel). She attended and graduated with honors from Jefferson City Public Schools in 1997. She went on to earn her B.S. in English, magna cum laude, at Truman State University in 2001 and her M.A.E. in Elementary Education at Truman State University in 2002.

Heather began her career in education by student teaching in a 3rd grade eMINTS classroom in Kirksville, MO and then teaching 2nd-8th grade gifted education at Southern Boone County R-I while earning her gifted certification from Drury University. She taught for three years before pursuing her PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri in an effort to not only further her own development as an educator but also see how she could improve some of the more frustrating education systems she saw as a teacher in the public school system, such as gifted education policy and a lack of new teacher supports in specialty areas.

As a full-time graduate student in ELPA Heather spent her first year as a teaching assistant for the Teacher Development Program, teaching courses on school systems, instructional methods, and cultural competence for pre-service teachers. She spent the
next four years as a graduate research assistant for Dr. Jay P. Scribner and the Hook Center for Educational Leadership & District Renewal where she was introduced to the district as an organization, which as a teacher she was never really taught much about. It really helped shape both her current academic work as well as her viewpoint as an educator.

Heather is newly married to her wonderful husband, Paul, who has journeyed from boyfriend to fiancé to husband to newlywed all in the span of Heather’s doctoral study. They have an adorable furry feline baby named Clyde, but no children….yet.