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Leadership strategies employed in high-poverty, high-performing small high schools
A mixed-method inquiry

By

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Abstract

Ever since the National Commission on Excellence in Education's *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report, a collective movement toward raising student achievement for *all* students and closing the achievement gap within student subgroups has changed the role of the site principal from manager to instructional leader, as well as transformed how states fund schools and assess their accountability. In 2014, California created a funding process through a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) that required collaborative decision-making and local supervision, and provided more funding to schools serving higher-poverty communities; raising the stakes of accountability also meant a greater focus on school leadership. As the principal of a small high school of 350 students, 19% of whom are living in poverty, this inquiry seeks to examine principal leadership in similar small high schools that are high-performing due to their principal's leadership and their respective approach to accountability planning.

All principals live on the front lines developing and implementing LCAP plans, while simultaneously juggling new mandates and all aspects of a school's operations. Small school principals lead this transformational improvement in teaching and learning with less district support and fewer resources. Although every principal's goal remains to ensure the high performance of students and faculty, I argue that over the last three decades, the unique challenges of small school principals have been underserved in California's education system. Seen in this light, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of Fullan's "Coherence Framework" and its application by school leaders in selected small high schools in Northern California. This study used a mixed-method approach that identified the goals, actions, and

services outlined in the LCAP and, through interviews, explored systematic leadership approaches related to school improvement and outcomes for low-socioeconomic disadvantaged students (SES). By studying how principals in high-performing small schools view these components, how they translate them into action, and how they address the particular challenges and opportunities in small districts, this study will provide valuable information to other small school districts and principals with limited financial and human resources, on how to enhance student achievement.

Keywords: principal, principal leadership, small high schools, CAASPP, LCFF, LCAP

Dedication

For all those small school principals who have developed the strategic and innovative leadership necessary to support excellence in learning and teaching. We may not have the time and resources of big schools, but we have mastered the strength of relationships and the power of putting students at the center of every decision.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

  Today's public schools look very different from the one-room schoolhouses dating from the nineteenth century. Public schools are overseen by elected school boards, state departments of education and the federal government, and providing free and public education is a hallmark of the United States of America. That being said, there have been, and continue to be, pivotal moments of inequality that shape California's education system.

  California, the thirty-first State in the Union and now the most populous state in the United States has generally been a leader in educational policy and change. By 1902, California's constitution called for state-funded aid up to high school, and by 1921, California established the State Department of Education and asked local school boards to set district budgets (Macías, 2014). Twenty years later, special reports led to lawsuits highlighting inequities and disparities among school districts. The Mendez v. Westminster School District of Orange County in 1946, a ruling that segregating Mexican children was a denial of the 14th Amendment (Macías, 2014), paved the way for Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. California's Governor's Earl Warren signed a bill two months after the US District Court for the Southern District of California, ending school segregation in California and officially desegregated public schools. Governor Warren of California would later become the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

  The Mendez case put California in a leadership position for pushing against systematic inequalities and racism. Before the 1970s, California was at the top of the country regarding per-pupil spending, although the financing system generated inequality in per-pupil funding (California School News Report, 2014). When California voters overwhelmingly approved

Proposition 13, a property tax limitation initiative, the reduction in tax revenue impacted public school funding dramatically. For the next twenty years, various cases challenged California's school funding system. Serrano v. Priest of 1968 was a case of historic proportions, which argued that using local property taxes to fund schools was unfair to poor communities; by 1983 California began equalizing funding. This move, however, ignored principles of equity. Fourteen years later, California Governor Jerry Brown began the work that would eventually move California from equalized to equitable spending and systematically change the school funding system.

> Today I'm signing a bill that is truly revolutionary. We are bringing government closer to the people, to the classroom where real decisions are made, and directing the money where the need and challenge is greatest. [Today] is a good day for California, it's a good day for school kids, and it's a good day for our future (State of California, 2013).

Governor Brown framed the new state finance system, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), by prioritizing local decision-making, distributing state finances more equitably, and simplifying the funding system, stating that "Equal treatment for children in unequal situations is not justice." (State of California, 2013). The LCFF recognizes that students with additional academic needs—such as low-income families, English language learners, and foster youth— need additional financial resources to ensure equity of opportunity. The LCFF is essential to closing opportunity and achievement gaps and provides the funding structure for how the State of California supports school districts. LCFF allocates base resources to all students and extra resources based on how many low-income, foster youth, and English learner students that a district serves.

There are three matrices for calculating funding under LCFF:

1. Base grants provide districts with the bulk of their funding. The base grant varies by grade level and is keyed to the average daily attendance (ADA) of students in four grade spans: K–3, 4–6, 7–8, and 9–12. These per-pupil grants are adjusted each year for the cost of living.

2. Supplemental grants provide districts with 20% or more than the base funding for each student who is either from a low-income family, an English learner, or in foster care.

3. In districts where at least 55% of students are in high need, concentration grants provide additional funding. For each low-income, English learner, or foster youth student above the 55% enrollment threshold, the district receives an additional 50% of the base funding.

Figure 1 is a visual representation of California's school finance system before and after the implementation of the LCFF, illustrating the new emphasis on equity that provides higher poverty districts with more funding.

Figure 1

Funding Equity under LCFF Graphic
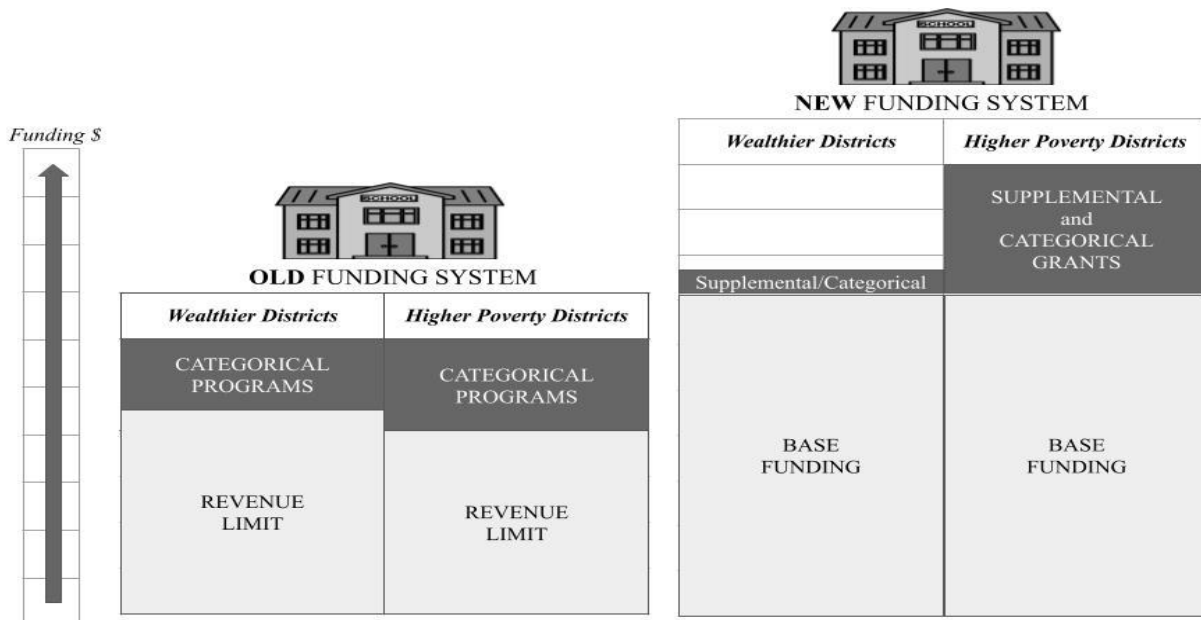
Note. Adapted from "What you need to know about California's LCFF," EdTrust-West, 2015.

As more funding was allocated through the LCFF formula, the state eliminated categorical funding streams, thus giving districts more flexibility in how they spent their revenue. This marks a shift in decision-making from the state to local school districts.

The LCFF has another key feature, which required districts to develop a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) based on eight-state priorities. LCAPs are three-year plans that describe what the district plans to do to support student outcomes. The priorities include the following: access to core services, implementation of Common Core State Standards, access to a broad course of study, student achievement, other student outcomes, student engagement, parent involvement, and school climate. Additionally, the LCFF was implemented at a time when California had just established a new state accountability system.

The LCFF reshaped education governance and fundamentally changed California's K-12 financing system. Part of the accountability reforms include replacing the Academic Performance Index (API) with the California Dashboard. The API assigned each school a triple-digit score based on its California Standardized Test (CST) scores. The Dashboard replaced the single API score with a more comprehensive set of metrics and a color-coded system grounded in a growth and improvement model. The color-coded pie system ranks from least favorable to most favorable. The general idea is that the color-coded system shows how well the school or a subgroup performed across an array of indicators, and whether and by how much it either improved or worsened.

The Dashboard provides four types of reports with detailed performance information:
- Equity report – performance level of all students
- Status and Change Report – current performance and change over time
- Detailed Reports – year-by-year data for the state and local indicators

- Student Groups Report – performance of various demographic groups

The Dashboard's color-coded system informs efforts to improve student outcomes.

Although the California Dashboard replaced the API index with multiple measures of success, high-stakes testing continues to create school improvement challenges, and educators throughout California grapple with the complexities and challenges of school improvement. State testing programs can have immense ramifications and add stress to already stressful environments, especially in high-poverty schools and districts. In addition, there are pressures for schools and districts receiving state and federal funds to achieve higher levels of learning and standardized testing performance markers for all children. Research shows that effective teachers can have a significant impact on student achievement. However, if the effective teacher is an outlier, surrounded by ineffective teachers, then that teacher's impact quickly fades out in subsequent years (Fusarelli, 2012).

As the high-stakes accountability grew in California, more attention has been paid to leadership (Elmore, 2002). Principals became instructional leaders, assumed to have a positive impact on student achievement (Fullan, 2001). The evolving accountability system changed the role of the principal, and researchers such as DuFour, Elmore, and Fullan studied leadership and a culture of change by focusing on whole system reform. Their research argues that schools will be unable to meet the challenges confronting them and will not sustain the process unless they identify ways for the overall organization to have a mutual allegiance and competition for the common good (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Lasting and systematic change within a school building comes with the leadership of the school principal. Principals can be change agents by building a collaborative culture, shared vision, and a collaborative climate.

It is likely that leaders face even greater challenges in small high-poverty schools. While there is a large body of research studying student achievement in large and urban schools, there are relatively few studies examining distinct characteristics and challenges of small schools and districts. In addition, there is no explicit agreement among researchers and educators about what constitutes a "small" school or a "large" school. There is research comparing achievement levels of students in large and small schools; however, the research is split in determining whether school size alone makes a difference (Eberts et al., 1982). None of the research finds large schools superior to small schools in their achievement effects. A similarity between rural and urban schools is that they both tend to educate students where high rates of poverty impact student achievement (Bouck, 2004). However, Corbet (2007) has argued that the research and dialogue among education leaders and policymakers regarding educational equity focus exclusively on urban communities.

Exciting research in the area of student achievement has emerged over the past decade with the work of Michael Fullan and his coherence framework. Fullan (2016) has gathered extensive data and postulated four key factors or components that lead to an actual increase in student performance. These four components—Focused Direction and Collective Purpose, Cultivation of a Collaborative Culture, Deepening Learning to Accelerate Improvement and Innovation, and Securing Accountability from the Inside Out—have led to significant findings of whole system change regardless of the school size. Fullan, who devoted his professional career to exploring how to bring about the best meaningful change in schools, districts, and the educational system as an entity, asserted that combining a focus on the moral imperative with changing whole systems leads to successful large-scale reform in districts of any size. "My overall conclusion about the field of school development is that ultimately the solution must be

deeply informed by sound theories—theories that are close to practice, that make sense of practice, and that help us identify and continually assess strategies for improvement" (Fullan, 2008). Fullan's research shows that focusing on coherence instead of achievement tests leads to improved student achievement, where higher performance on external assessments are a byproduct of good practice rather than the goal itself. According to Fullan (2016), highly successful leaders develop coherence to reduce or eliminate distractions and create a shared sphere of understanding. His theory helps explain the phenomenon of leadership as coherence-making strategies that employ capacity building, pedagogy, and internal accountability across the educational system. The accountability system therefore created more mandates, more compliance, and ultimately multiple initiatives for school leaders to manage.

The LCFF was a monumental change in school funding and provided a real test of Fullan's theories. The LCFF ultimately put control in local communities' and leaders' hands to ensure student outcomes are improved based on the funds that districts receive. Developing an LCAP to determine how schools will support low-income students, English learners, and foster youth demands district and school leadership. The LCFF and the LCAP push educational leaders to address change in whole system reform, put leaders in an active mode, and empower communities to make decisions in service to positive student outcomes.

This study seeks to deepen the understanding of Fullan's coherence components. Its case study is these components' actual application by school leaders in selected small high schools in northern California that are outperforming other schools with similar challenges. By studying how principals view these components, how they translate them into action, and the particular challenges and opportunities that they face in small districts, this study will provide valuable information to other small districts with limited resources to enhance student achievement.

Specifically, this study will look at small schools with a student enrollment of 200–900 with 65% or more students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, which have performed consistently, for over five years, above the state average on the annual California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) test in English and Math. In addition to identifying the small high schools that demonstrate success on the CAASPP exam (success being define as above the state average), this study aims to explore what and how site leaders mobilize stakeholders through Fullan's coherence components, and through the goals, actions, and services as defined by the LCAP to improve student outcomes in English and Math, regardless of the student's starting proficiency level.

Research Questions

This study used a mixed-method approach that explores systematic leadership approaches related to school improvement and outcomes for low-socioeconomic disadvantaged students (SES) attending small schools. This study focuses on the following two research questions:

Research Question 1

In small Northern Californian high schools that serve high shares of socioeconomically disadvantaged students (SES), *and* score higher than the state average on the CAASPP, what goals, actions, and services are outlined in these school's LCAPs and how do these compare with similar low-performing schools?

Research Question 2

What leadership strategies and implementation steps do these high school principals use to achieve student success and:

    a. How are these aligned to Fullan's coherence framework, focusing on direction, collaborative culture, deepening learning, and securing accountability?

b. What other strategies and implementation steps, outside of Fullan's components,

   do these principals report as related to their success?

   To investigate Research Question 1, I analyzed the LCAP plans for a sample of high-

performing and low-performing school districts identified in Northern California. To address

Research Question 2, I interviewed principals from a sample of high-performing Northern

California high schools.

<center>**Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**</center>

Introduction

       Research that explored the connections between poverty and student achievement in K-12 schools has been abundant in recent decades. Leithwood et al. (2004), for instance, concluded that effective leadership ranks second to quality teaching in terms of influencing student learning. Even more significant, Scheerens and Bosker (1997) have found that quality leadership is critical in schools serving students living in poverty. This literature review therefore structured to follow through wors that analyze the tangible connections between issues of leadership, small high school and high-poverty contexts, and school funding, as seen through the lens of the following four areas:

- Michael Fullan's Coherence Framework;

- Small School Districts Challenges;

- Socioeconomic Status and Achievement;

- Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).

Fullan's Conceptual Framework

       Fullan is a leader in educational whole system change and a global advocate for leadership in education. Fullan is the Global Leadership Director of New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL), and in addition to partnering with schools globally to support system change, he serves as an advisor to policymakers around the world with a focus on leadership in education. An advocate for change leadership, his research and writing over the past fifty years have primarily focused on innovation in schools, but have also covered many other pedagogical elements. Fullan (1996), for instance, focused on teacher quality, morale, and strategies for teachers' empowerment. Fullan (1997) (which went into a second edition in 2008), supported

<center>10</center>

principals as their role continued to evolve in light of changes in state accountability system, from school managers to instructional leaders. Fullan (2008) argued that principals are the most important agents of change in schools and, without a systems approach to leadership in place, asking principals to do more with already overloaded schedules demands more focus and attention.

Being a global advocate of leadership in education, Fullan (2003) has designated teachers and school leaders as "activators of leadership and learning," who, by helping pupils discover their talents and passions, also fulfill their role of transforming schools. More recently, Fullan (2010) built on the school leadership theme and outlined how leadership could lead school change through personal connections, such as drawing on resources from both the public and private sectors. In addition, Fullan calls the leaders "system thinkers in action," meaning that site leaders should focus not only on increasing student achievement and outcomes but also on building capacity in the next generation of school leaders to take the work even further. In addition to working closely with schools, policymakers, and governments, a central theme in Fullan's work has been the importance of supporting teacher agency and leadership capacity, and it is one of the reasons why his work has been central to both research and practical reform attempts of student achievement markers in the education system.

At the center of Fullan's framework is leadership. According to Fullan (2016), leaders must find the right combination of the aforementioned four components, and must deliberately foster a culture of working individually and collectively. One of the challenges in leadership is finding the correct drivers for sustainable change. Fullan describes sustainability as the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement, consistent with deep values of human purpose (Fullan, 2005). Fullan's coherence framework contains four significant

drivers: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability. According to Fullan, these four drivers are simultaneous: one is not more important than the other; rather, they work in service of each other. A graphic representation of that integration can be found on his website, Motion Leadership.

'Focusing direction' is about getting to a point of departure. 'Collaborative culture' clarifies the direction and creates shared ownership of the school improvement focus. 'Deepening learning' refers to new pedagogy that addresses the focus. The fourth driver, 'securing accountability,' will be an essential piece of Fullan's framework that features in this study. Schools and districts must be fiscally responsible as well as responsible for student outcomes. Understanding how high-performing high schools set and implement the goals, actions, and services outlined in the LCAP will be a further focal point in this study.

Fullan's research shows that accountability is the biggest hurdle for system change. Organizations often falter in this regard either due to a lack of accountability, which leads to loss of focus, or by exercising too much accountability, which only serves to demotivate stakeholders in the school's orbit. Fullan's coherence framework therefore provides a leadership roadmap as it pertains to internal and external accountability. According to Fullan, internal accountability must proceed and feed external accountability. Elmore (2002) stated that "No amount of external accountability will be effective in the absence of internal accountability." Internal accountability, according to Fullan, is when the group is responsible for itself individually and collectively. Leaders who lead with transparency, specificity, precision, and a non-judgmental attitude can build and feed into a positive learning environment in schools.

A fundamental principle of the LCAP structure is to give control to Local Education Agencies (LEAs), which very much aligns with Fullan's coherence framework to invest more in

internal accountability and less in external accountability. However, external accountability can play a supportive role and, in some cases, an intervention role for school sites. The framework will guide this study of leadership around creating a shared understanding of systematic leadership and implementation. After analyzing the LCAPs, I will study site leadership to determine the knowledge and strategy used to create whole system reform. Fullan's coherence framework is not a foolproof path to success; however, it is a template for leaders to consider as they move forward in implementing change, building trust, and sustaining success.

Challenges Facing Small Schools: Funding and Staffing Disadvantages

According to Vincent and Jain (2015), districts that serve more low-income students (those receiving free or reduced price meals) spend less on capital outlay per student and more on maintenance and operations than districts serving high-income students. As a result, poorer districts have fewer dollars for education programs, putting them at a competitive disadvantage. This disparity is exacerbated in cases where there is a combination of high poverty and small school size. Small districts also tend to be poorer, and poorer districts face extra fiscal challenges. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, n.d.) reported that 363 (59%) of the school districts in California are categorized as small, with an enrollment of less than 2,500 students. A major challenge of small districts is the ability to keep up with larger districts when it comes to facility and technology infrastructure. In addition, small districts in California have lower assessed value bond and bond capacity than non-rural, larger school districts (Vincent, 2018). Small school districts are also more likely to underspend on capital, maintenance, and operations; nearly three-quarters of school districts in the bottom quintile of capital spending are therefore small (Vincent, 2018).

The general operating budget in school districts covers maintenance and operation of facilities and capital budget reserved for capital projects. Local property taxes generally support capital budgets through local general obligation bonds. The general operating budget is funded through the LCFF, which includes funding maintenance and operations, teacher salaries, administrative salaries, and utilities. The state's effort to make school districts' general operating funding more equitable supports closing funding disparities; however, smaller districts see less of an increase in per student maintenance and operations spending. This funding gap makes it difficult for small districts to consistently budget each year for facility cleaning, upkeep, and maintenance.

Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health had concluded that the quality and condition of the physical spaces of a school are tied to student achievement and teacher retention (Eitland et al., 2017). Well-maintained quality school buildings have been found to contribute to student achievement in several ways: providing light, acoustics and air quality that directly impact learning performance; offering inviting spaces that enhance student self-belief and desire to be in school; providing technology that optimizes instruction; preparing students for the current job market; and communicating to students that the community values their comfort, safety, and education (Earthman, 2002). If small school districts are already at a disadvantage, underspending on school facilities disproportionately affects low-wealth communities. This dilemma furthermore undermines the spirit behind the LCFF.

The lower fiscal capacity of small school districts creates a staffing challenge as well. Small school principals have to work harder to recruit and retain staff than larger school principals (Montgomery, 2013). Although teachers in small schools tend to report professional satisfaction, compensation tends to be low, teacher turnover is often high, and hiring can be

difficult because of travel time to rural areas. These factors can result in a below-average share of highly trained teachers (Monk, 2007). Small school principals often have smaller staff working under them and therefore it becomes incumbent on the principal to retain teachers (Lock et al., 2012). High-stakes testing and state accountability creates additional stress on small school principals who already devote extensive efforts to recruiting and retaining staff. Accountability for student outcomes as measured by standardized assessments compounds the problem for small school principals, especially given that resources impacting results are not as readily available (Starr & White, 2008).

Another prominent challenge is the very small administrative staffing structure. Small school principals tend to have a greater abundance of diverse school responsibilities than their larger district counterparts. Small school principals are more likely to have to step in as classroom teachers, instructional specialists, project managers, and community volunteers than principals in larger schools (Canales et al., 2008). Small school principals are also called upon to take on district roles (Clark & Stevens, 2009). In addition to having to juggle multiple responsibilities, small school principals cannot delegate or share managerial responsibilities as their larger district counterparts are prone to do (Starr & White, 2009).

Socio Economic Status and Achievement

There are, however, small high-poverty schools and school districts that are beating the odds. "We have much more to learn from studying high-poverty schools that are on the path to improvement than we do from studying nominally high-performing schools that are producing a significant portion of their performance through social class rather than instruction" (Elmore, 2006). Decades of research have shown that schools can improve academic outcomes for students who live in poverty (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Education Trust, 2002; Teddie & Stringfield,

1993). Researchers such as Barr and Parrett (2007) concluded that one of the most important factors in achieving positive student outcomes in schools with high poverty rates is leadership—often of the collaborative and distributive kind. A common characteristic of high-performing, high-poverty schools is high-performing leadership.

This optimism is supported by the Coleman Report (1966), considered by many the most important education study of the 20th century. James S. Coleman, a Johns Hopkins University sociologist and one of the first researchers to use test scores to indicate equality (Kiviat, 2000), produced an *Equality of Educational Opportunity Report,* which focused more on student outcomes than school resources. Since the Coleman Report's (1966) appearance, educational researchers have spent decades studying how schools overcome negative influences of low socioeconomic status to improve student achievement. Researchers such as Goddard (1998), Goddard et al. (2000), and Tschannen-Moran et al. (2000), have focused on the variables that schools and school leaders can control, and concluded that some properties are just as important as socioeconomic status as causes for academic achievement. Specifically, they had found that the collective efficacy of a school's faculty can dramatically affect student achievement despite what a student brings to the school, and that the principal's actions drive the collective efficacy of a school's faculty to provide a clear focus on improving academic achievement.

High poverty, high-performing schools become efficient operators in disrupting the cycle of poverty. However, this disruption cannot take place without leaders who lead in light of social justice ideals. Their vision for the school is not only student-centered but focused specifically on students who are not succeeding academically. These leaders focus on inclusive practices to make sure all students have access to high-quality instruction. Furthermore, as DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) have claimed, social justice leadership involves recognizing unequal

circumstances and then operating under a moral imperative toward eliminating those circumstances. Disrupting the cycle of poverty requires transformational leaders who are not afraid to question and challenge the existence of marginalization in their schools to create positive change, both within the schools and in their broader communities (Mafora, 2013).

The Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP)

The past decade has seen a large overhaul in state standards, state assessments, state evaluation of district performance, and state funding formulas for education, all of which add to the complexity of developing a district accountability plan. In addition, because of the unique fiscal challenges and opportunities facing districts that are both small and experience high-poverty levels, a thorough understanding of LCFF and LCAP takes on significant weight. A review of the literature shows that funding emphasis on high-needs students and design emphasis on local control may not be enough to ensure higher student performance scores. In smaller school districts, principals frequently have a larger role in facilitating accountability plans, and it therefore becomes critically important that they themselves are familiar with the funding parameters, purpose, process, and likely measurements of success embedded in creating an LCAP.

California launched the LCAP system in the 2013–2014 school year, which replaced the previous K–12 finance system that had been in place for roughly 40 years. To address the fact that low socioeconomic status (SES) students tend to score lower on performance assessment tests, California also enacted the LCFF in 2013–14, a landmark decision that categorically shifted funding guidelines from state legislators and placed responsibility and fiscal accountability in the hands of local school districts serving disadvantaged students. To direct more funds to districts with high shares of low-SES students, the LCFF also granted districts

greater control by removing much of the ingrained supervision that was formerly attached to funding. To address issues of accountability within this new funding structure, the State of California launched the new requirement for school districts to develop LCAPs.

According to Affeldt (2015), more than half of the six million K-12 students in California qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. In addition, one-quarter of the students in California are considered English language learners (ELLs). These two data points were another reason that state legislators recommended an overhaul of the finance and accountability system (Affeldt, 2015). The LCFF consists of three levels of grants: base, supplemental, and concentration. The supplemental and concentration grant amounts are determined by the numbers of students with more significant needs, as defined by the formula (Taylor, 2013). Therefore, restructuring the school funding formula put more money toward schools serving students with the greatest educational needs (Menefee-Libey & Kerchner, 2015).

A hallmark of the process by which schools develop LCAPs is the engagement and input from school and community stakeholders, namely, students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Giving local control to local communities is a move away from government's centralized control and amounted to a considerable change after forty years of government oversight (Cooper et al., 2014). A significant part of the American populace has always been "leery of centralized control" because bureaucrats in a central state office inherently lack knowledge and understanding of local needs (Vasquez et al., 2013). Before the LCFF, schools within the funding structure received baseline level funding, and additional funding for various in-need subcategories of students (e.g., gifted, handicapped, at-risk) for transportation, facilities, and other specified spending. Additionally, states and the federal government built some formulas for poorer districts (Ladd et al., 1999). The formulas were complex to manage,

and shifting control to local stakeholders attempted to foment greater fiscal efficacy (Taylor, 2013). The LCFF focuses by design on local control to lead and affect the desired change in their schools. There are therefore fewer direct legislative mandates determining how programs are funded in schools.

There is a gap in the research literature concerning the effect of the finance and accountability system for California's public schools. This gap exists for two reasons: first, the implementation of LCFF is relatively new; and second, schools are still grappling with the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic. There are also assumptions about smaller, rural, diverse, lower SES schools and performance which is not always examined. California's funding system (LCFF) and the policy system (LCAP), implemented simultaneously, are all still relatively new, and researchers are therefore still attempting to disentangle these systems' respective consequences on the ground, in tandem with observing the impact of the state's new test score measurement system (CAASPP).

There is, however, new evidence that suggests some of the additional LCFF funding is helping to improve test scores. Pearson and Lafortune (2021), for instance, found that there are greater score increases for students meeting or exceeding grade-level standards in English and math for low-income, than for non-low-income students. Recent data shows that higher-need districts increased the number of students meeting or exceeding standards by ten and nine percentage points in English and Math, respectively, while lower-need districts increased by four and five points, respectively (Pearson & Lafortune, 2021). These trends suggest that additional LCFF funding is having an impact on test scores.

In 2014, the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) system replaced the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) system. Smarter Balanced

Assessment Consortia (SBAC) developed the CAASPP and aligned it with the common core standards. The Common Core State Standards are the academic standards adopted by 41 states (i.e., common core). The goal of common standards is to make sure all public school students receive adequate preparation for college and the job market when they graduate from high school, regardless of where they live. The standards are designed to prepare students for college and careers and make the US more competitive academically.

The CAASPP replaced the multiple-choice, fill-in-the-bubble test of the California Standardized Test. Each spring, the state requires students in grades 3–8 and grade 11 to participate in statewide English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics (MA) assessments. The CAASPP tests are taken on a computer and are adaptive. 'Adaptive' means that if a student answers a question correctly, the next question will be more difficult. If a student answers incorrectly or does not answer a question, the next question will be less difficult (SmarterBalanced, 2020). Some of the questions on the Smarter Balanced test require students to explain their thinking and are intended to measure a student's problem-solving and critical thinking skills. This is very different from the previous STAR tests which only contained multiple-choice questions. The STAR reporting used California Standards Tests (CSTs), which were criterion-referenced tests that assessed the California content standards in ELA, mathematics, science, and history-social science (see Appendix A). California educators have therefore made big changes in what and how they prepared their students to meet the common core standards.

In addition to CAASPP replacing the STAR test, the Dashboard replaced the Academic Performance Index (API) as the state's accountability and improvement system. Discontinued in 2014, the API was a figure that summarized the STAR test scores for a school in one number

(Allen, 2018). The STAR test was aligned to academic content standards and the API was intended to measure progress (EdData, 2018). STAR tests measured students' achievement of California's content standards in ELA, mathematics, science, and history/social science in every grade level through eleventh grade. The API score was used to rank schools in the state and among similar types of schools based on demographics. There were separate API scores for groups of more than ten students in ethnic subgroups, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, English learners, and students with disabilities. When California adopted new state standards aligned with the Common Core, the state suspended the single API, which was replaced with the Dashboard measured by state and local indicators.

Table 1 shows a comparison of API and the State Dashboard.

Table 1

A Comparison of API and the State Dashboard

	API	New State Dashboard
Metrics	Academic only (STAR/CAHSEE)	Multiple measures, including academic and climate/culture
Year-to-Year Changes	Does not consider growth or decline	Considers growth or decline
Subgroups	Subgroups' performance contributes to the score	Easily tracks progress of subgroups
Demographics	Similar schools ranking enabled easy comparison	No way to compare school's performance with similar school
Timeliness of Data	Timely data release/refresh	Data not all from the same year—outdated data on some measures
Summary	Single 3-digit number between 200–1000 indicates absolute performance	No summary score

	API	**New State Dashboard**
Tiering	Decile rankings indicate performance compared to all schools and similar schools	Five color grid based on both growth and absolute performance level
Comparison	Decile rankings provide easy comparison	Difficult to compare schools

Note. This information was produced by Educate 78 (2017) by comparing the academic performance index and new California School Dashboard.

Although the API did not include a measure of growth, growth was a part of the accountability system. The API was calculated by spring test scores and schools strove to achieve an 800 score (scores ranged from 200–1,000).

In summary, the Common Core state standards were adopted in California in 2010. In 2014, CAASPP replaced the STAR test, the LCAP was enacted in 2014, and the California Dashboard is a component of the LCFF legislation that was adopted in 2013. Thus, California's student accountability system and funding system simultaneously underwent a massive overhaul in four years. The dramatic change in what is taught, assessed, and how schools are funded, forced local education agencies to reimagine their approach to instruction, stakeholder engagement, and fiscal management in service to a more equitable approach to school funding, and a more holistic approach to school accountability. The need for high school principals in districts where they may have a larger role in communicating about the LCAP, as well as a greater role to play in developing actions with stakeholders and in directing funding, mandates that principals develop an expertise in the what, how, and eventual impact of the LCFF/LCAP system.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design

Introduction

This study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate principal leadership within seven higher-performing small high schools with a student enrollment between 200–900, as it corelates accountability planning and the four drivers Michael Fullan recommends for effective school improvement. First, to address RQ1, I conducted an analysis to identify the goals, actions, and services outlined in the school's LCAP. Second, to address RQ2, I interviewed principals in relation to their involvement in and ownership of LCAP. Also from these interviews, I explored systematic leadership approaches related to school improvement and outcomes for low-socioeconomic students compared to Michael Fullan's leadership drivers: focused direction and collective purpose, cultivation of a collaborative culture, deepening learning to accelerate improvement and innovation, and securing accountability from the inside out. After describing the sample I used for analysis, I will describe the research methodology and design for the LCAP analysis and an analysis of principal interviews.

Sample of Northern California Schools

California contains 1,309 traditional high schools, 260 charter high schools, and 259 alternative high schools. These schools are situated in 1,036 school districts: 344 unified school districts, 5 Common Administrative Districts (a combination of elementary and high schools for financial purposes), 528 Elementary School Districts, 76 High School Districts, 29 State Board of Education Districts, and 1 Statewide Benefit Charter (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

School Districts in California

School Districts in California

Category	Value (approx.)
Statewide Benefit Charter	~5
State Board of Education District	~25
Common Administrative Districts	~10
Unified School District	~350
High School Districts	~75
Elementary School Districts	~525
County Offices	~60
Total	~1,030
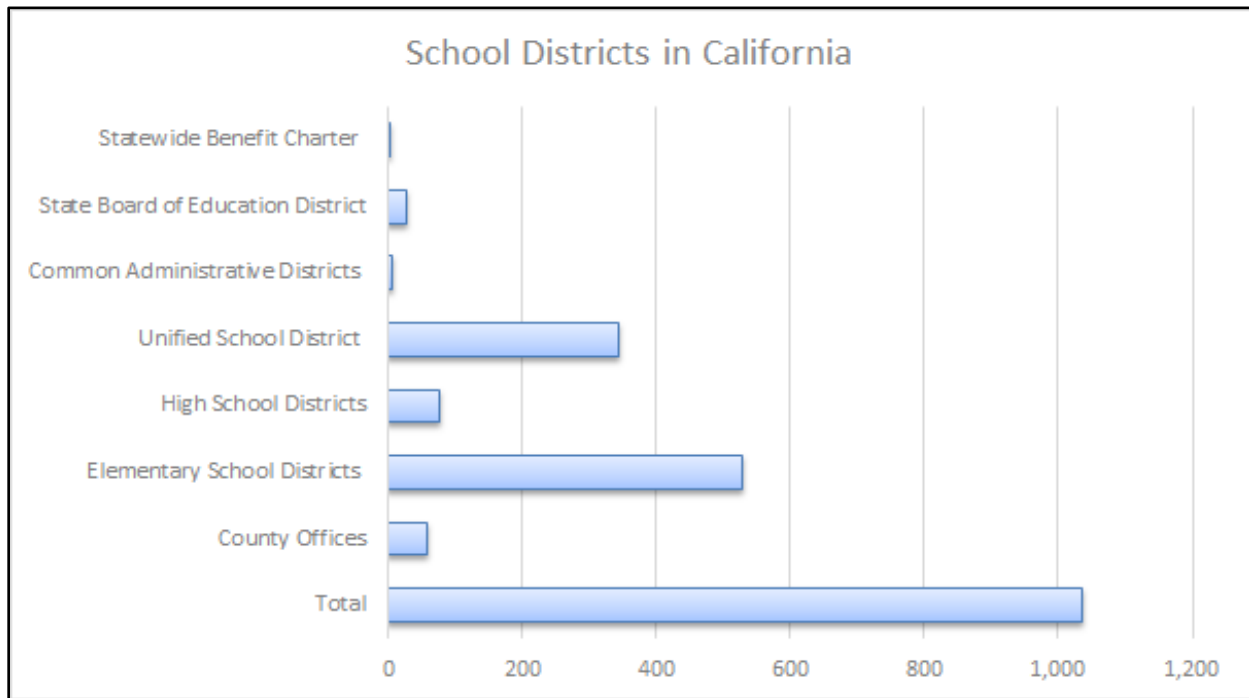
Note. See Appendix B for Definitions.

I used data from the Education Data Partnership website (EdData, 2018) to identify seven small, low-SES high schools in Northern California, five of whom were available for interviews. I defined small high schools to be those serving fewer than 900 students, and low-SES to be schools with 65% or more students participating in the free- or reduced-price lunch program. Household income is the criterion for participation in the program. Even though California will become the first state to implement a statewide Universal Meals Program for school children beginning in School Year (SY) 2022–23, the State Department of Education is still using the number of students who would qualify for free and reduced-priced lunch under the previous formula to determine high poverty schools. For a family of four, the income to qualify for free and reduced-priced lunch is $51,336 or below, in 2022 (CDE, 2021).

To narrow my search to Northern California, I divided the state into Northern California and Southern California. There is no official dividing line separating Northern California from Southern California, so for the purposes of this study, I define 'Northern Californian districts' as those north of Merced County (See Figure 3).

Figure 3

Northern California (Merced County and North)

There are 490 high schools in Northern California with an enrollment of 200–900 (see Table 3). Of those 490 high schools, 146 are small high schools (enrollment 200–900) and 44% (n=65) of the small schools in Northern California have a student population with 65% or more on free and reduced-price lunch.

Table 2

Small School Distribution Northern California vs. Southern California

	All High Schools	Schools with 65% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
High Schools in California	1,309	972
High Schools in Northern California	490	183
High Schools in Southern California	819	459
High Schools in Northern California with enrollment 200–900	146	65
High Schools in Southern California with enrollment 200–900	249	170

Note. Northern California = Merced County North; Southern California = Merced County South.

To classify the high-performing schools that will make up my sample from the 65 Northern California high-poverty small schools, I used the performance cut point on the 11th Grade Smarter Balanced CAASPP ELA. Specifically, I selected schools in which 45% or more students met or exceeded the ELA standard in a five-year cycle (2015–2019). This left me with seven schools. I chose 45% as the performance cutoff point because that was above the state average (44% in those same five years). Table 3 shows these seven schools and their ELA scores. I relied solely on ELA scores to form the cutoff, because when I narrowed the search to

look at Smarter Balanced Math scores above the state average, only five high schools met the

criteria. Those five schools were all charter schools. I did not want to focus on charter schools in

this study so as to have a sample set of only traditional high schools for closer comparison (see

Appendix C).

Table 3

Small School Districts in Northern California with a Five-Year Consistent or Growth Scores

Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments (SBSA) in English Language Art

% Standard Met or Exceeded ELA	**14-15**	**15-16**	**16-17**	**17-18**	**18-19**
State Average % Standard Met or Exceeded ELA	44%	49%	48%	50%	51%
High School 101	57%	45%	60%	50%	58%
High School 102	45%	40%	45%	53%	50%
High School 103	54%	54%	67%	65%	60%
High School 104	54%	67%	76%	58%	28%
High School 105	46%	59%	51%	49%	45%
High School 106	68%	71%	61%	68%	67%
High School 107	69%	56%	66%	65%	53%

The seven schools that met the ELA criteria scored above the state average all five years with the exception of two schools that had a drop in scores in one year. While only slightly exceeding the state average, these seven schools significantly outperformed the other 58 high schools that met the same size and demographic parameters. In 2015–2016, High School 102 dropped to 40% met or exceeded, and in 2018–2019 High School 104 dropped to 28% met or exceeded. Despite the one year drop in scores, I kept both schools in my sample to somewhat increase the sample size.

The small number of schools discovered in the selection process is indicative of the challenges that small schools with low SES face in exceeding state performance averages. But the same discovery of a small set of schools who are the exception, however, gave me a foundation for analyzing the role of leadership in their success. As stated earlier, as the principal of a small high school with 350 students and low SES, I seek to study how these principals address the particular challenges and opportunities that they face in small districts; whether those actions align with Fullan's coherence framework; the role each principal played in developing and executing their accountability plan; and whether there were any anomalies within those LCAP plans that principals felt contributed to their success. It is my hope that this study will also provide valuable information to other small districts and principals who also have limited financial and human resources at their disposal, in order to enhance student achievement.

Although my study focused in the main on high-performing small schools with low SES, I was also interested to compare the principals' plans of high-performing schools with a comparable sample of the seven lowest-performing small schools within my current school

district's county. This selection matched both the size and the SES data of the high-performing

schools as well as enabled me to have local access to those plans, should questions arise.

LCAP Analysis Method

To answer RQ1, once I identified the seven high schools, I analyzed their district's most

recent board adopted LCAP. Districts are required to develop a three-year plan using the state's

LCAP template to set forth the district and site goals, the actions that will be taken to achieve the

goals, and the expenditures needed to execute the action plan. The local board adopts the

district's LCAP and is required to produce an "annual update" that reports on progress toward

goals, actions, and expenditures. Districts can make mid-course corrections. Districts adopt a

new LCAP after three years (Cal. Educ. Code § 52061).

LCAPs are public documents, and I located the LCAPs in question on school district

websites. I examined each LCAP with a focus on educational services. In a broad sense,

educational services departments in school districts are responsible for providing service and

support in developing, coordinating, and ongoing evaluation of rigorous academic learning

programs based on the California Content Standards/California Common Core Standards. Some

examples of what educational services do:

- Provide the curriculum that our students learn.

- Ensure rigorous and student-centered classroom instruction.

- Support teachers in creating a technology-enabled practice.

- Assist teachers in utilizing assessment data to inform instruction.

- Train teachers and administrators.

- Develop and monitor best instructional practices.

- Innovate and improve learning systems and tools.

- Support students experiencing difficulties.

- Provide a safe and engaging learning environment.

- Provide specialized academic instruction and related services to support the needs of diverse learners.

- Support English Language Learners.

- Assess and evaluate student learning outcomes to continuously improve instructional and service delivery.

To conduct the LCAP analysis, I read the entire LCAPs and searched for keywords within educational services. Mills' (2017) study of 51 California K-12 Unified School Districts' LCAP plans helped me identify keywords to look for within each plan. Mills' findings suggest that there were areas of significant differences between approaches of high and low-performing districts. Higher-performing districts focused on the instructional system rather than basic services or requirements of proficiency and graduation (Mills, 2017). I cross-referenced key terms that I selected from Mills' findings with terms that were also most frequently mentioned in the descriptors and materials related to Fullan's coherence framework (Fullan, 2013) to create a final list of keywords to use in my LCAP analysis.

Professional Development

- Instructional Strategies

- Coaching

- Standards

- Intervention

- Assessment

- Benchmark

- Formative

- Summative

After searching educational services keywords, I read the LCAPs in a general manner looking for other factors to note. Once I read the plans, I examined them to look for broad themes and trends among the seven schools. For each keyword or goal, I compared the percentage present in high-performing and low-performing district LCAPS. Analyzing and comparing the high-performing school district LCAPs with the low-performing school district LCAPs was a critical step in my mixed-methods approach.

Principal Interview Methods

To answer RQ2, I used qualitative methods to understand high school principals' view of Fullan's leadership components, how they translate them into action, and the particular challenges and opportunities that crop up in small districts. I sent each principal from my sample of seven high-performing schools an initial email (see Appendix D), describing the study and asking them to participate. I followed up with a personal call if needed. Eventually, five principals agreed to participate. Once the interview was set up, I sent the principal a formal letter of introduction and consent to participate.

The five principals who responded formed the basis for my analysis. Drawing on a purposeful sampling of high school principals allowed me to explore the extent to which these principals from high-performing small Northern California high schools applied leadership practices and decision-making to achieve results for students who come from poverty. According to Creswell (2009), using qualitative methods proved a "means for exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). I conducted semi-structured interviews with site principals from five high-performing high schools to

understand leadership practices. This study is centered around quality leadership in small high-poverty schools. Principals working in high-poverty schools that have defied the odds are statistical outliers.

I interviewed each principal through Zoom. Creswell (2009) stated that interview protocols for qualitative studies are "useful when participants cannot be directly observed." All methods were documented in my research. I used my experience as a high school principal to build rapport with the interviewees. Using calendar invitations, I scheduled interviews with each principal, and worked to create a safe and comfortable environment. When I set up the interview, I informed the participants that I would voice-record the interview to support better data collection, and that their responses would be confidential and will not be used for anything other than research for this study. Although the ultimate sample of schools is listed, the names of leaders are not listed in my study. Participants were reminded that they could skip any question they wanted to omit and that their participation in the study was voluntary. However, no participant wished to skip any question or terminate their participation in the study prematurely. Participants were assured that the information they shared would be kept confidential and would be used exclusively for this study, without revealing their identities. All participants seemed very eager to partake in the study and share their knowledge. In addition to audio-recording the interview, I took notes to support the transcript.

Early in the discussion, I made a great effort to remain non-judgmental and maintain a respectful demeanor towards the interviewees. The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes with each of the principals in the identified schools. I set the first ten to fifteen minutes of the discussion for introductions to let the interviewees become comfortable, familiarize themselves with me, and build trust. Using the semi-structured interview protocol

gave me more flexibility in responding to the interviewees and asking probing questions specific to leadership components, its attributes, and processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured interview also helped keep the data collection focused on the leadership framework and allowed me to ask probing questions for more details, clarification, or examples. According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992), probes may take numerous forms; they range from silence, to sounds, to a single word, to complete sentences. The probes or follow-up questions were used in service to seeking more details or elaboration. Some sample probes were: "Can you tell me more about that?" "Can you give me an example of that?" Or, "What do you mean by that?" A draft version of my semi-structured interview questions and protocol is available in Appendix E.

The interview questions focused on how leaders move their organizations and systems forward in ways that align with Fullan's "whole system reform" (Fullan, 2013). Each school principal's perspectives provided descriptive data on how school and district leaders support goals, actions, and services within the LCAP to improve student outcomes. Understanding how specific individuals lead with a moral imperative to raise the bar for all subgroups, as the overall performance of the systems improves, was an essential outcome of the semi-structured interviews. Interviews drew out the type of interventions enacted by school leaders to achieve the goals, and what they attribute to their success. Furthermore, the interview process helped to tease a clearer understanding of what the leaders were doing specifically to support the goals, actions, and services stipulated in the LCAP.

First, participants were asked questions about leadership characteristics, decision-making, challenges, and their journey as school leaders. These responses were coded and analyzed for similarities, differences, and patterns. Next, questions were asked to elicit information about the decision-making process around building the LCAP. During the interview, questions were more

open-ended to allow the principal more free-flowing dialogue and to hear about other things they had done regarding implementing the LCAP. Although open-ended, some of the specific areas I inquired about include the extent of collaboration, support, or interactions with the district office and the availability of other resources to implement the plan. In addition, his provided the opportunity to uncover any unforeseen events or crises that may have had a role in implementation (see interview questions in Appendix E).

The following three tables (5–7) illustrate this study's principal and school site characteristics.

Table 4

School Site Characteristics

Principal	School Enrollment 2021-2022	Free and Reduced Lunch Percentage 2021-2022	National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Locale
Participant A	505	73%	Rural: Distant
Participant B	602	65%	Town: Fringe
Participant C	400	71%	Town: Fringe
Participant D	660	72%	Town: Distant
Participant E	220	70%	Rural: Remote

Table 5

Principal Characteristics

Principal	Total yeas at site (teacher & administrator)	Years as administrator	Years as principal at site	Years principal before them	Another site administrator (vice principal)
Participant A	21	12	12	3	No
Participant B	15	15	9	6	Yes - 1 Vice Principal
Participant C	3	22	3	4	Yes - 1 Vice Principal
Participant D	5	9	1	4	Yes - 1 Vice Principal
Participant E	17	5	5	1 year 6 years before moving on to County Superintendent	No

Table 6

Principal/Superintendent Relationship

Principal	Superintendent Information	Principal Reported LCAP Input
Participant A	Previous Principal moved on to become Superintendent at same district	High
Participant B	Previous Principal moved on to become Superintendent at same district	High
Participant C		High
Participant D	Previous Principal moved on to become Superintendent at same district	High
Participant E		High

School Characteristics and Participant Descriptions

None of the schools were located in big cities, based on the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) definition. Two schools were located in rural areas and three were located in towns. One school was particularly small (220 students) and rural, the rest ranged between 400 and 660 students. Being a small school and / or regionally isolated sometimes prevents access to information and assistance. All schools served a high number of students on free and reduced-price lunch. Family income level can impact the choice of neighbors, coworkers, and the availability of legal and social services which has an impact on school culture and student performance.

The principals who participated in this study had varying levels of administrative experience; however, they all have been at the same site for at least three years. Participant A and Participant B had similar experience; both spending their entire career at their same site and both had approximately the same number of years as a site principal. Three of the five school principals reported having been a Vice Principal before their current position. One principal with a high level of experience reported that the 2021–2022 school year felt like it was their "first year" because of the COVID-19 pandemic the previous two years. Another principal noted that they hired a vice principal in their first year and reported work ethic being a significant characteristic of leading in a high school as the "jobs start early and end late."

My notes, comments, and insights during the interviews allowed me to build each participant's leadership profile and identify emerging leadership themes. This process enabled me to compare each principal's responses as I interviewed them individually and then look for patterns across all five interviews. I coded based on Fullan's coherence framework and other emerging leadership themes. A few days later, I listened to each interview and began the coding

process. Once the interviews were completed, I reviewed and transcribed notes. Once transcribed, they were coded using a three-cycle coding method (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldana, 2013). The three rounds of coding yielded the significant themes that will be discussed later in this study.

My first two steps in organizing and preparing the data for analysis was transcribing each interview and then listening to each interview again looking at broad areas based on Fullan's coherence framework and other emerging leadership themes. At this point I was most interested in gaining a general sense of the information and reflecting on its overall meaning. I then re-read the transcriptions focusing on Fullan's themes using a coding method outlined by Creswell, Mirriam & Tisdell, and Saldana (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldana, 2013) that assigns three cycles of coding. I also used open coding of the interviews to allow for flexibility and fluidity in the interview to allow for open interpretation. According to Creswell (1995), "Coding is an important process to organize text-heavy qualitative data in an easily accessible fashion. In addition, classifying the data into a few themes throughout the coding process should make the data more manageable." The three rounds of coding allowed me to examine trends, commonalities, and overlap resulting in two overarching themes that will be discussed later in this study: authentic development and ownership of LCAP as a living document, and a collaborative culture who share accountability for student results. Revisiting the transcriptions and coding process three times deepened my ability to interpret the findings that were learned from these interviews. Finally, I reported on the plans, what site principals are doing with Fullan, and other leadership areas that surfaced.

Limitations

My study focused on a purposefully small, selected sample of schools that were both small in size (under 900 students) and high-performing (above state average on CAASPP ELA) and therefore may be limited in scope. I intentionally limited my interviews to schools that were high-performing since the research question had focused on areas of their principals' leadership that connected to increased student performance, and therefore interviewing the principals of low-performing schools was not needed for the interview section. A possible limitation in this regard could concern participants who may have come into the interview after having done some background research on me, which may have interfered with the authenticity of their answers.

This study aimed to understand how school leaders support the goals of actions and services included in the LCAP. District leadership and capacity-building are critical factors in developing effective student learning plans (Kotter, 2011). Blum and Knudson (2016) also reported that district capacity is key to continuous improvement in schools. The districts included in this study had demonstrated leadership capacity in their district-wide plans that were focused on student learning.

The literature review for this study was constrained by the limited amount of research available specific to small schools in California. The study did not include everyone who should have been represented. Despite these limitations, this study provides a leadership lens for understanding the decisions leaders make to align with systemic leadership when developing an LCAP, and the correlation of LCAP goals and leadership decisions with Fullan's coherence framework.

Chapter 4: Findings

My research findings address three essential areas of inquiry. The first area was centered on comparing the LCAP findings of the 7 high-performing small schools and 7 low-performing small schools to see where their plans might differ in ways that contributed to the success of the 7 high-performing schools. I then went on to examine the findings from the qualitative interviews with the principals of the five high-performing small schools in my sample to determine their perspective on LCAP as a force for improvement, as well as analyzing how the factors they believe contributed to their success align with Fullan's coherence framework. This analysis included assessing which factors aligned with the framework, as well as identifying elements that might be missing. These first two areas permitted me to then make connections to identify some opportunities and challenges that small schools could include in their LCAP and for small school principals to include in their practice of leadership.

Results for LCAP Analysis

As previously mentioned, the implementation of the LCFF was California's biggest change in the alignment of finance and government in over forty years, which endowed districts with greater local control over their budgets by requiring districts to construct their LCAP around specific goals, actions, and services. The LCFF also embodies a transformational way of looking at the decision-making process in local school districts because school districts are required to prepare a three-year LCAP plan that defines a district's goals and actions. The LCAP is a budget plan but is also an expression of values, reflecting a district's priorities and commitment to equity. Part 1 of my study therefore analyzes LCAPS in the seven high-performing small school districts targeted for interviews compared to seven low-performing small school districts, to tease out possible differences in mentalities, goals, and values.

I compared the educational services keywords, targeting sections of LCAP in these areas, to see if there were differences between the high-performing and low-performing small schools. I also compared the language of the LCAP of the selected sample of schools of both high-performing and low-performing schools. Figure 4 compares the goals, actions, and services listed in the LCAP of the seven high-performing small schools and a selected sample of seven low-performing small schools in Northern California.

Figure 4

Goals, Actions, and Services Listed in LCAP in High-Performing Schools and Low-Performing Schools
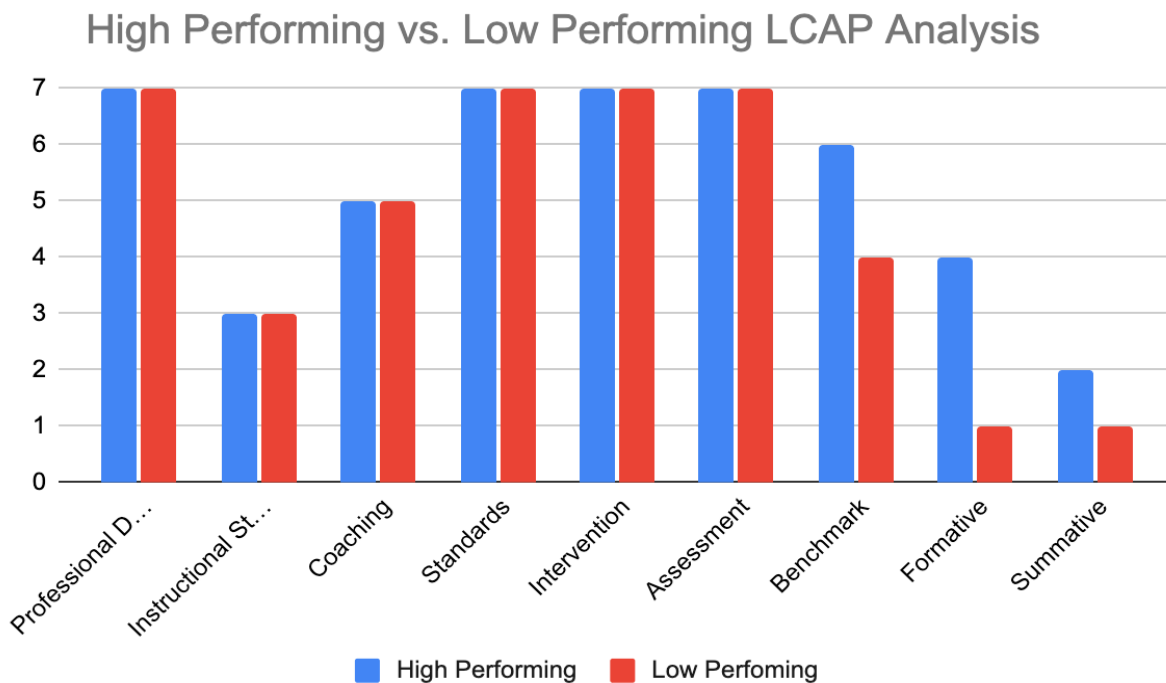
In this sample, there were only three key differences between high-performing and low-performing small schools: benchmarks, formative, and summative (assessments). Related to professional development, this was also a different finding from another LCAP study that sampled 51 schools of all sizes which found that high-performing districts put significantly more

emphasis on professional development and instructional systems (Mills, 2017). This was not the case in my smaller sample focused on schools with under 900 students; all fourteen districts (7 high-performing and 7 low-performing) were exactly the same in writing LCAP goals around six of the nine keywords: professional development, instructional strategies, coaching, standards, intervention, and assessment.

At first glance, the similarity in 6 of 9 keyword areas may simply be lending support to other studies that suggest there is often a compliance-driven approach to filling in lengthy LCAP-type documents with common responses where educators charged with writing accountability plans have become "fluent in the language of continuous improvement" (Stevenson, 2019). Another possible explanation is the smaller sample size of LCAPs analyzed. However, this is where a mixed-method inquiry can provide more insight and understanding into an LCAP ownership and usage through qualitative interviews.

I did find two key differences between groups in this comparison of LCAPs; one was found in the data analysis in the last 3 keywords—benchmarks, formative, and summative—with the most significant difference being the integration of formative assessment and feedback into their plans; the other difference was discovered during interviews related to ownership and specificity of LCAP plans.

All fourteen districts set goals around assessment; however, six of seven high-performing schools set goals around benchmark assessment compared to four of seven low-performing districts and only one low-performing district that stipulated goals around formative assessments compared to four high-performing districts. The use of formative assessment, whether teacher-made or state benchmarks, aligns directly to the internal and external accountability driver that is one of Fullan's four coherence elements. Schools that develop

communities of learning that address deeper learning, e.g., Professional Learning Communities, are intentionally building the capacity of teachers to take collective responsibility for student performance. This distinction is notable as these LCAPs provide more details in the *how* versus the *what* of assessment, and principals saw building collaborative expertise in formative assessment as a key component of their plan. Fullan's driver on focusing direction speaks directly to clarity of strategy and a review of 2014–15 LCAP plans by California's Legislative Analyst's Office recommended that districts move from comprehensive to focused plans (Taylor et al., 2015).

Furthermore, my findings agree with Mills' larger sampling of California LPACs, reinforcing the notion that principals in high-performing districts provide support, time, and resources for teachers to collaborate on instruction issues (Mills, 2017, p. 104).

That high-performing small schools in my sample were seemingly more specific about professional development around formative assessment and its integration into a collaborative instructional system, struck me as significant and I used interview questions to validate this connection. Since early indication of the LCAP plan analysis in my sample shows no difference between the high-performing and low-performing small schools in six of the nine areas examined, following this up in interviews was especially important because I wanted to ensure that the three differences were not simply accidental, and neither that these principals were simply going through predictable motions in their LCAP planning.

As previously mentioned, at first glance, large similarities between high- and low-performing schools could mean that the LCAP is more of a compliance document, which falls victim to what Schmoker (2004) described as annual school improvement plans, created and approved pro forma:

There were procedures for conducting wide-ranging "needs assessments"; for writing

lofty-sounding (but ultimately irrelevant) "mission," "vision," and "belief statements";

for "reaching consensus," setting "goals," and listing "action steps" and "objectives." We

then designated "persons responsible," "resources needed," "evaluation," and "timelines"

for the abundance of goals, action steps, and objectives we had set. All of this was then

transferred into fat, published plans, replete with columns and boxes for each term and

category. Invariably, we wound up committing to far more activities and initiatives than

anyone could possibly monitor, much less successfully implement. In selecting the

professional or staff development activities that filled our plans, novelty and surface

appeal overwhelmingly trumped evidence of school success—or any direct connection to

improvements in teaching. (Schmoker, 2004)

Schmoker's (2004) frank and vivid description of this tendency to see accountability

plans as a mandated product, in contrast to a living, strategy-specific guide, could definitely lead

readers of LCAP plans to be skeptical. It is both hopeful and reassuring that evidence based on

the principal interviews in this study would suggest otherwise.

Principal Interview Responses that Speak to LCAP Results

Remarkably, all five principals were very well-versed and highly involved in the LCAP

process in their respective districts, seeing it as a document where needs were identified

collaboratively at all stakeholder levels, and strategies were tied to high-impact practices. This

may account for the emphasis on formative assessment and feedback, which John Hattie's

'Visible Learning' ranks as a top effect size, and also aligns with Hattie's emphasis on ensuring

that teachers view their fundamental task as evaluating the effect of their teaching on student

learning capacities (Hattie and Zierer, 2018). Principal responses to LCAP questions likewise

related to Fullan's key driver, 'focusing direction,' inasmuch as they avoided the superficiality he warns against, where plans are not very precise, actionable, or clear (Fullan, 2016).

This apparent exceptionality applied even to areas that are typically challenging for principals. For example, early indication of the LCAP implementation showed parent engagement was difficult especially for parents of the target groups. One study showed that the parent engagement challenge can be met when districts empower high schools to lead those conversations rather than the district. Parents care deeply about their child's school, not necessarily the district (Koppich & Humphrey, 2022). However, when it comes to stakeholder engagement, one principal shared,

> As an admin team in the district, we have total control of the LCAP. We hold all of the required stakeholder meetings. I have a very active site council so we take our SPSA and that becomes a mini-LCAP. In addition, we have a lot of parent participation and we use that input and feedback to drive our LCAP. As administrators we have a good pulse on what the parents want.

Another principal shared,

> We have a ton of input in the LCAP. All of the administration has input. Our Superintendent meets with students, classified, parents, ELD parents, any subgroup there is he has meetings with them. There is not a stakeholder who is not involved. Once he gets it all laid out it is shared with us and we go through and make tweaks, changes and we set goals. We are all involved, it is impressive.

In a different district a principal shared a different LCAP input process that involved more Superintendent leadership; however, the same sentiment regarding stakeholder engagement and process was manifest,

Our superintendent puts on all of the LCAP meetings, he shows all of the data,

everything we have done with every cent that we have had over the last 6 years. We rank

what we want to see next with our parents and then we see what things rise to the top and

from there we go fund that. If the money is there it is getting funded. It's truly amazing.

In another district the principal was tasked with leading the LCAP process in their district. The

principal reported that "Our LCAP is really written based on the school sites. I got put in charge

of the LCAP the last round where it was written. I was the one engaging with stakeholders when

we were writing it."

When it comes to the evolution of the LCAP process, one principal shared their

experience with rewriting the LCAP to create more alignment, saying that

Our original LCAP was not well organized and so one of the things I did was involve

stakeholders in rewriting the main goals for us district-wide and what we want to see all

students K-12. And then we broke it down into those actions specifically for elementary

and secondary. It's written district wide but it is really written for our sites.

For the purposes of this dissertation, these comparisons give interesting insights into the

decision-making process in the seven high-performing schools, and led to qualitative interview

data regarding which leadership strategies and implementation steps these high school principals

used to achieve student success. One clear commonality was their ability at the local level to

begin building an instructional system that relied heavily on the interactions among and between

students, families, teachers, staff, building administrators, and district administrators. This ties

back to Mills' finding that strong instructional systems are a key element in the ability of LCAP

to improve student outcomes (Mills, 2017).

Two factors must be noted in relation to conclusions drawn from the comparison of these 14 LCAPs. Since I did not incorporate interviews with the seven low-performing small schools, I was unable to assess the degree to which the LCAP document was seen as state-driven, compliance-driven paperwork, or as an authentic document in which the majority of stakeholders were fully invested. In addition, the sample is too small to be able to evaluate for statistical significance.

Principal Interview Responses that Speak to Fullan's Framework

Further interview questions moved away from an LCAP-centered focus to other elements, which, in the principals' assessment, had contributed to their success, and enabled me to analyze how their responses aligned with each of the four drivers in Fullan's coherence framework. All five interview participants were very supportive of this study and look forward to hearing the combined results. I also noted two other commonalities among all five participants, the first being that each interview took place after their school's commencement ceremonies and each participant shared an appreciation for conducting the interviews after graduation. In addition, another strong commonality was that each participant's reflective and humble nature stood out in their response to every question I asked. The five participants were interviewed using the semi-structured interview protocol detailed in Appendix E. All participants expressed enthusiasm and excitement about sharing their leadership perspectives and, in particular, were very proud of the work done at their respective schools. After the interviews were transcribed and coded, leadership practices and themes emerged. The following analysis probed deeper into the themes and attempted to tease out meaning of the interviews to better understand Fullan's coherence framework as it pertains to the actual application of these components by school leaders in selected small high schools in Northern California.

Focusing Direction and Cultivating Collaborative Culture

Fullan described all four drivers (focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, securing accountability) as equally important in leading systematic change and emphasizes that they are interdependent. However, a deeper look at Fullan's framework indicates that cultivating collaborative cultures is an essential companion to focusing direction, and that both should take place simultaneously. Fullan argued that one cannot get focused direction if the leader is not collaborative; leaders get off to a strong start when focusing direction and collaborative cultures are "working hand in glove" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016b). According to Fullan and Quinn (2016b), leaders set the directional vision and then use collaborative cultures to develop shared understanding and collective purposeful action.

All five principals interviewed addressed he components 'focusing direction' and 'cultivating collaborative cultures.' A coherence framework aims to help leaders build coherent collaborative cultures so that the change is sustainable and continues with or without the leader. Sustainability relies heavily on the clarity of goals and the shared understanding and ownership a leader builds around those goals. One experienced administrator I interviewed addressed this point as follows:

> Momentum to get something going is the most challenging part. However, once you establish a clear goal and expectations, you get buy-in, and things start moving forward. Then it becomes easier for a leader to start implementing programs and processes that will lead to change.

Another experienced administrator touched on the idea of a moral imperative and collaborative culture. Again, this is reinforced in Fullan's coherence framework when he discussed focused direction being purpose-driven. As the administrator indicated,

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Whenever we work on new initiatives or have conversations with staff, I always try to

keep the focal point on not what is best for the teachers but what is best for kids, for our

kids specifically. I try to keep that focus in mind for every decision I make. I have open

conversations. I do listening circles with the staff; [I] invite the staff in to talk about what

is going on. Part of establishing a school culture of positivity and inclusiveness is having

listening circles with my staff to air out some things.

Fullan further describes fostering moral purpose in others by building relationships with

everyone—including those who disagree, are skeptical, or are cynical—and thereby listening to

and understanding the perspectives of others. All five principals spent the most detail in their

respective interviews discussing this area of building relationships. As one of the principals

explained,

I tend to have a collaborative leadership style. When you are an administrator and a good

leader, you have to be an honest listener. People quickly know if that is legitimate or not.

You have to be willing to say—I will make adjustments now that I am hearing your

concerns, or I heard you, but this is where we are going.

Recognizing and finding solutions to complex problems together while developing collaboration

during initial and ongoing implementation is critical to Fullan's first two components: 'focusing

direction' and 'cultivating collaborative cultures.' He points out that when change initiatives are

"highly prescribed but collaborative culture is weak and teachers have not been involved

sufficiently in developing ownership and new capacities, the result is pushback and resistance."

(Fullan, 2022). One principal reinforced this by stating, "Creating those personal relationships

and allowing your team to have the autonomy to co-create. The worst thing a leader can do is sit

at the top demanding things and pushing papers." Another principal added that "As an

administrator and a good leader, being a good listener, you have to be honest. I have seen several administrators say, 'I have an open-door policy,' and people know right away if that is legitimate or not."

According to Fullan, listening alone is not enough, but it's rather how listening with authenticity builds trust (Fullan, 2021). Another principal spoke to this point in discussing their way of establishing a collaborative culture early on, and acknowledged some of the challenges they faced based on previous leadership experiences: "It's the personal relationships you establish with people and the trust you establish. That has been the work that I have been doing here because there was a little bit of lack of trust from the previous admin." Another principal shared their perspective on relationships and collaborative cultures, claiming that "I believe that the biggest characteristics that will make a principal successful is personal relationships and allowing your team to have the autonomy to co-create."

Overall, all five principals appeared to have found the right mixture of pressure and support, mastering the delicate balance between "push and pull." Building ownership while focusing direction helps get traction on whole system reform and builds purposeful interaction. According to Fullan, leadership is at the center and integrates the four components of the framework. However, Fullan noted that "buy-in" does not necessarily lead to high impact unless a collaborative culture engages in capacity-building around shared expertise. Collaborating is not just about creating a place where people feel involved but rather about cultivating every stakeholder's expertise to be focused on a collective purpose (Fullan, 2017). It is this step that is required to deepen learning.

Deepening Learning

In a broad sense, Fullan describes deepening learning as a transformational process of teaching and learning. Deep learning is about deeper learning outcomes for students. He asks principals to step into a new role where they learn alongside teachers about what works and what does not and, which is the best resource to reach for to achieve the most efficacious learning: the students themselves. To accomplish this goal, it is necessary to "go deep" with all students, teachers, and systems. More specifically, Fullan described transformational pedagogy as empowering students, which creates a bottom-up approach and a push for change that arises from students and teachers and impacts the school and its wider connected systems more broadly. Fullan reported that when schools focus on deep learning outcomes for students, students become liberated and care more about school and more about making a difference. Thus they become a force for change because they do not have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Students ultimately become change agents for pedagogy's sake.

Principals are the lead learner and lead change agents in a school. One principal's perspective on empowering students to be a force for change was that "You know that's the beauty of a small school. I honestly don't know if I would have the impact I have on kids if I was at a very large school." In addition to recognizing the ability to come to know students in a small school, the participant went on to say, "The kids have to feel your presence. They have to see you, know you. I can honestly say that by the time the student graduates, I know every kid and they know me."

Fullan calls deep learning a form of learning that helps students make connections to the world and be ready for the challenges that they will face. To support learning such as this, Fullan argued that we need to recast the purpose of what students do in school. In other words, a moral

imperative for schools is needed and the principal's role is to put learning, purpose, and well-being at the forefront. As one principal stated, "It's how you empower them and empower their voice and listen to their concerns and make it so that they are the running force behind what you want to do." Another principal discussed his moral imperative by claiming that

> My goal is to get kids exposed and take away the barriers for them. When you send a student to college it is changing generations of families. It is taking a farm-working mom and dad who [are] sending their kid here and that kid is now going to Berkeley or UCLA, all over the place. To me that is what is changing the next generation of that whole family and that is amazing. To me, that is what I am basing my decisions on. There is data and then there is that too … and that is important to me.

Another principal said that "Our actions are anything we can do to take barriers away from kids, [either] financially, or [via] class enrollment."

Deeper learning is when schools allow learners to discover and then build on their strengths to fulfill their talents, purpose, and passions. Principals who lead with a moral imperative and deeper learning at the core keep students at the center of decision making. Once principal stated, "Obviously making every decision for students first, that is the ultimate and we need to support our adults so that they can do their best by children. That every decision should be centered around what is best for kids." Other examples of a student centered approach in service of deeper learning is, "Whenever we work on new initiatives or have conversations with staff, our focal points are what is best for kids, what is best for 'our kids' and have open conversations about it."

Fullan argued that deeper learning builds new relationships with and between the student, their family, their community, and their teachers. When this happens, it deepens the desire to

connect with others to do good. One principal simplified this notion with the following passionate response, "I don't care what anybody says, high school kids are like little kids in bigger bodies, and when they know somebody loves them and cares about them you are going to get their best effort."

A goal with deep learning mindset and systems is to create a grassroots movement and provide opportunities for students to come out of their shell to be able to manage the complex challenges they will face today and tomorrow. According to Fullan, deep learning has the potential to provide excellence and equity for all. One principal shared that, "You need systems and systemic approaches to supporting students. Identify students and figure out what supports they need. Create awareness and then advocate."

Advocating and supporting all students is at the core of deep learning: creating schools and learning environments where students are truly at the center of decision-making. At the core of Fullan's concept of deep learning is freedom; being a learner is the ultimate freedom.

Securing Accountability

Fullan described securing accountability as the ability to develop skills to build capacity among the group in service to its being responsible and self-sufficient. This capacity-building and responsibility for positive student outcomes empowers organizations to be able to interface with the external accountability system. Finding avenues to empower successful professionals to influence their colleagues for the purpose of a systemic, transformational change is a hallmark of securing accountability. As one principal shared,

> By giving staff autonomy to come up with choices and say things and do things,
> sustaining success is being aware of changes in education, always offering professional

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development and being held accountable and making sure we all have some say and ideas

are taken into consideration.

In addition to developing internal accountability and responsibility by valuing successful

professionals and providing professional development to support their continued growth, Fullan

argued that you can't secure accountability if you don't know who your people are. In the words

of one principal, "Each person's individuality and individual strengths and such have a really big

impact on the direction your school goes."

Fullan had claimed that the conditions for internal accountability include being

transparent and nonjudgmental. As one participant shared,

My style is giving autonomy to my support staff all the way up to my teachers and my

vice principal. I allow them to try things, I allow them to fail at things, we learn from it

and move on. I am never critical of them trying something new so I think my staff

[members] appreciate that.

The non-judgmental approach and commitment to assessing impact engages the learning

community in a continuous cycle of improvement which lies at the heart of securing

accountability. As the participant stated, "You have to have a cycle of improvement and you

have to have metrics or data to go with. I am a huge believer in using data and continuing to go

back and revise things."

Leaders focusing on building internal capacity first rather than external accountability create

buy-in and engagement with school staff, which then leads to the external accountability that

schools must be liable to as well. Fullan proposed that focusing on internal accountability first

creates the sustainability needed to be able to respond to complex challenges that schools face.

When done well, leaders who can secure accountability are able to hold their learning

community accountable to themselves, their stakeholders, and the public. One principal shared, "Keeping stakeholders involved is what keeps us moving forward because it keeps them bought-in and wanting to see us continue to thrive." Another principal added to this by saying, "We share our information with stakeholders. So when we are taking a look at data, we spend time with stakeholders talking about what is missing and how we can brainstorm together some ways to address some of these issues for our students."

Fullan's coherence framework gives leaders a structure to strategically build a coherent collaborative culture where the leader becomes dispensable. This makes ultimate sense because if too much depends on the leader, the organization will fall apart upon their departure. If the leader develops capacity in others, they pave the way for the future.

There were elements that touched on focusing direction with a strong emphasis on the degree to which a culture supports change by fostering trust. However, no responses reflected the "explicitness of strategy" or sustained focus on a small number of impactful goals that Fullan emphasized is a key component of focusing direction. While interview responses showed that these principals were keenly aware of the importance of cultivating collaborative cultures, I noted that no responses specifically addressed building collaborative expertise (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

It was both inspiring and impressive that these principals utilized students' voices as a powerful lever for moving toward deeper learning. However, their answers were not explicit as to how they used that lever to improve teaching and learning, or how they created knowledge-building partnerships between students and teachers. Likewise, there were no responses that spoke to the clarity of learning goals and precision in pedagogy that is such a key part of Fullan's deeper learning driver. In terms of securing accountability, all five principals appeared to be both

transparent and nonjudgmental, key attributes in Fullan's description of internal accountability. They were also proactive in creating the conditions for teacher leaders to provide internal support and accountability. When Fullan addresses the securing accountability driver, he spoke passionately about the moral imperative of having every student learn. These principals share that same passion and moral purpose. Fullan also suggested that internal accountability requires a culture where teachers are willing to "deprivatize practice" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016), but no principals spoke to that particular issue either.

Building Relationships as a Leadership Strategy

This study uncovered another leadership strategy category that all five principals reported to be related directly to their successes. Fullan's coherence framework is grounded in the leader focusing on capacity building in service to long-term impact for making a lasting difference in the organization. Yet building capacity and internal accountability cannot happen without establishing trustworthy relationships. Although Fullan did not list relationship-building as one of the four core drivers, Chapter 4 in Fullan (2001) is titled "Relationships, Relationships, Relationships." He notes that building strong relationships is not only one of the most difficult skills for a leader, but one of the most crucial ones as well, indicating that forging relationships can have a profound multiplying effect on collective ownership and efficacy, noting that people operating in conditions of high trust, collaboration, and effective leadership are more willing to innovate and take risks. All five participants revealed strategic thinking in how they identified groups of important stakeholders, and spoke about being present and building relationships with stakeholders at every level, but especially leveraged their presence across the school campus as a means of building relationships. As one of them indicated: "It's about intuition, it's about how you solve problems before they even become problems. Being present, being outside on the

grounds, being in the classroom." Another principal shared, "It's the personal relationships that you establish with people and the trust that you establish. That has been the work that I have been doing here because there was a little bit of lack of trust from the previous admin."

One principal shared a daily practice that focuses on relationship-building at their site, to the effect that "When you establish community and positivity, you know we are all working together. One of the things I try to do is say good morning to everyone … build it into my regular practice." By paying attention to relationships, leaders can help develop the foundation for change and success. Clearly, these five leaders have embraced a core belief promoted by Fullan, namely that "If moral purpose is job one, relationships are job two, and you can't get anywhere without them." (Fullan, 2001).

Small School Opportunities and Challenges

It was abundantly clear that all five principals not only loved their school, but loved being in a small school. Rather than seeing "small" as a deficit, they were quick to point out opportunities that large schools may be missing. A small town high school is frequently the hub of activity for the whole community, resulting in the ability of a principal to personally know entire families and hear from a larger percentage of stakeholders in a variety of settings. Principals can leverage community pride to build buy-in for crucial change. Likewise, principals at small schools come to know both the strengths and needs of each student and staff member more quickly and more thoroughly, thereby allowing them to tailor change efforts to personalized needs and targets. In small schools, a teacher may have had a student for multiple years and/or multiple classes and, because of the degree to which you know that child and their circumstances, you are more likely to monitor and respond to a student's progress day to day, whereas larger districts seem to focus on summative grades and assessments (internal and

external). When asked about the current challenges they face as school leaders, it was not surprising all five school principals discussed the effects that the COVID-19 global pandemic has had on their perspectives and focus as school leaders. This question overwhelmingly created the longest pause in each participant's discourse before answering the question.

Principals were also transparent in identifying unique challenges that small schools face. A principal with experience as a school leader in both large and small schools described his experience leading with fewer resources by saying that

You have to be flexible. Small schools are a whole different ball game. It's nice in the sense that you can make change faster at times but it can be an impediment. I do not have a vice principal, it's just me … so I am always trying to figure out a way to get others to help me lead.

As noted in Chapter 1, small school principals must wear many hats as part of their professional identity, and the same is true for all staff positions, including teachers. The ability to distribute or delegate responsibilities is limited in such settings. Change is hard, and deep change is remarkably hard; no single principal can or should try doing it alone. Fullan defined capacity-building as encouraging and supporting teachers in their innate desire to build new skills and continuously improving their craft (Fullan, 2021). Inside a small school, developing teacher-leaders with the collective expertise and capacity to influence others is not just desirable but necessary for any significant change to happen. What adds to this challenge is that teacher-leader capacity must be developed within a much smaller number of staff positions. Another principal reinforced this specific small school challenge by stating that, "You have to have flexibility. Small schools don't have a large pool of teachers or staff waiting in the wings, so you must be able to think creatively and be flexible."

In a small school, the communication network is tight, and failing to have an authentic ability to listen fully and respond thoughtfully can have quicker and broader repercussions than in a large school. Small schools may have a smaller staff contingent, but these staff members experience the same demands as larger schools, and responses to those demands are more quickly and fully felt by the entire staff. As one principal shared, "You have to be a good listener and you have to really understand where all of your staff is individually. In a small school, everybody's individual personalities, strengths, [and] areas for growth—all have a larger impact on the school than it would in a [bigger] school." This sentiment was echoed by another principal, who stated, "Small schools are a challenge in terms of everybody needs something from us. Everybody wants something from you every single time. So it's how you also take care of yourself."

Although all five principals were open about the challenges as well as the opportunities in small schools and did not reference Fullan specifically, it is clear that the responses I received during interviews reinforced the research Fullan has collated in his coherence framework: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative culture, deepening learning, and securing accountability.

Following the interviews, I compared what I heard from principals with what I learned through researching Fullan's coherence framework and teased out what I saw as the top opportunities and challenges tied to all four drivers.

Table 7

Key Opportunities & Drivers Related to Fullan's Coherence Framework

Opportunities	Driver	Challenges
Principals can more easily meet one-on-one with teachers, students, and families to not only encourage input but also clarify the purpose and actions that are the focus of school change. Ownership of LCAP is therefore higher.	Focusing Direction	Focus can require that principals reduce the number of goals and initiatives, and may require abandoning other programs. In small schools, there is often a long and deep tradition and connection to existing programs, and a push to include those in LCAP.
The small number of staff has likely already developed a culture of collegiality and caring. Teachers know other teachers outside their content area. Staff has likely come together in meetings where conversations or work on school events required shared responsibilities.	Cultivating Collaboration	There can be a perception that "we already do that here." There may be little sense of urgency. It requires that principals clearly articulate how and why collective efficacy with focused and impactful collaboration is a culture worth developing.
Small school principals have an increased ability to engage in learning walks that involve multiple visits to every classroom to observe learning in action. Likewise, holding student focus groups around deep learning likely involves a higher percentage of students.	Deepening Learning	In large schools, principals who step up as learning leaders often have other administrative positions that can hamper instructional responsibilities. Because of multiple hats, principals may struggle to devote consistent time to learning walks.
Staff in small schools are accustomed to personal, professional, and collective responsibility and thinking of the entire student body as "our kids." Transferring that practice and belief to holding themselves accountable for	Securing Accountability	Small schools that serve a large low SES population, may be under greater scrutiny for addressing external accountability measures as the entire community likely knows "test scores" and rankings. Principals need to

Opportunities	Driver	Challenges
increasing their impact on collective student success, with all its implications, may feel like a more comfortable step.		work to educate the community on a variety of holistic measures of success and connect internal actions to impact on external scores.

Small schools may indeed suffer from restraints related to limited fiscal and human resources, but an overarching advantage is the ability, within smaller communities, to know an entire community and its needs on a more personal level. This familiarity shows up in the immersive involvement of school principals in the LCAP process and more personalized ownership of the stakeholders in LCAP goals and actions, and may even account for the emphasis on formative assessment which is a differentiated and personalized approach to meeting student needs. The communal nature of small schools, inasmuch as it relates to the leadership drivers in Fullan's coherence framework, shows up in the overwhelming emphasis that the principal interviews placed on relationships and how they contribute to their success in cultivating collaborative cultures. As the principal of a small high school myself, the overarching takeaway from these findings is to embed actions in the LCAP that intentionally capitalize on the strengths of being a small community and speak directly to the challenges that inevitable arise from limitations on fiscal and human resources.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Discussion, and Implications

As a small school principal, I was touched by the generosity and the openness of the five principals who shared their stories. The interviews reinforced my commitment to using Fullan's coherence framework as part of the continuous improvement work I do at my own school and energized me for the steps to come.

There are decades of research about poverty and student achievement in K-12 schools. Effective leadership ranks second to quality teaching influencing student learning, and quality leadership is critical in schools serving students living in poverty. This study's intent was to gain special insight into small school leadership, by focusing on the leadership strategies of school leaders serving in high-poverty small schools in Northern California. Districts and schools were challenged by the introduction of LCAP to reimagine goals, actions, and services, and to increase outcomes for underserved students (either those coming from marginalized groups or students with low socioeconomic status).

In my study, I aimed to explore systematic leadership approaches related to school improvement and outcomes for low-socioeconomic disadvantaged students (SES). Quantitative data was generated from analyzing districts' focal areas in their LCAP. Patterns emerged and areas of similarities and differences were identified and discussed. In addition, my study evaluated how leaders who serve in high-poverty schools support goals, actions, and services to achieve positive student outcomes.

Conclusion #1: In high performing small schools, principals report a sense of purpose where there is a greater degree of internal accountability and shared ownership of the students as opposed to ownership of the subject matter or focus on external accountability measures.

Conclusion #2: In high performing small schools, teachers seemed more open to building their own capacity to align and personalize formative assessments in pursuit of individual student growth on essential standards.

Conclusion #3: In high performing small schools, principals tended to report a high degree of feeling of connection with their teachers, staff, students and community which allowed them to identify specific needs and that improved learning and teaching.

Conclusion #4: In high performing small schools, Superintendent and Principals reported working closely together with staff and community, both in interactions and by discussing with them what their goals and input are. They kept in touch with both staff and community, resulting in a more thorough knowledge of and commitment to the goals and action plans within their LCAP.

Conclusion #5: Principals report that Fullan's developing relationships and establishing collaborative cultures seemed to be a prerequisite or starting point for much of the work on achieving excellence. This focus on collaboration and fomenting relationships emerged more often than other factors such as accountability, in the principals' accounts.

Discussion

When the accountability system was revamped in 2013, it opened up the possibility for local control to align priorities and funding to the continuous improvement needs unique to their district and schools. Yet in a 2017 presentation to the Stuart Foundation, Mike Kirst, California's President of the State Board of Education observed, "We got all the policies right, but not yet the depth of implementation," noting that it is easy for LCAP plans to become ends in themselves (Fullan and Rincón-Gallardo, 2017). Conclusions drawn from the principal interviews show that these five leaders understand the necessary and clear connection between LCAP and enhanced

teaching practice, as well as the necessity for trusting relationships to be in place as a prerequisite to building capacity.

The Fullan Coherence Framework's major emphasis on capacity building speaks to the old adage, "if we knew how to fix it, we'd have done it by now," and continued revisions of the LCFF/LCAP systems point out that initial models of underestimated how much capacity would be needed for reform to be successful at the local level. The five principals interviewed had a surprisingly high level of knowledge about the needs of their teachers, as well as their students, that helped them identify where capacity was lacking and establish collaborative ownership in building collective efficacy. The focus on individual classroom use of formative assessment – with an effect size of more than double the hinge point (Hattie, 2017); is an example of the fact that these principals were not compliance driven but developed collaborative plans that contained specific strategies and actions that required the development of more effective and engaging instruction. Likewise these interviews spoke directly to the importance of developing conditions that create internal motivation and accountability: a sense of purpose and connectedness.

This study used a mixed-method approach that explores systematic leadership approaches related to school improvement and outcomes for low-socioeconomic disadvantaged students (SES) attending small schools. This study focuses on the following two research questions:

Research Question 1

In small Northern Californian high schools that serve high shares of socioeconomically disadvantaged students (SES), *and* score higher than the state average on the CAASPP, what goals, actions, and services are outlined in these school's LCAPs and how do these compare with similar low-performing schools?

Research Question 2

What leadership strategies and implementation steps do these high school principals use to achieve student success and:

  a. How are these aligned to Fullan's coherence framework, focusing on direction, collaborative culture, deepening learning, and securing accountability?

  b. What other strategies and implementation steps, outside of Fullan's components, do these principals report as related to their success?

To investigate Research Question 1, I analyzed the LCAP plans for a sample of high-performing and low-performing school districts identified in Northern California. To address Research Question 2, I interviewed principals from a sample of high-performing Northern California high schools.

Implications

The audience for this study includes leaders at all levels of the education system, who are interested in understanding change-style leadership and effective whole system reform as both apply to maximizing school funding, and to demonstrating growth and success in school accountability. Schools across California will be reporting on their first three-year LCAP this year (2022) and setting goals for the next three years. Therefore this study is timely and might be able to provide support to district and site leaders. Fullan's distinguished research career on developing knowledge and competencies to facilitate system change can support districts to build a commonly owned approach for student success. Applying Fullan's coherence framework to the high-performing schools studied will support the implementation of plans to achieve positive student outcomes.

According to Fullan (2013), "systems that lack clarity and consistency on such key issues as purpose, priorities, strategies, and goals will not develop the collective capacity to help students learn at high levels." For example, California's funding formula for schools requires school districts to develop, adopt and annually update a three-year LCAP. As part of the LCAP, districts must identify annual goals, designate specific action plans toward implementing those goals, and measure progress for student subgroups across multiple indicators, based on eight state priorities. In addition, the district's spending plan must align with the state's priorities.

Implication #1: A principal travels "at the speed of trust," and must develop strong relationships first—with students, families, staff, and community members—and especially with those individuals who may have differing opinions. Systemic change requires brutal honesty and total transparency, and without a culture of trust, they will not be able to accomplish LCAP goals.

Implication #2: Since small school districts have a smaller pool of applicants and individual teachers may have a disproportionate impact on students (through multiple years and/or multiple classes), the need for building collective efficacy carries more weight.

Implication #3: Small school districts should capitalize on the strong connection between community and schools and consider programs where community members can influence the academic or social-emotional success of students, such as mentoring programs, place-based learning, and other opportunities for one-on-one and small group interactions.

Implication #4: Because of the smaller population size, small schools should move from "keeping students at the center of their decisions" to using students as agents of change and co-collaborators. Deepening learning requires that we empower students to become changemakers

who help themselves to develop learning skills, giving and receiving feedback, and enacting student agency.

Implication #5: Because of the smaller population size and more frequent interaction with individual students, a strong emphasis on formative assessment could be a more effective strategy for an increase in performance than an overemphasis on external summative assessments.

Implication #6: Small districts should encourage cooperation and sharing of information between principals and district superintendent since their contact with community and staff often overlap. A possible implication is that in selecting superintendents for small districts, individuals should be chosen who value direct community and staff contact more than those who are more detached and invested in strategic planning.

General Implication: Small school districts must not focus on a deficit mindset but educate themselves on the advantages of being small and determine how to leverage those advantages as part of the action steps within LCAP. While small school districts present numerous challenges, school principals should take every opportunity to remind teachers and staff of the opportunities and benefits of working in a small school environment, spending time generating ideas, and tailoring plans to the benefits of a small, more personal, environment.

Personal Learnings and Thoughts

Having had the opportunity to conduct this study and talk to such a wide spectrum of talented, successful and dedicated principals was a great honor and opportunity to gain new ideas and connections. I learned a great deal about how a principal and a superintendent can and should work in tandem in small district settings and how they can model collaboration for an entire district. My thoughts about the importance of relationships and collegiality were both reinforced and expanded. I have come to understand and cherish the unique opportunity a small school can offer its teachers,

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students, and staff. I am now, more than ever, recommitted to my journey of establishing thriving cultures in the schools I currently lead and will continue to lead in the future. I have learned more about how to leverage and take advantage of how small schools give us each an opportunity to turn students' lives around; one student at a time. Likewise, deepening my understanding of Fullan's coherence framework helped build my own capacity to transfer that knowledge to my next round of LCAP design as well as in my day-to-day practice. Drawing on both interviews and research, I am determined to approach continuous improvement with intentionality, paying close attention to how I direct focus, build a collaborative culture, deepen learning, and secure accountability.

It has been four years since I returned to the small high school that I attended first as a student, this time as its principal. That journey back "home" reminded me that small schools and small towns really can become a family where caring for the whole child, whoever's child they may be, bonds people together. I feel privileged to be able to know my students, families, and teachers on such a personal level. There were 55 students in my own graduating class and there were 65 graduates in the Class of 2022. Although Lake County is the poorest county in California, there is joy in coming together and a hopefulness in the future. The lessons I learned from research and interviews have given me a sense of resolve and optimism. My next step is to apply what I have learned, and involve all these stakeholders, whom I have come to love, in our next round of LCAP, and then turn our plan into reality. Kids are waiting!

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Table 8

California Standardized Test (CST) and Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment Comparison

California Standardized Test (CST)	Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment (SBAC)

Item Types
*Selected Response
*Multiple-Choice
*Single Correct Option
	*Selected Response (SR)
	  ❖ Students choose correct responses from series of options
	  ❖ Includes, but is not limited to, multiple-choice options
	*Constructed Response (CR)
	  ❖ Students enter a word, phrase, sentence, number, or set of numbers
	  ❖ May measure more than one standard
	  ❖ Computer scored, with human backup scoring for validation
	*Extended Response (ER)
	  ❖ Math only
	  ❖ Covers content at greeted depth
	  ❖ Required elaborate answers and explanations of reasoning
	  ❖ Contributes to the Performance Task Component
	  ❖ Takes longer to administer than CR
	*Technology Enhanced
	  ❖ Select text, recorder text, draw a line, graphing
	  ❖ May be components of ER and PT tasks
	  ❖ In Math, may include use of authentic math tools (i.e., spreadsheets, geometry software)
	*Performance Task (PT)
	  ❖ Integrates knowledge and skills across multiple standards
	  ❖ Reflects real-world tasks
	  ❖ Occurs across multiple sittings
	  ❖ May require up to 120 minutes

Levels of Cognition
*Recall & Reproduction
*Basic Skills & Concepts
	*Critical Thinking
	*Problem Solving
	*Depth of Knowledge (DOK) levels
	  1. Recall & Reproduction
	  2. Basic Skills & Concepts
	  3. Strategic Thinking & Reasoning
	  4. Extended Thinking

Scoring Methods *Scantron readers	*Computer Adaptivity *Human Scored *Written performance tasks

Levels of Performance
Proficiency Levels
  ❖ Advanced
  ❖ Proficient
  ❖ Basic
  ❖ Below Basic
  ❖ Far Below Basic
	Achievement Level Descriptors
	  ❖ Standard Exceeded (Level 4)
	  ❖ Standard Met (Level 3)
	  ❖ Standard Nearly Met (Level 2)
	  ❖ Standard Not Met (Level 1)

Table 9

District Definitions

District	Definition
County Office	County Offices of Education review and approve district budgets and LCAPs. Most county offices provide *at least some services to their local* school districts. Some manage special statewide projects. Most county offices also operate some education programs that provide services directly to students.
Common Administration Districts	An elementary and high school district with the same administration, school board, and teachers' organization.
Elementary School District	A district that typically encompasses Kindergarten K through eighth grade.
High School District	A district that typically encompasses 9th through 12th grade.
Unified School District	A district that generally includes and operates as both elementary and high schools Kindergarten through 12th grade.
Statewide Benefit Charter	Under California law, the State Board of Education can authorize a school to operate as a "statewide benefit charter," a status granted to an organization that can prove its schools will provide a "distinct value" to the entire state.
State Board of Education District	**X**

Note. Source: EdSource

Table 10

Small School Districts in Northern California with Five-Year Consistent or Growth Scores in the

Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment (SBSA) in Math

% Standard Met or Exceeded Math	**14-15**	**15-16**	**16-17**	**17-18**	**18-19**
State Average % Standard Met or Exceeded in Math	33%	37%	37%	38%	39%
KIPP San Jose Collegiate Santa Clara County East Side Union High *Charter School	61%	50%	51%	56%	53%
Oakland Charter High Alameda County Oakland Unified *Charter School	72%	72%	64%	No Reported Score	49%
Lighthouse Community Charter Alameda Oakland Unified *Charter School	53%	48%	47%	No Reported Score	No Reported Score
KIPP King Collegiate High Alameda San Lorenzo Unified *Charter School	No Reported Score	55%	49%	No Reported Score	No Reported Score
American Indian Public High Alameda Oakland Unified *Charter School	70%	72%	63%	No Reported Score	62%

APPENDIX D

Dear {name},

My name is Annie Pivniska Petrie, and I am a principal at Upper Lake High School and a student in the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership in the Office of Graduate Studies at the University of California, Davis. I am interested in learning from other principals who lead in small, successful high schools in Northern California. I have a genuine interest in understanding change leadership and effective whole system reform as they apply to building clarity, coherence, and capacity for teachers, so students can thrive. Studying leadership in high-poverty schools that have defied the odds is compelling given the demands placed on school principals.

I am hoping to talk to you about the leadership steps you took to support student achievement while taking care of the unique needs of the students in your community. I identified your school as an important person to talk to because your students have performed above the state average on the annual California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) test in English and Math consistently over a five-year period, and I'm really interested in learning from you the strategies you have implemented to achieve this.

I hope you allow me to interview you about these strategies you develop. The interview would last about one hour. Your interview will be used in my dissertation … you will agree to participate in my study and … I would be happy to meet in person or over Zoom. Please let me know if you'd be willing to participate and I will then coordinate a time to meet with you.

Yours sincerely,

Annie Pivniska Petrie

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University of California, Davis

Principal, Upper Lake High School

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APPENDIX E

I would like to begin by asking about your leadership journey and experiences.

1. Can you tell me about your leadership journey?

2. What are the personal characteristics and daily practices you believe that a leader of change, in a small school, needs the most?

3. How do you make decisions with specific student populations in mind?

4. What are the greatest challenges that you face as a leader?

5. How long have you been a principal at this school?

6. How long has the previous principal served there before you (if they had been there for less than 5 years)?

I want to transition to the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) to learn about your understanding of the LCAP at your school.

7. Given that the LCAP is a district document, how much input did you have? What is your understanding of the different relationships between stakeholders?

8. How does the district's LCAP support your school's vision of goals, actions and services? What are you basing your decisions on?

9. How do you create shared ownership and incorporate stakeholders in the development of the LCAP?

10. What does it take as a leader to implement, execute, and communicate goals, actions, and services in this upcoming LCAP cycle?

11. How will you sustain your success? Which systems have supported your ability (and what has challenged it) to maintain and continue increasing student success? How did you choose those systems and what makes them systemic?