Tracking Turnaround: Understanding Data Use as a Shared Leadership Practice

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BOSTON COLLEGE

Lynch School of Education

Department of Educational Administration and Higher Education

Professional School Administrators Program

TRACKING TURNAROUND: UNDERSTANDING DATA USE AS A SHARED LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

Dissertation in Practice

by

Sonia L. Tellier

with Suzanne M. Charochak, Julia James Carlson, Gregg T. Gilligan, and Eylem B. Icin

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Education

May 2018
Tracking Turnaround: Understanding Data Use as a Shared Leadership Practice

by

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Dissertation Chairperson: Dr. Martin Scanlan

Dr. Nathaniel Brown (Reader)

Dr. Erin Nosek (Reader)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examined leaders’ shared data use, a process of translating data into action (Bernhardt, 2013). Understanding data use is considered conceptually by attending to the assistance relationships shared between central office leaders and principals in the context of turnaround. Such relationships are marked by occasions during which members share expertise by modeling practices; the modeling informs how systems, structures and subsequent practices are introduced and even reinforced for newer members. I focused my analysis on four manifestations of data use: data’s influence on adjusting leadership practice, data’s ability to inform instruction, data use’s benefits from technological advancement, and the intentional promotion of resilience. Data collection included document review as well as interviews with central office leaders and principals. Findings evidenced the nature of both central office leaders’ and principals’ data use as well as revealed a remarkable degree of commonality in the language and practices these leaders shared. The results of this study indicated that assistance relationships are a functioning element of leadership in the turnaround context. This study supported the research that leaders’ shared practice of data use benefits student growth and achievement in line with state-determined assessment and accountability targets. Recommendations include additional research into Lawrence Public
Schools’ data use to further inform a blueprint for comprehensive district-wide reform as well as the development of exit criteria from receivership.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedication

I dedicate this accomplishment to my two children: my son, Rylan Joseph Tellier, and my daughter, Sophie Josephine Tellier. They are my greatest joys, and I am thankful for their patience and encouragement. I trust they will one day look back on this time to find inspiration and motivation for their own journey in continued education – no matter the path each takes. I look forward to our next great adventures!

I also dedicate this work to my greatest champions who are looking down on me through rays of sunshine and drops of rain to see that I reached this goal. My heart is overjoyed to know that the love and guidance of my grandmother, Ethel Josephine Dobbins; my grandfather, Richard Hartwell Dobbins; and my father-in-law, Rickie Joseph Tellier, Sr., continues. They all challenged me and motivated me to earn the highest level of education available in my field and have been with me on this journey. They live on in my heart, my mind, and in my words.

Expression of Gratitude

In addition, I have a debt of gratitude to express to a number of people in my life. First, I thank my husband, Joseph M. Tellier. In more than two decades together, he has had to listen to me tell him over and over that I want to earn my doctorate one day. Now, we have realized that dream together. I thank Joe for encouraging me to chase my dream and for providing the additional support our family needed to maintain the intense schedule demanded by the interests and talents of our children. It’s been a challenging three years, and we have grown as a result of the ways in which we responded to those challenges. Thank you, Joe, for being my best friend and my husband. I look forward to the next big endeavor on which we decide to embark.
I thank my mom, Heidi C. Dobbins-Morse, for pushing me forward and telling me all the time, “You can do it, so get it done.” While it’s been a long time coming, my mom always knew the day would come. Thank you!

I also express sincere appreciation to my mother-in-law, Joyce L. Tellier, who also gave me continual support and encouragement. Thank you!

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Thank you to my fellow teammates – Julia James Carlson, Suzanne M. Charochak, Gregg T. Gilligan, and Eylim B. Icin – who collaborated with me on this study. It has been a privilege to share this journey with you. And to Dr. Martin Scanlan, Hotel Delta Sierra, for pushing us through many iterations and ensuring that we remained judicious with our word selection. Your passion and compassion led us to this accomplishment.

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   Recommendations
Practice
   Turnaround starts with transformation of central office
   Supports from central office must address individual needs of the schools and principals
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In today’s climate of accelerating reform, critical improvements in school-level performance cannot be realized without direct and intentional support from central office leaders (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). In an effort to realize this change, central office leaders must shift their focus from management and operations to instructional leadership. Transforming the role of central office requires that the work practices of central office leaders be revolutionized to keep pace and adequately support school-level instructional leadership (Honig et al., 2010; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). The rapid rate at which educational leadership is changing underscores the need for dedicated research in this area.

Reform attempts have historically provided guidelines for states and districts to address the persistent challenges faced by underperforming schools (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, & Luppesu, 2010; Duke, 2012). Current accountability measures require states to develop academic standards, assess all students annually in grades 3-8, measure growth for subgroups, and report achievement on a number of measures including performance, participation, graduation rates and attendance. These factors trigger actions for schools that fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Those classified into the lowest performing levels are designated turnaround schools and districts and may be subject to state takeover.

Despite the continued focus on the lowest performing schools, state and central office leaders have had little influence on improvement within and among schools (Berliner, 2011; Forte, 2010; Payne, 2008). Complex policies, inability to understand and interpret reform efforts, and the unintended consequences (e.g., curriculum narrowing and focus on test

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1 This chapter was collaboratively written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project. Authors include Julia James Carlson, Suzanne M. Charochak, Gregg T. Gilligan, Eylem B. Icin, and Sonia L. Tellier.
preparation) of these accountability reforms hinder improvement efforts (Berliner, 2011; Hong & Youngs, 2008). Recent research on school improvement has largely focused on leadership styles and the responsibilities of principals and faculty (e.g., Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003). Less is known about the role of and interactions between central office leaders and principals. Related research situated in a turnaround context is even more scarce given the lower incidence of such a designation. Research on schools has not explicitly included the role of central office, and research on central office often does not include explicit consideration of school operations (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). In addition, there is less improvement at scale in cases when the central office is not deeply involved (Knapp, Honig, Plecki, Portin, & Copland, 2014; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Walstrom, 2004; Ogawa, 1994).

In response to this identified gap, our overarching study sought to understand how central office leaders support principals as instructional leaders in a turnaround district. We examined five key turnaround components: autonomy and accountability, human capital, learning time, instructional expectations, and data use (Schueler, Goodman, & Deming, 2016; Riley, 2014; Riley & Chester, 2015). Our study focused on central office leaders’ influence on principals’ instructional leadership in a turnaround district. Each team member conducted an individual strand with specific research questions related to one aspect of this core focus (See Table 1.1).
### Table 1.1

*Turnaround Components*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Team Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Autonomy and Accountability</td>
<td>Suzanne M. Charochak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Human Capital</td>
<td>Eylem B. Icin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Learning Time</td>
<td>Julia James Carlson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Instructional Expectations</td>
<td>Gregg T. Gilligan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Data Use</td>
<td>Sonia L. Tellier</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Massachusetts, when a district is designated as Level 5, the Commissioner appoints a Receiver who is afforded the powers of a superintendent and provides him/her with autonomies to lead a successful turnaround effort while establishing a system of accountability for student outcomes. In theory, cultivating autonomy begins with a focus on human capital, namely, whether or not the leadership has the necessary competencies to ensure the instructional staff can advance student achievement. Similarly, central office leaders examine learning time opportunities to determine if the structure of the school schedule and calendar provide adequate opportunity for student learning. Then, central office leaders seek to develop a shared understanding of the importance of high expectations to ensure that they are in place within the schools. And finally, central office leaders gather evidence on student performance, analyze that data, and support shifts in instructional practice to foster student success.

Honig (2013) argues to realize the goals of today’s extensive reform efforts central office leaders’ must reconfigure how they support principals’ instructional leadership (Honig). One of the key strategies of this central office transformation is the creation of assistance relationships with principals, which served as the conceptual framework for this overarching study. Honig (2008, 2012; Honig et al., 2010) theorized extensively about the nature of assistance.
relationships. Honig (2008) describes these as distinct from mere activities of central office leaders coaching or providing information or resources to schools. Instead, drawing from sociocultural learning theory, Honig describes assistance relationships as occasions “in which participants more expert at particular practices model those practices and create valued identity structures, social opportunities, and tools that reinforce those models for more novice participants” (p. 634). Our team explored the actions of central office leaders that reflected enactment of the five high-quality practices of assistance relationships. These included differentiated supports, modeling of effective practice, use of tools, brokering and buffering, and development of networks (see Table 1.2).
Table 1.2

High-quality Practices of Assistance Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice (Code)</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated Supports (DS)</td>
<td>Central office leaders tailor their approaches, including the amount of time spent with building administrators, the conversations in which they engage with them, and the tasks in which they support them. Supports are based upon experience, the needs of the principal and the issues specific to each school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling (M)</td>
<td>Central office leaders who frequently model for principals were identified as having a greater influence on the development of instructional leadership practices. In addition, those who paired reflective strategies with modeling increased the likelihood of positive reports regarding instructional leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Tools (UT)</td>
<td>Central office leaders utilize conceptual tools to promote new ways for principals to think, act and reflect on good instructional leadership practice. Tools included frameworks for quality teaching and learning, walkthrough and observation protocols, cycle-of-inquiry protocols, and data-based protocols to focus instructional leadership practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brokering (BR)</td>
<td>Central office leaders provide new resources, increase understanding, and safeguard principals from external demands (e.g., reducing participation in district meetings, running interference or managing issues that might interfere with the genuine work of instructional leadership).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks (N)</td>
<td>Central office leaders facilitate principal engagement and support the improvement of professional practice through principal networks, which stimulate high-quality learning environments, fostering strengthened their instructional practices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Honig et al., 2010)

Each individual strand within the overarching study of this dissertation in practice posed independent research questions, conducted a relevant literature review, and applied similar methodology. Each team member reported out on his/her findings.

**Literature Review**

The goal of improving educational outcomes for students in turnaround districts across the nation is an element of current educational reform. To provide a context for our study of how central office leaders support principals as instructional leaders in a turnaround district, we
reviewed three key bodies of literature. First, we examined reforms and accountability measures that address turnaround schools. Second, we considered literature on assistance relationships (Honig 2008, 2012; Honig et al., 2010) in the improvement of teaching and learning. Third, we reviewed the turnaround components necessary for improved student outcomes.

**Turnaround Reform and Accountability**

To understand a turnaround district, one must first understand the historical context of these reform efforts. Although early reform focused on access to public education for all students (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954), it was *A Nation at Risk* (NAR) (1983) that identified both the problems and complexities of our current education system. NAR characterized mediocrity in public schooling as a threat to the nation’s future (Ravitch, 2010). While NAR promoted higher standards for high school graduation and college admission requirements, it ignored social and economic factors including poverty, housing, welfare and health. It likewise ignored the importance of early education on students’ foundational skill development (Coleman et al., 1966; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Ravitch). Despite these shortcomings, NAR focused public attention on education reform and led to the standards-based reform movement.

**Federal policies and reform.** Federal policy and reform aim to enact school improvement through a focus on accountability. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 introduced academic standards and annual requirements for states to test children in reading and math. From its inception, ESEA underwent seven legislative iterations, each designed with the intent of strengthening an accountability system that addresses student achievement (Forte, 2010). However, each subsequent reauthorization of ESEA has been unsuccessful at improving low-achieving schools due to a mismatch of the services prescribed
and actual needs of schools as well as a lack of capacity of states to provide the necessary supports to districts (Duke, 2012; Honig, 2013).

The first four reauthorizations aimed to provide services to poor and low-achieving students under Title I/Chapter I of the law (Bohrnstedt & O’Day, 2008). Three subsequent reauthorizations broadened the scope of the involvement of the federal government and leveraged funding to spark standards-based reform throughout the states. The Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) of 1994 outlined GOALS 2000, which targeted excellence in math and science (IASA). IASA required all districts to implement rigorous academic standards and held schools accountable for the achievement of these standards (Haertel & Herman, 2005; IASA; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 was the primary impetus in the development of turnaround and radically transformed the accountability landscape for public schools (Cosner & Jones, 2016; Duke, 2012). NCLB was the first federal policy to mandate that all students in all schools were required to participate in high stakes testing and linked federal funds to strict accountability measures (Nichols & Valenzuela, 2013). The policy design, which included a rating of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), provided heavy sanctions to districts and schools (Hursh, 2007; Jennings & Sohn, 2014). NCLB called for states to take responsibility for low-achieving schools and districts and to focus more attention and resources on the lowest performing schools and student subgroups. Under NCLB, schools and districts that failed to make AYP for over five years became subject increased sanctions, including takeover. In response to the requirements, states developed policies to address the urgency of turnaround and embedded in those policies specific strategies for raising achievement (Duke, 2012).

However, research suggests that accountability systems outlined in NCLB did not result in a decrease of the number of low-achieving schools (Berliner, 2011; Forte, 2010). Low
performing schools became subject to tremendous pressure to address accountability and improve student learning (Cosner & Jones, 2016). At the same time, these accountability provisions lessened the likelihood of enacting high-quality leadership practices (Finnegan & Daly, 2012).

The newest reauthorization of ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015), requires states to develop policies and submit a plan outlining how each will provide comprehensive supports to the lowest-performing schools. The accountability sanctions defined in ESSA and the resulting plans formulated by individual states, including Massachusetts, will continue to transform the landscape of turnaround practices. What remains under ESSA is the framework for district accountability and the restructuring of the poorest performing (i.e., lowest 5%) schools and districts.

Education reform focused on raising standards in education. The importance of standardized curriculum and the introduction of standards-based reforms shifted the view that principals alone were responsible for school improvement (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). The increased attention to both school improvement and turnaround efforts extended the accountability measures from schools to districts and refocused reform on the role that leaders at both levels play (Leithwood, 2010). As a result, research began to examine the role of central office leaders in school improvement efforts (Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Across states, accountability models vary (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). The US Department of Education, under the ESEA Flexibility Program, recommended states adopt a tiered system of accountability, focusing on the lowest performing schools (Duke, 2006; Wong & Shen, 2003). Within each reauthorization of ESSA, there remained a focus on the requirement for states to develop and maintain a statewide system for accountability (NCLB,
To better understand this shift, we now attend to specific accountability measures in Massachusetts.

**Massachusetts turnaround.** The takeover process is articulated in the Massachusetts state accountability system and overseen by the Office of District and School Turnaround (ODST) (ODST, 2017; M.G.L. 603 CMR 2.06(1)(b)). The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) classifies schools and districts in five levels. The highest performing schools and districts are classified as Level 1, and the lowest performing schools and districts are classified as Level 5 (ODST, 2017). This classification, in turn, dictates a series of district and state actions designed to support school improvement efforts.

Schools and districts designated as Level 4 must create a Turnaround Plan. This plan outlines the redesign and improvement efforts in which they will engage to improve student achievement. Plans are reviewed at the end of two years, at which time a school’s or district’s progress is evaluated and additional actions and benchmarks are determined. The Commonwealth’s plan aligns to the national conceptualization of turnaround that includes “dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low performing school” (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010, p. 4). Specifically, such intervention must produce gains within a tight two-year timeline as well as ready the school for a sustainable transformation grounded in heightened performance. Failure to elevate performance within the two-year period triggers a review by the Board of Education and the possibility of designation as a Level 5 District (OSDT, 2017).
Table 1.3

Massachusetts Classification System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>DESE Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commendation Schools</td>
<td>High achieving, high growth, gap narrowing schools (subset of Level 1)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High achieving, high growth, gap narrowing schools (subset of Level 1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>Meeting gap closing goals</td>
<td>Very Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>Not meeting gap closing goals</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>Lowest performing 20% of schools</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>Lowest performing schools (Subset of Level 3)</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lowest performing schools (Subset of Level 3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td>Chronically underperforming schools (Subset of Level 3)</td>
<td>Extremely High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education)

When a Massachusetts district is designated as Level 5, the Commissioner appoints a receiver to assume the powers of the superintendent and school committee. These powers include full managerial and operational control over the district (M.G.L. 603 CMR 2.06 (1) (b); M.G.L. c. 69, § 1K). Districts slated for receivership are required to create, develop and implement a new turnaround plan that ensures they can support effective instruction and student achievement (ODST, 2017). Having discussed these different processes for establishing turnaround schools and districts – both nationally and in Massachusetts – we now turn to discuss research on practices within these settings.

Assistance Relationships

This increased accountability results in the need for the central office to transform its focus from compliance, management and operations to teaching and learning (Honig, 2009,
In this overarching study, we examined this by focusing on central office leaders’ support of principals’ instructional leadership.

In a study across fifteen urban school districts in the San Francisco Bay area, McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) found that district leaders play an important role in systemic change. Current research supports the findings that a weak central office role limits the improvement in large-scale reforms (Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, & Wang, 2013; Honig, Lorton, & Copland, 2009; Knapp, et al., 2010). When central office leaders effectively promote principals’ instructional leadership, student achievement increases (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; Duke, 2015; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010). To this end, central office leaders must shift the focus of their work from regulatory functions to service as agents of change (Honig et al., 2010).

The conceptual framework of assistance relationships provides a lens for considering this (Honig et al., 2010). Honig et al. define assistance relationships as structured interactions between central office leaders and school leaders “in which people work together to strengthen how they go about their work” (p. 128). In their study of three urban districts, Honig et al. outlined five high-quality practices to support principals’ instructional leadership capacity through assistance relationships. These practices focus on strengthening principals’ instructional leadership and highlight the creation of such relationships, which are developed by differentiating supports, modeling effective practice, using tools, brokering and buffering, and developing networks (See Table 1.2).

While the research (Thompson, Henry, & Preston, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2010; Schueler et al., 2016) provides various strategies to school leaders to turnaround low-performing schools, these strategies are only viable if matched by district collaboration for sustained improvement. As Duke (2015) claims, “[w]ithout capable district leadership...even the
best efforts of the most dynamic and talented school leaders may be short-lived. Sustaining improvements in student achievement requires a coordinated approach involving both school and district leaders.” (p. 189). Therefore, the way central office leaders support school principals is critical to turning around chronically underperforming schools and districts.

As a result, current research (Honig et al., 2010; Honig, 2012) highlights the need for central office leaders to more explicitly partner with principals in turnaround districts. Assistance relationships are integral to gaining traction in the accelerated work of school and district turnaround. Turnaround efforts are designed to be a balance of pressure and support; however, the reality is that there is significant pressure coupled with diminished support. In a case study of an underperforming urban district, Finnigan and Daly (2012) confirm that “[g]reater emphasis on district-level accountability for each school may shift the emphasis of central office from pressure to support at the school level” (pp. 66-67). Therefore, without explicit attention to the development of assistance relationships, turnaround is designed to achieve meager results at best (Finnigan & Daly).

To gauge whether and how interactions between central office leaders and principals benefit achievement of turnaround outcomes, each member of our team related the use of assistance relationships to one of the five turnaround components (Schueler et al., 2016) (See Table 1.1). While assistance relationships may benefit any number of educators and leaders working together, our team specifically considered the link between central office leaders and school principals. This link warranted close examination as it surfaced the importance of how goals and action plans must be deliberately crafted with attention to the interconnectedness of the work shared between these two groups of leaders. In short, our overarching study aimed to identify the most critical levers for change in response to the rapid acceleration of reform initiatives and mandates (Honig et al., 2010; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Sun, Johnson, &
Przybylski, 2016). In this third and final body of literature, our team unpacks the five turnaround components.

**Turnaround Components**

School turnaround generally differs from school improvement in terms of depth and rate of change (Herman et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2010). Whereas improvement is a normally gradual process, the turnaround context demands quick and dramatic transformation. Herman et al. characterize turnaround contexts as demanding “dramatically improved student outcomes in a short time” (p. 6). Moreover, turnaround focuses on chronically underperforming schools and districts.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) provides specific guidance to districts identified for turnaround (ODST, 2017). Each individual strand in this dissertation in practice looked at one of these turnaround components through the five high-quality practices of assistance relationships (see Figure 1.1). Individual examination of each of these components illustrated the use of assistance relationships and the role of central office transformation in the improvement in the Lawrence Public Schools. The following sections unpack each component and its importance in school turnaround.
Figure 1.1. Connecting Assistance Relationships and Turnaround Components.

**Autonomy and accountability.** One key turnaround practice is autonomy juxtaposed with accountability. Autonomy as a reform strategy is used in turnaround schools to impact school improvement efforts (Demas & Arcia, 2015). Central office leaders grant autonomy to principals as a means to build instructional leadership capacity (Honig & Rainey, 2012).
Autonomy of principals allows school-based decisions to reflect the individual school conditions (Patrinos, Arcia, & McDonald, 2015; Honig & Rainey). This autonomy can be realized in four areas: budget, staffing, curriculum and schedule. The development of assistance relationships support this autonomy and the practices used within their schools as an important goal in turnaround practices (Honig et al., 2010).

When autonomy is paired with accountability, the process of school improvement happens more rapidly (Demas & Arcia, 2015; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). Aligned systems of assessment and accountability support higher and deeper levels of learning for all students. Central office leaders must balance the degree of autonomy available to schools with accountability systems that assess gains in students’ academic performance. Schools are granted increased autonomy in areas such as budget, staffing and curriculum in exchange for being held accountable for the outcomes they produce. In a turnaround district, the stakes are high. Improvement efforts must be realized or schools face severe sanctions, including the possibility of school closure (Menefee-Libey, 2010).

**Human capital.** A second key turnaround component involves human capital, which is an important component of turnaround efforts and is also central to implementing ambitious instructional reform (Spillane & Thompson, 1997). Development or lack of human capital, especially the leadership, plays an important role in the turnaround context (Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Murphy, 2008). Lowest-performing schools are provided with enormous flexibilities to manage and develop human capital in the federal and state regulations (Duke, 2012). Research calls for strong leadership, staff development, and capacity building in turnaround schools (Cosner & Jones, 2016; Leithwood, 2010; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005; Murphy, 2008; Orr, Berg, Shore, & Meier, 2008). Strong principals are one of the most important elements of successful turnarounds. Research argues that turnaround principals need
to have a certain mindset and skills (Duke, 2015; Murphy, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand the role of central office in recruiting, retaining and developing these leaders through assistance relationships.

**Learning time.** Learning time serves as the third turnaround component. Research shows that a resource of additional time enables schools to build in opportunities for core instruction, academic support, and teacher development and collaboration (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009). These resources are implemented within the master schedule through intervention blocks or through extended learning opportunities (i.e., summer school). Improving the efficiency of public education, with a focus on learning time, is of great importance. The idea that increased learning time leads to increased achievement is gaining support (Long, 2013). Policymakers have focused on the different uses of learning time and how to expand upon it, especially those schools and districts who have been chronically underperforming (Jez & Wassmer, 2015).

While researchers such as Long (2013) seek to show the correlation between learning time and student achievement, the scholarly evidence from empirical research on this subject is not extensive (Jez & Wassmer, 2015). For central office leaders and principals, it is important to understand the evidence on learning time and how it may fit best into a district in receivership.

**Instructional expectations.** The fourth component attends to instructional expectations. Honig (2012) argues it is critical that central office leaders and principals collaborate in the development of principals’ instructional expectations within their schools and of their teachers. Principals must create a learning environment conducive to providing high-quality teaching and learning for all students (Gottfried, 2003; Cotton, 2003). Principals’ instructional expectations greatly impact the quality of instruction teachers provide in the classroom (Cotton). Student achievement improves when principals purposefully create instructional expectations as they
relate to systems and structures, school culture, adherence to the curriculum and working conditions for teachers (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Specifically, the assistance relationship between central office leaders and principals is a critical part of central office transformation to support principals’ development and reinforcement of heightened instructional expectations (Honig, 2012). Therefore, central office’s influence on the collaborative development of shared, high instructional expectations is a critical support for principal leadership. This will foster improvement in their leadership capacity and ultimately improve student achievement in turnaround districts.

**Data use.** The fifth and final component involves the use of data. Data is defined broadly as any information yielded from one’s work to inform continued growth through the adjustment of leadership practice, shifts in instructional practice and use of technology to create efficiencies to achieve both in a data-wise school culture (Sun, Level, & Vaux, 2015). Subsequently, data use refers to a disciplined process of translating the data into action (Bernhardt, 2013).

Researchers (Sun et al., 2015; Sun, Johnson, & Przybylski, 2016) have begun to identify cultural traits within schools and districts that are representative of a data-wise culture. And, while their work holds much promise, they conclude in the most recent of these studies that sustaining an effective data-wise culture requires ongoing, focused professional development and consistent routines and protocols that inform how leaders treat data (Sun et al., 2016).

In most cases, leaders’ responses to data are expected to yield improvements in teaching and learning. Central office leaders provide targeted supports to principals, which foster their shared capacity as instructional leaders. Likewise, this ongoing, dedicated attention to data use contributes to emerging practices that inform how all educators use data to respond to students’ learning needs (Hubbard, Datnow, & Pruyn, 2014). Yet, the more educators are pressed by
national and state reform, the less time they have to intently focus on nurturing these practices. Like the interactions of educators – in and out of formal meetings – data system use is similarly variant. Therefore, translating data use into a social process is critical to transforming leadership practice (Wayman, Shaw, & Cho, 2017; Cho & Wayman, 2014).

Conclusion

Turnaround districts do not see significant improvement in teaching and learning without substantial engagement by central office leaders in building the capacity of the instructional leadership among principals (Honig et al., 2010). Central office’s role in turnaround districts requires clear expectations of central office-to-school relationships (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Honig, 2012). Our overarching study explored the work of central office leaders to foster assistance relationships with principals in a turnaround context. Each individual strand focused on one of the five turnaround components in the Lawrence Public Schools: autonomy and accountability, human capital, learning time, instructional expectations and the use of data (See Table 1.4).
Table 1.4

Individual Research Questions According to Turnaround Component

**Autonomy and Accountability**
1. In the context of a turnaround district, what ways do central office leaders grant autonomy to support school improvement?
2. What practices do central office leaders employ to support principals’ autonomy as instructional leaders in the context of increased accountability in a turnaround district?

**Human Capital**
1. In the context of a turnaround district, what practices do central office leaders use to recruit, develop, and retain principals?
2. How do assistance relationships between the central office leaders and principals contribute to this process?

**Learning Time**
1. How does central office support principals in the selection of learning time opportunities?
2. How does central office support principals in the implementation of learning time opportunities?

**Expectations**
1. In the context of a turnaround district, what practices do central office leaders employ to strengthen principals’ instructional expectations?
2. In the context of a turnaround district, how do “assistance relationships” between central office leaders and principals affect principals’ instructional expectations?

**Data Use**
1. What is the nature of data use for central office leaders?
2. What is the nature of data use for principals?
CHAPTER TWO

Research Design and Methodology

As our dissertation in practice team embarked on examining how central office leaders support principals as instructional leaders in a turnaround district, Lawrence Public Schools, all five members shared common practices and protocols for both gathering and analyzing data. Our team collectively contributed to the shared work of data collection but worked independently when analyzing data for individual studies. Data collection and/or analysis procedures that are unique to a member’s particular strand are reported in chapter three. In this chapter, we present the design of the overarching study shared by team members with specific elements that include the study design, the criteria for site selection, and the procedures for both data collection and subsequent analysis.

Study Design

This overarching study explored how central office leaders interact with and support principals in their evolving practice of instructional leadership in the Lawrence Public Schools. We conducted a case study of a single site, which served as a bounded system. A bounded system is particularly relevant in this case as the instance of turnaround is a “specific, complex functioning thing” (Merriam, 2009, p. 28). In particular, a qualitative case study is appropriate for a research problem like ours, which is rife with unknown variables (Creswell, 2015; Yin, 2014). Specifically, we explored the complex interactions between central office leaders and building administrators. The unit of analysis of our case was a turnaround public school district. We aimed to conduct “an intensive, holistic description and analysis” (Creswell, p. 21) of central office leaders’ interactions with and support of principals in this district.

2 This chapter was collaboratively written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project. Authors include Julia James Carlson, Suzanne M. Charochak, Gregg T. Gilligan, Eylem B. Icin, and Sonia L. Tellier.
Guided by our conceptual framework of assistance relationships, our team focused on central office leaders’ support of the development of principals’ instructional leadership. Examination of a myriad of relationships and interactions lent insights and a fuller understanding of the practices in a turnaround district that requires some degree of central office transformation. By analyzing the turnaround work through the lens of assistance relationships, we aimed to develop a deeper understanding of central office’s role in the improvement of teaching and learning.

**Site selection.** Our team applied two essential criteria to the selection of a Massachusetts public school district that would provide an accurate site. First, our research would be conducted in a turnaround context. Therefore, we looked to districts at Level 4 or Level 5 as designated by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Second, to understand the influence of turnaround efforts on assistance relationships, the district had to be presently engaged in central office transformation. Consequently, restructuring efforts specific to a turnaround strategy provided the environment for such central office transformation.

As reviewed in the Literature Review, Massachusetts’ five level classification system is a scale that denotes a school’s and district’s annual performance. Lawrence Public Schools was designated as an appropriate district. In the event that our team could not secure permission for this site, we were prepared to contact the other districts who met our criteria: either identified as a turnaround district (i.e., Level 4) or a low performing district (i.e., Level 3). Ultimately, the overarching study required a district that displayed evidence of active turnaround strategies as well as demonstrated progress (See Table 2.1). Our team anticipated that a district engaged in these strategies would display a parallel change in its leadership dynamic – especially with regard to the interactions between central office leaders and principals.
Table 2.1

Accountability Level Improvements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Accountability Level</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to low number of districts identified for receivership, the team anticipated difficulty masking the identity of the selected district. Therefore, to enrich the data collected, the team pursued and was granted a non-confidentiality allowance, so the district could be named. However, to the extent possible, the team agreed to maintain the confidentiality of central office leaders and principals selected as participants.

Data Collection

In order to determine how central office leaders supported principals as instructional leaders in a turnaround district, we relied on three types of qualitative data: archival documentation, interviews, and observations. Qualitative researchers operate under six assumptions (Merriam, 1988), and our team leveraged all six in advancement of our study. First, as qualitative researchers, we drew more from the process of discovery than we did from finite, quantifiable outcomes. Likewise, as stated in the second assumption (Merriam), we trusted that our efforts would inform meaning in the vital relationships shared between central office leaders and the principals they employ and support. How they received information and made sense of their work was critical to their success as well as their growth.
Third, as qualitative researchers seeking to derive meaning of the work in which other leaders are engaged, we knew that we collectively served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. As such, we were the mediators between the data and the newly forged understandings we share. Fourth, we engaged in interviews to enrich our understanding of the central office – principal dynamic of instructional leadership. Therefore, in accordance with the fifth assumption, such fieldwork yielded data that is descriptive and supportive of the sensemaking in which we engaged to present our conclusion. Finally, our research is, as Merriam (1988) purports, the cumulative result of inductive reasoning, theories, abstractions and details melded into substantiated conclusions.

**Document review.** Our team first conducted a document review. The documents for the initial review process included public documents on file with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) such as the initial and renewed district turnaround plan, the individual school improvement plans posted on the district website, and recent District and School report cards issued from DESE as well as any other documents identified through our interviews. We chose these documents to see what goals and strategies the district redesign committee identified as relevant to improving teaching and learning. Some participants provided additional documentation (e.g., data dashboards, professional development materials, staff memos and curriculum development procedures), which we added to the review (See Table 2.2).
Table 2.2

Sample Document Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District Turnaround Plan (2012, 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Improvement Plans (2014, 2015, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Improvement Plans (2014, 2015, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School Improvement Plans (2014, 2015, 2016)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Report Cards</th>
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</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff Memos</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our Way Forward</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews. Concurrent with the document review, our team conducted semi-structured interviews to further probe participants’ perspectives. The interview process allowed our team to gain an understanding of each interviewee’s perspective of the assistance relationships shared between central office and schools (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As indicated in Table 2.3, the team initially interviewed central office leaders and principals focusing on the assistance relationships that supported principals’ instructional leadership. Employing the snowball technique (Merriam, 2009) to extend our purposeful sample, our team interviewed 15 participants: six central office leaders and nine principals. Identified participants were recruited with support from the superintendent’s office. However, given time constraints, we applied strict limiting criteria to determine our selection of interviewees. We sought to engage with a minimum number of principals who represented the differing accountability designations (i.e., Levels 1 through 4) and spanned all grade levels (K-12).
Table 2.3

Interview Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Central Office Leaders</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building Principals, K - 12</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Other administration mentioned in plans targeting central office support of principals’ instructional leadership</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In preparation for our semi-structured interviews, the team prepared an interview protocol (See Appendix A) and previewed it through cognitive interviews to improve question validity and determine if the questions created probed the aspects of instructional leadership intended. This process involved asking the initial question, recording the response and probing the participant with a variety of questions (Conrad & Blair, 2009). We asked a participant a question from the protocol, “In what ways do you work with principals to set a vision and goals around instructional expectations?” The subject answered, and the interviewer probed “What do you think I meant by instructional expectations?” These responses were used to finalize our interview protocol (Beatty & Willis, 2007). Participants of the cognitive interview were similarly situated but selected from a district other than the Lawrence Public Schools. Interview responses recorded and transcribed.

**Observations.** Finally, our team entertained opportunities to engage in observations of central office leaders’ and principals’ interactions. Our team members planned to leverage the observations to gain valuable insight into the identified leaders’ routine – even *natural* – practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, opportunities for observations were limited to public meetings. Compounding constraints limited access to observations as will be discussed later in the limitations section. For example, our team benefitted from the Superintendent’s presentation to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which was relevant and
highly informative. In anticipation of observations, our team developed an observation protocol (Appendix A). Raw data was recorded in field journals, reviewed and typed into formal field notes, and shared among all team members to be analyzed in line with the team’s coding strategy.

**Data Analysis**

Our team uploaded all data – documents, interview transcripts and observation field notes – to an online qualitative research software, Dedoose, which facilitated the coding of all data (Merriam, 2009). The coding process was cyclical (Saldaña, 2009). The team used the first cycle of coding to “organize and group similarly coded data into families” (Saldaña, p. 9). These initial codes informed responses to the team’s individual research questions, which aligned with five key turnaround focus areas: Autonomy and Accountability (AA), Human Capital (HC), Learning Time (LT), Instructional Expectations (E), and Data Use (DU). For a summary of these primary codes, please refer to the Interview Protocol (See Appendix A). Throughout the process, each researcher applied inductive reasoning to develop additional descriptive codes (Saldaña).

For the second cycle, the conceptual framework of assistance relationships guided the secondary codes that allowed our team to further analyze the data and inform our shared exploration of assistance relationships. These codes, as described in Table 1.2 and derived from Honig et al.’s (2010) explanation of assistance relationships, included Differentiated Supports (DS), Modeling (M), Use of Tools (UT), Brokering (BR) and Networks (N).

Following the first two cycles of coding, the team completed pair checks to review each other’s coding cycles (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Working in these pairs, transcripts were first coded by one member and then verified by the second member. The pair who conducted the interview also conducted this initial coding. Individual team members then reviewed each
transcript to determine whether additional cycles were needed to address their individual
research questions (see Table 1.4).

Alongside coding the documentation and interviews, our team utilized analytic memos
to record decisions on the coding process and code choices, as well as field notes and reflections
of the interview process. Each team member contributed to a shared process memo that captured
the documentation and subsequent reflection of the decisions made by the team throughout this
process. This collaborative work helped articulate how team members made sense of the data
(Saldaña, 2009). All notes and documents were kept in both Dedoose and a secure folder within
Google Drive.
CHAPTER THREE

TRACKING TURNOVER: UNDERSTANDING DATA USE AS A SHARED LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

Introduction: Problem, Purpose, and Research Questions

In the ever-accelerating rush of educational reform, demands on central office leaders and principals alike are increasing (Leithwood & Lewis, 2012; Sun, Johnson, & Przybylski, 2016). Research points to the critical work of central office leaders, specifically superintendents and assistant superintendents, in advancing reform efforts. Other research documents principals’ efforts to improve teaching and learning (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). The work of both central office and school leaders is related and elevated through assistance relationships (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). Such relationships are occasions during which one or more members share their expertise by modeling certain practices. The modeling then informs how systems, structures, and subsequent practices are introduced and even reinforced for newer members (Honig et al., 2010). By attending to assistance relationships, our overarching study explored the interactions within the central office – principal dynamic and attempt to better understand how these leaders collectively respond to broad national or state reform with nuanced and district-specific responses – especially in a time-bound turnaround context (Cosner & Jones, 2016).

In a study of the turnaround progress of Lawrence Public Schools, Schueler, Goodman, and Deming (2016) highlighted the five essential components of the district’s turnaround strategy. Each member of the team independently prepared a strand of the overarching study. Each strand considered one of the five turnaround components and explored its connection to assistance relationships. I attended to leaders’ use of data to gauge its relevance to the assistance relationships shared between central office leaders and principals. Careful attention to turnaround reform emphasized both leaders' reliance on data to inform decision-making (Sun et al., 2016; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012;  

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3 Chapter 3 authored by Sonia L. Tellier.
Specifically, my strand sought to address the following two, parallel research questions.

In the context of a turnaround district:

1. What is the nature of data use for central office leaders?
2. What is the nature of data use for principals?

I begin this chapter by briefly reviewing the literature that provides a context for this inquiry.

**Literature Review**

I considered four bodies of literature: data use in educational leadership, organizational learning theory, the function of instructional leadership, and the nature of assistance relationships. From the literature, I present a four-part schema for data analysis from which I highlight the four manifestations of data use: adjusting leadership practice, informing instruction, leveraging technology, and promoting resilience.

**Data Use in Educational Leadership**

Within the scope of this strand, *data* is defined broadly as any information yielded from one’s work to inform continued growth through the adjustment of leadership practice, shifts in instructional practice, and use of technology to create efficiencies to achieve both in a data-wise school culture (Sun, Level, & Vaux, 2015). Subsequently, *data use* refers to a process of translating data into action (Bernhardt, 2013).

Routine data use is a requisite feature of assistance relationships (Honig et al., 2010). The success of leaders’ shared work relies on their use of data to improve (Bernhardt, 2013). Clear protocols outline how to access and interpret data to foster shared understanding. Despite having protocols, there are occasions when colleagues’ interpretations of data confuse or complicate their work as well. Therefore, exploring how central office leaders and principals effectively use data can help us understand this as a lever for organizational learning (Datnow & Hubbard, 2016). Likewise, understanding how central office leaders support principals’ professional practice is critical to
understanding how leadership successes can be replicated and failures remedied. Districts do this work by engaging in organizational learning (Senge, 2006) and fostering assistance relationships (Honig et al., 2010).

Attention to assistance relationships and leaders’ reliance on data are particularly important to understanding turnaround efforts. State education departments use data to identify turnaround schools or districts: the lowest performing (bottom 5%) schools are deemed “turnaround schools” (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007). When engaged in turnaround, districts often undergo dramatic and swift changes to leadership intended to yield equally dramatic and swift changes in student outcomes (Calkins et al.). Once critical resources are allocated within the turnaround district, demands of accountability for performance gains on key improvement benchmarks perpetuate the imperative of effective data use (Calkins et al.).

Research is limited, however, in the consideration of how the learning-focused assistance relationships shared between central office and school leaders influence positive change in instructional leadership practices. Likewise, there is limited research identifying the link between these relationships, data use, and successful turnaround initiatives. These limitations point toward the need for research into the role of effective data use practices in the advancement of turnaround reform.

**Organizational Learning**

This strand is grounded in organizational learning theory, which suggests a process of improving leaders’ skills and knowledge to shape culture (Senge, 2006). The theory, while broad, attends to two key elements: sensemaking and its influence on reform. In a study of a district’s decade-long experience with decentralized leadership, Umekubo, Chrispeels, and Daly (2015) frame sensemaking by first reminding us that organizations do not have brains. Rather, they have a host of actors who interact based on norms, routines, and histories. These actors forge systems for coding, retaining, and transferring information. An organization’s system of structures serves as the
foundation for sensemaking, a process by which various members act as a single collective who gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from multiple sources (Umekubo et al.).

Liou, Daly, Brown, and del Fresno (2015) expand on the application of the iterative process of sensemaking, highlighting the benefits of local knowledge, which includes the district’s and/or school’s history as well as shared expertise. Their study backgrounds the social influence on sensemaking. Liou et al. contend that this is true in research, allowing exploration of more technical approaches to reform. The exchange of data among colleagues is a critical element of understanding the ongoing work of reform. Data allows educators to know which strategies are working and how effective they are.

**Sensemaking via data use.** The outcome of the sensemaking process is the assignment of meaning to one’s work that is evidenced-based. Data use, then, rests at the praxis between theories for change, mandate for reform, and adjustment to practice (Umekubo et al., 2015). How colleagues assign meaning begins as an individual process, then extends to interactions with colleagues to test ideas and plan responses collectively (Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993), which is the heart of an assistance relationship (Honig et al., 2010). Such a process is socially derived, emphasizing the value of colleagues’ interactions with each other in the exchange and use of valuable data.

Umekubo, Chrispeels, and Daly (2015) outline influences on professional learning within the organization. Effective data use, in line with their perspective, is nurtured by interaction. Therefore, Umekubo and colleagues theorize that the more frequent the opportunities to interact with colleagues, the stronger the outcomes and planned actions derived from data use. Both the process for examining data and the outcomes of such a process surface from a closer review of social relations, reinforcing the interconnectedness of the two research questions, which aim to understand how each group of leaders independently treats data. The overall aim is to understand how leaders’ interactions aid data use.
Data use’s iterative cycle of synthesis and application allows ideas to be refined and tested. The cycle continues to yield new knowledge and new actions. Ultimately as the process repeats and layers in new information, improvements are expected to punctuate the end of one cycle and the advancement to another (Umekubo et al., 2015; Daly & Finnegan, 2010; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Data use, as a socialized process in assistance relationships, promotes sensemaking. Thus, colleagues’ interactions are integral to data use to improve teaching and learning, which is the result of effective instructional leadership (Honig & Venkateswaran; Spillane, 2012). Seeking to understand leaders’ sensemaking processes begins to inform responses to the two questions in this strand regarding the contours of data use.

**Interactions.** Social relationships are predicated on interactions among all members of the district. Their interactions allow for an exchange of information and resources. Effective data use is drawn from relational ties with others in the organization. The communications exchanged may vary in frequency; however, colleagues influence each other’s individual understandings as they forge a collective understanding of their work. This perpetual influence links interactions and data use to sponsor organizational learning to advance school reform. The flow of information within and across the district offers insight into the strength of colleagues’ relational ties. This highlights the socialized nature of data use. Liou, Daly, Brown, and del Fresno (2015) cite that attention to the social and relational work of change serves educational leaders well. Such work may beget new forms of leadership essential to respond to mounting twenty-first century educational challenges (Leithwood & Lewis, 2012; Sun et al., 2016).

In addition, the volume of accountability measures with which today’s schools are faced demand an understanding of how colleagues interact to advance this work (Hite, Hite, Mugimu, & Nsubuga, 2010; Sun et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2016). Educators’ individual efforts alone cannot achieve such substantial change. Donovan, Ashdown, and Mungai (2016) conclude that no matter the change being demanded on an educational system, a true measurement of the change cannot be made without
attention to how educators interact. Taken alongside an informed understanding of sensemaking, social interactions transform data use into a collaborative practice that informs a common, shared understanding.

Accelerated reform in the turnaround context requires structured, sustained social interaction. In responding to my research questions, I learned more about how central office leaders and principals both describe the social nature of leadership in the turnaround context. There is little evidence about their shared practice in the effort to exit turnaround status. Central office leaders and principals must maintain open channels of communication to be able to outline a plan of action, allocate necessary resources, and follow through with the plan (Duke, 2012). Piecemeal plans for reform are one-dimensional. While they may address one or two critical areas of needed reform, they neglect to address all components of reform – particularly leadership (Duke). As a collective of multiple leaders working together to achieve improved outcomes, a leadership team’s interactions are not only inevitable but essential. When a leadership team focuses on improving teaching and learning in the turnaround context – the core of educational data literacy (Bernhardt, 2013) – leaders’ data use is a demonstration of their instructional leadership (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012).

**Instructional Leadership**

Just as data use is a socialized act of leadership, it is also a critical element of how leaders inform instruction. The context provided in this section helps frame the schema for data analysis in response to this strand’s two research questions. Likewise, central office leaders who are most willing to engage in assistance relationships are most likely to have a positive impact on both principals’ instructional leadership and overall teaching and learning (Honig et al., 2010). Like their colleagues in successful private industries (e.g., healthcare), instructional leaders who seek to improve teaching and learning are best served by redesigning the work system to routinely capture the outcomes of their work and consider the embedded lessons that will inform continued improvement (Honig et al., 2010).
The work to improve teaching and learning is a systems problem (Honig et al., 2010; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). And within the one larger system (i.e., the district), there are a number of subsystems (e.g., schools and departments). Data use crosses the entire system. Cross-system improvements and change rely on collaboration, which results from structured social interaction borne of strong instructional leadership. For example, clear protocols for data use allow for leaders from one elementary school to communicate and support colleagues in another elementary school to engage in parallel study of the effectiveness of a particular strategy or initiative. Collaboration is further informed by the patterns in which such interactions occur. For example, if a classroom teacher knows to seek annual state assessment data from the assistant principal each September, his/her start to the school year is increasingly efficient. The principal can plan meetings with colleagues, review data and plan instruction. Yet, this is a process that begins with the central office leaders’ modeling through assistance relationships (Honig et al. 2010). Therefore, patterns of social interaction are critical to ongoing reform efforts in today’s schools (Calkins et al., 2007; Coburn, 2001; Moolenaar, 2012). Specifically, the patterns in collegial networks warrant close study as they are central to both educators’ and educational leaders’ sensemaking for reform, subsequent achievement of reform, and quality of instructional leadership.

Understanding the nature of social interactions in the data use process highlights the social nature of change. By extension, one could conclude that the more we understand how our colleagues think, the more we can engage with them, test ideas, and move forward together. Similarly, researchers (Coburn, 2001; Moolenaar, 2012) suggest that leaders perform their leadership tasks separately though interdependently in an intricate interplay. This interplay leads to a sense of how smaller data teams operate within the school’s instructional leadership design. Understanding both individual and collective approaches to data use clarifies the conceptual framework and supports the importance of assistance relationships to advance instructional leadership. Likewise, understanding
how data use influences instructional leadership via assistance relationships is particularly important turnaround.

**Data Use via Assistance Relationships**

Strong instructional leadership benefits from leaders’ participation in assistance relationships. Such leadership relies on taking action derived from effective data use. Data used to inform decision-making must be keenly selected to ensure the realization of improved teaching and learning (Honig et al., 2010; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). As instructional leaders, we are learners. As learners, we are discerning in the information from which we seek to derive new understandings. Yet there is a known trend of central office leaders not using evidence to inform their decisions: “Prescriptions abound describing what central offices should do to improve teaching and learning district-wide, yet virtually none of these prescriptions rest on direct empirical evidence about how central office might actually have a positive impact on school-level practice” (Honig et al., 2010, p. 5). If central office leaders are not keen on looking to the known successes and failures of others in their roles, if they are not looking at the data to inform their practice, then they fall short of modeling data use practices for other leaders in the system.

This strand’s interpretation of the *Dimensions of Central Office Transformation* framework (Honig et al., 2010) calls out central office leaders’ reliance on data to influence change. Honig and colleagues (2010) highlight the broad range of data sources from which leaders should draw evidence. Further, Honig et al. unpack the variance in data sources as well as related policies and practices that need to be in play to effectively work with that data (Honig et al., 2010). Yet, all aspects are predicated on the notion that leaders participate in assistance relationships. This, then, serves as the conceptual frame for this strand (See Figure 3.1) and the bridge to connecting the manifestations of data use to effective leadership practice. Figure 3.1 illustrated the organization of my individual strand and complements Figure 1.1, which organizes the team’s overarching study in its entirety.
Figure 3.1. Data Use and Assistance Relationships.

Literature (Sun et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2015) documents attempts to measure the effectiveness of data use as a distinguishing cultural characteristic in today’s most successful schools. Focusing more intently on creating a measurement, Sun, Johnson, and Pryzbylski (2016) extended the initial research to leadership with consideration of data-driven school leadership. I drew from these two studies to articulate the nature of effective data use. Therefore, to operationalize data use as a turnaround component, I focused my analysis on these four manifestations: data’s influence on
adjusting leadership practice, data’s ability to inform instruction, data use’s benefits from technological advancement, and the intentional promotion of resilience.

**Adjusting leadership practice.** In the face of national reform agendas (e.g., the Every Student Succeeds Act), central office leaders and principals alike must rely on data to inform adjustments to leadership practices (Sun et al., 2016). Systematic use of data informs how leaders make sense of their roles: it is not about how they perceive their role as authorities; rather it is about how they receive and respond to various data (Sun et al.) to achieve their goals.

Sun et al. (2016) confirm that “principals’ use of data to lead schools can underpin all their leadership practices” (p. 94). Yet, despite this importance, there is reason to pause and look more closely at this practice. Principals, like their central office leader role models, attend to data globally, looking for broad trends in student achievement. Despite the emerging models of effective data use, even the most promising of data-wise cultures require further professional development and strengthened protocols to realize the vision of effective data use (Sun et al.). Simply, changed approaches to instructional leadership are necessary for promoting effective data use that is followed by an aligned and actionable response (Townsend, Acker-Hocevar, Ballenger, & Place, 2013).

**Informing instruction.** If data use is not a strong cultural norm and if it is not treated at a classroom or student level, there is little connection between the story told in the data and the one that unfolds in the classroom (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). Without clear guidance from instructional leaders, educators are at a loss on how to respond to the amounting data (Hubbard et al., 2014). Educators need continual training and practice to analyze data fluently (Sun et al., 2015). Of particular note, “[d]ata-informed instructional design is one of the best means to operationalize ‘inclusion’ theories, helping each student succeed and promoting social justice” (Sun et al., p. 78). At the outset of the study, Sun and colleagues underscore the function of data use in reaching all students at their entry point to learning.
Sun, Levey, and Vaux (2015) conclude that teachers who use data consistently and effectively have leaders in their schools who support and shape this practice and influence a culture that requires data use. In line with the demands of accountability in the turnaround context, there is an equally important need to create efficiencies around data use. Once such efficiency can be achieved by leveraging technological advancement via data management programs.

**Leveraging technology.** Digital tools add another dimension to the sensemaking process of data use. To this end, Cho and Wayman (2014), in a comparative case study of three independent districts, find that current reform mandates have elevated the importance of data use. Their study suggests that the increase of available collaborative technologies and social media has transformed the delivery of and access to data. Yet, despite these various media, Cho and Wayman concluded that the agency to use technology to inform change rested in the users, not the technology. Therefore, the reality of how well received a technology is relates directly to the value judgment the user holds and his/her interactions with colleagues in relation to that judgment. Sensemaking, then, has a contoured influence on reform: the product yielded from use of technology carries different meanings for different users across the district hierarchy (Cho & Wayman). Understanding how technologies are used offers insight into the interplay between leaders at different levels within the district. Likewise, “envisioning and habituating” (Cho & Wayman, p. 32) the practices that ground the effective use of tools like these is a social matter that must promote resilience.

**Promoting resilience.** In Weick’s (1993) case study account of the Mann Gulch fire disaster of 1949, he quickly recounts the deadly incident in which a team of smokejumpers landed in an active fire to fight it. When the fire closed in, one team member recommended others lay in the ashes from an escape fire he’d both lit and extinguished. He did just that and survived. Several others did not and paid with their lives.

In the account, Weick (1993) arrives at critical conclusions for organization resilience. Such resilience is born of norms and respectful interactions in which members of a team listen to and learn
from one another. Members promote resilience when they accept being wrong or simply not
knowing, they honor each other’s expertise, and share leadership. Knowing when and how to do this
is another feature of increased resilience to known order within a team or organizational structure.
Sensemaking within assistance relationships rests at the heart of Weick’s argument. Organizations
become vulnerable to chaotic dismantling when there is a disruption to the leader-follow relationship.
In the face of a rapidly changing environment, like the Mann Gulch tragedy in Montana, critical
lessons are learned that can be stretched to understand the impact of vulnerability within a district or
school in the face of reform. If the central office’s leadership fosters the development of a strong role
system, founded on trust, honesty, and respect, then colleagues within the district will be more likely
to cultivate resilience to carry forward in the face of change (Weick), thereby informing the
sensemaking process.

Spillane and Anderson (2014) expand the notion of resilience to talk about the complication
of sensemaking for those leaders who are new to their positions. New leaders are often surprised by
the plurality of demands from various stakeholders. The ability to communicate with others who
share their roles and have experience with this work aids sensemaking and fosters critical
relationships that promote resilience — and persistence — in both the role and work. Without
responding thoughtfully to concerns about resilience, neither reform efforts nor sound data practices
can prove effective or sustainable.

These four manifestations of data use benefit the work of turnaround. Cosner and Jones
(2016) suggest that “leaders of struggling schools facing accountability pressures will need to
understand a constellation of distinct and occasionally subtle issues that motivate more nuanced
leader approaches” (p. 52). While reform in the turnaround context is expected to be
accelerated, it is also borne of a delicate interplay between leaders learning new approached to
their practice. How central office leaders and principals use data in this context will inform their
goals, determine their actions, and lead to their ultimate outcomes. Their increasingly socialized
practice paired with data fluency will help to ensure that those outcomes are increasingly positive. Ultimately, sustaining a focus on teaching and learning is the north star of their work.

**Advancing this Strand**

To recap: first, the literature presented on organizational learning as sensemaking and social interaction explores how today’s leaders are using data to improve leadership by broadening the scope of their work in response to data. Second, the literature presented on instructional leadership merges leaders’ individual work into a collective action to achieve turnaround reform. Then, the literature on learning-focused leadership qualifies leadership as a collaborative process that benefits from assistance relationships that govern the central office leader – principal dynamic. The review concludes by outlining four manifestations of data use.

**Methods**

**Context**

This strand of the overarching study sought to respond to two questions:

1. What is the nature of data use for central office leaders?
2. What is the nature of data use for principals?

These questions, like those of my teammates, informed our team’s decision to use the case study research design (Yin, 2009). The phenomena studied is the influential relationship shared between central office leaders and principals in the development of principals’ instructional leadership through assistance relationships for which the Lawrence Public Schools served as the single, holistic case.

Yin (2009) cautions that some case studies – particularly those classified as explorations – may have a purpose but may not have corresponding propositions. Yet, while this strand explored the presence of assistance relationships in the expected use of data, there are two working propositions: First, as a district engaged in receivership, Lawrence Public Schools’ administration is engaged in and modeling data use practices in an increasingly data-wise culture. Second, both central office leaders as well as principals are critical players in the success of data use in the district. Lawrence’s
turnaround experience benefits this strand as it is one of only three Massachusetts districts in receivership. Further, this strand, like the overarching study, benefited from Lawrence’s demonstrated progress (Schueler et al., 2016), presenting the district as, what Yin may classify as a unique case.

Data Collection

This strand used a qualitative research design that permitted a range of yet unknown variables to be considered in both the collection and subsequent analysis of data. I explored the central phenomena (Yin, 2009), leaders’ improved assistance relationships through structured and consistent data use. Such exploration helped to identify the contours that contributed to (or detracted from) the quality of the leaders’ assistance relationships in the central office – principal dynamic. Yin cautions that case studies often deviate from the path set by the researcher at the beginning of the study.

Document review. I drew initial data from a cross-document analysis of strategic planning documents and previous research. These documents include the initial Turnaround Plan as well as the commissioned Harvard study (Schueler et al., 2016) and are all from the period in which Lawrence Public Schools engaged in receivership. The patterns of data discussed as well as subsequent actions and benchmarks revealed central office leaders’ and principals’ thinking about data use as a specific leadership practice. Finally, I reviewed the District’s renewed Turnaround Plan to see if the trends from initial changes to leadership practice are translated into the planned actions and expected outcomes within the strategic objectives. Though systematic in nature, the document review process influenced slight deviations from the original path, allowing for “the accidental uncovering of valuable data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 175) that spoke to central office leaders’ data use, principals’ data use, and their shared use of data as a feature of their assistance relationships.

Semi-structured interviews. Along with my peers, I engaged in a series of semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with identified participants. With a partner, I completed two of the six interviews from this group while having access to all six transcripts (See Table 2.2). Similarly, and also with a partner, I conducted interviews with three of the nine principals as well as drew
conclusions from the full complement of data yielded by our team collectively. The interview process allowed me to gain an understanding of each interviewee’s perspective and then respond with follow-up questions (Merriam & Tisdell). The resultant data informed responses to this strand’s two research questions; I was able to describe the use of data by central office leaders and principals as well as describe their shared use as cultivated by assistance relationships.

**Data Analysis**

My fellow teammates and I conducted an initial analysis of documents and interview transcripts using selected primary codes highlighted in the Question Key Alignment at the top of the shared interview protocol (See Appendix A). These codes allowed my colleagues and I to first sort the data by turnaround component, so we knew to what data we each needed to attend individually.

I then conducted a deeper, second cycle of analysis in which I applied codes representative of the key practices of assistance relationships. These five codes include Differentiated Supports (DS), Modeling (M), Use of Tools (UT), Brokering (B), and Networks (N). This deepened analysis began to informed how I could respond to my two research questions. I anticipated that analysis results would uncover trends in how central office leaders and principals regard their roles and use data to inform their work in this turnaround district. I compared the results to determine what preliminary findings were parallel (or incongruent) as I compare interview responses with that which was captured from the document analysis.

After conducting in this two-part analysis, I collaborated with my team to engage in peer checks. We discussed our preliminary findings, tested ideas, and shared data that we thought could benefit another’s study in the event he/she did not initially review or interpret the data in a similar manner. This process leveraged inductive reasoning to inform possible additions of other descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2009).

Once this team process was done, I repeated the coding process a final time to fully inform responses to my research question. These last codes are specific to my strand and align with the four
manifestations of data use presented in the literature review: Adjusting Leadership Practice (ALP), Informing Instruction (II), Leveraging Technology (LT), and Promoting Resilience (PR). A summary of the data analysis process follows in Table 3.1. I documented all steps in the process in an analytic process memo, which captured the sequence of decisions and related actions I made during coding, so, if necessary, a finding could be traced back to its first appearance or my steps can be retraced to refine my thinking as I prepared the findings for publication.

Table 3.1.
Layers of Data Analysis for Documents, Interviews, and Observations

Layer 1
- Autonomy and Accountability (AA)
- Human Capital (HC)
- Learning Time (LT)
- Instructional Expectations (IE)
- Data Use (DU)

Layer 2
- Differentiated Supports (DS)
- Modeling (M)
- Use of Tools (UT)
- Brokering (BR)
- Networks (N)

Layer 3
- Adjusting Leadership Practice (ALP)
- Informing Instruction (II)
- Leveraging Technology (LT)
- Promoting Resilience (PR)

There were a handful of observations considered in the substantiation of presented claims about the four manifestations of data use.

Findings

I organized my findings to respond to each of the two research questions. I first present evidence regarding the nature of central office leaders’ data use and then address the nature of principal’s data use. As will become clear across these two sections, the evidence revealed a remarkable degree of commonality in the language and practices these leaders shared. Their
enthusiasm carried through the entirety of the findings, from the full complement of participants, and highlighted how they have adjusted their leadership practice.

**Central Office Leaders’ Data Use**

The first question seeks to uncover the nature of central office leaders’ use of data in relation to the four manifestations: adjusting leadership practice, informing instruction, leveraging technology, and promoting resilience.

**Adjusting leadership practice.** During the seven years in which the Lawrence Public Schools has been engaged in receivership, the central office has been transformed into a leaner team of well-versed administrators who must be prepared to respond to questions and concerns posed by school-level leadership – principals specifically. And, while Sun et al. (2015, 2016) present adjustment to leadership practice as a way for leaders to more frequently and more meaningfully use data, the cumulative outcome of the interviews and observations revealed that, in most instance, both central office leaders and principals view adjustment to leadership practice as a way to bolster their skill set to ensure they are leading teachers – and ultimately students – to high-quality learner match by heightened performance scores.

According to interviews with central office leaders, most leaders\(^4\) spoke about the reduction in the number of administrators on the team. In the Renewed Turnaround Plan, the superintendent/receiver confirms that there was a thirty percent reduction in central office administrators, availing an additional 1.6 million dollars in funding to the schools (Riley & Chester, 2015). The shift to more school-level support empowered principals to use their data to identify intervention strategies and be able to secure the additional personnel to flexibly and intently support student learning.

\(^4\) Responses are categorized as All; Almost all = more than 75% of the whole or one group; Most = more than half of the whole or half of one group; Some = more than one; One; None.
As I listened to interviewees share their ideas, I appreciated one’s summary about the central office transformation: “It’s interesting, because as a central office, we’re not your typical central office...We don’t tell principals how to run their schools. We don’t tell principals what to implement in their schools.” As this leader continued her explanation, she added,

We definitely have goals that we need to make sure that we meet in terms of providing kids with their rigorous instruction, meeting the standards in terms of enrichment opportunities, hiring the right people, so those are common goals that we share...but, realistically, our principals know their schools the best, and so when we talk about shared goals, we have the umbrella... [Principals] do the research, they tell us what they need and we provide the support and customer service to make sure that they carry it out.”

Another central office leader offers an additional illustration of how the development of assistance relationships has influenced an adjustment in leadership practice:

I really strive to write very clear emails and with plenty of time to think about things and to give suggestions and to set time aside to go and meet with them [the principals] around the thinking that they’re doing. It’s about just trying to really make sure they have a nice solid base and then working individually with them as they outreach.

In line with this customer service orientation, if a central office leader cannot respond, s/he has to know which colleague on the central office team can:

I get all kinds of calls about all kinds of things, and if I don’t know the answer, I know who will, and that is a major component of the support piece. With a smaller central office, we are leaner, so we have to be able to understand all the workings and make sure everybody gets what they want. I definitely view myself as a customer service person for schools, from teachers to staff.

Over the course of the turnaround period, 2011 – present, central office leaders have focused on the growth and achievement targets set by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and
Secondary Education (DESE) in 2011 at the advent of turnaround. One central office administrator characterized the effort as mixed: “We’ve made incremental progress. We’ve made some great progress in math and science. English has been a little bit more difficult, so just trying to keep cracking at that… We’ve made growth, but it’s tougher to get the higher percentages of growth.” The central office leadership team believes in a responsive practice that is informed by a variety of rich data.

**Informing instruction.** Data’s role in informing instruction is provide objectivity to making decisions about teaching and learning. When asked to talk about data’s role in designing instruction, one central office leader commented that there is an intentional effort to avoid making comparisons among teachers’ individual practice: “It’s not about comparing to anybody else; it’s really about ‘what happened here?’” Almost all central office leaders emphasized data use requires pausing and asking questions about what happened and where to target improvements or professional development. One central office leader characterized it this way: “[you are] trying to get back to the root cause of ‘why didn’t this got eh way we intended it to go?’, ‘what do we need to do to tweak this?’” Within the Lawrence Public Schools, there is an emphasis on personalized supports: “People learn at different rates and have different challenges.” As this central office leader clarified her point, she continued, by sharing that it’s about “being able to work with each person in a way where you’re hopefully helping them.” This is the root of data use practice for all central office administrators. One central office leader confirms that “it’s always about teaching and learning.” The team gathers data, analyzes it, and responds with resources that can support continued student growth and advancement. While all central office leaders commented on this phenomenon, one central office leader offered this representative summary:

We talk about differentiated instructional all the time, the most important thing about Lawrence is the differentiated support we give our schools. So, like differentiated
instruction, we give those people that need more help more help, and those people that need less the wiggle room to just go do their thing.

Indeed, the salary savings gained from the central office transformation and ultimate reduction in central office positions has allowed more funds to flow into the schools. Attention to data informs the reallocation is able to fund targeted classroom intervention and instructional coaching: “With a leaner central office … we have pushed more resources to the school level and established new policies to support schools and promote continuous improvement (Riley & Chester, 2015, p. 2). During an interview with a central office leader, the leader further explained, “When we trimmed the central office by a third, that meant that we distributed all of those resources in terms of funds to the schools. Schools are now able to have content coaches, curriculum coaches. They’re able to put together teams to provide support in this area.” Central office leaders confirmed that data is, and has been, commonly available. Yet, before central office transformation, school level leaders had a wealth of data though lacked the skills to analyze and/or interpret the data. A central office administrator explains:

That was our biggest problem before is that we had all of this data. Nobody was using it, one, because they probably didn’t know how to interpret the data, and two, they didn’t know how to implement any type of change within the classrooms at the classroom level. We were doing a really poor job in providing any type of professional development… I think that also had a lot to do with the fact that there was no consistency. How do you work with one school on one type of test, and then a different school is using a different type of test? It was just very difficult.

While this central office leader appears to advocate for consistency, she is in fact advocating for common data use protocols that allow a facility in moving among the differentiated tools for data collection to accommodate the unique nature of each school. Through central office transformation, central office leaders nurtured a common vision for student learning, measured by
routine assessment data, and monitored by principals. Further, through the concerted leadership efforts, principals received professional development as well as benefitted from central office leaders who modeled the expected data use practices.

Almost all central office administrators confirmed that an essential facet of data use is the development of self-driven accountability. In other words, principals are expected to access, analyze and monitor formative and summative data to ensure teachers are preparing students to meet learning and assessment targets. In turn, they are monitoring their own accountability when they monitor others’ efforts. And, if the find that they need differentiated support or brokered access to a particular resource, they reach out to central office leadership for customer service.

From the perspective of central office leadership, the results of various benchmark assessments (e.g., A-Net, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), and NWEA) diagnose both an individual student’s entry point into learning, and, on a grander level, the overarching curricular and instructional goals a school must achieve. A central office administrator explains the instructional value taken from these resources: “It’s really standards-based instruction. It goes right back down to the frameworks, and we invest a lot of time and a lot of energy, and a lot of money into training around the standards.” The assessments track student progress and growth in alignment with the standards. As a colleague described, “Having a clear target line, you can really see where the students are and make sure [you]’re giving them what they need, what every other student across the Commonwealth is getting at that grade level.” Happily, the administrator concluded, “We’re getting closer to it.”

**Leveraging technology.** Recognizing that external pressures for accelerated reform are closely linked to societal changes, I cannot disconnect treatment of data use from treatment of available technologies. Examples of how both central office leaders and principals leverage technology to support data use varies. Some central office leaders spoke about the creation of a “Big Data Sheet” on which a range of data about each student is recorded. The Sheet is prepared
in Microsoft Excel and can be sorted using any of the included fields (e.g., English Learner or Disability Status, MCAS or ACCESS scores). The *Sheet* includes each student’s “current enrollment linked back to all different measures. Every student has a row.” The administrator continues to offer details about the *Sheet*,

This is the nitty gritty…We can’t take everything, but the pieces we want to keep the eye on, the focus on. Historical MCAS, just to look at trends. NWEA. Not just about where their actual score it but their growth. Their continual growth related to their peers…I’ll go back and get historical attendance rates. I’ll throw that in there. Program code…ACCESS, MCAS, ANet, NWEA, I-Ready.

The *Sheet* was created to help the schools “harness all this massive amount of data.” And, while this tool is informative and useful, it is not a replacement for the robust reporting included with each of the assessment programs. Administrators “should get comfortable in there.” She continued by adding, “That’s part of my job, getting training on how to access those reports.” In the end, she concluded that “hopefully [the data] aligns with what they are seeing in the classroom, linking them all back.”

Aside from the creation of the *Sheet*, all central office leaders also described brokering agreements with the providers of the range of benchmark assessment programs. These programs generally include robust reporting features. One particular program, ANet, was among the programs selected and vetted by the central office administration: “We brought in ANet, and some schools adopted it, and the reason why some schools adopted it and not everyone, is because of that full autonomy versus bonded autonomy. We had the schools that were struggling the most were mandated to almost use ANet, because they had nothing else.” This is an element that is discussed during the brokering period but that is maximized by principals and their school data teams as will be discussed later in the findings. This is indicative of how central office leaders and principals have leveraged technology in the realm of data use.
**Promoting resilience.** The underpinning of the Lawrence Public Schools’ turnaround effort is the changed beliefs of leaders. There is consensus around the notion that what works for one may not work for another. A central office leader shed insight on this idea:

There's different permutations of kind of schools, and the thing I do know is parents…just want a good school for their kid…As long as we can have good schools, the problem will kind of solve itself, and so, we've tried to tip the school district that way, going from one good school to two, to four, to eight, to ten, whatever it is. You know, if we got 25 schools and we could get to 12 or 13 Level 1 schools...you know, the idea that the District will tip that way, versus this one-size-fits-all, which has never proven to work, ever, anywhere in education, in city education I should say, in America, that I'm aware of.

Coupling this sentiment with the previously raised notion of a customer service orientation, almost all central office leaders frame their responses to data by considering if they were the principal or if they were the teacher, what would they want for support? I repeatedly listened as central office leaders confirmed this approach and each shared some variation of ‘you can look at the data to see the influence of your work and the difference you are making.’ The following remarks by a central office leader are illustrative:

Lawrence is a moving target…It’s always moving. You can’t just create something and let it go for six months. I think my experience being in a school kind of allows me to see if I were a teacher, this is what I’d want. This is how I’d like it. Then I always reach out and say, ‘Do you want it a different way?’ [I’m a]lways open to that feedback. We kind of work around that way. That has been integral to the central office redesign in which this team was engaged. They have forged assistance relationships.

As another central office leader summed it up, knowing a central office leader is monitoring your data is like having “a little guardian angel.” This leader explains further, “For what I do…I
just hover around them, around their data, and make sure it’s where they need to be. They probably aren’t even aware I do all that, but I definitely do that.” As the response continued, the leader concluded, “If we are in alignment, then I feel pretty good about that. If we’re out of alignment, I know I need to spend a lot more time watching their things.” In the end, almost all central office leaders shared the sentiment that every little piece of information you have helps inform a decision, which determines how one’s support manifests. This fosters leaders’ resilience despite the external pressures of receivership. All central office leaders are empowered to help make sense of the District’s data to support principals’ data use.

In line with the previously shared illustrations of the District’s commitment to high skill and high will, a central office leader shared that when he “go[es] to some schools that are really struggling, and we start talking about individual teachers, and this is kind of the framework we talk about because I think, fundamentally, how you change a building is by king of getting a tipping point of good teachers in the building.” To return to the notion of accountability mentioned at the outset of this section, it is important to note that “autonomy comes with some significant accountability. It isn’t free.” The results (i.e., the data) are key. If the school, the principal, or any number of teachers are not demonstrating progress and are not responding to the District’s differentiated supports, there are consequences. Conversely, if the school, principal or any number of teachers are doing well, there are rewards. Share data use connects leadership practice at these two levels. A central office leader characterizes the District’s efforts by reflecting on his own experiences:

I was a principal in [another district] for a while, and I spent a lifetime evading and ignoring the central office. And I could do that because I knew what I was doing and my scores were so good that people had to leave me alone. But, if you don't do that, you get beat up or you lose your job, and so it's a dangerous game to play. And so, there were a
lot of great principals, in my opinion, that were kind of stifled because they just played the game, rather than doing what they felt was best for their kids and their schools. As he talked about his experiences, this central office leader clarified his vision for the Lawrence Public Schools,

And we wanted to kind stop that, and so, we tried to put together a system where it's not a free-for-all, it's not complete unbounded autonomy. It's kind of like, we ask principals to take personal responsibility over their own building, right? Everything somebody says good about your building, or bad about your building, you take personally, right? Your test scores, you take personally. Any surveys about your school, you take personally, take ownership of it. And if you do that, we're going to give you autonomy, if you prove that you can keep getting results to do your thing.

Ultimately, the data presented in this section illustrates central office leaders’ considerations for and practice with data use. These leaders use data, drawn from a range of sources, to dynamically adjust their leadership practice, recognizing that the landscape of accountability is anything but static and requires multiple measure to monitor effective practice. Similarly, data use is a core means of informing shifts in instruction. These shifts are informed from the range of summative and formative assessment tools. Some tools implicate leaders’ ability to leverage technology to manage and warehouse the wealth of data mined. And, when considered together, these three manifestations of data use lead to a fourth, which is the promotion of resilience. This final manifestation of data use underscores the social process of learning through sustained, critical use of data. Educational leadership is not a static practice. The following section considers principals’ use of data in line with these same four manifestations of data use.

**Principals’ Data Use**

While the first research question considers data use through the lens of the central office leaders, the second research question considers data use through the lens of the principal. These
school-level leaders are viewed as exercising a fair degree of autonomy in line with one of the five stated components of the District’s turnaround plan. For example, whether considering data collection or action taken in response to data, principals have the autonomy to select the formative assessments used to monitor progress within the school. Principals similarly monitor classroom assessments and teachers’ responsive use of data. That is one means of continually adjusting leadership practice.

**Adjusting leadership practice to inform instruction.** As I analyzed principals’ descriptions of data use, there was a near indiscernible relationship between how they use data to adjust their practice and how they use data to inform instruction. It appears that at the school level, these two manifestations of data use are convergent. When asked directly, all principals reported that the nature of data use for them is largely about progress monitoring through principals’ selection of formative assessment tools. All principals identified the ways in which data use became an integral feature of their daily practice in response to receivership. One principal described the change for his school: “When the superintendent came in, he pretty much looked at certain schools that had the title of Level 3, Level 4. You had your Level 1 schools that had pretty much autonomy. They could figure it out.” And, as the superintendent spoke with this principal of a then Level 3 school, he was joined by other leaders who “would have certain people suggest certain things…For example, when he showed up, I was a Level 3. And he was mentioning programs such as ANet, ST Math.” The next steps came together: “So when we looked at it, then I sat down with my leadership team [and said], ‘What are the goals based around this? How do we get out of Level 3? What can we figure out?’” This principal concluded the story by sharing that this is the third year his school has enjoyed a Level 1 designation. I confirmed this statement by accessing the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s School and District Profiles page. Like this principal, all other principals were clear about the District’s overarching expectation that they know where their school stands and the actions in
which to engage to continue to grow. This is the heart of the turnaround effort (Riley & Chester, 2015).

One principal noted that while initially teachers described feeling lost trying to use data protocols, these same teachers now have some of the most robust and usable data walls:

Originally the preschool teachers were looking at me like I have three heads but honestly they had the best data walls that I have seen. Very developmentally appropriate but looking at so if a child comes knowing one number, eight weeks later how many numbers and so on and so forth. It's very simple but it's such powerful information.

Almost all principals characterized data use as a straightforward process that yields powerful information guiding adjustments to leadership practice, and, subsequently, to instruction. One succinctly shared that “Data is part of everything that we do.” And, by way of an example, one principal shared the benefit of involving a coach from the ANet’s publisher into the school’s data cycle:

[The ANet Coach] is going to meet with us and guide us and also analyze data with us so we don’t just analyze this data in-house. She comes, meets with the administration. We go over needs and what needs to be addressed. Then she also presents to the grade level teams. She walks us through different strategies that can be implemented. She also comes to do classroom visits. It’s not just coming and meeting us. She does the whole where she will look at curriculum implementation and provide us some feedback as well.

The bottom line rests in all principals being open to feedback and participating in the feedback loop by both receiving and giving feedback. That is how changes to instructional practice are informed.

While almost all central office administrators called out the use of various benchmark assessments, almost all principals spoke in greater detail about the operationalization of these
tools, particularly assessments. When asking one principal about the nature of data use, the immediate response was “we do all kinds of assessments.” Despite not hearing words like “coordination” or “articulation,” the ensuing experiences shared by this principal – and nearly all others who participated in both the overarching study and this strand – centered on responsive strategies for the current year (i.e., coordination) and the progressive impact of these strategies through continued teaching and learning in an increasingly standards-based curriculum (i.e., articulation). One illustration is drawn from one principal’s move within Lawrence from a higher performing school to a lower performing one. Her transfer came with the charge to bring coordination and articulation to the school:

[Teachers at this new school] haven't had the opportunities we had at my other school to go deep into the common core and really understand what those standards mean…living and breathing in the standards…kind of pushing the bar with kids around text complexities and conceptual understandings. They know them through reading the standard, but I don't think their instruction has lived in those standards, the way the instruction did at the school I'm coming from.

Despite the variety of benchmark assessment programs most principals reported using (e.g., the ANet series from the Achievement Network and the MAP Suite of assessments from NWEA), schools are developing clear protocols that begin with a school-level administrative review of students’ aggregated performance. This is followed by a grade-level team review to determine the course for achieving or maintaining a Level 1 status. One principal shared,

I'm coming with, ‘We were Level 1. We don't know what we are [now]. What are we going to do?’ I always use the ‘we’ because they have to be willing. They have to understand that without them, the Level 1 status is not going to happen. We have grade level teams looking at how we are implementing curriculum…This is one of the few schools that's doing it all the way through grade five.
Then, the process deepens to a student-level review. Action plans are created on all three levels and progress monitored with interim assessments, which demand use of built-in tech tools (e.g., updated academic tracking systems) that “enable[d] the district and schools to design user friendly data reports” (Riley & Chester, 2015, p 30) to advance their goals via effective use of data.

**Leveraging technology.** Most principals shared that they rely on available technologies to administer computer-based formative, benchmark assessments. While there is variance in the programs used at each school, there is a clear reliance on the use of computer-based administration (CBT). A key benefit of CBT interim assessments is that student performance – individually and collectively – can be immediately viewed. In some cases, the results can be color-coded by students’ demonstrated risk level. These principals and their faculty teams maximize their use of these tools to ensure students are on track to meet the predetermined targets. One principal clarified:

> We use school wide to determine trends. And so, kids take [the MAP] assessment three times a year, and that is a growth base assessment, so that assessment levels itself, depending on the student. So, if you have a fifth grade student who's operating at a second grade level, the MAP test adjusts itself, so that we can see what those kids need to learn next, or...what they're ready to do next. And so, then we have a learning continuum, so we can work with kids in small groups that way.

The value of CBT called out in this example is the manner in which the assessment platform is designed to adjust questions based on the tester’s ability.

There is an added layer of particular importance for the use of CBT drawn from the Commonwealth’s move away from the Legacy MCAS to a revised Next-Generation MCAS that will require full CBT delivery in the coming years. Most principals only hinted at the requisite skills that students will need to fare well on these CBT assessments. These include efficient and
accurate typing, digital composing, and easy navigation from one platform to another. Questions in the interview protocol did not target these skills; rather emphasis was on data collection tools and reporting features.

One principal also shared a secondary student information data management system she uses in addition to the primary one used by the District. The secondary tool is referred to as the dashboards. She explains, I really find these dashboards powerful…there’s lots of different reports you can run.” As she begins to explain how the tool works, she logs in to offer a preview and continues, “This is my tutoring dashboard. When teachers assign kids to tutoring, we use a centralized student information system. I can actually see over a period of time who is pulling kids, which kids are being pulled, what frequency, which staff member. It's very useful for me.” As the interview continues, this principal illustrated how her school’s achievement of a Level 1 designation was the result of both data use and digital data management:

Then, this is also very powerful. So, on given day, I have a leader board of I can see how people are using systems. So, I can look…I was filtering this morning for all these ESL students. I want to look at the 7th Grade. First of all, I can see where 97% of attendance, 12% of students have had phone calls home today…which is good…ideally we want more. There is 76% homework completion, which is pretty low. Five 7th Grade students have been referred from class. So, automatically I have that dashboard, I see who is here and who is not. I call the absent students first thing in the morning. So that's really helpful for me. This actually syncs with an app on my phone.

As this principal continued to share the capability of the dashboard tool, she exuded a sense of excitement. She finished by sharing that beyond achievement and accountability data, she can also readily access attendance data and reach out to families:

Basically it's really easy for me. What I do in the morning is I greet all the students when they come in. Then we close the doors and I go stand outside. And so I'm standing
outside, right. I hold my computer. I see kids. So here's all the students in the school. I see [a student], so I type in his name. I look, I automatically see here is his attendance, his tardies, his early dismissals, here's his family members’ names. So I can type here. I can call or email them immediately.

While most principals shared stories about online testing programs and commonly available reporting features, this principal’s story stood out. She has taken advantage of the District’s gift of autonomy and leveraged technology to enrich her use of data to meet the designated targets. Most principals’ skill development in conjunction with their learned experiences promotes resilience.

**Promoting resilience.** The deliberate attention to central office transformation has changed how all principals view their relationship with central office leadership. One principal, who is a veteran educator in the Lawrence Public Schools, summarized the change during an interview: “[W]e’re like a family. We’re all on the same page, same goal.” This shift breeds resilience through trust. Through the concurrent turnaround process and central office transformation, all principals are trusted to use data to make sound and well-informed decisions. A prime example is taken from how formative assessment programs are selected. A school can elect to use a district-endorsed program or, if warranted, can elect to use another program. This autonomy, borne of the District’s transformative process, is an outcome of both the leaders’ commitment to rapid growth as well as the flexibility granted through the changed governance of receivership.

One principal indirectly offered a definition of resilience in an anecdotal story about increased student performance for a high number of at-risk students that resulted in a swift move to a Level 1 designation. This principal shared that resilience is a careful combination of collaboration, willingness, sacrifice, and motivation, that, when well-supported through assistance relationships yields success despite the circumstances in which it occurs. Despite the level of poverty in the city or students’ home experiences, the emphasis of turnaround is the commitment
to all students’ academic achievement. Data use informs leaders’ shared practice in the realization of this goal.

Data analysis revealed that while some participants’ responses suggest their resilience, there is less data to clearly outline how principals promote resilience through their use of data. Despite the lesser volume of data, the data available suggests principals’ considerations for and practice with data use. These leaders treat two manifestations of data use (i.e., adjusting leadership practice and informing instruction) synonymously. Like central office leaders, principals draw from a range of sources to dynamically adjust their leadership practice as they respond to differentiated supports. These two groups of leaders also share reliance on using a range of summative and formative assessment tools to inform shifts in teaching and learning.

In sum (See Figure 3.2), my findings illustrate the connection between how central office administrators use data (i.e., repeated responses to my first research question) and how principals use data (i.e., repeated responses to my second research question). The shared outcome or practice that is yielded highlights how both levels of leadership use data, which is a feature of my discussion.
Leaders’ Shared Data Use

When I considered responses to my two research questions comparatively, I found leaders’ shared use of data to be a practice integral to their assistance relationships. With consideration of the four-part analytic frame (i.e., Adjusting Leadership Practice (ALP), Informing Instruction (II), Leveraging Technology (LT), Promoting Resilience (PR)), I explored both central office leaders’ and principals’ data use. Using central office leadership’s customer service orientation, there is a clear two-way communication channel shared between central office leaders and principals. The heart of their shared practice is collaboratively and cooperatively learning and improving.

Conversely, for those schools whose scores tell a story of continued struggle or smaller, more incremental gains, they, too, reap the benefit of central office transformation. However, their benefit comes in the form of more intensive support. Through central office’s empowerment of
some schools, central office leaders have more time to provide more data-informed, targeted support and intervention to the schools, specifically the principals, who are struggling.

In line with the District’s emphasis on data use, central office leaders and principals alike are working to foster a more reflective professional practice. They believe that using data to tell the stories of success and strife leads to increased exercise of autonomy and resilience across the District’s schools who each have a unique school culture. Lawrence Public Schools’ leadership – at both the central office and school levels – have forged their own internal support networks that promote strong professional practice oriented toward improved student success. The District’s leadership elected to be innovative and data-driven, and their decisions have proven to pay a high yield for the students and families of the city of Lawrence as well as for the principals and central office leaders facilitating this change in professional practice. The District’s commitment to its students, as tracked and substantiated through shared data use, is the hallmark of growth for leaders in the Lawrence Public Schools. This is the key to their assistance relationships.

**Relating Data Use through Assistance Relationships**

Central office leaders indicated that there is a link between strong standardized performance outcomes – the data – and principal retention. Understanding this link leads to a better understanding of the explicit connection between leaders’ responsive action to the data to central office’s “customer service.” The five high-quality practices of assistance relationships undergird this connection; these are differentiated supports, modeling of sound practices, use of conceptual tools, brokering partnerships and agreements to secure needed resources, and the development of networks for sustained support in this work (Honig et al., 2010).

The first of these high-quality practices, differentiated supports, calls for central office leaders to engage in a genuine transformation that results in a leadership style by which these leaders learn to tailor their approaches as well as the amount of time spent with principals to personalize the support they provide. Analysis of data repeatedly affirmed the Lawrence Public
Schools’ commitment to providing differentiated supports. The central office’s belief in customer service has created an atmosphere in which central office leaders are interventionists who, when needed, consider the issue at hand through objective data analysis, attention to current research as well as lessons learned from experience (another data source!) to intervene in a manner that will bring about resolution with efficiency and success.

Second, the success of the Lawrence Public Schools’ leadership is tied to central office leaders’ ability and willingness to model the interventions they recommend. Modeling, as presented by Honig et al. (2010), purports that central office leaders who frequently model strategies for their principals have a greater influence on the development of instructional leadership practices. Even more, when effective modeling is coupled with ongoing cycles of data analysis, the leadership team increases the likelihood of positive, responsive change. While leaders’ references to modeling were more anecdotal in nature, they did confirm that modeling is a valid element of the central office transformation strategy, which has bred success for students across all grade levels and led to more consistent data use to monitor progress.

The third high-quality practice is the use of conceptual tools (i.e., templates and frameworks) to promote critical thinking, innovation, changed action, and ongoing reflection. These tools are critical to both sustaining a changed practice as well as promoting transferability of sound strategies from one school to another. Among the tools referenced in both the document review and interview process, the framework for educator evaluation was commonly regarded as a critical tool for leadership transformation. In addition, all leaders spoke about the Instructional Leadership Institute (ILI), which was led by central office leaders in line with the ideas presented in *Our Way Forward* (Riley, 2014). Attendance at the ILI offered professional learning along with a framework for school-level goal development. Other conceptual tools like the *Big Data Sheet* offer protocols for data use help to promote sound instructional leadership practices.
Fourth, central office transformation relies on central office leaders’ ability to broker partnerships and agreements to secure critical resources for effective instructional leadership at both the district and school levels. This high-quality practice was repeatedly called out in all leaders’ responses to interview questions. Of note, this appeared to be a hallmark of the Lawrence Public Schools’ central office transformation process. For example, the reduction of the administrative staff at central office freed up funds to enable the provision of new resources. Another critical element of the central office transformation centered on the superintendent’s/receiver’s commitment to safeguard principals and their teachers from external demands (e.g., managing compliance requirements, monitoring state level achievement targets). Brokering efforts reduced – or even eliminated – interruptions to teaching and learning at the classroom level.

Finally, the development of sustainable networks enabled central office leaders to facilitate principal engagement as well as support the improvement of professional practice through principal networks. Such networks stimulate high-quality learning environments. A prime example that was repeatedly echoed by participants was how the district’s assistant superintendent previewed a range of formative assessment programs, bartered tentative agreements and empowered principals to make informed decisions about the best way to monitor student learning and growth in across the Lawrence Public Schools.
CHAPTER FOUR

Discussion, Limitations, and Recommendations

This overarching study explored central office transformation as a key strategy in the turnaround process in an underperforming urban district. Our dissertation in practice team examined the key practices necessary for the establishment of assistance relationships as outlined by Honig et al. (2010) and documented across five strands highlighted in the Lawrence Public Schools’ Renewed Turnaround Plan (Riley & Chester, 2015). Previous research examined other aspects of this phenomena. Similarly, our team did as well: Charochak (2018) focused on the role of assistance relationships and the intersection of autonomy and accountability for principals as instructional leaders. Icin (2018) focused on the contribution of assistance relationships in the recruitment, development and retention of principals. Carlson (2018) focused on the assistance relationships developed among central office leaders and principals in the selection and implementation of learning time opportunities. Gilligan (2018) focused on central office leaders’ role in the development of assistance relationships to employ and strengthen principals’ instructional expectations. Tellier (2018) focused on the nature of data use for central office leaders and principals.

Lawrence Public Schools was the first district in Massachusetts designated for receivership as a result of chronic underperformance and the first to demonstrate measurable gains in student achievement (Wulfson, 2017). Lawrence students’ MCAS performance improved 18 percentage points in mathematics and 24 percentage points in English language arts between 2011 and 2016. The District’s graduation rate rose 19 percentage points, and the annual dropout rate fell by more than half. Subsequently, the number of level one schools

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5 This chapter was collaboratively written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project. Authors include Julia James Carlson, Suzanne M. Charochak, Gregg T. Gilligan, Eylem B. Icin, and Sonia L. Tellier.
increased from two to ten during this same period. Moreover, the District substantially increased arts and enrichment opportunities for all students.

The overarching study contributes to the extant literature through the exploration of those high-quality practices identified by central office leaders and principals. Each strand presented individual findings in the five areas of autonomy and accountability, human capital, learning time, instructional expectations, and use of data. In this final chapter, we discuss these findings vis-a-vis their implications for practice, policy and research. First, we discuss the transformation of central office and the essential shifts made by the Lawrence Public Schools in the enactment of the high-quality practices. Second, we discuss the cross-cutting connections of assistance relationships across the five strands. Third, we provide recommendations that we believe may guide state and district leaders in addressing chronically underperforming districts and schools in urban areas.

**Synthesis of Shared Findings**

Two common findings surfaced as the team synthesized the individual strands in the overarching study. First, consistent with the research by Honig et al. (2010), we found that in transforming central office, leaders leveraged the stated high-quality practices to develop assistance relationships with principals. These assistance relationships are best highlighted through the examination of two important features: autonomy and accountability and the hiring and retention of principals in the turnaround process. Second, we found that these practices contributed to the development of principals as instructional leaders through the use of the five high-quality practices. Of particular focus is the development of leadership skills that deepen principals’ understanding of the importance of high instructional expectations, optimizing learning time and the use of data. In the following sections, we discuss each of these findings.
**Transformation of Central Office**

Our overarching study suggested that the transformation of central office and the development of assistance relationships played an important part in the preliminary success of turnaround under receivership. Consistent with our conceptual framework, findings indicated common efforts to implement the five high-quality practices (Honig et al., 2010) in the Lawrence Public Schools’ turnaround effort. Goals confirmed in the District’s Renewed Turnaround Plan (Riley & Chester, 2015) were further substantiated in the Superintendent's call for action in *Our Way Forward* (Riley, 2014). Through each individual strand of the overarching study, data pointed to the purposeful restructuring of central office as “customer service” and the enactment of the high-quality practices of assistance relationships (see Table 4.1).
Table 4.1

*Cross-cutting Impact of Assistance Relationships’ Practices on Turnaround Components*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assistance Relationship Practices</th>
<th>Examples of Practices that Cross Strands of the Overarching Study</th>
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</table>
| **Differentiated Supports**       | • Level of autonomy granted to principals balanced with accountability, performance level  
                                     | • Resources for and responses to focused, school-level managerial decisions vary by school  
                                     | • Support tailored to increase principals’ instructional leadership  
                                     | • Data use provided objective responses to individual principal requests  
                                     | • Provision of opportunities to grow principal capacity based on their unique needs |
| **Modeling**                      | • Modeling paired with reflective strategies informed principals’ leadership styles  
                                     | • Principals mirrored own leadership practices on the successes of central office leaders’ experiences as principals  
                                     | • Focus areas tied to cycles of inquiry and supported with data  
                                     | • Accompaniment to the introduction of new tools |
| **Use of Tools**                  | • Development and utilization of templates, shared resources, webinars and available technologies  
                                     | • Protocols and conceptual tools for instructional rounds, educator evaluation  
                                     | • Promotion of critical thinking, innovation, changed action and ongoing reflection  
                                     | • Creation of opportunities for personalized professional learning |
| **Brokering**                     | • Central office leaders’ provision of previewed resources  
                                     | • Safeguards for principals to protect from extraneous external pressures  
                                     | • Minimized impact of compliance tasks on schools, classrooms  
                                     | • Buffered principals from bureaucratic policies and non-essential work  
                                     | • Contribution to common understanding of planned actions and expected outcomes |
| **Networking**                    | • Central office leaders connect with principals with external organizations to evaluate both practice and progress  
                                     | • Provision of opportunities for cross-district and interagency collaboration  
                                     | • Stimulation of high-quality learning environments that promote collaboration and open sharing of best practices |

As Table 4.1 shows, central office leaders in the Lawrence Public Schools enacted high-quality practices throughout the turnaround process. The five high-quality practices of
assistance relationships (column 1, Table 4.1) catalogue multiple examples of how practices are evidenced across the five strands of the overarching study (column 2, Table 4.1). Each of our five strands (i.e., autonomy and accountability, human capital, learning time, instructional expectations, and use of data) examined specific components of the turnaround plan of the Lawrence Public Schools. While explicit reference to Honig et al.’s (2010) research was not a feature of the central office leaders’ intentional plan, there was clear and consistent enactment of these practices by central office leaders across all strands in the development of assistance relationships with principals. Examples of the broad enactment of high-quality practices were seen in both the manner in which central office leaders modeled leadership in their interactions with principals and the use of conceptual tools to support these efforts. The intersection of these practices, when paired with reflective strategies, have contributed to the Lawrence’s positive results. This suggests that central office transformation is elemental to turnaround success.

Common Themes

Several common themes emerged in the findings across strands. First, evidence showed that autonomy was a primary impetus behind change in Lawrence. We observed that the level of autonomy for principals existed on a continuum that is linked to accountability targets and can be substantiated through data use. Second, it was clear throughout our overarching study that despite the autonomy to implement programs at the school level, there remained a common vision of high-quality teaching and learning that was designed at the central office level. Finally, principals valued supports and accepted them as a tool for improvement, not of evaluation, in line with the customer service model employed by central office leaders. Principals accepted supports, whether they were provided directly from central office leaders, or leveraged from local resources. Principals reported that these supports made a difference in student learning and achievement.
The creation of assistance relationships is targeted and increasingly personalized in nature. This assistance is predicated on both the autonomy and accountability as well as the recruitment and retention of principals. These are two means by which central office leaders determine the nature of the assistance that principals require.

**Autonomy and accountability.** Consistent with the findings of Honig & Rainey (2012), the Lawrence Public Schools enacted the turnaround strategy of granting autonomy to school leaders in managerial decision-making to foster school improvement. The provision of this autonomy in the areas of budget, staffing, curriculum and instruction, and school schedule enabled principals to make decisions that addressed the unique needs of their individual school communities. In addition to increased autonomy, central office leaders engaged in assistance relationships with principals as a means to build instructional leadership capacity. This strategy was defined in the purposeful design structure of the turnaround plan as “Open Architecture” and highlighted by a differentiated, guided autonomy in which principals are charged with designing a school program unique to the needs of their students. Specifically, central office leaders offered autonomy to principals, providing supports and guidance, while monitoring school leaders’ improvement efforts. These supports differ in frequency and intensity in balance with the performance level of principals’ instructional leadership.

**Recruitment and retention of principals.** Principals play an important role in turning around the lowest performing districts. Lawrence’s central office leaders focused on recruiting principals who showed ownership of their buildings. As such, these principals would make the best of the autonomy provided to them. The significant autonomy provided to principals was paired with substantial central office support that manifested itself in the enactment of the five high-quality assistance relationship practices. Principals valued the agency they had through the autonomy they were given. Through differentiated supports, central office leaders reallocated resources to provide principals with timely interventions when they struggled. By brokering
new resources or buffering principals from external demands, central office leaders made
principals’ jobs more manageable. Moreover, through facilitated networks, central office leaders
encouraged district wide collaboration. Consequently, the assistance relationships developed
between central office leaders and principals provided an appealing work environment for
principals and contributed to their retention. We now turn to the second common finding of the
overarching study, the enactment of the five high-quality practices in the development of
instructional leaders.

Development of Instructional Leaders

Just as the Lawrence Public Schools enacted purposeful strategies to transform central
office in the development of assistance relationships, central office leaders also communicated
the expected outcomes of such assistance in the development of instructional leaders. This was
done with intentional emphasis on instructional leadership, which demands heightened
expectations, structured learning time, and routine use of data. The Lawrence Public Schools,
through the use of assistance relationships, provided support for principals that contribut
to the positive growth identified for students (Schueler, Goodman, & Deming, 2016).

High instructional expectations. The evidence we found of central office leaders’
efforts to strengthen principals’ instructional expectations is consistent with emerging research
about the critical role central office leaders play in supporting principals’ development as
instructional leaders (e.g., shared vision, working collaboratively) (Honig, 2012). For example,
when raising expectations, Lawrence Public Schools’ central office leaders created instructional
leadership institutes, developed networks and tools, and modeled key practices for principals. In
all schools, central office leaders asked principals what they needed to raise expectations, and
together they took on a “partnership approach” in response. Accordingly, when creating a
culture of raised expectations, central office leaders provided principals ongoing opportunities
to collaborate by maintaining the use of professional networks and structured times for common
planning and data review. Many principals also used collaboration time to keep the focus on high expectations by modeling their own interactions with central office leaders with their building-based leadership teams.

**Optimizing learning time.** Expanded learning time aimed to improve student achievement in some of the most chronically underperforming schools. The findings supported that all schools selected and implemented learning time opportunities, which resulted in increased achievement (Schueler, Goodman, & Deming, 2016). Principals had flexibility in how they implemented learning time; they received training and benefitted from the modeling of different options regarding how to set up their master schedule and extend learning opportunities through enrichment.

The literature presented on learning time opportunities as a turnaround practice in urban districts suggests that the selection and implementation of said practices helps schools create the conditions for improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Moreover, the impact of learning time opportunities on school improvement were shown to be more influential when coupled with central office leaders’ support of principals (Hanushek & Raymond, 2004). Consistent with this research, improvements in the Lawrence Public Schools were realized with the implementation of learning time opportunities that included not only core curriculum but enrichment as well. When schools began to get results, their success was shared with others to model best practice. Schools began to emulate each other, as evidenced in the findings, and the District as a whole improved. A review of selected school schedules revealed that all implemented expanded learning time. As stated on the Lawrence homepage, “The Lawrence Public School district has made a significant investment in TIME as a resource to advance the achievement of learning.”

**Data use.** Collectively, leaders’ share a constant sense of urgency, and data use informs responses to that urgent need for perpetual action, which grounds both central office leaders’ and principals’ shared practice of data use. Having data and being able to meaningfully use that
data remains a critical component of Lawrence Public Schools’ narrative of success. Decision-making appears centered on what is best for students. Knowing how to use data is essential to the District’s imperative for leadership: Principals must be able to hold themselves accountable while central office leaders lessen the impact of external pressure.

Ultimately, data use is the nexus of central office leaders’ and principals’ shared practice of instructional leadership. The stories of success, as documented in assessment scores, sponsored increased autonomy for school-level leaders who reap the benefits of a transformed central office. Principals whose formative and summative assessment data revealed the greatest gains or sustained high performance received full autonomy to make decisions about their curricular design and the corresponding instruction and assessment.

**Limitations and Recommendations**

In light of our findings and current research on underperforming urban districts, the following section provides recommendations that may guide state and district leaders in future efforts in the turnaround of chronically underperforming schools and districts. In this section, we first discuss the limitations of our study. We then present the recommendations from each independent strand as well as those from the overarching study as they relate to three key audiences: practice, policy, and research.

**Limitations**

Conducting a qualitative, single-case study in an urban Massachusetts school district highlighted how central office transformation efforts led to Lawrence leaders’ creation of assistance relationships. The study – both in its totality and through its five individual strands – contributed to a growing body of research. However, despite the contributions, there are several limitations.

The first limitation that the team considered is that the unique authority granted to the superintendent/receiver in turnaround context is not available in other public school districts.
The superintendent/receiver, who is appointed by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, does not have to answer to an elected, multi-member school committee. Therefore, the structure of central office leadership in the Lawrence Public Schools may inhibit the generalizability of our findings in a broad range of contexts without adjusting for consideration of this variable.

Second, our team is aware that our study presents a snapshot of Lawrence Public Schools’ leadership as we aimed to examine the role of central office in providing principals with supports to develop their instructional leadership. Through this study, we documented use of high-quality practices that contributed to the strengthening instructional leadership and improvement of teaching and learning. While we drew data from documents that capture the District’s turnaround experience, our overarching study does not chronicle long-term, longitudinal trends in student performance. As previously cited, this is a take off point for future contributions to the growing body of research documenting Lawrence’s turnaround journey.

Among the limitations are the restrictions presented by the tight bounds of receivership. One such limitation is a possibility that participants may be hesitant to answer questions about central office leaders, the support they provide and their relationships with principals due to pressures of the receivership. In the end, our team’s probing into the systems and structures of change did not appear to cause discomfort for participants.

Finally, our study’s data relied on self-reported interviews gathered from central office leaders and principals. Document review and observations, while limited, provided additional context and confirmed findings from interviews. However, the bulk of evidence relied upon self-reported interviews which limits generalizability of the study. Future researchers may find that with additional site time and more opportunities for observations, they may overcome these limitations.
Recommendations

Enactment of the key strategies utilizing Honig et al.’s (2010) framework of assistance relationships and the development of principals as instructional leaders to guide turnaround reform efforts have led to demonstrated improvements in the Lawrence Public Schools. Drawing from the five strands as well as the overarching study, we present the following recommendations that implicate three audiences: practitioners, policy makers, and researchers. To better understand the scope of our recommendations, we offer a summary of the recommendations that identified each with one of three categorizations:

1. *Broadly Transferrable*. A recommendation that fits into this category is drawn from our research in the turnaround context in support of assistance relationships but is not limited to such a context. These recommendations suggest practices that would benefit improved trust among educators and improved teaching and learning for students as a result of shifts in the execution of leadership.

2. *Legal Despite Anticipated Challenges*. A recommendation in this category is likewise sourced from our research in the turnaround context. While it would be legal to transfer the related practice to nearly any educational context, there are anticipated challenges (e.g., changed working conditions, need for impact bargaining) with doing so that could deter use outside of the turnaround context.

3. *Restricted to Turnaround Context*. A recommendation in this category is, as the name states, restricted to the governance and structure of a school or district engaged in the turnaround process.

While the recommendations span five independent strands as well as the overarching study, Table 4.2 presents the full complement of recommendations from our team.
### Table 4.2.

**Summary of Recommendations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Broadly Transferrable</th>
<th>Legal Despite Anticipated Challenges</th>
<th>Restricted to Turnaround Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overarching Study: Practice</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnaround efforts must address the complex challenges facing districts.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnaround starts with transformation of Central Office: Practitioners should re-examine the structure of central office identifying ways to transform relationships with principals to provide “customer service.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports from Central Office must address individual needs of the building and its principal.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase principal retention central office leaders should focus on non-pecuniary factors such as work environment and district support.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Leverage local resources to improve teaching and learning to sustain turnaround gains (e.g., human capital, community organizations).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Overarching Study: Policy</strong></td>
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<td>Receivership offered a “Legal way to Reimagine Education:” there needs to be a way for all districts to be able to make changes like Lawrence without the strict provisions of receivership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enable districts to employ flexibility with district responses to persistent challenges (e.g., portfolio model, changes to compensation).</td>
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<td>Incentivize university and district partnerships to improvement development of leadership pipeline.</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>Broadly Transferrable</td>
<td>Legal Despite Anticipated Challenges</td>
<td>Restricted to Turnaround Context</td>
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<td><strong>Overarching Study: Policy continued</strong></td>
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<td>Prioritize principal autonomy and the establishment of assistance relationships between central office leaders and principals.</td>
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<td>Focus on district transformation prior to the failure of districts; policies should give district leadership flexibility to implement a variety of initiatives.</td>
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<td>Emphasize sustainability of turnaround reform in any new policy initiative.</td>
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<td><strong>Overarching Study: Research</strong></td>
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<td>Conduct a complementary study that explores teachers’ experiences with receivership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conduct longitudinal, follow up study of Lawrence’s progress to assess long-term gains.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create university and district partnerships to improvement development of leadership pipeline.</td>
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We intentionally present our recommendations in the following order: practice is the daily action of leaders; policy is the next tier and provides a framework for practice, and research studies both practice and policy and offers insight into both their efficacy and need for change.

**Practice**

Turning around chronically underperforming schools is a challenging task for central office leaders. Central office leaders in these districts face complex challenges. For example, upon arriving in Lawrence, before the turnaround team was able to begin implementing the turnaround plan, they first needed to address the physical challenges of the infrastructure. The first three months were spent fixing toilets, putting up stalls, repairing broken windows and
ensuring there was heat in every classroom. In addition, they had to overcome the low morale that was pervasive in the district. The reputation of Lawrence was not positive, with a local news magazine dubbing it “The City of the Damned” (Boston Magazine, 2012). Teachers had not been evaluated, principals faced an uncertain future, and the district had endured unstable leadership. Findings of this overarching study provide some insight into effective practices that can be utilized by central office leaders charged with this difficult task. Despite these factors, there were a core of existing educators and administrators that held to the belief that positive outcomes could be realized. Below are the recommendations of our team in what we believe are 

*Lesson Learned from the Lawrence Public Schools.*

**Turnaround starts with transformation of central office.** The Lawrence Public Schools began the process of turnaround by first examining the structure and practices of the central office. A reduction of central office staff (30%) meant that there was more money available for the schools. The funding for these positions was diverted to the individual school buildings and used to improve teaching and learning. As a result of these findings, our first recommendation for practitioners to central office leaders is to prioritize the limited resources according to their contribution to teaching and learning and allocate them accordingly. The closer the funds are to the building level, the more impactful they may be in supporting student outcomes.

The transformation of central office leaders included a commitment to both autonomy and a “customer service approach.” To start with, principals need the autonomy to design their schools in the way they believe will work for their students. Lawrence Public Schools’ theory of action was that people on the ground knew best, and they needed to be trusted with high stakes decisions. Therefore, central office leaders should grant autonomy to building principals and their staff to utilize structures and tools that best meet the unique needs of their individual school community. Next, central office leaders should provide principals with timely and
effective support. Autonomy works best when balanced with accountability and ongoing monitoring of efficacy. The five high-quality practices, identified by Honig et al. (2010) and corroborated by this overarching study, provide a template to structure district support for principals. While central office leaders empower principals with autonomy to make a wide variety of managerial decisions in their buildings, they should also provide principals with supports tailored to their unique needs.

**Supports from central office must address individual needs of the schools and principals.** Each building and the needs of its students are unique and require programs and structures that supports the needs of the school community. Therefore, principals in the schools need the flexibility to make decisions about the work they do every day. The approach in Lawrence avoided a *One Size Fits All* fix and instead utilized a strength-based model to guide the creation of the turnaround plan. Despite the overall performance of the district, central office leaders evaluated what was working (some high performing schools and some high performing teachers and leaders) and made adjustments based on their evaluations.

Additionally, Duke (2015) argues that a successful school turnaround cannot happen without a capable principal at the helm. Central office leaders should focus on recruiting principals with certain characteristics as the challenge of turning around schools is not an easy one. By hiring principals who demonstrate ownership of their schools’ results, central office leaders can maximize the effectiveness of autonomy as an improvement strategy. Findings illustrated the impact of non-pecuniary factors in retaining principals. Therefore, central office leaders should not just rely on compensation as an incentive to recruit and retain strong principals for the turnaround work. Improving work conditions should be targeted by central office leaders to increase principal retention. Providing autonomy and district support through assistance relationships will go a long way in improving working conditions in low-performing schools.
Policy

This overarching study highlighted the importance of central office transformation for a model district in the context of a turnaround. It is important to note that the gains realized by the Lawrence Public Schools were achieved through the process of a receivership. This receivership offered what the superintendent described as a “Legal Way to Reimagine Education” (The Boston Foundation, 2013). First, as part of the receivership, the receiver has the substantial authority to make changes as they operate with both the authority of the School Committee and the Superintendent and report directly to the Commissioner of Education and not the Mayor or school board. Second, the receiver is relieved from the constraints of collective bargaining; they are provided the authority to limit or suspend rights if they are deemed an impediment to rapid improvement. Third, the Lawrence Public Schools had the opportunity to rethink teacher compensation and as such, constructed a career ladder for teachers. Finally, the receivership afforded principals an opportunity and the tools to make changes to both staffing and school design.

Within the ESSA framework, state-level policy makers have more latitude to address their lowest performing schools (Sargrad, Batel, Miles, & Baroody, 2016). Policy makers should enable districts to employ flexibility with district responses to persistent challenges (e.g., portfolio model, changes to compensation). While state takeover remains an option for remediating chronically underperforming districts, policy makers should design regulations that focus on district transformation. The policies should give district leadership flexibility to implement a variety of initiatives. Local resources (e.g., human capital, local community organizations) should be prioritized in designing new programs. Policy makers and state education leaders would be wise to come up with guidelines that promote greater flexibility to district leaders to focus on school autonomy and meaningful district support.
Research

While the literature provides direction for school leaders on how to turn around schools, the focus on central office transformation is limited. Our overarching study sought to call out central office leaders’ role in turnaround. We concluded that these leaders value their changed role from directing principals’ action to providing *customer service* in response to principals’ requests. Transformation of central office served as the backdrop for common findings. In transforming central office, leaders leveraged the high-quality practices to develop assistance relationships with principals.

Future researchers may continue to contribute to the growing body of literature by examining our team’s findings and offering a longitudinal view of this practice. Even more, this research would be complemented by a comparative analysis of the initial superintendent/receiver’s influence on the District’s success and the influence of the incoming leader. Another implication for future research calls for a study that explores teachers’ experiences with receivership. As previously called out, the current turnaround effort spotlights leaders’ professional practice; however, their changed practice affects teachers’ practice. A study that captures teachers’ perceptions and experiences would offer a more holistic view of turnaround.

Finally, researchers should focus on creating partnerships with underperforming districts to develop leadership programs not only to address leadership gaps, but also to study the impact of assistance relationships on principal development. Through these partnerships, researchers and practitioners can identify effective strategies to develop capacity and sustain turnaround gains.
References


An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap, M.G.L. Ch. 69, Section 1K (2010).


Carlson, J. J. (2018). *The role of central office leaders in supporting principals with learning time in a turnaround district*. Boston College, Boston, MA.


boards/ese/programs/accountability/support-for-level-3-4-and-5-districts-and-schools/school-and-district-turnaround/


Appendix A
Interview Protocol

Question alignment key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DS</th>
<th>Differentiated Supports</th>
<th>LT</th>
<th>Learning Time</th>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Networks</td>
<td>HC</td>
<td>Human Capital</td>
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Questions for Central Office Leaders

- How do central office leaders support principals in the selection of learning time opportunities (e.g., master schedules, block schedules)?
- How do central office leaders support principals in the implementation of learning time opportunities?
  - Follow up: Is there specific training on creation of a master schedule?
- Are there certain areas where schools have more or less autonomy? Please share an example.
  - Follow up: On what data do you rely to make decisions?
- How much control do you have over the management structures and the policies implemented in schools? Over what decisions do you not have control? Are these important to your job?
- Your schools all have different performance levels, capacity, communities, and demographics. What indicators are used to measure progress at both the district and school levels?
  - Follow up: How do you assess outcomes in light of these varying school needs?
  - Follow up: What are the advantages and disadvantages to this approach?
- What qualities do you look for in principals? What strategies/procedures are used in the district to recruit principals?
- What is done in the district to increase principal retention? What are the main drivers of principal retention?
- In what ways do you work with principals to set a vision and goals around instructional expectations?
  - Follow up: If instructional expectations and/or accountability goals are not fulfilled, what happens?
- What systems and structures do you have in place to support principals’ development within their schools and of their teachers? Please talk specifically about instructional expectations and/or professional growth opportunities.
Questions for Principals

- How do you create your master schedule?
  Follow up: What things do you need to consider when creating?
  Follow up: How do you decide on block or regular schedules?
- How do you decide to offer extended learning opportunities (e.g., Summer School, after school, etc.)?
- How much control do you have over your school’s budget? What can you control?
  Follow up: What role does central office play in your school’s budget?
  Follow up: What aspects of the budget do you not have control over? Is it important to your job?
- How much control do you have over staffing (typical year)?
  Follow up: What role does central office play in your school’s staffing?
  Follow up: What aspects of the staffing do you not have control over? Is it important to your job?
- How much control do you have over curriculum and instruction (typical year)?
  Follow up: What role does central office play in your curriculum decisions?
  Follow up: What aspects of the curriculum do you not have control over? Is it important to your job?
- Why did you choose to work in the district? What motivates you to keep working here?
- Do you feel supported by the central office, and, if so, in what ways? Do you think there are enough professional growth opportunities for you at LPS? Why?
- What professional development opportunities are provided for principals? Please describe how they improve your instructional leadership skills.
- In what ways do you work with central office leaders to set a vision and goals around instructional expectations?
  Follow up: On what data do you rely to make decisions?
- What structures or practices are in place support to your development of instructional expectations within your schools and of your teachers?
- How are expectations for high-quality instruction communicated and understood by most staff?
- What indicators are used to measure progress at the school level?
Appendix B
Adult Participant Consent Form
Adapted from Boston College Sample Form

Boston College | School of Education | Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education

Informed Consent to be in study titled *Central Office Support of Principals through Assistance Relationships in a Turnaround District*

Researchers: Julia Carlson, Suzanne Charochak, Gregg Thomas Gilligan, Eylem B. Icin, and Sonia Tellier

**Introduction**
- You are being asked to be in a research study of that is exploring the nature of the relationship shared between central office leaders and principals. Our team is specifically seeking to understanding how these two groups interaction with each other to advance turnaround reform.
- You were selected to be in the study because you are either a central office leader (i.e., superintendent, assistant superintendent or deputy superintendent), a principal, or another influential educator who was reference in three or more of the interview with participants in the first two identified groups.
- Please read this form. Ask any questions that you may have before you agree to be in the study.

**Purpose of Study:**
- The purpose of this study is to understand the role of central office leaders support principals’ growth as instructional leaders. We want to know about the nature of their relationships, especially as a result of working in a district engaged in receivership.
- People in this study are from your same school district. The total number of people in this study is expected to be approximately eighteen to twenty-four fellow educators.

**What will happen in the study:**
If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do respond to a series of questions that will inquire about your role as an administrator. We will also ask about the relationship(s) you share with other administrators in your district. We anticipate that our interview will take approximately forty-five to sixty minutes. This will be the only opportunity that we will specifically seek you out to ask questions. However, if you think of an additional experience or idea you want to share, you can email it to your primary interviewer within seven (7) days of the interview.

**Risks and Discomforts of Being in the Study:**
There are no expected risks. This study may include risks that are unknown at this time.

**Benefits of Being in the Study:**
- The purpose of the study is to examine the assistance relationships shared between central office administrators and principals to inform their instructional leadership.
- The benefits of being in this study are the contributions to a growing body of research that seeks to understand the nature of leadership in a turnaround district. While you may not experience a direct, personal benefit, please know that you are helping inform leadership practice at large.

**Payments:**
You will not receive any payment for being in the study.
**Costs:**
There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

**Confidentiality:**
- The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we may publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file.
- All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file. Since we will be recording the interview, we want to inform you that members of the Dissertation in Practice team, our Chairperson and instructional staff supporting our efforts to articulate our findings. Access is solely for the support of articulating and substantiating our findings in our Dissertation in Practice, which will be a published document. These reasons, therefore, are explicitly educational purposes. Our recordings will be erased and our interview transcripts will be destroyed upon publication of the final dissertation.
- Mainly just the researchers will have access to information; however, please note that a few other key people may also have access. These might include government agencies. Also, the Institutional Review Board at Boston College and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records.

**Choosing to be in the study and choosing to quit the study:**
- Choosing to be in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to be in this study, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University.
- You are free to quit at any time, for whatever reason.
- There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not taking part or for quitting.
- During the research process, you will be notified of any new findings from the research that may make you decide that you want to stop being in the study.

**Getting dismissed from the study:**
- The researcher may dismiss you from the study at any time for the following reasons: (1) it is in your best interests (e.g., side effects or distress have resulted), (2) you have failed to comply with the study rules, or (3) the study sponsor decides to end the study.

**Contacts and Questions:**
- The researchers conducting this study are Julia Carlson, Suzanne Charochak, Gregg Thomas Gilligan, Eylem B. Icin, and Sonia Tellier. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact them at [telephone number or other way to contact person].
- If you have any questions about your rights as a person in this research study, you may contact: Director, Office for Research Protections, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or irb@bc.edu.

**Copy of Consent Form:**
You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

**Statement of Consent:**
I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form. I have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to be in this study. I have received a copy of this form.

**Signatures/Dates**

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<tr>
<th>Study Participant (Print Name) :</th>
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<td>Participant or Legal Representative Signature :</td>
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