The Role of the School District in High-Performance Title One Schools in South Texas

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Abstract

A mixed research study was designed and conducted to identify effective characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools. Four South Texas Title 1 schools identified as High Performing Schools by the Texas Education Agency in 2016 were selected for the study. To be selected, these schools were also required to meet or exceed a set of criteria applied by the researchers. An effective school model, comprised of eleven characteristics and school processes, was developed based on a synthesis of effective school research and served as the theoretical framework for the study. The characteristics include Culture, Leadership, Instruction, Improvement, Home and Community Relations, Curriculum, Environment, Professional Development, Vision/Mission, Resources, and Staff.

Data was collected from professional school staff, principals, and parents related to the essentiality of the eleven effective characteristics and processes used by the schools. Onsite data collection from each school included a staff survey, focus group session, principal interview, and a parent survey. Results supported the essentiality of the eleven school characteristics synthesized from previous effective schools' studies. The results also yielded valuable school district strategies that supported the High-Performing Reward Title 1 schools. These strategies included the provision of active specialized support by district staff, district curriculum designed by district teachers during the summer, instructional resources selected through teacher input, flexibility in implementing district supports, professional development during summer and the school year to meet individual teacher needs, district-designed student assessment, an intra-

district and inter-district competitive school environment focused on student achievement, and

parent initiatives aligned to local needs.

The Role of the School District in High-Performance Title One Schools in South Texas

A study to identify effective school characteristics and their processes in high-performing Title One schools in the South Texas Region One Educational Service area, extending along the Texas-Mexico border from Brownsville to Laredo, was designed and completed—*Effective School Practices In Title I Schools Exceeding Educational Expectations (E3)* (Padilla et al., 2019). The study's findings supported an eleven effective school characteristics model designed from analyzing 100 effective school models in the literature. The 11 effective characteristics model included: culture, curriculum, environment, home and community relations, instruction leadership, professional development, resources, staff, and vision/mission. Because all four schools identified for the study were from the same school district, the researchers deemed it essential to also examine the supportive role of the district in effective high performing Title I schools (Padilla et al., 2019). The supportive roles and practices the school district provided the study's high performing Title I schools are presented and discussed in this report to further the study of school district impact on school success.

Review of Literature

Several authors have well-reviewed the roles and practices of school districts as important characteristics in developing effective schools (Anderson, 2003; Leithwood, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006;). Linking school district as a crucial factor in school performance has been described by Anderson as "vague" (p. 2), "weak" (p. 3), and "more logically than empirically demonstrated" (p. 14). Leithwood (2010) suggested that school district is linked through a "chain of variables" (p. 13) to student learning, making its influence "too indirect and complex" (p. 20) to assess. Although, Leithwood (2010) determined that district leadership served as a "critical

bridge" (p. 70) to student success, he also stated: "At best, the available evidence allows us to infer some broad goals that successful leadership will need to adopt, acknowledging that additional research will be needed to identify leadership practices that are successful in achieving such goals" (p. 12).

In a meta-analysis study that included 27 studies since 1970, 2,817 districts, and 3.4 million student achievement scores, Waters and Marzano (2006) found a statistically significant positive relationship between district leadership and student achievement, determining that "District Leadership Matters" (p. 3). They also found several school district responsibilities that also positively impacted student achievement: collaborative goal setting, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment and support of district goals, monitoring goals for achievement and instruction, and use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals. Their meta-analysis also identified school district practices related to each responsibility (pp. 15-17; See Appendix A).

Additionally, Waters and Marzano (2006) found a "surprising and perplexing" relationship—school autonomy correlated positively with student achievement while site-based management noted a "negligible or negative correlation with achievement" (p. 13). They explained these conflicting findings due to "defined autonomy" (p. 13). They described it as the district providing schools with autonomy exercised within specific and well-defined boundaries set by district goals. Waters and Marzano's "defined autonomy" was also described by Shannon and Bylsma (2004) as a balance between a school district's authority and school autonomy. Shannon and Bylsma stated that a school district sets expectations and provides schools autonomy with support and mentoring. Thus, schools possess autonomy to make school-level decisions, but these decisions must be aligned to established specific district goals and

expectations. So, this would be autonomy with guardrails to ensure district goals and expectations are met.

Increased emphasis on improving student achievement and the emergence of state and federal accountability systems have reignited attention to decentralization of decisions to the school level and have reopened the debate regarding the role of districts in supporting the work of schools. In a study by the Rand Corporation, Caldwell (2004) wrote, "school-based management … is the systematic and consistent decentralization to the school level of authority and responsibility to make decisions on significant matters related school operations within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards, and accountabilities" (pp. 2-3). In the Wallace Foundation Report *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, Leithwood et al. (2004) summarized the district's roles in improving student achievement. They pointed out that the district's role in high achieving schools include communicating a sense of efficacy, emphasizing student achievement, developing curricula, ensuring alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to learning standards, developing and supporting teachers, promoting collaboration and professional communities, and investing in instructional leadership.

In summary, a school district possesses much authority in supporting school effectiveness through resource allocation, reorganizing the central office, providing reliable student assessments, and freeing time for principals to focus on instruction (DeVita, 2010). Past research has identified general goals school districts should pursue (Leithwood et al., 2004). However, research is needed to identify practices school districts should implement to support school success strongly.

In a research study on high-performing Title 1 schools in South Texas Region One, the

southernmost region of Texas alongside the border with Mexico, four Title 1 schools were

selected for the study after a rigorous selection process (Padilla et al., 2019). The four schools

were designated as "High-Performing" Reward Schools by Texas in 2015-16 (Texas Education

Agency [TEA], 2016), received other state academic distinctions, included at least a 400-student

population, and did not have an enrollment of more than the 7.7% state average of students who

qualified for the Gifted and Talented program (Texas Academic Performance Report 2015-16

State Profile). Analysis showed these four "High-Performing Reward schools were ranked

amongst the top 20% academically-achieving schools in Texas (TEA, 2016). These high-

performing Title 1 schools in South Texas were also ranked high-achieving among all Texas

schools (Padilla et al., 2019).

The district is one of the largest school districts in Region One. The district and selected

schools included a high percentage of Hispanic, ELL, At-Risk, Economically Disadvantaged,

and Mobile students (See Appendix B). These schools were assigned random codes to ensure

strict confidentiality (Padilla et al., 2019).

To guide this study, an effective school model consisting of eleven characteristics was

developed from 100 effective school characteristics models found in the research literature

(Padilla et al., 2019). From highest to lowest frequency in the literature reviewed, the eleven

characteristics common to the 100 models were: Culture, Leadership, Instruction, Improvement,

Home and Community Relations, Curriculum, Environment, Professional Development,

Vision/Mission, Resources, Staff, and Other. However, "Other" was not included in the study's

model because it reflected numerous factors infrequently found in the models analyzed. The

most present characteristic in the "Other" set was the school district. However, as a by-product

of this effective school characteristics research, some school district practices that support school success were identified (Padilla et al., 2019).

The research study of high-performing Title 1 schools in Region One identified school district practices that supported school success. The purpose of this report is to present and discuss these school district practices with the intent to further the study of school district impact on school success.

Methodology

The effective school characteristics study was a mixed-methods case study comprised of three data collections methods: school staff and parent surveys, school staff and parent focus group sessions, and principal interviews. The study included five research questions. The research question most pertinent to the findings discussed herein is Research Question 1:

(1)   What are the common effective school characteristics of high-performing high-poverty schools in Region One?

Eleven effective school characteristics and their processes were derived and defined from the same set of 100 effective school characteristic models identified through the review of the literature. These 11 effective school characteristics guided the study's formulation. Theories and frameworks that informed the study including the strengths and limitations of the methodology employed have been previously described in detail (Padilla et al., 2019).

Results

School Staff and Parent Focus Groups and Principal Interview Results

The surveys used did not include School District as a characteristic because of its limited occurrence in the 100 effective school models identified and analyzed (Padilla et al., 2019).

However, the level and type of school district involvement and its impact on the school

effectiveness were raised during group focus sessions and principal interviews.

Group focus sessions for professional school staff ranging from 8 to 13 participants were

conducted at each school, with 42 total staff members participating. During these sessions,

school staff discussed the school district's involvement and highlighted the following supports

and concerns related to the school district:

Table 1

School Professional Staff Group Focus Sessions Expressed District Supports and Concerns

District Supports	District Concerns
Develops curriculum for every grade level created by teachers during the summer	Needs to provide greater attention to our school
Engages teachers in curriculum writing, thus promoting greater teacher understanding of curriculum in the schools	Needs to provide more workdays dedicated to school planning
Provides flexibility for teachers in using and supplementing the district curriculum	Provides curricular resources but still needs to provide more
Requests feedback about district curriculum from teachers every six weeks	Needs to provide more writing trainings
	Needs to provide more student discipline options
Provides professional development in summer, so teachers do not lose instructional time during the school year	Needs to be careful with re-zoning that changes school student demographics
Permits schools flexibility on the use of district instructional programs and resources	Does not provide self-contained classes to meet the needs of some special education students

All four principals were interviewed. Principals generally described the school district as

"very supportive," "does a lot," and "awesome." Principals also identified positive supports and

concerns related to the school district (See Appendix C).

Forty-four parents from the four study schools participated in the parent group focus

sessions during which the school district was discussed. Parents identified the following supports

and concerns by the school district:

Table 2

Parent Focus Sessions Expressed District Supports and Concerns (N=44)

District Supports	District Concerns
District provides an English-learning program free to parents	Needs to improve school cafeteria food, "kids complain about the food."
District provides parents training on computers and technology	Should ensure every school includes a one-hour class period focused on helping students academically
District designates one district staff member as the parent contact	
District provides "good programs" to parents	Needs to ensure proper and safe outside environments on school and near schools such as stop signs and potholes
District takes initiatives to help and support parents	Needs to focus on our school too and not just the schools where all the attorneys' and "D.A.'s kids attend

Findings and Discussion

Results of the study of these four High-Performing Title 1 schools supported the 11 characteristics model of effective schools. The supports and practices of the school district in promoting high performance in the schools were identified by staff, principals, and parents during group sessions. These supports and practices are organized by theme.

District Specialized Support

The school district provided district-level specialists to support schools and teachers. Specialists assigned to instructional core departments greatly assisted schools and teachers in making decisions and identifying and implementing effective instructional and other strategies. These departments were well structured and organized by the school district to support schools. Thus, these district personnel directly supported schools based on their individual needs and supported district goals. These practices correspond to the following effective district strategies identified in the literature.

Table 3

District Specialized Support Alignment to Strategies in Literature Sources

Strategy	Source
"Monitoring goals for achievement & instruction" by "coordinating efforts of individuals and groups within the organization to increase the reliability of the system"	Waters & Marzano (2006, p. 16)
"an active administrative team"	Murphy & Hallinger (1988, p. 178),
"organizational structures and settings which support and enhance staffs' work and learning's"	Leithwood (2010, p. 258)
"modifying organizational structures and building collaborative processes" "that support and sustain the performance of administrators and teachers as well as students."	Leithwood et al., (2004, p. 24).

However, the school district in the study was a large district. As such, alongside the praise for specialized support from the district, it was clear that more specialists were needed to serve all the schools effectively. Moreover, because the subject schools were already high-performing, they did not receive the same attention and time as the less performing schools. The information shared suggests that district specialists were so busy helping the less performing schools that they had little to no time to sufficiently support the high-performing schools. The high-performing schools in the study felt less appreciated because of the lesser district attention. The school district should heed this voiced concern to ensure all schools, staff, and students receive the support necessary to reach high performance and maximum performance by all staff and students.

Curriculum

School staff and principals highlighted the school district's support in providing a fully developed curriculum for all grade levels created by teachers during the summer. The curriculum

writing process promoted a greater understanding of the curriculum among the participating teachers, who then took that understanding to their schools to utilize and share with other teachers. Moreover, the school district provided teachers with flexibility in their implementation of the district curriculum to meet their student needs. The school district also monitored curriculum implementation, using a structured process, throughout the school year that included feedback from teachers every six weeks.

The school district effectively acknowledged and utilized its internal expertise of its teachers to develop curriculum based on professional and experiential knowledge of their own students rather than soliciting already-developed curriculum and external experts who may not understand local student needs. Also, the district curriculum specialists greatly support new teachers who may need more time to understand and implement curriculum in the classroom fully. It prevents these teachers from being more overwhelmed than they already are beginning a new job with the great responsibility of ensuring student classroom success that leads to success in their future life experiences. Critically, this action further enhanced teachers' skills in developing curriculum, which they then shared at their schools. However, the school district did not direct all teachers to implement the district's curriculum precisely as written but gave teachers the flexibility to modify the curriculum as needed. Expectedly, professionals who know best how to meet the needs of students are the very teachers who teach them directly and daily. They exist at each school—experts of their students' learning needs. District curriculum, without flexibility, is much like sewing a pair of pants and expecting everyone to wear that pant—a one-size-fits-all mentality destined to fail with many. Internally designed district curriculum flexibly implemented is a win-win for the school district, first-year teachers, master teachers, and students.

The school district's curriculum development is aligned to effective district strategies in the literature: "use of resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction" by "adopting an instructional and resource management system supporting the implementation of the district's instructional philosophy" (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 16).

The school district guided the development of the district curriculum during the summer. This ensured that the district curriculum was aligned to state standards and the district's instructional philosophy. These school district practices are also aligned to effective strategies identified in the literature.

Table 4

District Curriculum Alignment to Strategies in Literature Sources

Strategy	Source
"coordinated and aligned curriculum"	Shannon & Bylsma (2004, p. 1)
"curricular focus"	Murphy & Hallinger (1998, p.77, p. 177),
"district-wide curricula"	Leithwood (2010, p. 252) Anderson (2003, p. 9)
"monitoring curriculum"	Shannon & Bylsma (2004, p.2)
"consistency in the curriculum."	Leithwood et al. (2004, p. 42).

Instructional Resources

The school district provided instructional resources to the schools selected with teacher input. Although district specialists are often experts in their specialized field, teachers possess real-world specialization, often perceiving problems before they materialize. Great teachers are ahead in their understanding of what their students need to experience maximum success. There may be many levels or shades of understanding student needs, but all shades count. The school district ensures its choice of instructional resources includes up-to-date specialized knowledge and on-the-ground knowledge as well. Moreover, since instructional resources can often be very expensive, school district initiatives for all schools may help bring costs down. So, school

district-level decisions for economic reasons are extensively guided by professionally focused

district specialists and professionally realistic specialists—the classroom teachers.

The school district also included flexibility in the use of these resources, ensuring school

staff could design how the resources would be used in their schools to support each school's

unique staffing and students' needs. Again, the school district infuses flexibility in its services to

schools. As a school, classroom teachers are given the flexibility to implement, monitor, and

adapt instructions resources to individualize the service an instructional resource can provide

students. This flexibility ensures school district "support" does not become a demand. The

school district's instructional resource management is aligned to effective strategies found in the

literature.

Table 5

District Instructional Resources Alignment to Strategies in Literature Sources

Strategy	Source
"use of resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction" by "adopting an instructional and resource management system supporting the implementation of the district's instructional philosophy" and "controlling resource allocation"	Waters & Marzano (2006, p. 16)
"allocate resources strategically" and "flexibly."	Shannon & Bylsma (2004, p. 2)
"grant increasing control to schools . . . and management of PD resources	Anderson (2003, p. 98)
"increased school control over . . . resources"	Leithwood et al. (2004, p. 43)

With the plethora of instructional resources available, schools and teachers may never be

satisfied with the number of instructional resources provided. Thus, while teachers demonstrated

their support for the school district's resources, they expressed a need for more resources—an

unending expectation.

Professional Development

 The school district provided professional development during the summer and throughout the school year. The summer sessions allowed teachers to attend without missing instructional time. This opportunity ensured maximum learning time for students. By providing professional development in the summer, the school district also supports teachers who prefer not to miss instructional time. However, by providing professional development during the school year, the school district supports teachers who might not attend summer professional development due to personal and family commitments. Teachers' professional and personal worlds are both supported by the school district's professional development plan and evidently, greatly appreciated by the study's teachers. The school district's management of professional development is aligned to effective strategies in the literature.

Table 6

School District Management of Professional Development Alignment to Strategies in Literature Sources

Strategy	Source
Use of resources to support the goals for achievement & instruction" by "Providing extensive teacher . . . staff development" and "Providing access to professional growth opportunities through the design of a master plan to coordinate in-service activities of the district."	Waters & Marzano (2006, p. 16)
"coordinated and embedded professional development."	Shannon & Bylsma (2004, p. 1)
"ensure that the time and money allocated to professional development reflects its value to the district" and "refocus routine institutional practices in the service of professional development."	Leithwood (2010, p. 272)
"District-wide job-embedded professional development focuses and supports for teachers."	Anderson (2003, p. 11)

Table 6

School District Management of Professional Development Alignment to Strategies in Literature Sources

Strategy	Source
"District-wide job-embedded professional development focuses and supports for teachers."	Leithwood et al. (2004, p. 43)

Similar to resources, there can never be sufficient opportunities for professional development for all staff members. Continuous monitoring and improvement are necessary for the school district to provide professional development responsive to all staff members' needs.

Student Assessment

The school district provided principals and schools with state testing results for students. This work helps improve the time, effort, and quality of campus improvement processes. Too often, districts dump data onto the schools with a "goodbye and good luck." School principals and staff may not have the training or background to dive into the school's data to develop an aligned and potentially effective school improvement plan. So, too often, schools ignore the data and just keep doing what they have always done. This leads to the same outcome—failure. Instead, the school district provides state test data to the schools already analyzed with successes and challenges identified. The schools can then take their local expertise of the students and plan appropriately. Even with computer-based solid data programs, schools must know precisely what to search and cross-search. The school district promoted school success by breaking down the data into easily understood data, which could be applied for school improvement by the school staff.

The school district also administered benchmark tests to support the schools and teachers in monitoring student achievement throughout the school year. This ensured that schools focused

more effort on addressing student academic weaknesses through differentiated instruction. With

benchmarks already developed, schools and teachers can review the benchmarks, plan their

curriculum and focus on instruction. This saves the schools and teachers much time and effort,

helping them focus on monitoring rather than test designing. The school district's student

assessment supports are aligned to the following effective strategies in the literature.

Table 7

School District Student Assessment Supports Alignment to Strategies in Literature Sources

Strategy	Source
"Monitoring goals for achievement & instruction" by "Monitoring student achievement through feedback from the instructional evaluation program"	Waters & Marzano (2006, p. 15)
"coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment."	Shannon & Bylsma (2004, p. 1)
"gathering and interpreting student assessment data, . . . district endorsed diagnostic assessment processes."	Anderson (2003, p. 10)
"use formative and summative student assessments aligned to the new standards."	Leithwood et al. (2004, p. 26)

Environment

The school district promoted a competitive environment among schools to strive to

achieve at its highest potential. Competition engenders more significant effort and motivation to

become better and even the best within a group. Without the competitive edge, schools may

experience moderate success rather than high success. A school can only be the best if it wants to

be the best and work towards that goal. A school district can talk about goals, but merely talking

about goals does not necessarily motivate anyone. However, comparing schools against each

other—their successes and challenges—can create a sense of urgency that breeds success among

the schools. Schools can build a commitment, among their staff, by building a culture of competitiveness within the school toward other schools.

Additionally, this competitive school environment produced high expectations among all school staff, motivating them to help students achieve higher. In every school, one heard "our children" can be the best and we will not allow their background to prevent them from achieving it. To be the best school, teachers indicated an unwavering commitment to working long hours, so their students' challenging demographics and home experiences would not impede their progress and, ultimately, academic success. Moreover, while teachers identified good teachers and better teachers in their schools, their sense of competition was strictly amongst schools and not within the school. There was very little doubt that high expectations and competition with other schools to be the best school in the district drove and unified the staff's thinking, spirit, and efforts in the four study schools.

Leithwood and others (2004) identified "Creating and sustaining a competitive school" (p. 12) as an important district leadership goal, but they referred primarily to school competition against charter schools. However, the competitive environment established by the school district for its schools did not include just charter schools but also included all district and state schools. The school district created a very positive competitive interaction among its schools to perform highly in state academic assessments to energize the schools toward district goals. This competitive environment to energize and align school autonomy to district goals are discussed subsequently.

Parent Initiatives

The school district not only invested time, money, and effort in helping students learn, but it also made an investment in helping parents learn. The school district provided parents with

free access to programs to improve their English language proficiency and technology skills.

Both initiatives support parents helping their children succeed in school and help them improve

themselves socially and economically. Parents expressed tremendous respect and appreciation

toward the school for these efforts. The school district also assigned one district staff member as

primary contact for parents. Thus, if parents needed more information or wished to share a

concern, they did not have to go through the district bureaucracy—it was only necessary to

contact just one person who was primarily responsible for listening and respond to parents. One

contact simplifies the process and is much more inviting for parents.

The school district's parent initiatives align with the Waters and Marzano's (2006)

"Goal-setting process" responsibility. They discussed the need to include "all relevant

stakeholders" (p. 11) in collaborative goal setting. Of course, a school district's stakeholders

include parents. Leithwood and others (2004) also recommended "giving a greater voice to

community stakeholders," as in the case of "parent-controlled school councils" (p. 12). Previous

effective school district research provided a limited reference to successful parent practices.

Discussion

Common successful strategies among these themes included active support and flexibility

in all school functions, such as curriculum, instruction, staffing, etc. There was no sense of

authoritative top-down control or dictating by the school district. Instead, schools and teachers

were provided flexibility but within an environment of high expectations and competitiveness.

The school district provided its organizational goals, expectations, resources, and services. It also

infused flexibility so that each school and teacher could work toward maximum student success

differentially based on local school needs. However, it cannot be overstressed that schools and

teachers fully understood that flexibility within a highly competitive environment still included

high expectations for success by all. This integrated practice of flexibility in a competitive

environment reflects Waters and Marzano's (2006) "defined autonomy." As elaborated earlier,

the school district provided tremendous flexibility to principals and teachers to implement

district resources as needed to meet their local student needs to ensure student academic

success—a major, if not the biggest, school district and school goal. Simply, the school district

implemented competition among its schools to excel in achieving district goals as guardrails to

guide school autonomy and infused the philosophy of "Do what you need to do, but be the best

at what WE need to do!" The district held the schools accountable for student learning. The

schools and teachers felt empowered and responded to this expectation by holding themselves

accountable and responsible for decisions made to improve student learning.

No organization is perfect, not even a school district. Areas the school district needed to

improve were also identified. Most of the improvements were related to the concept of

continuous improvement: Doing it well but always trying to do it even better. Parents focused

on improvement to cafeteria food and the surrounding external environment of the schools.

School principals identified a need by the school district to support greater inter-campus

networking. They felt their schools could improve even more if more time was provided for

schools to share their successes with each other. An excellent idea or program in one school can

benefit other schools if the information is shared. Schools wanted more opportunities to learn

from each other. They were also concerned about possible attendance re-zoning and its impact

on their school's student demographics. While their schools' student demographics were very

challenging, they were concerned that the possible re-zoning of their students to other schools

may jeopardize their learning. They emphasized the success of their schools with such students

and the fear that another school might not be as successful with them. These schools expressed a strong choice to work with these demographically challenging students.

The most critical improvement commonly identified by school staff, principals, and parents was proper recognition and extra support from the school district to their schools. The school district was criticized for focusing more time and effort on under-performing schools or schools with students from "high-society" parents than on high-performing schools. This perspective led to these principals, school staff, and parents feeling less appreciated and supported by the school district. Principals and staff felt left out of the school district's limelight and efforts to secure grant funding. This was such a strong feeling that one participant stated: "Throw us a bone." In other words, something, anything was better than no attention from the school district. So, all schools received all the school district pluses identified by the participants, but none of the additional kudos the school district provides is directed toward already successful schools. This is a dire criticism because everyone needs to feel sufficiently appreciated and supported. In fairness to the district, state, and federal funds and grants are made available to turn around low-performing schools. However, there should still be fairness in the district's allocation of its time and recognition to all its low and high-performing schools.

While the 11 characteristic effective school model supported by effective school literature and an effective school research study design did not include school district as a characteristic (Padilla et al., 2019), the same effective school research study demonstrated that a school district could support high-performing Title 1 schools. A school does not exist in a vacuum but in a complex contextual external environment.

This complex contextual external environment includes the school district, the local community—beyond the parents, and the state and federal communities and governments. Any

one of these external environment components can impact a school's performance, especially in funding. Of course, the external component's proximity to the school affects its impact. As a proximal external component, a school district can readily affect school performance. Thus, a school district can positively influence a school's performance, as was the case in this research study. However, this support may not necessarily ensure school success (Leithwood et al., 2004). Moreover, a school can perform highly without great support from any external component, including the school district, making the journey much more difficult. School districts should strive to positively influence all their schools to achieve high performance, following the many examples demonstrated by the school district in this research study's high-performing Title 1 schools.

It should be noted that a limitation in the study was that the parents were not randomly selected to participate in the study but were chosen by the school. This process ensured a sample of parents who were more active and connected to the school. However, parents involved may have been more positively oriented toward the school.

Conclusion

Four high-performing Title 1 schools in South Texas supported an eleven-characteristic model of effective schools generated from the effective school research literature (Padilla et al., 2019). Additionally, the four study schools strongly revealed several strategies implemented by their school district that served to support their successful efforts. These effective strategies related to active specialized support by district staff, district curriculum designed by district teachers during the summer, instructional resources selected through teacher input, flexibility in implementing district supports, professional development during summer and the school year to meet individual teacher needs, district-designed student assessment, an intra-district, and inter-

district competitive school environment focused on student achievement, and parent initiatives aligned to local needs.

In particular, flexibility and the intra-district and inter-district competitive school environment provided the foundation for the success of the other strategies, establishing a defined-autonomous work environment as presented by Waters and Marzano (2006). The school district provided schools and teachers flexibility in the many services it provided within a competitive environment that ensured flexed district supports. The four schools were focused on being the best school in the school district and area for student achievement. Autonomy with guardrails and other strategies used by the school district can serve as guidance for other school districts striving to support their schools in achieving academic high-performance. This would positively impact students, teachers, principals, schools, parents, communities, and school districts across the nation.

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Appendix A
Leadership Responsibilities and Practices

Superintendent Responsibilities	Practices Used by Superintendent & Executive/District Office Staff to Fulfill Superintendent Responsibilities
Goal-setting process *The superintendent involves board members and principals in the process of setting goals.*	• Developing a shared vision for the goal-setting process • Using the goal-setting process to set goals developed jointly by the board and administration • Developing goals that are coherent and reflect attendant values which support involvement and quality in achievement rather than maintenance of the status quo • Communicating expectations to central office staff and principals
Non-negotiable goals for achievement & instruction *Goals for student achievement and instructional programs are adopted and are based on relevant research.*	• Modeling understanding of instructional design • Establishing clear priorities among the district's instructional goals and objectives • Adopting instructional methodologies that facilitate the efficient delivery of the district curriculum • Incorporating varied and diverse instructional methodologies that allow for a wide range of learning styles that exist in a multi-racial student population • Adopting 5-year non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction • Ensuring that a preferred instructional program is adopted and implemented
Board alignment with & support of district goals *Board support for district goals for achievement and instruction is maintained.*	• Establishing an agreement with the board president on district goals • Establishing an agreement with the board president on the type and nature of conflict in the district • Along with the board president, remaining situationally aware, agreeing on the political climate of the school district • Establishing an agreement with the board president on the nature of teaching/learning strategies to be used in the district • Providing professional development for board members • Establishing an agreement with the board president on the effectiveness of board training
Monitoring goals for achievement & instruction *The superintendent monitors and evaluates the implementation of the district instructional program, impact of instruction on achievement, and*	• Using an instructional evaluation program that accurately monitors implementation of the district's instructional program • Monitoring student achievement through feedback from the instructional evaluation program • Using a system to manage instructional change • Annually evaluating principals • Reporting student achievement data to the board on a regular basis • Ensuring that the curricular needs of all student populations are met • Observing classrooms during school visits

Appendix A
Leadership Responsibilities and Practices

Superintendent Responsibilities	Practices Used by Superintendent & Executive/District Office Staff to Fulfill Superintendent Responsibilities
impact of implementation on implementers.	• Coordinating efforts of individuals and groups within the organization to increase the reliability of the system, with adjustments by individuals to quickly respond to system failures
Use of resources to support the goals for achievement & instruction *Resources are dedicated and used for the professional development of teachers and principals to achieve district goals*	• Adopting an instructional and resource management system supporting the implementation of the district's instructional philosophy Providing extensive teacher and principal staff development • Training all instructional staff in a common but flexible instructional model • Controlling resource allocation • Providing access to professional growth opportunities through the design of a master plan to coordinate in-service activities of the district
Defined autonomy; superintendent relationship with schools *The superintendent provides autonomy to principals to lead their schools but expects alignment on district goals and the use of resources for professional development.*	• Developing a shared vision and understanding of "defined autonomy." • Using standards for content and instruction as basic design principles • Committing the district and schools to continuous improvement • Screening, interviewing, and selecting teachers along with principals • Hiring experienced teachers • Rewarding successful teachers and terminating the employment of unsuccessful teachers • Establishing teacher evaluation as a priority for principals • Ensuring that principals speak with teachers about results • Establishing strong agreed-upon principles/values which direct actions of people • Ensuring that schools have a clear mission focused on school performance • Ensuring that school practices are characterized by the opportunity for all students to learn, Including socializing functions in district meetings • Maintaining high expectations for school performance • Expecting principals to fulfill instructional leadership responsibilities • Directing personnel operations to assure a stable yet improving and well-balanced workforce • Ensuring that schools are characterized by an orderly climate Promoting innovation

Appendix A

Leadership Responsibilities and Practices

Superintendent Responsibilities	Practices Used by Superintendent & Executive/District Office Staff to Fulfill Superintendent Responsibilities
	• Developing principal awareness of district goals and actions directed at goal accomplishment • Providing leadership of curriculum development • Ensuring that homogeneous ability groupings within classrooms do not segregate students into racial or other inappropriate groups • Applying district sanctions to students for unsatisfactory academic performance • Rewarding students beyond standard honor rolls and recognition assemblies for exceptional performance

Source: Waters & Marzano, 2006, Figure 2, pp. 15-16

Appendix B

Student Demographics

School	Total	Hispanic	White	ELL	At-Risk	Eco-Disad	Mobility
Study School 1	564	99.3%	0.4%	63.5%	78.9%	95.4%	24.4%
Study School 2	526	98.5%	1.5%	62.5%	75.3%	97.0%	20.3%
Study School 3	398	99.2%	0.8%	66.8%	77.9%	93.2%	12.3%
Study School 4	611	98.9%	1.1%	58.1%	67.4%	94.9%	20.5%
Study District	34,629	97.4%	1.5%	32.1%	62.5%	85.3%	17.7%
Region One	430,140	97.4%	1.7%	36.9%	63.3%	85.1%	N/A
Texas	5,343,834	52.4%	28.1%	18.9%	50.3%	59.0%	16.2%

Source: Texas Education Agency *Texas Academic Performance Report 2015-16 State Profile*;

Texas Education Agency 2016

Appendix C
School Principal Focus Sessions Expressed District Supports and Concerns

District Supports	District Concerns
Provides "good" professional development	Needs more district specialists to meet school needs
Provides professional development throughout the school year	Too busy helping poor-performing schools that time is not focused on high-performing schools
Organizes curriculum writing by teachers in the summer	Leaves high-performing schools out of grant requests even though we need additional support
Provides state test data results to schools	Forgets about high-performing schools, "throw us a bone."
Organizes benchmark tests and their results for schools	Needs to recognize high-performing schools more
Organizes district departments into "good systems."	Needs to support more inter-campus networking
Specialists are supportive of schools and teachers	
Permits schools to use their budgets as needed	
Has high expectations of all schools	
Promotes a very healthy competitive environment to encourage schools to work hard and be the best school	
Requests feedback from teachers on the district curriculum every six weeks	
Provides school with many instructional programs and resources selected through teacher input	
Provides curriculum but with flexibility on how teachers use it	
Requests feedback on district curriculum	
Allows schools much flexibility	
Engages teachers in curriculum writing	
Implements early-exit Bilingual program.	