WORKING TOGETHER FOR IMPROVEMENT OR COMPLIANCE: SCHOOL AND CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERSHIP RELATIONAL TRUST IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS WITHIN THE ACCOUNTABBILITY ERA

A Capstone Project

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By

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The advent of the standards-based accountability movement was focused on the reform of schools through high educational standards, rigorous assessments, and accountability through sanctions for schools not meeting goals (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Lee & Reeves, 2012). Yet the reform movement has not reached its intended outcomes, and numerous unintended consequences have emerged. Among the most salient consequences, a reduction in trust has been seen within educational organizations (Finnigan, 2010; Sahlberg, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Bryk and Schneider (2002) found that trust is a requisite ingredient to the school improvement outcome sought by standards-based accountability. Researchers have further suggested that the relationships, and specifically trust, between central office and school-based leaders in school improvement efforts is ripe for exploration (Daly & Finnigan, 2012).

This study investigates trust between central office and school-based leadership and how central office leaderships' roles and practices in school improvement efforts work to support or hinder trust within a standards-based accountability context. To explore this further the study's research questions focused on how central office leaders conceive their leadership roles in relation to schools; the practices central office leaders employ within school improvement efforts and the impact on trust; the manner in which levels of trust vary, if at all, by schools with accountability sanctions; and any differences

that exist in central office leadership practices across schools with and without accountability sanctions.

This study took place in a medium sized, urban-suburban school district in the mid-Atlantic. The research studied a new initiative within the district, quarterly chats, which focused on bringing together key central office and school leaders to discuss school improvement efforts within the school year. A phased mixed-methods approach was used. Phase one comprised surveys sent to school (n=68) and central office (n=6) leaders and document reviews conducted. Survey results were analyzed using quantitative descriptive and inferential statistics as well as qualitative coding. Phase two focused on 60-minute semi-structured interviews of central office leaders (n=6) incorporating a further exploration of initial findings from phase one. Semi-structured interviews and document analyses were analyzed using an initial deductive coding scheme which was updated iteratively through the coding process.

Findings from the study suggest that all central office leaders interviewed within the district viewed that their role as central office leaders was to support schools and school improvement efforts. Findings suggest the practices central office leaders employed within the quarterly chats had a direct relationship with the extent of school leaders' trust of central office and their willingness to engage meaningfully in shared work focused on school improvement. Specifically, the central office leadership practices of listening, questioning, affirming, providing feedback, seeking alignment between

school and department priorities and actions, and following through on promised supports were critical through either their presence in expanding trust or restricting trust through their absence. Finally, SPS central office leaders viewed their roles in working with sanctioned schools as a support and aimed to position themselves to mediate the increased external pressure. The central office leaders interviewed highlighted the practices of affirming the work of the school, avoiding blame, providing constructive feedback, and modeling shared responsibility as ways to best advance school improvement. At sanctioned schools, despite increased external pressure, trust levels were not found to be significantly different between school and central office leaders.

Based on these findings, this study concludes with several practitioner focused recommendations aimed to inform central office leaders in how they can best position their organizations and schools for improvement. First, a clear vision must be established of the role of central office as support agents in working with schools. For this vision to take root, building the capacity of all central office leaders to act as support agents including a focus on the specific practices discussed in this study. Leaders need to also build structures of frequent improvement discussions and horizontal accountability advancing the conditions of shared responsibility and psychological safety. Finally, central office leaders must be prepared to mediate the impact of external accountability sanctions on trust by framing sanctions within the established vision of support and working to maintain trust as a required ingredient of school improvement.

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APPROVAL OF THE CAPSTONE

This capstone (Working Together for Improvement or Compliance: School and central office leadership relational trust in school improvement efforts within the accountability era), has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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DEDICATION

"Love and peace and hope and trust. All the world is all of us."

–Liz Garton Scanlon

I dedicate this work to my amazing family. To both my sons, Conrad and Anderson, who were born during this journey and have kept me grounded throughout with giggles, smiles, and the occasional calm moments. To my parents, Mom and Dad, who taught me the value of always learning and seeking understanding, even when we feel we know. Finally, to my loving, patient, funny, and strong wife; none of this would have been possible without your support, love, humor, and sacrifice. You will forever be my north star; guiding me, making me a better man, and always reminding me what matters most in life.

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This journey would never have started without the support and love of those closest to me. The sacrifices they have made allowing me to embark on this personal journey of growth and fulfillment means more to me than I can express. Thank you to my parents for always encouraging me to grow and supporting me for the past thirty-six years. Thank you to my wife who has encouraged me through the ups and downs of this journey and kept me centered throughout. I love all of you and none of this would have been possible without you returning that love in spades.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The reform wave of standards-based accountability in driving school improvement has had major policy implications and subsequent practice implications across states, districts, and schools within the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Lee & Reeves, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Federal, state, and local initiatives attempt to support schools in meeting requirements through technical means such as additional resources, new initiatives, and a focus on enhanced pedagogical practices (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Harris & Herrington, 2006; Lee & Reeves, 2012). Relatively less attention, however, has been paid to the social dynamics that drive improvements within successful schools and districts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Clapham, Vickers, & Eldridge, 2016). One key component of these social dynamics within improvement efforts is trust between central and school-based leadership (Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). This capstone explores trust between district and school-based leadership within the standards-based accountability context, and the role trust plays in supporting or hindering improvement efforts within schools and the district overall.

The term *accountability* has proliferated in educational reform and improvement discussions. Darling-Hammond (2004) identified political, legal, bureaucratic, professional, and market forms of accountability as existing within the K-12 educational arena. This study explores the impact of the standards-based accountability context on trust across district and school leadership in relation to bureaucratic and professional accountabilities. Bureaucratic accountability is defined as, “federal, state, and district

offices promulgate rules and regulations intended to ensure that schooling takes place according to set procedures" (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 1050). Specifically, I review the impacts of bureaucratic accountability, as legislated through the standards-based accountability reform movement, on professional accountability enacted through relationships of trust between central office and school-based leaders.

The standards-based accountability reform movement in education has aimed to drive school improvement across the United States for the better part of three decades (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). The theory of action of standards-based accountability is that through higher academic standards and rigorous assessments linked to those standards, school improvement is incentivized by holding educators to account for outcomes that do not meet standards, with consequences ranging from external sanctions to reduced autonomy (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Lee & Reeves, 2012). School districts have responded to these increased pressures to meet accountability requirements through additional resources, new initiatives, enhanced pedagogical practices, the replacement of staff, and at times the closure of schools (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Harris & Herrington, 2006; Lee & Reeves, 2012). With all of these efforts, trust is a crucial, if less acknowledged, aspect of accountability and school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Clapham, Vickers, & Eldridge, 2016). With this foundational understanding of standards-based accountability, I will next delve deeper into the challenges and impacts of the standards-based accountability movement, the impact of trust in school improvement efforts, and finally the role central office plays in school improvement efforts within a standards-based accountability context.

The Challenges of Improvement within a Standards-Based Accountability Context

In 2017, 243 schools across the Commonwealth of Virginia failed to meet the state's accountability requirements for full accreditation. From 2012 to 2017 the number of schools that failed to meet accountability standards more than doubled within Virginia (Pyle & Grimes, 2017). All of these schools went through thorough state reviews, local monitoring, and mandated efforts to implement pedagogical best practices. Despite receiving technical assistance from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and increased support and resources from their local division central offices, these schools continued to fall short of the State benchmarks (Pyle & Grimes, 2017).

VDOE requires schools not meeting accreditation standards to undergo academic reviews, school improvement planning, differentiated technical assistance, and at times enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the school division and the VDOE regarding the discrete actions the school will engage in to reach accreditation (The Virginia Department of Education, n.d.). In addition to state-level requirements, schools also face increased requirements and oversight from their division central office. Local requirements include: additional formative assessments, monitoring of curriculum pacing, and the implementation of division identified pedagogical practices and interventions. These requirements and additional supports are intended to support schools in their improvement efforts. However, increased oversight may also deliver an unintended message to the staff within the school of a lack of trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2007). Indeed, research shows school-based leaders indicate few opportunities to provide input on improvement efforts and feel their professionalism, and the professionalism of their staff, is often devalued (McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vasquez Heilig, 2008).

Accountability National Reform Movement

The recent accountability efforts in Virginia were following a part of a larger national accountability reform movement dating back two decades. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 pushed accountability driven reform movements at the national level to the forefront. Schools were required to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) indicators in the areas of Reading and Math. With AYP benchmarks increasing annually, the number of schools facing sanctions expanded rapidly. In 2004-05; over 9,000 schools nationwide were found to be "In Need of Improvement" (INI) status, an increase of nearly 50% from the previous school year (Stullich, Eisner, McCray, & Roney, 2006).

Not only were an ever-increasing number of schools across the nation facing sanctions for underperformance, as was also seen within Virginia, many schools identified within the accountability system as needing improvement failed to improve in the years that followed. In California alone in 2007 only 5% of the 700 schools identified as needing improvement successfully improved student outcomes in the following year to move out of improvement status (Center on Education Policy, 2008). This lack of improvement left many schools with increasing levels of sanctions, state interventions, and division mandates. The assumption of using sanctions and public reporting alone to drive school reform and improvement was proving a failed logic across the national landscape (Mausethagen, 2013).

In December 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law replacing NCLB. ESSA showed a significant pivot from NCLB by shifting power back to states, focusing on multiple measures of student and school success, and encouraging innovation at the state-level in future accountability systems (Darling-Hammond, Bae,

Cook-Harvey, Lam, Mercer, Podolsky, & Stosich, 2016). Within Virginia ESSA facilitated the revision of the state's accreditation accountability system. The new accreditation system is designed to encourage school improvement through incorporating multiple measures of student success, focusing on closing achievement gaps, and acknowledging adequate student growth as a success measure (Pyle & Grimes, 2018). Within the most recent year 137 schools within Virginia did not meet the full accreditation requirements, down from 243 in 2017 in the last year under the old system (Pyle & Grimes, 2019). While encouraging, the question moving forward is if schools identified as needing improvement within the new system advance and improve to reach full accreditation, unlike schools under the old system.

Impacts of Standards-Based Accountability on Schools

The implementation of standards-based accountability has led to several benefits across the K-12 education landscape. Increased accountability pressures have led to a greater focus on school improvement within sanctioned schools along with increases in actual performance (Ehren & Shackleton, 2016). With an elevated focus on improvement, researchers found increased use in data in decision-making, alignment of local and state curriculum, and greater attention and resources to low-performing students (Hamilton, Stecher, Marsh, McCombs, & Robyn, 2007). At the state level, research has shown greater commitments to increase the instructional capacity of teachers as well as increased instructional resources for teachers especially within schools attended by larger proportions of minority students (Harris & Herrington, 2006; Lee & Reeves, 2012). At the national level, a RAND study (Faxon-Mills, Hamilton, Rudnick, Stecher, 2013) noted the benefits of increased system coherence through the alignment of standards, curricula,

and professional learning. With these benefits understood, research has also highlighted consequences within the impacts of standards-based accountability.

However, research has also shown a multitude of unintended consequences for staff in schools falling under accountability sanctions including: a narrowed curriculum, increased teacher-centered pedagogy, de-professionalization of staff through decreased autonomy, and a focus on students close to passing (Au, 2007; Berry & Sahlberg, 2006; Loeb, Knapp, & Elfers, 2008; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). With an increased focus on standards and assessments schools have seen a shift away from focusing on individual relationships and caring roles typically seen within the teaching profession between teachers and students (Finnigan, 2010; Mausethagen, 2013). Research has shown that these individual relationships and caring roles are critical factors in school improvement efforts (Mausethagen, 2013). The shift away from attending to these relationships is thus paradoxical to the overall goal of standards-based accountability of school improvement (Mausethagen, 2013).

Trust is a critical element in school reform and specifically the notion of relational trust as described by Bryk and Schneider (2002). Research has shown an impact of being under accountability sanctions on teacher to principal relationships and trust. Schools under accountability sanctions were found to have significantly fewer teachers reporting feeling supported to make changes to their own pedagogical practices (Finnigan, 2010). Further, these teachers reported lower levels of trust in their school principal when compared to non-sanctioned schools (Finnigan, 2010). The importance of school leadership forging relationships with teachers and having teachers feel supported in school change is a critical element that drives successful school reform (Leithwood,

Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The notion that school leadership is significantly less able to make teachers feel supported in the very schools identified where change is most needed remains a challenge within the accountability reform movement. Teachers also reported lower levels of trust in their school principal within schools under accountability sanctions.

The Role of Relational Trust in Reform

While policies at the federal, state, and local level have attempted to mandate improvements within schools identified as requiring improvement, little attention has been paid to the social relations and networks of individuals both within and outside the system that must work together to improve the school. Bryk and Schneider (2002) investigated over 400 Chicago elementary schools to examining the impact of relational trust and school improvement efforts. Relational trust is defined as "the distinctive qualities of interpersonal social exchanges in school communities, and how these cumulate in an organizational property" (p. 12). Bryk and Schneider (2002) determined, "Relational trust constitutes the connective tissue that binds these individuals together around advancing the education and welfare of children" (p. 144). The researchers went on to conclude that in the absence of building, supporting, and sustaining relational trust across actors in the school improvement efforts all future policy initiatives will continue to fall short of their intended goals. Research has shown the critical nature of trust at the school-level across school leadership and teachers, students, parents, and the community as a critical variable in driving school improvement efforts (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015).

Beyond the school-context, research has shown the importance of trust between school and district level leaders for district-level improvement to sustain across the long term (Chhuon, Gilkey, Gonzalez, Daly, & Chrispeels, 2008). The trust of district level leadership from school staff and leadership supports their willingness to collaborate and implement division-level initiatives within their schools and individual classrooms (Louis, 2007). Identified in research but overlooked in policy and practice, the importance of relational trust between district and school-based staff is an important lever to launching and sustaining improvement efforts within schools and districts.

Central Office as a Support Agent

The role of the central office has changed substantially over the past half century. Historically, the central office has been seen as regulatory agents of schools overseeing such functions as finance, human resources, and other basic business operations. This original cast of central office has shifted over time with an increased focus on curriculum, professional development, and student support services for schools. With the shift in focus also came a more recent explicit shift in the conceptualization of the primary role of central office from regulatory to support agent for schools (Honig, 2012; Mac Iver & Farley 2003). Prior to this shift, many had begun to call for the dramatic reduction or even elimination of the central office. Overarching critiques focused on overly bureaucratic, self-serving, bloated and highly inefficient administration buildings that had a negative impact on student outcomes (Crowson & Boyd, 1991; Peterson, 1999).

Mac Iver and Farley (2003) found the call to reduce and or eliminate central office in public education as ill-informed. They found strong positive links between

effective central office practices of curriculum guidance, hiring practices, professional coaching of principals, and professional development of school-based instructional staff as all linked to positive outcomes of student achievement within schools. Honig (2012) extended this research by looking at the discrete practices of central office leaders that best supported and developed instructional based leadership in school principals. The research found continued support for the need of central office to take on the role of teacher in supporting school principals and by doing so "…represent a fundamental shift in the role of some central offices from mainly management, monitoring, or other hands-off principal support roles to central offices operating as main agents of principal learning" (Honig, 2012, p. 35). Research has identified building professional community with schools through collaboration, open two-way communication, and connecting schools for collaborative learning as core practices of central office leaders in supporting trust between school and central office leaders (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Chuon et al., 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2012). Central office leadership plays a key role in expanding or restricting trust across educational organizations.

The advent of the standards-based accountability movement was focused on the reform of schools through high educational standards, rigorous assessments, and accountability through sanctions for schools not meeting goals. Yet the reform movement has not reached its intended outcomes, and numerous unintended consequences have emerged. Among the most salient consequences, a reduction in trust has been seen within educational organizations (Finnigan, 2010; Sahlberg, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Trust is a requisite ingredient to the school improvement outcome sought by standards-based accountability (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). This paradox and the critical

role central office leaders' play in expanding or restricting trust, within a standards-based accountability context will be the focus of this capstone. The context in which this investigation will be conducted will be reviewed in the following section.

Background of Study

This study is based within a single district within Virginia. Stapleton Public Schools (SPS) is a medium sized urban school district within Virginia. The district has a diverse student body with a majority minority student body and over half of students identified as economically disadvantaged. The district has recently begun efforts to further shift the role of central office to a support mechanism for schools. These support efforts have been especially focused for those schools identified within state and federal accountability systems in recent years. With a shift of central office to the role of a supportive agent for schools, a focus of building trust between central office and school-based leadership was identified as a critical ingredient.

Accountability within a District Context. SPS has had several schools identified within the state and federal accountability systems over the past fifteen plus years. Several schools have remained identified as needing improvement across multiple years and have been subject to federal sanctions, state mandates, and additional local requirements.

With the increased external pressures of having schools identified as needing improvement the district has had substantial turnover across all levels of the organization. SPS has had over five superintendents in the past ten years. Likewise, central office staff have faced substantial turnover with the superintendent transitions. Finally, school-based

staff have also been impacted with a frequent turnover of principals, particularly in schools under sanctions, as well as a staff turnover ratio of 14-17% over the past five years. This has created a challenge in implementing meaningful and sustained change at the school and district level as leadership and staff turnover leads to frequent restarts and the need to constantly onboard new staff.

Central Office as a Support. Historically, the central office within SPS has largely served as a regulatory structure for schools. Central office oversees all large-scale business operations as well as curriculum development, professional learning, and student support services for schools. New leadership within SPS has emphasized the need to further reposition central office as a support agent. This was done through emphasizing the need to further allow school identified concerns to inform central office actions and lessen the "top-down" mentality within the SPS culture. Further, central office leaders were encouraged to engage in dialogue with schools directly in face-to-face forums within schools to better allow for shared discourse and problem-solving.

School Improvement Planning in SPS. Under new leadership SPS has embraced the need to at times create and at other times refine systems and processes within the division. The goal of central office leadership is to help to buffer against the frequent staff turnover and create a sustained organizational culture of continuous improvement at the division and school levels. School improvement planning was the first major process to undergo revisions. All schools were required to create school improvement plans that prioritized their overall goals, the discrete steps necessary to reach their goals, and how they will measure progress towards their goals over the course of the year.

Central office leadership teams meet with schools on a quarterly basis to discuss their school improvement plans. Named quarterly chats, these discussions focus on current school successes, challenges, and needed central office supports in the implementation of their improvement plan. Schools may request which central office staff they would like to be present and also have control over who from the school joins in the discussions. Schools are provided with a general structure of topics to cover but have large amounts of discretion in what exactly is discussed within the meeting.

Central Office Role in Quarterly Chats. These meetings are intended to bring leadership together across central office and at schools as learners in the process of school improvement. Specifically, the meetings are intended to facilitate collaboration and open two-way communication between central and school-based leaders. Further, they are intended to reinforce desired environmental norms of reciprocal dialogue, shared responsibility, and a focus on student learning. This is a fundamental shift from previous efforts within SPS where previous superintendents have held meetings only with schools under state and/or federal sanctions as an additional accountability mechanism to monitor progress. Central office staffs within the quarterly chats are intended to serve as supports to the school leadership team, not evaluators of the school's efforts. Schools are allowed to make requests of central office staff for needs they may currently have in terms of materials, staffing, professional development, community relations, and/or budget needs. Central office leaders then follow-up with schools regarding their requests and provide a summary of activities at the subsequent quarterly chat.

Trust within SPS. In a survey of all teachers in 2018, one-third of respondents did not feel there was an atmosphere of trust within their school ("TELL SPS," 2018).

Further, in a 2017 survey of parents, 35% disagreed that there was mutual trust and respect between SPS and the community (K12 Insight, 2018). Across both surveys, respondents reported lower levels of trust in schools facing current accountability sanctions than non-sanctioned schools. Bryk and Schneider (2002) identified trust as the lubricant that facilitates improvement through collective action, while distrust leads to a lack of risk taking which in turn impedes innovation, learning, and organizational improvement. The seeds of trust must have been planted in order for school improvement to take meaningful root in educational organizations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; O'Neill, 2013; Sahlberg, 2010).

The Problem of Practice

Within SPS poor academic outcomes have led to accountability sanctions for several schools. The sanctions and subsequent reduced autonomy have fostered conditions of distrust and blame across stakeholders. The lack of relational trust serves as a barrier to efforts in general and, in particular, to school improvement efforts where collective effort across central office and school leadership is required to reach the desired goals.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

While there is much research on the impacts of standards-based accountability structures on schools, there is very little on the impact these accountability structures have on the relationships between school and central office leaders in driving improvement within schools. In particular, there is currently limited research on the impact of the standards-based accountability reform movement on relational trust

between central office and school-based administrators. Are these seemingly diametrically opposed concepts of accountability and relational trust able to be aligned to advance schools through continuous improvement? This capstone serves as a case study investigating the relational trust between central office leadership and the leadership of all 17 schools within the district. The study took place within a standards-based accountability context, and investigated the role central office leadership practices play in supporting or hindering improvement efforts within schools and in the district overall.

Research Questions

To investigate the relational trust between district and school-based leadership and the role it plays in supporting or hindering improvement efforts within 17 schools and in the district overall, my research examines the following research questions:

1. What is the role of quarterly data chats in supporting or restricting relational trust between school and central office leaders in a standards-based accountability environment?

    a. How do central office leaders conceive their purpose and role in the quarterly data chats with schools?

    b. What central office leaders' practices in quarterly data chats support or hinder trust with school leaders?

    c. How, if at all, do the levels of trust between school and central office leaders vary by school accountability status?

d. What are the differences in central office leadership practices within the quarterly data chats across schools with different accountability statuses?

These questions, which are exploratory in nature, were investigated using a mixed-methods approach. A survey and document analysis served as the initial phase of data collection within the study with results then being used to inform topics for further exploration in semi-structured interviews with select central office staff. A survey and document analysis were selected for use in the initial phase for their inherent benefits in efficiency of data collection, ability to quickly analyze data once received, and the ability to limit response bias through anonymity. The survey offered the ability to collect quantitative and initial qualitative information from a broad group of stakeholders across the district that provided high-level information. The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews of all central office leaders who attended quarterly chats. By using a phased approach, the researcher was able to further investigate the emergent initial findings from survey and document analysis through the qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews of key staff in the second phase.

Limitations and Delimitations

This capstone utilized a mixed methods approach to generate knowledge based on the specific context analyzed. Findings from this capstone are based within the context of the division and schools analyzed. With that said, this study can be used to inform potential future research efforts across different contexts.

The research study took a purposeful look at relational trust using quarterly data chats between central office and school-based leaders as a unit of analysis. It is

acknowledged that the variables impacting relational trust between central office and school based-leaders extend well beyond the quarterly data chats. These are complex social interactions and the relational trust between staff is based not only on what happens within quarterly data chats. The historical interactions across personnel as well as interactions between meetings that influence relational trust extended beyond the scope of this capstone.

Definitions of Key Terms

Below is a set of definitions for key terms used throughout this capstone project to ensure clarity in meaning when discussing these topics.

Accountability: While accountability as a term has become ubiquitous in its use, within this paper the term will be used within the context of federal, state, and local policies set in place to publicly evaluate school performance based on student outcome data.

Accreditation: The accountability system within Virginia used to evaluate school performance incorporating student outcome data in the indicator areas of English, Math, Science, Chronic Absenteeism, Graduation Rates, and Dropout Rates.

Fully Accredited: Status assigned to schools within Virginia meeting benchmarks across all indicator areas and within required subgroups in English and Math.

Accredited with Conditions: The status assigned to schools within Virginia falling significantly below benchmarks in one or more indicator areas based on data from the previous school year.

Relational Trust: Aggregating all individual interpersonal social exchanges leading to individual trust discernments into an overall organizational attribute.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher of this capstone project is an employee of the division investigated. Having worked in the division for over ten years it is important to acknowledge a level of researcher bias as it relates to the importance of relational trust and the role central office can and should play in supporting schools in improvement efforts. These biases are based on the practical and lived experience of the researcher and were considered and buttressed against when conducting data analysis and in the reporting of findings. Response bias has also been a critical consideration based on the researcher's role within the division and the potential for other division staff to want to offer the "right" answer.

The role of the researcher within this capstone was a dual role both as an internal member of the organization being researched and as a research observer with clearly delineated modes of data collection. The researcher is a central office staff member within the division being analyzed and has been a participant in the quarterly data chats during the timeframe of this study. Clear delineation was a challenge at times because of my status as an "insider researcher" (Mercer, 2007), encompassing my dual role as doctoral student researcher and central office staff member. However, no data for this study were collected by the researcher while participating within the quarterly data chats (e.g., no fieldnotes were recorded nor were conversations documented), and the role of researcher was disclosed to participants with consent when data were collected. The

researcher carefully considered power dynamics and existing relationships in terms of their impact on data validity and was sensitive not to create instrumentation or situations where participants were unduly influenced in their responses and or actions based on any of these factors.

Knowledge Use of the Capstone

As this capstone is a case study, the first level of utility will be to the district being analyzed. The district is engaged in a major initiative of instilling systems of continuous improvement and securing greater levels of relational trust across the organization. The analysis on the impact of the quarterly chats on supporting or hindering these relationships across central office and school-based leadership will help to inform next steps within the district. Beyond the context of the district being studied, this capstone addresses a current gap within the literature where little exists examining the impact of an accountability context on the relational trust between central office and school-based leaders.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

As a major driver of reform within K-12 education, the standards-based accountability movement over the past four decades has had far reaching implications on all facets of schooling in America (Valli & Buese, 2007). Likewise, the impact of relational trust has shown to be a key driver in educational reform and improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Yet, research has shown the negative correlation between these two key cogs in driving school improvement. With increased levels of standards-based accountability research has indicated a decline in relational trust (Daly & Finnegan, 2012). Calls for intelligent accountability have emerged stressing a re-legitimization of trust, relationships, and professional community (Clapham, Vickers, & Eldridge, 2016; O'Neill, 2013; Sahlberg, 2010). This literature review aims to unpack the key concepts related to relational trust and its impacts on driving school improvement efforts at the school and district levels. However, before broaching relational trust, I first offer a review of the relevant literature on standards-based accountability reform and the impact on school improvement efforts. The connections between accountability and trust within educational organizations will then be explored. I will then narrow the focus by reviewing relational trust and its role within school improvement efforts. Finally, the role of leadership will be analyzed through central office and school-based leaders' trust of one another in advancing school improvement efforts.

Methods of Literature Review

This literature review includes empirical evidence on the effects that the standards-based accountability movement has had on K-12 education; the role of Central Office as a supporting agent to schools; and the role of relational trust between Central

Office and school-based leaders in driving school improvement efforts. Research articles were found using Google Scholar and EBSCO. Key search terms included terms such as: “district office support”, “relational trust”, “accountability reform” and “central office support of principals.” These search terms were then refined based upon results and suggestions for similar terms within the search engine. Snowball techniques were also used from relevant seminal works looking to those studies that were cited within the article as well as those that later cited the article. Identified articles were reviewed for quality utilizing the constructs outlined by Hays and Singh (2012, p. 200).

While there was a large body of research identified around accountability reform efforts as well as relational trust, there was far less literature on the topic of the role of central office in supporting schools within this context. Further, the role relational trust plays in the interactions across leaders within the system was limited. Many studies were confined to the school-level and did not unpack the broader context of the school in relation to central office, state, or federal actors. Some studies looked at these concepts at the district or state-level; however, very few investigated the interactions of standards-based accountability and relational trust across schools and central offices (Chuon, Gilkey, Gonzalez, & Daly, 2008).

Accountability in Education

The term accountability is used a great deal within the educational field by all stakeholders and yet remains ill-defined. Bovens (2005) discussed the obligation of an actor to justify their conduct to a significant other. The significant other weighs the evidence of conduct provided and issues a judgment of affirmation or sanction upon the

actor. Klijn and Koppenjan (2014) extended on Bovens' definition to include outcomes alongside conduct as evidence informing an accountability judgment. Arguing that within many accountability contexts, the outcomes informed the overall judgment at a greater weight than the actions that preceded them. Radin (2009) defined this focus on outcomes rather than process as performance accountability. Globally, performance accountability within the public sector in the United States focuses on citizens, public officials, and professionals. Citizens want to see an effective use of their tax dollars; public officials want high quality services for their citizenry; and professionals want to demonstrate to citizens and officials that their efforts produced results (Radin, 2009). With this understanding, the construct of performance accountability within the public sector can be defined as need for professionals to justify their outcomes to the citizenry and public officials who then level a judgment of affirmation or sanction.

Accountability Typologies. The actors, context, and method of this accounting lead to multiple typologies of accountability within the public sector. Darling-Hammond (2004) identified political, legal, bureaucratic, professional, and market forms of accountability within educational organizations. Bureaucratic accountability through federal, state, or locally promulgated rules and regulations ensures superiors are able to hold subordinates to account. Political accountability is leveraged through the democratic process for elected school board members. Legal accountability is enacted through the courts for all stakeholders, while professional accountability is through professional peers in ensuring compliance with accepted standards and codes. Market accountability is seen in parents and students right to choose certain schools or courses they believe best.

All of these typologies of accountability interact dynamically with one another within educational organizations. Collectively, they are intended to reinforce democratic control of the organization, enhance the integrity and legitimacy of public government, support organizational improvement, and serve as a mechanism for catharsis when public trust is breached (Levitt, Janta, & Wegrich, 2008). Accountability mechanisms thus are increased in contexts where there has been a breach of public trust or a questioning of the legitimacy or integrity of the actors being held to account (Levitt et al., 2008; O'Neill, 2002). The increases in accountability are intended to introduce the structures and transparency that then allow stakeholders to make informed judgments of those being held to account in the absence of trust (Sahlberg, 2010).

Standards-Based Accountability

Theory of Action. The Standards-Based Accountability movement arose to increase accountability of educational organizations in the United States in response to concerns of the effectiveness of public education and the breach of public trust stemming back to the 1980s (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Standards-based accountability asserts that through higher academic standards and rigorous assessments school improvement is made possible. Improvement is further incentivized in underperforming schools by publicly holding educators to account for low student outcomes, with consequences of external sanctions and reduced local autonomy (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Lee & Reeves, 2012). Holding the educational actors to account in underperforming schools is then rationalized to force educators to reorient, adjust, and focus towards meeting accountability requirements leading to improvement (Lee & Reeves, 2012).

With the understanding that all typologies of accountability in education interact dynamically, it is important to unpack the impacts of standards-based accountability across typologies. Standards-based accountability includes forms of market accountability; public transparency aims to give parents choice in the selection of the best school for their child. This parental choice then is theorized to drive competition among schools leading to increased efficiencies and greater academic outcomes (Sahlberg, 2010). Professional accountability within the standards-based movement is intended to shift to a greater focus on aligned standards, increased rigor, and academic outcomes with an 'internal accountability' among teachers in terms of informal, relational, and emotional sanctioning for underperformance driven by competition (Mausethagen, 2013). Political accountability likewise is leveraged toward academic outcomes with the electorate holding politicians accountable for underperformance thus incentivizing actions from politicians to improve school performance (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

The theory of action asserted within standards-based accountability is rooted in rationalistic and behaviorists views. While easy to grasp, the act of schooling does not occur in a closed system. The act of schooling, and the organizations that deliver it are incredibly complex, dynamic, open systems where one input can lead to a multitude outputs with some intended and others not (Brazer, Bauer, & Johnson, 2019). Therefore, we will next explore the benefits and critiques of the standards-based accountability movement once implemented.

Benefits of Standards-Based Accountability. The implementation of the standards-based accountability movement has led researchers to investigate if the theory of action matched the enacted reality. A number of studies show that increased

accountability has led teachers to work harder to improve student performance (Au, 2007; Hamilton, Stetcher, & Klein, 2002; Lee, 2006). Lee and Reeves (2012) found beneficial strategies emerged such as long-term commitments from state departments in the increase of instructional capacity of all teachers as well as increases in instructional resources for teachers. This coincides with a finding from Harris and Herrington (2006) that standards-based accountability led to additional resources specifically in schools attended by larger proportions of minority students.

Research has also found that increased accountability pressure has led sanctioned schools to focus more on improvement efforts along with greater increases in reported performance (Ehren & Shackleton, 2016). With the increased focus on improvement, researchers found reported increases in using data in decision-making, a focus on the alignment of local curriculum to state standards, and increased attention and resources to low-performing students (Hamilton, Stecher, Marsh, McCombs, & Robyn, 2007).

Market-based accountability and the advent of choice has increased parental agency in the education of their children (Musset, 2012). Through choice and public transparency, the ability of highly ranked organizations to sustain that success through reinforced legitimacy has also been increased (Espeland & Stevens, 2008). The literature is more mixed in regards to the positive impact on overall student achievement with a key limitation noted of all the variables that impact student achievement (Dee & Jacob, 2009; Lee, 2006; Wong, Cook, & Steiner, 2009). Clear benefits are present from the standards-based accountability movement. With that understood we must next also consider the unintended consequences that have emerged.

Critiques of Standards-Based Accountability. A major critique of the theory of action of standards-based accountability centers on unintended consequences. Frey, Homberg, and Osterloh (2013) questioned the appropriateness of the approach given the high ambiguity in goals and the unclear connections between means and ends within education. This they argue leads to measures that are inherently incomplete, overly simplistic, and do not reflect the overarching goals of education. The measures and their reported numbers do create an 'illusion of control' which directs the behavior of school staff working under the assumptions of validity (Frey et al., 2013).

Campbell's Law states that the more any quantitative social indicator is used in social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the less valid it will be in measuring the social processes it was originally intended to monitor (Sahlberg, 2010). The actions by educators in response to accountability pressures that distort the accountability measures were grouped by De Wolf and Janssens (2007) into unintended and intended strategic behaviors. Research has shown unintended strategic consequences in response to accountability pressures are a narrowed curriculum, a fragmentation of the curriculum to discrete assessed skills, an increase in teacher-centered pedagogies, de-professionalization of teachers through decreased autonomy, and a focus of resources on students who are close to passing (Au, 2007; Berry & Sahlberg, 2006; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Loeb, Knapp, & Elfers, 2008). Diamond and Spillane (2004) further our understanding of this research when they found teachers in sanctioned schools were far more likely to engage in unintended strategic consequences than those in non-sanctioned schools, leading to a disproportionate impact on the schools and students most in need. Less common, but still cited in the research are the intended strategic

behaviors of excluding academically struggling students from testing, student and adult cheating, and purposeful fraudulent reporting of results (Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

Researchers have also investigated the impact standards-based accountability may have related to interpersonal interactions within educational organizations. Through a comprehensive literature review, Mausethagen (2013) found consistent support in the research that standards-based accountability policies had negative impacts on teachers' relationships with students and with one another. Finnigan (2010) investigated the impact of accountability on teacher-principal relationships and found that principals in sanctioned schools were significantly less likely to employ inclusive instructional leadership practices. Most significant was the key finding that overall lower levels of trust were reported from staff of the principal in sanctioned schools compared to non-sanctioned schools.

The standards-based accountability movement had an intended aim of increasing the trust of external stakeholders in the educational system; however, when there are increased pressures, oversight, rules, and bureaucracy it resulted in less trust across internal stakeholders (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Further, standards-based accountability looks to simplify what are complex organizations leading to accountability systems that are far too complex for stakeholders to understand and thus to trust (O'Neill, 2013). The effort sought to increase public confidence in schools' abilities to deliver on educational promises but at the cost of corroding trust across students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members (Sahlberg, 2010).

Intelligent Accountability and Trust. O'Neill (2013) argued in reference to the unintended consequences of the standards-based accountability movement that the 'assessment tail' has 'wagged the educational dog' for far too long. The standards-based accountability movement seen as the successor to trust has fallen short (O'Neill, 2013; Sahlberg, 2010). O'Neill (2013) asserted, "Trust-free accountability is a mirage" (p. 10), and that the field must begin to look towards a new future within accountability where trust is at the forefront.

Clapham, Vickers, and Eldridge (2016) emphasized the need to re-legitimize trust, relationships, emotional health, and care within future accountability systems. O'Neill (2013) terms a revised approach to standards-based accountability as intelligent accountability. Intelligent accountability aims to allow a balance of qualitative and quantitative indicators to build mutual accountability, professional responsibility and trust. Sahlberg (2010) asserts that responsibility precedes accountability and that responsibility grows from trust. Organizations built on trust spread responsibility across all members which then creates mutual accountability across professionals. The focus on mutual accountability represents a clear shift in focus from the bureaucratic to the professional typology of accountability. Intelligent accountability rejects competitive market accountability by emphasizing collaboration and networking as a means to facilitate school improvement (Sahlberg, 2010). At the root of this shift is the importance of trust and a focus on horizontal rather than hierarchal structures of holding one to account. Therefore, it is important to delve deeper into the literature regarding the nature of trust, trust as an individual and organizational property related to improvement efforts, and the role leaders play in trust within organizations.

Importance of Trust

Trust as a construct, while much discussed within the educational and broader literature base, does not have an agreed upon succinct definition. This was captured by Hosmer (1995) when he stated, “There appears to be a widespread agreement on the importance of trust in human conduct, but unfortunately there also appears to be an equally widespread lack of agreement on a suitable definition of the construct” (p. 380). At its most basic conceptualization, theorists and researchers have agreed that trust is a psychological state that is reached through a multitude of interrelated cognitive processes and orientations (Kramer, 1999).

The overall functioning, improvement, and success of organizations emerge based upon the individuals who work within it. The facet of the interpersonal interactions and the trust that emerges is described by Cranston (2011) as the glue that binds organizations and by Bryk and Schneider (2002) as the lubricant that facilitates improvement through collective action. Trust is necessary for effective cooperation and communication between individuals which constitute the fabric of relationships within organizations (Baier, 1986). Trust also greatly reduces the transactional costs of decision-making for leaders allowing staff to assume positive intent and knowledge that in making decisions the leader has their best interest in mind (Kramer, 1999). Within effective organizations that reach improvement aims trust is a critical ingredient.

As much as trust builds and sustains successful organizations, distrust inhibits unsuccessful organizations. Distrust leads to inefficiencies as individuals have to attend to self-protection for fear of being victimized (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015;

Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). In this preservation of self, an unwillingness to take risks also emerges. This lack of risk-taking impedes innovation, learning, and organizational improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The greatest cost to distrust is once established it permeates and is self-sustaining. Once an individual distrust another, all future interactions will be viewed through this lens and negative intent presumed. Further, once individuals sense distrust in the environment, in the interest of self-protection, they are more likely to start from a place of distrust in forming new relationships (Bies, Barclay, Saldanha, Kay, & Tripp, 2018; Govier, 1992).

Once broken, research shows that trust can be repaired and hinges on the violator's response to the breach (Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnigham, 2002). From an organizational level, organizations tend to respond poorly to repairing trust by not acknowledging their role in the breach and focusing more on external than internal stakeholders (Schwartz, 2000). Studies have focused on repairing trust at the interpersonal with recommendations of: acknowledgement of the violation, determine the root causes of the violation and admit responsibility, and accept responsibility of the consequences of the violation (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Gillespie and Dietz (2009) focused on the leadership practices in rebuilding organizational trust. The researchers found leaders need to attend to reducing the risk of future trust breaches through improving regulatory systems. Also, leaders must increase the chance of trust building interactions through their behavior and communication demonstrating ability, benevolence, and integrity (Gillespie & Dietz, 2009). Through leaders' prolonged and committed focus to both systems and relationships repair trust can be regained.

Trust is extremely fragile within organizations. Individuals are far more likely to remember and act upon a single instance breaching trust than they are to be influenced by a single instance building trust. This fragility is only amplified when the relationship has an unequal distribution of power between the two parties (Cuevas, Julkunen, & Gabrielsson, 2015; Kramer, 1999). For these reasons, trust is something that must be purposefully attended to, built, and nurtured within organizations. Specifically, leaders must attend to trust first given their unique ability to influence the overall culture of an organization and to affirm trust through their words and actions (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Trust can be conceived as a pillar that holds up successful organizations, or in its breach, causes them to crumble. With an understanding of the importance of trust and the centrality of trust within accountability, we must understand the types of trust seen within organizations.

Typologies of Trust in Organizations

How the psychological state of trust is reached within organizations is a source of tension within the literature. Within the psychological literature, this tension plays out across trust as a rational choice versus trust being influenced by broader social and situational factors (Kramer, 1999). Within educational literature, this tension is explained by Bryk and Schneider (2002) in the comparisons of what they termed organic, contractual, and relational trust in organizations. Organic trust is reached through an unquestioning belief by the individual in the moral authority of the leaders and the inherent “rightness” of the organization. This type of trust is most commonly seen in organizations rooted in religious ideology. Contractual trust is arrived upon in organizations with clear expectations of roles and processes along with an agreed upon

observable outcome. This type of trust can be found for example in factories with high reliance on well-understood roles, processes, and easily observable outcomes.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) argued that neither organic nor contractual trust defined what they observed within educational organizations. They observed educational organizations as complex networks of social exchanges and interdependencies where outcomes were multifaceted, diffuse, and difficult to measure. Further distinguishing educational settings was an asymmetrical power distribution where no single role was afforded complete dominance. The unique distribution of actualized power across roles within the organization led to all parties being vulnerable to one another. The researchers saw the need for both belief and observable behaviors in the formation of trust. This spurred them to define a third type of trust within organizations, relational trust.

Relational Trust

Relational trust within organizations is achieved collectively through the individual relationships of all members of the organization. Within school organizations, this includes students, teachers, parents, community members, and school and district leadership. We will start by reviewing the seminal work from Bryk and Schneider (2002) as it relates to relational trust across the school organization and impacts on improvement.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) conducted seminal research in the area of relational trust. The researchers conducted case study research as well as longitudinal statistical analyses from over 400 Chicago elementary schools across almost a decade. Twelve in-depth case studies were conducted across four years which included observations of

meetings, events, and classrooms; interviews and focus groups with principals, teachers, parents, and community members; and follow-up interviews focused on how the school had progressed and faltered in their improvement efforts. Quantitative data that emerged from longitudinal survey efforts, as well as student achievement data, were then triangulated with the qualitative case study data. The researchers found that elementary schools with high relational trust were over three times more likely to show marked improvements in student achievement outcomes. Schools with low scores on relational trust, as determined by survey data of teachers, had only a 14 percent chance of showing student achievement gains. Comparatively, schools with high scores on relational trust had a 50 percent chance of showing marked student achievement gains. Throughout the longitudinal study, schools with chronically weak relational trust year after year had virtually no chance of improving student achievement outcomes.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) found four key attributes of school organizations where relational trust was high that directly contributed to the schools' abilities to improve in meeting their overall missions. Specifically, the researchers found relation trust allowing organizations to (a) be innovative; (b) facilitate public problem solving; (c) coordinate meaningful collective action, and (d) sustain a focus on the moral imperative for improvement. These organizational attributes when enacted led to organizational improvements and positive student outcomes. Perhaps most powerful, in reaching success at the organizational level the researchers found that relational trust was reinforced across the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. In seeing the successes within their school, individual members of the school community became more likely to trust and thus to

innovate, collaboratively problem solve, implement well, and focus on the students as the purpose of their efforts and sacrifice (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

The feedback loop where trust leads to improvement, which begets greater trust and yet still greater improvements, underscores the critical nature of relational trust as a key ingredient to organizational improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). While relational trust may not be the only ingredient that leads to school improvement of student outcomes, it is clear through Bryk and Schneider's (2002) seminal work that it is a required ingredient. For a deeper understanding of relational trust, we must explore how individuals arrive at trust decisions.

Relational Trust at the Intrapersonal Level. At the intrapersonal level of relational trust an individual is constantly making decisions regarding the level of trust they give to the individuals that they interact with. Hardin (1992) argued that the psychological state of trust is reached by an individual through the intersectionality of three areas: properties of the truster, attributes of a trustee, and the context over which the trust is being given. Bryk and Schneider (2002) align with Hardin's previous conceptualization noting the impact of material self-interests, social status and esteem of the trustee, and in the educational context, the need to enact one's moral duty all impacting the individual discernment to trust or distrust. The psychological state of trust is decided by the individual through the interplay of the individual's attributes and needs, the attributes of the individual for whom trust is being assigned, and the larger context in which the interaction rests (Hardin, 1992).

Individual Attributes. An individual's personal attributes, self-interests, values, and background all play an important part in the decision to trust (Atkinson, Poston, Furlong, & Mercado, 1989; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Jones & George, 1998; McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Research has shown that individuals have variability in their personal attributes that lead to differences in their "pre-disposition to trust" (McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998). Further, individuals incorporate their perceptions of the level of shared beliefs and values in trust decisions of others (Atkinson et al., 1989; Jones & George, 1998). It is important to understand these personal factors in leading to the understanding that the discernment of trust is multifaceted and a deeply individualistic process that is ever-evolving.

Interpersonal Trust Discernments. Much attention within the literature has been paid to the attributes that lend to building and sustaining trust across individuals. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) conducted a multidisciplinary literature review of what attributes lead to trust which encompassed the fields of psychology, sociology, philosophy, economics, organizational science, and education spanning across four decades. Through this robust analysis, they were able to synthesize findings and conceptualizations of trust into the five key attributes of benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness.

The weight ascribed across these attributes in the discernment of trust is dependent on context. For example, Weinstein, Raczynski, and Pena (2018) found that teachers focused more on benevolence in trusting principals, while principals focused more on competence in their trust of teachers. Specifically, the power dynamics across

individuals play a role in trust discernments and how attributes are valued against one another in that decision-making.

Relational Trust and Power. Organizations, including educational organizations, incorporate features of asymmetrical power structures. Teachers have power over students, principals have power over teachers, and district leaders have power over principals. While these features exist, they do not afford those in a position of power complete power. At the core of fostering effective relationships across these roles is trust, brought about as a necessity through the interdependence across groups and the vulnerability that emerges from that interdependence (Baier, 1986; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Hosmer, 1995; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran 1999; Lapidot, Kark, & Shamir, 2007; Tennenbaum, 2018; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy 2000). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) found that subordinates recalled more trust-related incidents than superiors and that breaches of trust were experienced at greater levels for subordinates than their leaders. The role of power in the level of vulnerability and the interdependence experienced between parties in establishing trust is critical to understand when exploring trust at the interpersonal level within school organizations.

Leadership Role in Relational Trust

While all members of an organization affect relational trust, those in leadership roles hold a unique position in impacting relational trust. The leadership role affords power. With this power, the impacts of decisions that leaders make span across all stakeholder groups in the organization (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Weinstein et al., 2018).

For this reason, we will delve deeper into an understanding of the research on relational trust and improvement in school organizations focusing on school and district leadership.

School Leaderships' Role. A small body of literature directly links relational trust from faculty of the principal to positive student achievement outcomes (Chughtai & Buckley, 2009; Forsyth & Adams, 2014; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Zeinabadi, 2014). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) found that faculty trust in the school principal was positively correlated with student achievement data. The researchers were also able to identify the specific principal behaviors focused within the areas of interpersonal relationships and competence grounded in strong instructional leadership. These findings expand on Bryk and Schneider's (2002) earlier work by specifically identifying the principal's role in relational trust and the explicit leadership behaviors that foster and sustain that trust.

Measuring student academic outcomes directly linked to principals' roles in establishing relational trust is an example of an available methodology lagging behind the theoretical understanding of the importance of the principals' role in establishing relational trust and the indirect links to student achievement (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). A broader body of literature affirms the need for principals to play an integral role in supporting and sustaining relational trust within schools. Relational trust serves as a required ingredient towards a positive school climate, facilitating improvement efforts, and in sustaining a school's ability to continue to fulfill its mission of advancing student learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Cosner, 2010; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Weinstein et al., 2018). The literature base identified the key facets of principals

establishing trust with faculty through benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness, and the importance of developing trust in hierarchical role relationships to advance the overall school organization forward.

District Leaderships' Role. Relational trust has been found to be a critical ingredient in advancing improvements within schools, yet has been understudied in the role that district leadership has in supporting or hindering school and district improvements through relational trust (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004). The limited research has shown a low level of trust between school and district leaders (Chuon, Gilkey, Gonzalez, & Daly, 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2012). Low trust was identified as being caused by a lack communication, respect, and follow through which inhibited trust and led to a lack of risk taking at the school level (Chuon et al., 2008). Trust can be improved by district leaders through modeling trusting behaviors, providing autonomy wherever possible, and serving as the conduit between schools in the sharing of best practices (Daly & Finnigan, 2012). Daly and Finnigan (2012) synthesize these findings through quoting Fullan (2003) when he stated, "Leading schools – as in any great organization – requires leaders with the courage and capacity to build new cultures based on trusting relationships and a culture of disciplined inquiry and action (Fullan, 2003)" (Daly & Finnigan, 2012, p. 521). While almost non-existent in the literature base of relational trust, district leadership plays a role in supporting or hindering schools' abilities to build relational trust and to foster and sustain improvement efforts. For these reasons, it is important to further explore the role of central office leaders in supporting school-improvement efforts and the impact of relational trust in these efforts.

Central Office Leadership Practices Supporting Trust

Dating back fifty years, central offices were seen as regulatory agents. Central office roles focused on overseeing business operations such as finance, facilities, transportation, and human resources. This original cast of central office has shifted over time. There has been an increase in focus on curriculum, professional development, and student support services for schools from central offices. With the shift in focus also came a more recent explicit shift in the conceptualization of the primary role of central office, from regulatory to support agent for schools (Honig, 2012; Mac Iver & Farley 2003).

The move of central offices role to a support agent of schools has been complicated by the standard-based accountability context. Central offices have been positioned as key agents within the chain of standards-based accountability between schools and external stakeholders. Central offices have been placed in a role of providing guidance, oversight, and stimulation for designated schools within their districts to improve (Leithwood, 2013). Thus, the desire from central office to support schools must be negotiated through the standards-based accountability context which asserts higher levels of bureaucracy through increased rules, regulations, and sanctions to coerce school improvement (Daly & Finnigan, 2012). Increased bureaucracy and the sanctioning of schools negatively affect the professional community, limiting collaboration, risk-taking, and innovation which are all correlated to positive school improvement outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007).

Honig (2012) looked at the discrete practices of central office leaders that best supported and developed instructional based leadership in school principals. The research found continued support for the need of central office to take on the role of teacher in

supporting school principals and by doing so "…represent a fundamental shift in the role of some central offices from mainly management, monitoring, or other hands-off principal support roles to central offices operating as main agents of principal learning" (Honig, 2012, p. 35). This extends the previous research by not only discussing the role central office plays in teaching and learning that goes on within schools, but clearly posits the need of central office leaders as the main actors in working next to principals in a hands-on manner to support them in their development and capacity as instructional leaders. Research has identified building professional community with schools through collaboration, open two-way communication, and connecting schools for collaborative learning as core practices of central office leaders in supporting trust between school and central office leaders (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Chuon et al., 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2012). The following section will investigate further the practices of central office administrators and their role building trust and supporting school improvement efforts.

Building Professional Community. Professional community is defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002) as the collaborative work practices of educational professionals and the normative controls that guide this work. Further delineating**,** the researchers focused on the practices of collaboration across staff in shared work and the prevalence of reflective dialogue across professionals for their shared work. Complementing these practices, Bryk and Schneider (2002) also investigated the norms within the environment for shared responsibility and the level of focus from staff on student learning. The researchers found that schools with high-levels of professional community also had high levels of relational trust and were more successful in school improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Leithwood (2012) extended this research finding that practices within highly effective central offices' focus on creating structures and norms within the district encouraging regular and reciprocal dialogue focused on improvement efforts between school and central office leaders. Research has shown the importance of open communication pathways between central-office and school leaders in school improvement efforts and building trust (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). This open communication allows for increased transparency, shared understanding, greater efficiency (Honig, 2012; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006; Leithwood, 2012). A myriad of communication modes has been used between school and central office leaders including: email, telephone, letter, newsletter, social media, face-to-face, and/or text message. Research has suggested the positive impact of face-to-face communication in building and sustaining trust. Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) found that increased face-to-face meetings between central office leaders and school staff supported school improvement efforts through increasing shared responsibility and lowering the level vulnerability of school staff.

Research asserts that the reciprocal nature of this dialogue is of particular importance as individuals seek reciprocal as opposed to asymmetric relations. Reciprocal relations provide mutual benefit to the relationship, in effect creating a reinforcing effect (Daly & Finnigan, 2012). The strengthening of the reciprocal relationships through collaboration and reflective dialogue must also be supported by the environmental norms of shared responsibility and focus on student learning.

Summary

Drawing on a range of literature, this review concludes that a major consequence of SBA was the reduction of relational trust within educational organizations, a required ingredient for school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Daly & Finnigan, 2012). The intelligent accountability critique of SBA has emerged calling for a re-legitimization of trust, relationships, and professional community (Clapham, Vickers, & Eldridge, 2016; O'Neill, 2013; Sahlberg, 2010). Along with this a desire to reduce hierarchal structures within organizations in favor of greater horizontal structures leading to greater shared responsibility and relational trust. Central office and school leaders are at the core of the desired shift. Leadership can enact the practices of building professional community through collaboration, reflective dialogue, shared responsibility, and a focus on student learning.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the relational trust between district and school-based leadership and the role it plays in supporting or hindering improvement efforts within a standards-based accountability context. The literature on relational trust, standards-based accountability, and central office leadership practices supportive of school leadership informed the conceptual framework for the study. Research has shown the importance of relational trust in supporting a culture of innovation, problem solving, and coordinated collective action leading to school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Furthermore, researchers have found that central office and school-based leaders support improvement efforts through explicit shared theories of action and consistent communication and interactions with one another around improvement efforts (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006). Yet, research has shown that standards-based accountability sanctions have a negative impact on staff relationships leading to lower levels of trust in schools identified as requiring improvement (Finnigan, 2010; Mausethagen, 2013). Researchers have suggested that the relationships, and specifically trust, between central office and school-based leaders in improvement efforts is ripe for exploration (Daly & Finnigan, 2012).

The purpose of this capstone is to investigate the influence of practices of central office leaders within school improvement discussions on relational trust between district and school-based leadership in a standards-based accountability context. A literature review of standards-based accountability, relational trust, and central office leadership practices led to a conceptual framework displaying the connections of these topics and exploring their relationship to school improvement efforts. The conceptual framework connects central office leadership practices to relational trust with school-based leaders in

school improvement efforts within a standards-based accountability context. Following the conceptual framework, I will discuss my research design including: participants, data collection and instruments, data analysis methods, and limitations.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is supported by Bryk and Schneider's (2002) seminal research into relational trust in school improvement efforts. They found that trust, and specifically relational trust, is a required ingredient to successful school improvement efforts. The researchers define relational trust as aggregating all individual interpersonal trust decisions into an overall organizational attribute. Bryk and Schneider (2002) discovered that high levels of relational trust led to key critical organizational features of a supportive work culture with an enhanced commitment to the school and a positive orientation of staff toward change efforts. Along with the culture, the researchers also found a facilitative work structure with professional community leading to collective decision making and shared responsibility. Bryk and Schneider (2002) found these positive organizational features then fueled improvements in student engagement and learning which yielded positive student outcomes which worked to reinforce the relational trust within the environment (see *Figure 1*).

Bryk and Schneider (2002) moved beyond looking at the phenomena of relational trust in a vacuum and discussed the environmental factors, or in their terms "shaping forces", that had key influence in the expansion or restriction of relational trust. Within their study this included areas such as institutional reputation, school size, level of mutual vulnerability across parties, and specific individual forces such as social status, self-

interests, and moral-ethical motivations. These environmental factors directly influenced the individual trust disposition, interpersonal trust discernments, and thus the overall level of relational trust. While their model is helpful, it did not specifically address the emerging context of standards-based accountability and its potential influence, nor did it look at specific leadership practices that build or restrict trust across an organization.

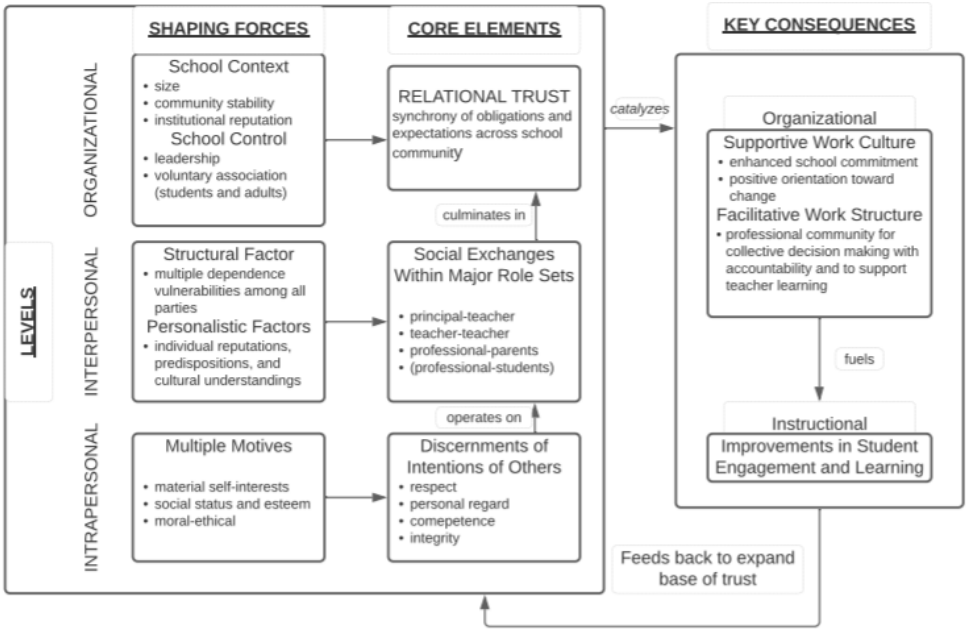

Figure 1. Relational trust as a social resource for school improvement. Reprinted from *Trust in Schools: A core resource for improvement* (p. 124), by A. Bryk & B. Schneider, 2002, New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Standards-Based Accountability Context. Bovens (2005) outlined the accountability process from actors, processes, and outcomes (see *Figure 2*). This was extended by Radin (2009) to performance accountability through the heightened focus on outcomes within the ultimate judgement. Critical to the current study is the understanding of an ultimate performance judgement within the process leading to the accountability outcomes of either affirmation or sanctions. Tying this to Bryk and Schneider (2002), positive outcomes or affirmations can lead to an expansion of trust within organization.

Conversely, negative outcomes and sanctions restrict the base of trust within the organization. This ultimate accountability judgement then has influence over both the environmental conditions within the organization and the leaderships' disposition to trust and practices.

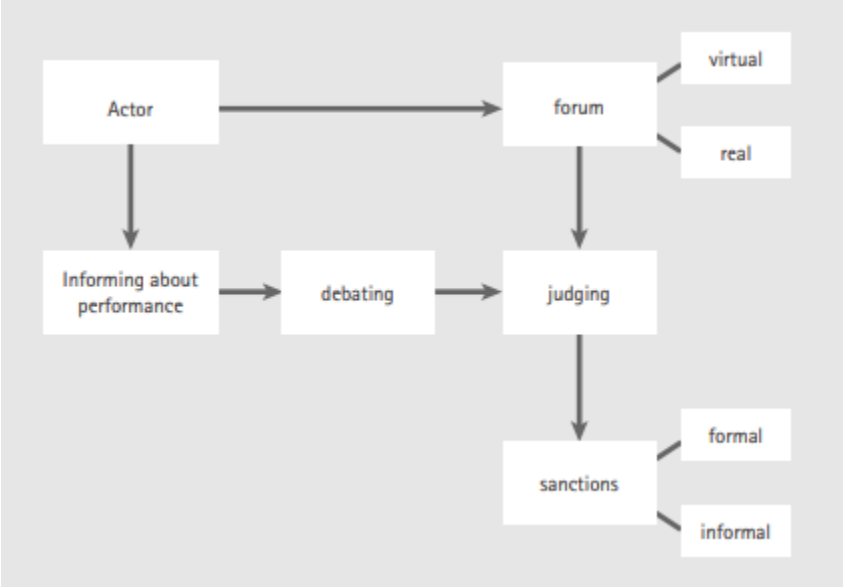

Figure 2. Accountability process. Reprinted from "Public Accountability" In *The Oxford handbook of public accountability* (p. 186), by M. Bovens, T. Schillemans, & R. E. Goodin, 2014, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

In summary, the literature shows that relational trust is a required ingredient for school improvement efforts and that accountability judgements can impact the expansion or restriction of trust within the organization. Next, I turn to how central office leaders fit into this framework. Specifically, the role central office leaders assume with schools in school improvement efforts and the leadership practices that serve to expand trust.

Role of Central Office. Trust has been identified as a required ingredient for school improvement, and yet accountability sanctions of poor performing schools act as a

constraint on developing and sustaining trust. The question emerges, what role do central office leaders play in expanding or restricting trust? Over the past fifty years central office leaders' roles have begun to shift from a focus on the management of schools to a primary role of support agent for schools (Honig, 2012; Mac Iver & Farley 2003). The shift to central office as a support agent for schools has been complicated by the role central offices play as oversight entities of sanctioned schools within the chain of standards-based accountability (Leithwood, 2013). This standards-based accountability driven oversight role for central offices asserts higher levels of rules and regulations for sanctioned schools which negatively affects the professional community, limiting collaboration, risk-taking, and innovation which are all correlated to higher levels of relational trust and positive school improvement outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007). This tension has left central offices at times operating as a support agent for schools but at other times operating as a management and oversight entity of schools. The role central office leaders assume with school leaders impacts the level of relational trust between school and central office leaders. This leads to the question of what specific practices can central office leaders employ in expanding trust?

Leadership Practices Expanding Trust. From a practitioner's lens it is important for this researcher to understand not just roles of central office leaders but also the specific practices that central office leaders employ and their impact on trust. Research has identified that leaders can build professional community through collaboration, open two-way communication, and creating opportunities for collaborative learning across professionals (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006; Bryk & Schneider, 2002;

Chuon et al., 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2012). These leadership practices are critical to study within the context of standards-based accountability to investigate the interplay between standards-based accountability and leadership practices, leading to the subsequent expansion or restriction of trust within the organization.

Summary. The central component of the conceptual framework for this capstone is relational trust between school-based and central office leaders. The conceptual framework adds to the seminal work of Bryk and Schneider (2002) by expanding the unit of study beyond the school and investigating the trust between central office leadership and school-based leadership. The current study also places an emphasis on central office leadership roles, practices, and the standards-based accountability context to derive how these elements interact with one another in the ultimate expansion or restriction of trust across central office and school-based leadership within school improvement efforts (see *Figure 3*).

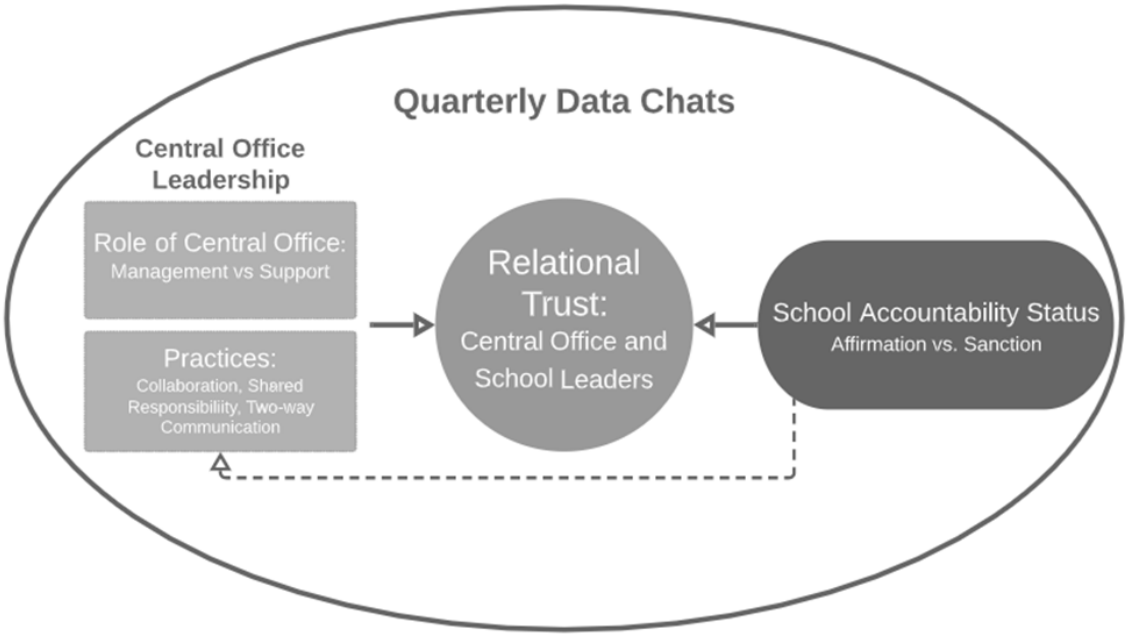

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework. Relational trust and the influence of central office leadership practices and standards-based accountability.

Research Design

The research questions, which are exploratory in nature, were investigated using a mixed-methods approach. A mixed-methods approach combines both quantitative and qualitative research approaches together. Creswell and Garrett (2008) identify the need to balance quantitative with qualitative methods in order to best address the increasingly complex problems facing educators. This study explored central office leadership roles and practices influence on trust between central and school-based leadership within a standards-based accountability context. Directed by the conceptual framework presented above (see Figure 3), the study investigated what leadership practices expand or restrict trust, and the linkages between central office leadership practices, relational trust with school leaders, and the influence of the standards-based accountability context.

The mixed methods approach allowed for the triangulation of data across methods. The power in using this approach was to allow for an investigation of the interactions across sources and methods. Maxwell (2010) argued the real difference between quantitative and qualitative approaches is not just numeric and text based. Rather, the difference is between understanding the world through variance, variables, and correlations versus understanding the world in terms of observations, perceptions, events and interactions. The triangulation of data within this study is aimed to bridge these world views in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the problem of practice.

The mixed methods approach was leveraged to investigate the relational trust between district and school-based leadership and the role it plays in supporting or hindering improvement efforts within schools and in the district overall. In this study the mixed methods approach included a survey of central and school-based leadership followed by semi-structured interviews of key central office leaders. This approach was designed to explore the following research questions:

1. What is the role of quarterly data chats in supporting or restricting relational trust between school and central office leaders in a standards-based accountability environment?

    a. How do central office leaders conceive their purpose and role in the quarterly data chats with schools?

    b. What central office leaders' practices in quarterly data chats support or hinder trust with school leaders?

    c. How, if at all, do the levels of trust between school and central office leaders vary by school accountability status?

    d. What are the differences in central office leadership practices within the quarterly data chats across schools with different accountability statuses?

The central question addresses the overall impact of central office leadership practices on trust with school leadership within the standards-based accountability context. To answer that question, my first sub-question explores how central office leaders understand the purpose of quarterly data chats and their role within the chats. The second sub-question

investigates the specific practices of central office leaders within quarterly data chats that are viewed by participants as expanding or restricting trust. The third sub-question looks at how trust between central and school leaders may vary based on school accountability statuses. The final question folds in the standards-based accountability context with behavior and will investigate any differences in central office leader practices within the quarterly chats based on school accountability statuses.

Participant Sample. This study took place in a medium sized, urban-suburban school district in the mid-Atlantic. All 17 schools within the district were included in the study. Given the focus of the study on district and school leaders, participants included principals, assistant principals, and district leaders that participated in the quarterly data chats. The survey delivered in phase one of data collection was delivered to both school (n=68) and district leaders (n=6). The document analysis in phase one focused on the official notes taken within each quarterly chat across all schools (n=17) for a single round of the quarterly data chats and a central office tracking document of school support requests and current completion status. The semi-structured interviews conducted in phase two of data collection were targeted to central office leaders (n=6) for further exploration of the research questions and further elaboration of emergent findings from phase one.

Survey design. The survey included two versions, one for school leaders and one for district leaders. The surveys incorporated items from Tschannen-Moran's (1999) validated principal and faculty survey instruments with minor adaptions to make the survey language applicable for a school-to-district comparison. For example, an item on the school leader survey for this study is "School leaders in this division trust the central

office." This was adapted from the Tschannen-Moran's original item from the faculty survey which was "Teachers in this school trust the principal." These items were used as a baseline of trust between district and school-based leadership. The survey also integrated items from Tschannen-Moran's (1999) validated school climate subscales focused on academic press, professionalism, and collegial leadership. Items from Bryk and Schneider's (2002) subscale on collective responsibility were also incorporated. These items were utilized to gauge school and central office leaders' perceptions on the topics of collaboration, reflective dialogue, shared responsibility, and a focus on student learning. Specific questions were also developed to respond to the degree of specific central office leadership roles and practices in quarterly data chats and the degree that expanded or restricted trust. Finally, open-ended questions probed what practices in particular expanded or restricted trust for school leaders.

Document collection. Each school's quarterly chat meeting minutes (n=17) as well as a central office tracking document of the status of requested school supports were collected for document analysis. The meeting minutes were reviewed seeking an understanding of the role and practices central office leader' display within the quarterly data chats; however, the minutes were inconsistent in depth and note taking and thus were used primarily as a gauge of who attended the meetings and a general understanding of topics discussed. The document analysis of the central office tracking document of the status of requested school supports from one quarter of quarterly chats was able to be accessed. The tracking document was utilized to analyze the frequency in which central office was fulfilling school support requests and to understand the types of support requests schools were making.

Semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as phase two of data collection. These interviews were targeted to all district leaders (n=6) regularly involved in the quarterly data chats. The interviews were designed to look more deeply at district leaders' perceptions of the purposed of quarterly data chats and their role within the chats, their practices that expand or restrict trust, and the influence of a school's accountability status on their practices and level of trust. These interviews included an introduction to the intent, a consenting process, and scripted questions as well as potential follow-ups.

Data collection process. Data was collected in two phases. Phase one consisted of an electronic survey consent form being distributed to all potential participants. A total of 55 school leaders and six central office leaders consented to participate in the study. All consented participants then received an email invitation with a link to an anonymous electronic survey. The response window for the survey was 17 days. Reminders were sent to non-participants three times over the course of the window to increase response rates. Phase two consisted of the district leader semi-structured interviews. After phase one was completed and initial analysis conducted, phase two began. The selected district office leaders were already consented through the survey process which also discussed their participation in a semi-structured interview. The interviews took place within a two-week window.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study took place in two phases which mirrored the data collection process. To analyze survey results both quantitative and qualitative methods

were used. To analyze responses to Likert scale survey items the researcher used quantitative methods by calculating item response frequency, mean scores, and standard deviations for each survey item to compare results across topics and respondent groups. Inferential statistics were also applied through *t*-tests to identify any significant differences in survey items within the modified Tschannen-Moran (1999) trust scale between schools with recent accountability sanctions and those without sanctions. Qualitative analysis of open-ended survey items used an initial deductive coding scheme based on the literature review and conceptual framework regarding specific central office leadership practices that led to school leaders feeling supported or unsupported (see Appendix C). All open-ended responses were then read through by the researcher and a memo was completed to capture overall takeaways and key learnings. This led to an initial review of codes with refinements in organization and the emergence of new codes. The data were then coded with additional levels of recrafting, organizing, and emergent codes through the coding process (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Similar methods of coding were used within the document analysis for grouping school support request types. Bowen (2009) found benefits of document analysis as an analytic method included: efficiency, uninfluenced by the research process, and a permanent record open for reinvestigation. Document analysis is frequently used as a method of data triangulation with other qualitative and quantitative sources studying the same phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). Bowen (2009) explained document analysis as an iterative process through initial skimming and then more in-depth reading informing coding and the organization of data to inform research questions.

Semi-structured interviews were analyzed in detail through a phased approach. First, during the interview field notes were compiled by the researcher highlighting answers to the interview questions. Immediately following each interview, the researcher used memoing to capture initial key learnings and take-aways from the interview. A review of these memos, the literature review, and conceptual framework were used to create an initial deductive coding scheme. Codes were grouped by research questions into four main areas of central office role, purpose of the quarterly chats, central office leadership practices, and the impact of standards-based accountability systems. Within each of these areas initial sub-codes were developed based on the literature review and conceptual framework. Each transcript was then reviewed individually and coded with analytic memos done after each coding session. Throughout this process as additional themes emerged across interviews through a review of memos and within coding sessions additional sub-codes were added to the code list. (See Appendix C for code book.)

Preliminary findings were reviewed within and across sources which were then reviewed collectively and an analytic memo created with each research sub-question to then combine and synthesize findings across sources by research question. Findings by research sub-question within the analytic memo were then reviewed to synthesize overall findings.

Limitations

This study looked in-depth within a single school district to generate knowledge based on the specific context analyzed. Findings from this are based within the context of the district and schools that took part in this study This case study can be used to inform

potential future research efforts across different contexts and with aim of comparing the findings from this context to those found in different contexts.

The study took a focused look at relational trust using quarterly data chats between central office and school-based leaders as a unit of analysis. Variables impacting relational trust between central office and school based-leaders extend well beyond the quarterly data chats. These are complex social interactions, and the relational trust between staff is based not only on what happens within quarterly data chats but also the historical interactions across personnel as well as future interactions between meetings that extend beyond the scope of this capstone.

Researcher Role

The role of researcher within this study was a dual role both as an internal central office staff member who participated within the quarterly chats and as a research observer. Clear delineation was a challenge at times because of my status as an "insider researcher" (Mercer, 2007), encompassing my dual role as doctoral student researcher and central office staff member. However, no data for this study were collected by the researcher while participating within the quarterly data chats, and the role of researcher was disclosed to participants with consent when data were collected. The researcher carefully considered power dynamics and existing relationships in their impact on data validity and was sensitive to not create instrumentation or situations where participants were unduly influenced in their responses and or actions based on any of these factors. Creswell and Miller (2000) found it "important for researchers to acknowledge and describe their entering beliefs and biases…and then to bracket or suspend those

researcher biases as the study proceeds" (p. 127). Having worked in the division for over ten years it is important to acknowledge a level of researcher bias as it relates to the importance of relational trust and the role central office can and should play in supporting schools in improvement efforts. These biases are based on the practical and lived experience of the researcher and were considered and buttressed against when conducting data analysis and in the reporting of findings. Response bias has also been a critical consideration based on the researcher's role within the division and the potential for other division staff to want to offer answers they feel are preferred by the researcher.

To control for research bias, I developed a research design that triangulated both sources and methods to increase the credibility of my findings. I have been diligent in the construction of the survey instrument and semi-structured interview questions to eliminate any language that conveys my personal beliefs. I also relied on critical friends and the rigorous review of my capstone committee to alleviate any potential research bias that emerged.

Summary

This capstone project aims to advance the understanding of trust between central office and school leaders within a standards-based accountability context. This was done through focusing on school improvement meetings within a single district. The impact on trust these meetings may have across leaders, and how standards-based accountability may play a role in trust across these professionals. Understanding more about how trust and standards-based accountability influence one another in school improvement efforts across school and central office leaders should be used to inform future efforts.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study investigated the role of quarterly data chats in supporting or restricting relational trust between school and central office leaders in a standards-based accountability environment. This overarching question was then explored through four subquestions focused on how central office leaders conceive their leadership roles in relation to schools; the practices central office leaders employ within the chats and the impact on trust; the manner in which levels of trust vary, if at all, by schools with accountability statuses; and differences that exist in central office leadership practices across schools with different accountability statuses.

In this section, I present findings to these questions derived from analyses of interviews, surveys, and documents. Analyses of discrete data sources were woven together by relevant themes to create integrated findings across sources. I begin by investigating how central office leaders think about the role of central office in relation to schools and specifically how they conceive their roles within the quarterly chats. With that understanding, I then explore the conditions and specific central office leaders' practices within quarterly data chats and how those supported or hindered trust with school leaders. Finally, I present findings on how the standards-based accountability context impacted trust between school and central office leaders and central office leadership practices within the chats. This section concludes with a discussion of how these findings inform answers to the primary research question about the role central office leadership plays in building or restricting relational trust with school leaders within the accountability context. Chapter Five then uses findings presented in the current

chapter to explore and refine the conceptual framework of this study and to make actionable recommendations for practitioners.

Central Office Leadership Roles (Research Subquestion 1)

Data from this subsection draw on semi-structured interviews of Stapleton Public Schools (SPS) central office leaders to better understand central office leaders' impact on relational trust in school improvement efforts. Central office leaders were asked how they conceive the role of central office and their specific leadership roles within the quarterly chats. As shown in the conceptual framework central office has been conceived as a support or management entity. The literature shows how central office roles have shifted over the past five decades since the creation of a centralized school system structure over a century ago. The spectrum of roles identified within the literature ranged from pure oversight and management of schools to support partner and resource provider to schools. Given this wide range, it is critical to first understand how central office leaders within SPS conceive of the overall role of central office and then specifically, how they understand their role within the quarterly chat. Findings from this line of inquiry intend to provide a conceptual context to the subsequent exploration of their espoused and enacted practices. Overall, findings from central office leadership interviews reveal that SPS central office leaders view the role of central office as a support agent in school improvement efforts and that these leaders assumed the specific roles of learner, support broker, and coach within the quarterly chats.

Central Office Role as Oversight versus Support. All six SPS central office leaders interviewed felt that central office played an important role in supporting schools.

The role of central office as a support aligned with the vision of the superintendent and the values of the central office staff; but a third of leaders interviewed (n=2) discussed the tension they faced in balancing the support of schools while also meeting mandated oversight job responsibilities.

In discussing the role central office, the superintendent commented, “Central office is supposed to be a support to the schools. I think a lot of times people get that role of central office wrong.” The superintendent expressed a clear view of central office as a support for schools. Half (n=3) of the central office leaders explicitly discussed how the superintendent’s vision of central office as a support aligned with their personal leadership approach. One central office leader stated, “I think my whole life as a teacher, as an assistant principal, as a principal and even in my various central office roles, I think that I’ve always had at my core, a value of support, service, collaboration, and teamwork.” Another central office leader shared how the support he received as a principal from his central office supervisor instilled his value of support as a central office leader. The superintendent commented that, as central office leaders, “We’re trying to be empathetic. We’re trying to be compassionate. We’re trying to be supportive.” Yet he went on to discuss his view of the too frequent reality of central offices taking on the role of oversight and the impact on schools. “That is why you constantly see the tension between schools and central office, because a lot of central office cultures or philosophies are that we're here to tell the schools what to do.”

The desire for alignment between values expressed by leaders and how they conceived the role of central office as a support for schools appeared to be clear from

their overarching characterizations. However, this created tension for interviewees when they discussed central office at times taking on an oversight role of schools. One leader discussing the impact of central office mandates noted, "[I]t's a top-down approach which I think really hinders the progress that organizations can make." Another leader mentioned the lack of progress through mandates and how top-down initiatives often face resistance and low implementation in schools. "…I know that it's very difficult to mandate, street-level bureaucrats like to mandate, but when you go out and check, the implementation is not occurring." SPS central office leaders showed an acute awareness of the potential misalignment between their own value in the role of central office as a support and their actions as central office leaders. This created a self-consciousness of not becoming viewed as leaders who issue top-down mandates to schools from central office. The Title I Director highlighted this tension:

> I try to do my work as a support function. At the end of the day, yes, compliance is a necessary evil, right? The basic function of my job is so that nobody goes to jail. We spend this money in accordance with the millions of laws that are there for the betterment of particular groups of students. But I can't stick in that place…That's not the relationship I have with the schools I work with.

The Title I Director expresses her value of support while also noting the necessity of her role in ensuring school compliance with federal requirements and the law. The tension between her value of support and the need for compliance leads her to note that she cannot "stick" in a compliance stance but it is a "necessary evil". She feels the need to

balance compliance requirements and her value of supporting schools through establishing supportive relationships with schools.

To advance school improvement efforts, all SPS central office leaders felt they must prioritize support for schools. Half of the leaders interviewed discussed how the role of support aligned with their own values and the tensions they faced when their job requirements mandated oversight roles ensuring compliance with federal, state, and local education requirements. One of these leaders discussed buffering this tension through established relationships with schools based on the role of support. The duality of role assumption between oversight and support and how the quarterly chats fit into the roles of central office is explored further in the next section.

Continuum of Support and Monitoring. When SPS central office leaders were asked if central office's role is one of support or oversight, all (n=6) felt this was a false choice. SPS central office leaders stated that the role of central office falls on a spectrum of support and oversight that shifts based on federal, state, and local policy requirements along with individual central office leaders' job responsibilities connected to these requirements. In this section we look further into how SPS central office leaders teased out differences in mandated oversight for compliance compared to internal monitoring for support through processes like the quarterly chats.

Three of the SPS central office leaders discussed oversight as focused on compliance and monitoring if mandated expectations were being met within schools. The Director of Special Education noted, "For me compliance is did you get your IEP done on time? Did you get your progress reports done on time? Are you meeting your deadlines?"

This framed compliance oversight as focused on binary questions aligned with meeting or not meeting compliance requirements. In particular, central office leaders overseeing programs, including as Special Education or Title I, with high levels of federal and state requirements and associated high-stakes expressed the need for oversight to ensure compliance.

Half of SPS central office leaders (n=3) made direct distinctions between the oversight of external compliance mandates and the monitoring of internal initiatives through processes like the quarterly chats. The Special Education Director in discussing the distinction between oversight for compliance and the quarterly chats noted, “What’s the quality of the programming you’re providing? So that’s where the quarterly chats fall more on we’re talking quality…Are you seeing best practices and co-teaching models? Station teaching? Parallel teaching strategies?” While leaders saw oversight for compliance focused on whether an activity was completed or not, the Special Education Director saw the monitoring of internal initiatives as more complex by focusing on not just if something is done but how well something is done.

How the information is being used was also an important theme that emerged as distinguishing between oversight activities. The Director of Special Education noted, “When you start to talk compliance that comes out as a “gotcha”. You know, you had six IEPs that weren't finished on time. That's “gotcha.”” Here the director is noting the inherent judgement and associated higher-stakes that is embedded in how information is used within compliance oversight. In checking on if district defined instructional best practices are being seen within schools and at what quality the superintendent discussed

his ability to monitor to have a deeper understanding of what is happening in schools through the quarterly chats. “I understand what's happening in our schools. You know, I don't have to read a report and try to like have a general idea of what's happening. I'm able to really understand the day to day issues and concerns.” Through his lens of support, the superintendent felt able to monitor the quality of what is happening in schools and the day-to-day challenges that schools face to better inform future support efforts.

SPS central office leaders saw the role of central office as falling on a continuum of oversight and support. While SPS leaders saw oversight for compliance focused on whether an activity was completed or not, they saw the oversight of internal initiatives through the quarterly chats as more layered by focusing on how well something is done, the challenges that emerge, and how to best support schools.

Barriers to Support. While there was a clear vision of central office serving as a support mechanism for schools, four central office leaders pointed out barriers to enacting that vision. The main themes they highlighted were the allocation of resources, frequent leadership churn, and building-level receptivity to support.

Two SPS central office leaders highlighted how the existing bureaucratic structure and lack of resources needed to change impeded central office acting as a support for schools. One leader offered an example in which a school staff member needed support to meet a federal compliance requirement yet there was no identified role within central office to support that individual in the specific task they were attempting to complete. “You [central office leaders] don’t have the control over resources you have, so what

positions you have sometimes dictates the supports…it is an organizational structure issue that prevents us from being a good support organization." This leader voiced frustration over the inability to secure and allocate resources she felt necessary for her department to best restructure itself to function as a support for schools in alignment with the superintendent's vision.

Two central office leaders also discussed the constant churn of both central office leaders and superintendents in impacting the overall functionality of central office as a support mechanism for schools. These leaders cited the frequent transitions as leading to inconsistency across departments and with a historical lack of clear vision from the superintendent it was left to individual central office leaders to decide the role of their departments and how they interface with schools. According to those interviewed this lack of consistent vision and supports for schools fed into the largest barrier, distrust.

Almost all (n=5) SPS central office leaders interviewed mentioned the lack of building level receptivity to central office support. "Some people [principals] are open and constantly [asking], what can we do better? What can you do to support? Others are like. 'I want nothing to do with you'." While some school leaders were open to support other school leaders were not receptive. This led to frustration across central office staff in attempting to support schools but at times being shut out by school leadership. In looking more closely at why this may be happening one central office leader shared, "[Y]ou have to build that trust so they value what you bring in. They have to value you, your level of service and support. … They said we don't trust and have very little confidence in the people (from central office)." This central office leader felt resistance

from schools stemmed from not trusting the quality of the support from central office and having low confidence in the staff from central office offering the support.

In summary, all SPS central office leaders felt they must prioritize support for schools. Yet half of the leaders discussed the tension created by the duality of support and oversight of schools within their day-to-day roles. SPS leaders did distinguish oversight for compliance as focused on whether an activity was completed or not, while they saw the monitoring of internal initiatives through the quarterly chats as more layered by focusing on how well something is done, the challenges that emerge, and how to best support schools. Central office leaders highlighted the barriers of limited resources and outdated organizational structures, frequent changeover of central office leadership, and lack of school receptivity to support in their ability to better support schools. As one central office leader suggested, trust appears to be an important ingredient in enabling productive central office support of schools to occur. In the next section I look into how the overarching role conceptualization of central office as support and monitoring played into leaders' understandings of their roles within quarterly meetings with school teams to discuss the work, successes, and challenges schools face in their improvement efforts.

Central Office Leadership Roles within Quarterly Chats

Central office leaders expressed value in the role of central office in supporting schools; yet they discussed some of the tensions they faced in balancing support with compliance requirements, the need to monitor school efforts, and at times resistance from school leadership to central office support efforts. Central office leaders' understanding of the role of central office is further explored through the specific context of SPS quarterly

chats and central office leaders' views of their specific roles of learner and support agent within those chats.

Role of Learner. All SPS central office leaders (n=6) noted that quarterly chats are intended to bring leadership together across central office and schools as learners in the process of school improvement. Specifically, central office leaders felt the meetings are intended to facilitate collaboration and open two-way communication between central and school-based leaders. All central office leaders interviewed discussed their role within the quarterly data chats as learners. The superintendent of SPS emphasized this point as a central tenet of his leadership:

> It provides me an opportunity to really listen. So it plays out by listening and learning, because some people, especially when you're going into the superintendent role, some of my colleagues believe you have to be the person with all the answers and you have to be the first and last person to speak. And that's really not true. The quarterly chats allow for schools and their leadership teams to take ownership in what they're doing and coming into listen, it shows that you're respecting and you value their work.

The superintendent emphasized the need to listen to school staff within the quarterly chats in order to learn. He felt many of his superintendent peers do not listen to school staff to learn and instead dominate conversations and feel the need to provide answers. He noted through listening he is showing value in the work and professionalism of school staff and empowering them to take ownership of their school improvement efforts.

The superintendent and one other central office leader extended their learning beyond specific school improvement efforts into relationships between school staff and the climate within each school. The SPS superintendent stated:

> I also have learned that there's more to schools than their school improvement plans. What I mean by that is you can tell what the culture of a school is by going to these quarterly chats. You can learn if the staff respects the leader of the building, if the leader respects the staff in the building, if they have a good rapport or not, if there's trust in that space. I'm learning all those different things. I'm taking in all of those different things from your data to your culture, to your leadership style, to your rapport with your staff, to the staff support with you as a leader, to your communication skills.

Through listening and assuming the role of the learner within the monitoring process of the quarterly chats the superintendent was able to learn and extend his knowledge of schools beyond just their specific school improvement actions into the building climate. The superintendent emphasized the importance of relationships, trust, and communication in school leaders' ability to foster an overall school climate that is necessary foundation to support school improvement work.

A central office leader further explained the learner role and the relationship between schools and central office leaders in school improvement conversations. "The conversations really go deep with all of us at the same level. We're all problem solving, dissecting, and understanding to see how we help move this school further." By assuming the role of learner and actively engaging in problem solving with school leaders this

central office leader notes the equal level between central office and school leaders. The SPS central office leaders stated that they took on the role of learner within the quarterly chats and by doing so showed value and respect in the work of school staff and empowered school leaders to take ownership of their school improvement efforts.

Role of Support Broker. All central office leaders discussed taking on the role of learner to empower schools in the challenges they confront, and a majority (n=4) discussed using this learning to support schools along the way. A central office leader from curriculum stated, “I'm listening to what's needed from my position, what does the school need in order to move forward that I have access to.” The leader is looking to identify needs within schools and then act as the bridge to provide the school with the needed supports that central office leaders have access to. Another leader highlighted using the quarterly chats to inform adjustments to supports they are already providing to schools. “I can really find out a little bit more from those quarterly chats on what's important to the leaders there…It helps me to adjust our support for them.” This central office leader is noting the importance of not just offering more support for schools but also refining current supports to best meet the current priorities and needs of school leaders. One of the central office leaders emphasized that it is not just providing everything exactly as requested by the school but, “how do you listen for what’s truly a need.” This leader underscored the need to truly listen and support school leaders by providing a bridge to delve deeper into the challenges faced and through this new understanding identifying their needed supports. These four leaders all expressed the need to support school leadership through the role of brokering. The leaders highlighted providing a bridge to school leaders to needed supports, to listening to school leader

priorities to refine existing supports, and assisting school leaders in reaching new understandings of the challenges faced and subsequent supports.

Role of Coach. Three central office leaders, including the superintendent, discussed supporting school leaders through the role of a coach. The SPS superintendent commented,

> A good leader could know the answer, but it's better for you not to say it because sometimes I may know things are going to go in the wrong direction, but I have to allow people to see that for themselves.

The superintendent felt it important for school leaders' development to learn from their own mistakes. He went on to discuss the power of individual growth and learning through "safe" mistakes. Not allowing mistakes that could have undo impact on students, but allowing those smaller mistakes to happen as a learning opportunity for the school leaders and allowing him and other central office leaders to coach and support the school leaders along the way. Two central office leaders also mentioned schools seeking feedback and coaching before and after quarterly chats. "Principals ask, "Hey, can we go over what we're thinking for the quarterly chat? What do you think?" So some of the support for the quarterly chats was actually prior to the meeting," School leaders were seeking coaching from this central office leader through his feedback and insights to prepare for the quarterly chats. One central office leader also shared principals requesting support after the quarterly chats and at times those being hard conversations based on the questioning and feedback she provided.

> It is the same as any coaching conversation… I think there's an art and a skill to those kinds of conversations. I don't want you to be defensive when we're having a difficult conversation. I want you to know that I do appreciate and care about your perspective.

The central office leader is highlighting the need for assuming the role of coach and using coaching strategies when attempting to support and grow school leaders. SPS central office leaders discussed the need to support school leaders' growth and learning through assuming the role of coach. This empowered school leaders to experience their own mistakes and then reflect and learn from them through central office leaders coaching.

Central office leaders voiced a desire and value in the role of central office in supporting schools, and discussed assuming the roles within the quarterly chats of learner, support broker, and coach. Central office leaders' felt as learners they prioritized listening to schools within the quarterly chats and by doing so showed value and respect in the work of school staff. Central office leaders also highlighted serving as bridges to necessary supports for schools and brokering access to those resources. Finally, as coaches these leaders aimed to support the development and growth of school leaders by supporting their learning through their school improvement efforts. Through these roles central office leaders aspired to understand the school improvement work within each school, broker supports and resources toward school improvement efforts, and support school leaders' growth through coaching.

Summary. To investigate the first research subquestion, SPS central office leaders were asked how they conceive the role of central office and their specific

leadership roles within the quarterly chats. All SPS central office leaders stressed the central office role of support for schools, yet half also discussed the tension between the duality of their roles in both support and required oversight functions of their jobs. Along with this duality in role, leaders noted barriers to central office acting as a support including: limited resources and outdated organizational structures, frequent changeover of central office leadership, and lack of school receptivity to support. To serve as a support for school leaders within the quarterly chats central office staff highlighted assuming the roles of learner, support broker, and coach. SPS central office leaders discussed through assuming these roles that school leaders would feel empowered to have the resources and supports needed to advance their school improvement efforts. However, as one central office leader suggested, trust appears to be an important ingredient in enabling central office to act as a support for schools in their improvement efforts. In the next section I report findings on the overall trust between central office and school leaders within SPS.

Trust between Central Office and School Leadership (Research Subquestion 2)

In this section I explore the overall level of trust and the specific components of trust between central office and school leadership. The previous section outlined that central office leaders felt their role was one of support for schools. The premise of this subquestion is that trust is an important ingredient in allowing central office to act as a support for schools in their school improvement efforts.

School Leaders Trust of Central Office Leadership. School leaders (n=45) were invited to complete a survey based on a subscale from Tschannen-Moran's (1999)

validated faculty trust survey instrument. The original subscale contained eight questions measuring faculty members' trust in principals with minor adaptions made to query school leadership trust in central office. While central office leaders in interviews voiced a strong desire to act as a support for schools, results on the school leadership trust of central office leaders subscale showed low levels of trust. Over one in four (29%) school leaders surveyed disagreed that they trust central office leadership. Forty percent of school leaders surveyed felt that central office leaders do not tell them what is really going on. Thirty-six percent felt that school leaders are suspicious of most of the actions done by central office leaders. An analysis of individual responses within this subscale showed large uniformity in response patterns. School leaders who disagreed with having trust in central office leaders (n=13) also selected negative response options across all other items in the subscale.

Central Office Leaders' Trust of School Leadership. Central office leaders (n=6) were invited to complete a survey based on a subscale from Tschannen-Moran's (1999) validated principal trust survey instrument. The subscale used contained eight questions measuring principals' trust in faculty with minor adaptions made to query central office leadership trust in school leaders. Results on the central office leadership trust of school leaders subscale showed higher levels of trust (mean=4.64) than seen in the principal survey (mean=4.09). Six out of eight items had mean scores at or above the overall subscale mean. The largest outlier was four out of six (67%) central office leaders (mean= 3.33) agreeing with the statement, "I question the competence of some of the division's school leaders." Within the central office leadership survey there was one leader who disagreed that they trusted school leadership. This respondent selected

negative response options for all other items in the subscale and was the only central office leader choosing those options in every other question except for the previously discussed question focused on the competence of school leaders.

Central Office Trust Compared to School Leadership Trust. Within SPS, survey results indicated that school leadership (mean=4.09) had lower levels of trust in central office leaders than central office leaders (mean=4.64) had of school leaders. Response to subscale items varied across the two groups as well. In the survey, school leaders expressing distrust of central office leaders most frequently cited openness, honesty, and reliability from central office leaders as the most problematic areas.

In contrast to findings from interviews of central office leaders, survey results showed many school leaders (40%) did not feel that central office leaders were open to discourse and truly confronting the challenges the district faced. In response to an open-ended survey question of when school leaders felt unsupported, one school leader stated,

> A point when I felt particularly unsupported by central office was during the discussion about special education. What led to that feeling was what felt like defensiveness about special education practices instead of being open to what we need and what works in our building.

This leader highlighted central office staff assuming a defensive posture rather than taking on the supportive roles characterized in the preceding section. The leader noted in particular how out of touch central office appeared to be with the actual needs and ways of working in their schools.

In addition to identifying a defensive posture, school leaders mentioned a range of other deficiencies. In response to an open-ended survey question, a school leader discussed the lack of vulnerability displayed, “It has become an act of one upmanship among schools and the trust to be vulnerable is not yet there.” Beyond openness and honesty, school leaders most frequently cited reliability as a concern. Twenty-four percent of survey respondents disagreed that central office leadership could be relied upon. In response to an open-ended survey question, five school leaders cited specific instances of a lack of follow through on requests made for central office support as leading to them feeling unsupported. Another leader shared, “At some quarterly chats we had great collaborative ideas on how to improve, the follow up however was lacking.” For school leaders responding to the survey, the areas of openness, honesty, and reliability were most cited as areas where breaches of trust were present with central office leaders.

Central office leaders responding to the survey on the other hand most frequently cited a perceived lack of competence in their trust of some school leaders. While four out of six central office leaders surveyed cited a concern in the competence of some school leaders, three of them clarified within their interviews that this sentiment pertained to a small number of school leaders overall. In speaking to some of the trust challenges one central office leader noted, “That's tied to a particular school or subset of schools…and I know my colleagues would identify some of the same issues that I would in that regard.” Another leader reiterated this sentiment saying, “…central office staff having some questions about some of our school leaders…just a few of them.” While competence of

school leaders did emerge as a concern for central office leaders data from interviews of central office leaders suggest it was targeted to a small number of school leaders.

Overall, trust of central office leaders from school leaders within SPS is lower than central office leadership trust in school leaders. School leaders reported lower levels of trust in central office leadership cited the areas of openness, honesty, and reliability. Central office leaders for their part cited specific cases of concerns of competence of school leadership. With the concerns of trust in SPS between central office and school leaders acting as a barrier to central office as a support agent in school improvement efforts, I next explore the specific conditions and central office leadership practices seen within the SPS quarterly chats and their ability to either support or hinder trust with school leaders.

Central Office Leadership Practices and Conditions Influencing Trust (Research Subquestion 2)

In order to better understand the overall research question focused on the role that quarterly chats play in supporting or hindering relational trust across school and central office leaders, in this section I explore the specific central office leadership practices within the quarterly chats and the conditions influencing trust. As noted above, one of the key findings of this study is that SPS central office leaders viewed central office as a support mechanism for school improvement efforts and their specific roles as learners and agents of support within the quarterly chats. When asked if central office and school leaders engage in collaborative inquiry in search of improved methods of instruction 80% (n=35) of school leaders agreed while 66% (n=4) of central office leaders agreed. As

noted in earlier findings, central office leaders felt the quarterly chat was a support structure that aimed to allow collaborative inquiry focused on school improvement. The question that emerges is why do some leaders not agree?

In this section I further explore the specific central office leadership practices and conditions within quarterly chats and the impact these practices and conditions had on building or constricting trust between school and central office leaders. Overall findings suggest the coaching practices of listening, questioning, affirming, and providing constructive feedback can support school leaders and their trust in central office leadership. In addition to coaching practices, the central office leadership practices of seeking coherence, and following through on promises are key in supporting schools and building trust. Beyond these practices, the conditions within quarterly chats of shared responsibility and psychological safety emerged as critical components to supporting trust and open and transparent conversations regarding school improvement efforts. Findings show the absence of these central office leadership practices and conditions within the quarterly chats constrained trust and impeded collaborative inquiry focused on school improvement.

The "Dog and Pony Show". Three central office leaders discussed how SPS as a division historically had used quarterly meetings between central office leaders and school leaders within schools facing federal and/or state accountability sanctions. These targeted "governance" meetings were focused on tracking accountability indicators throughout the year to ensure improvement within sanctioned schools. "An early hurdle that we had to overcome was our history of only taking a team of central office people to

a school when there was a problem." The governance meetings were in the opinion of one central office leader, "…seen by the schools as oversight. It felt too negative." The superintendent shared in starting the quarterly chats, "People were defensive initially because the culture before was, if we say something wrong about your data, you're going to be doomed or you're in trouble. That's all they knew." Central office leaders saw school leaders equating the new quarterly chats within SPS to the historic high-stakes targeted governance meetings within accountability sanctioned schools.

This led to what all central office leaders (n=6) interviewed and three school leaders surveyed discussed as "the dog and pony show" nature of some quarterly chats within SPS. The superintendent said, "The first few data chats, it was a dog and pony show…but I knew that that's how it was going to be because everybody was trying to impress me as the new superintendent." Beyond building rapport with the new superintendent, another central office leader tied the initial performance nature of the chats to school leaders' fear of potential punishment. "When we started the quarterly chats, I think the initial reaction to that was that it was a punitive measure or had the potential to lead to punitive measures." This central office leader went on to discuss how some school leaders were only willing to discuss school improvement efforts that were going well because of fear of negative consequences.

Three school leaders also reported feeling that the quarterly chats were conducted in a high stakes environment and were not authentic, open, or transparent conversations. One school leader responded in an open-ended survey question, "It often feels like a dog and pony show followed by very few questions that are useful in practice." Another

school leader shared, “Honestly, the quarterly data chats feel like a "show and tell" focused on appeasing members of the central office team, whereas the real work of school improvement happens on the ground during the daily operations of the school.” These school leaders highlighted the disconnect they saw between the day-to-day work in schools to improve and the quarterly chats. They noted how the incongruence between the work in schools and what was presented to central office within the chats led to a feeling of inauthenticity within the chats and a lack of utility.

In their open-ended survey responses school leaders also discussed some of the reasons they attributed to the “dog and pony” feeling within the chats.

> I would say I have felt a power dynamic in quarterly chat meetings that makes the conversation unbalanced and just not candid. We enter the meetings in a protective stance… The atmosphere is most definitely not collegial or one of a "problem-solving" nature.

The school leader noted the asymmetric power dynamics they felt within the quarterly chats leading to a lack of transparency. The leader also highlighted the fear of punishment and the lack of collegiality and problem-solving within the chats. Another school leader agreed with this stating, “We push around data, but it is generally conducted in an environment of high pressure that takes away from the spirit of mutual inquiry and authenticity in joint problem solving.” These school leaders noted the uneven power dynamics and high-stakes environment they felt within the chats with school staff coming to the meetings in a “protective stance”. The school leaders highlighted how this

environment took away from a feeling of collegiality, authenticity, and shared problem solving.

A central office leader when thinking about why certain schools felt more like “a dog and pony show” said, “The [school] leader isn't comfortable showing their vulnerabilities because of the lack of trust. They don't feel like if I'm honest about the things that aren't going well, that I'm going to be supported.” The central office leader pointed to the need for trust between school and central office leaders in order for school leaders to feel safe being vulnerable in discussing their challenges. As reported above, the lack of trust noted by this central office leader is supported by the school leadership survey results where 29% (n=13) of school leaders disagreed with the statement that they can trust central office leaders. Further, 29% (n=13) of school leaders also disagreed with the statement that central office leaders act in the best interests of school leaders.

While certain schools and central office quarterly chats struggled with the “dog and pony show” feeling within quarterly chats others reported being able to move past this into more authentic school improvement dialogues and collaboration. The Title I Director in discussing Title I schools said,

> This was going to go fine in the Title I schools, because they're used to doing that. They already know what to expect. It was a little more challenging for some of our other schools, because they think that this was going to be some kind of ‘gotcha’.

The Title I Director pointed to the familiarity of Title I schools in having data discussions with central office staff as a benefit in their initial approach to the quarterly chats and not feeling as though they operated in a high-stakes “gotcha” environment. The superintendent also discussed schools moving beyond the “dog and pony” show.

> Then when people began to see that this is not a dog and pony show, and I do read these documents before I come in here and I get to the point, I don't want to hear all the fluff, I want to get to the data and have open discussions.

The superintendent highlighted schools seeing his preparation for the meetings and developing an understanding that he wanted to have transparent discussions around the data and improvement efforts, The superintendent was able to point to a specific instance where a school team became defensive in initial conversations around their data but through time came and multiple chats came to understand the purpose of the chats.

> I think they realized we weren't there to ridicule or to criticize. We were there to talk through what the data's saying and to see how we could support… they realized that exposing our deficits is not to your demise. It really is to support and to make it better.

The superintendent highlights the shift he saw in the school team from thinking the chats were high-stakes and punitive in nature to seeing them as a support structure in advancing their school improvement efforts. He went on to discuss how the school in the third chat requested central office support and were more open to collaboration with central office staff where before there had been reluctance.

School and central office leaders reported some school's quarterly chats feeling inauthentic and performative in nature. These school leaders reported sensing uneven power dynamics and a high-stakes environment within the chats. The school leaders highlighted how this environment took away from a feeling of collegiality, authenticity, and shared problem solving. Other schools however were reported by central office leaders to have moved past this "dog and pony" show into a lower stakes environment where transparent collaborative conversations took place and supports were requested to advance school improvement efforts. What central office leadership practices assisted schools in moving beyond the "dog and pony" show? In the following three sections I explore specific central office leadership practices and how they either assisted or hindered moving school teams beyond a "protective" stance and into a more open and trusting position within the quarterly chats.

The Power of Listening and the Art of Questioning. The central office leader roles of learner and coach were enacted through the central office leadership practices of listening and questioning. In having a reflective dialogue all (n=6) SPS central office leaders cited the importance of listening to school leaders and their teams within the quarterly chats. One central office leader further explained, "…really listening and trying to understand." The superintendent reinforced the practice of listening by stating, "…an opportunity to really listen…some of my colleagues believe you have to be the person with all the answers and you have to be the first and last person to speak, and that's really not true." Central office leaders highlighted the need to listen intently to schools within the quarterly chats to seek a deeper understanding of their school improvement efforts.

When school leaders were asked in an open-ended survey item for the time in quarterly chats they felt most supported, four of them discussed feeling listened to. One school leader stated, “The response to our data sharing was validated by restating our work. It felt like we were actually being listened to when the central office staff were able to restate what we shared.” The inverse of this also proved true for five school leaders. When asked in an open-ended survey item when they felt most unsupported, one school leader stated, “When some central office staff spent more time on their phones than engaged in our presentation.” Another stated, “Central office members were often late to the meeting or had to leave early. It showed that it was not a priority.” Central office leaders practicing active listening to seek understanding within the SPS quarterly chats supported trust with school leadership, while instances where school leaders did not perceive they were being listened to hindered trust.

In addition to listening, both central office and school leaders pointed to the importance of questioning within the quarterly chat dialogues. The superintendent highlighted a point within a chat when a school team turned defensive.

> We [central office leaders] didn't get defensive back. We just kept asking questions about the data and asking them to help us understand. I think that if we would've engaged and said look at this, this is why you're wrong. If we would've done that approach, then I don't think we would've seen them have that paradigm shift after that session.

The superintendent noted the importance of central office leaders not assuming a defensive posture and instead continuing to ask questions of school staff in seeking

understanding. He felt central office leaders continuing to seek understanding through questions assisted school staff in future sessions shift from a defensive to more open stance. Another central office leader shared, “I use questioning as a strategy to problem solve. I learned a long time ago that I didn't have to have all the answers. People can have the answers and my job is to support them in getting there.” This leader highlighted how questioning can be used as a strategy to assist school leaders in problem solving and reaching answers. Both of these central office leaders were clear that questioning can be a strategy in seeking clarification, and can be used as a coaching practice in pushing a conversation forward and helping school leaders problem solve and uncover new ideas.

In contrast with central office leaders, school staff reported both feeling supported and unsupported by questioning from central office leaders. In an open-ended survey response, one school leader stated feeling most supported when, “It felt like we were actually being listened to when the central office staff were able to restate what we shared, ask legitimate questions that indicated that they were paying attention.” Another stated, “Being listened to first and then asking questions that got to the heart of what we were doing as a school.” However, questioning can also lead to school leaders feeling unsupported. In an open-ended survey response one school leader stated, “We shared the work we were doing to strengthen the collaboration between special education and general education teacher. A central office leader asked "Will this really move the needle?" and we said "We'll see when the scores come out.”” Although in the form of a question, the central office leader in this instance was perceived as expressing doubt in the efficacy of the school’s plan which created a defensive reaction from the school leader. Questions from central office leaders framed in a way to affirm what they heard,

and directed to probe deeper into the key school improvement efforts made school staff feel supported. On the other hand, questions school leaders perceived as judgements from central office leaders reaffirm asymmetric power dynamics and elicited defensiveness and feelings of not being supported from school leadership.

Central office leaders intended that the practices of listening and questioning within quarterly chat sessions as means of expressing to school leaders that they valued their school improvement efforts. Further, questioning from central office leaders intended as a demonstration of understanding of school improvement efforts made school leaders feel supported, according to school leaders themselves. On the contrary, not listening and asking questions that were perceived by school leaders as thinly veiled judgements were also sharply felt by school leaders and led to feelings of not being supported by central office staff in school improvement efforts.

Providing Affirmation and Constructive Feedback. Findings showed the central office leadership role of coaching enacted through the practices of listening and questioning. In addition, findings presented in this section show the role of coaching enacted through the central office leadership practices of providing affirmation and constructive feedback to school leaders. Central office leaders through interviews stated a desire to function as a support for schools. Survey results indicate that eighty-nine percent (n=40) of school leaders and all (n=6) of central office leaders surveyed felt that central office and school leaders help and support each other. Eleven school leaders in response to an open-ended survey question stated feeling most supported in moments of receiving positive affirmation from central office leaders within the quarterly chats. One

school leader stated in their open-ended survey response, “Our administrative team and teacher leaders were praised for our transparency and honesty when assessing our data. We were also commended for our building-wide strategies which addressed our particular areas of growth in regard to meeting student academic goals.” The school leader highlighted how receiving affirmation for their transparency within the quarterly chat and their building-wide improvement strategies from central office leaders made them feel supported. The superintendent discussed the purposeful strategy behind these affirmations.

> One thing that we all are as educators, regardless of your role, is we are people pleasers and that's why we got into this profession. We like to follow the rules, we like to get things right, and we like to get affirmation.

The superintendent stressed the importance of affirmation for educators who in his view are individuals who value structure, want to do things well, and are reinforced in their efforts through validation. Positive statements from central office leaders affirming the school improvement work going on within schools made many school leaders feel supported through the quarterly chat structures.

Along with positive affirmation, central office leaders discussed the need at times to provide direct feedback to principals. However, three central office members spoke to how this type of feedback was done individually and not within the quarterly chat meetings themselves. The superintendent discussed discrete feedback to principals regarding the format and dialogue within the quarterly chats.

> I try to give people hints along the way too. Like when principals end up talking the whole meeting and no one on their staff was able to get anything in. Then, you know, I sent an email like, “Why don't you let the staff talk sometimes?”

The superintendent noted how he would give direct feedback, in this case via email, to individual principals outside of the quarterly chats. In this excerpt he highlighted direct feedback regarding allowing more participation from their staff to increase open dialogue within the quarterly chats. There were also times the superintendent discussed having significant concerns regarding a principal and their school improvement efforts and how he provided that feedback. The superintendent said,

> I think it's embarrassing and I think it is condescending and disrespectful to address someone's flaws, especially leaders in front of their staff…So I might have some real tough conversations one-on-one and I might not say anything positive about you, but I won't say anything negative in front of your staff about you.

Here the superintendent again noted the importance of having difficult feedback conversations in a one-on-one setting so as to not undermine a school leader in front of their staff.

The superintendent also would leverage other central office leaders to work individually with principals to provide feedback and support them. One central office leader stated,

> There were many times when the superintendent would call me as we're leaving, we're all in our cars leaving and say, “Hey, can you follow up with the principal on this? Right, like something I didn't want to say in the meeting, but I don't want that to happen again in the next meeting. And here's my perception. And can you work with them?”

The central office leader pointed out that at times there was feedback that the superintendent did not want to deliver within the quarterly chat but did want to have it delivered individually to the school’s leader. The central office leader also shared that many times school principals would also reach out to her seeking support and feedback on the quarterly chat sessions. “These conversations that were had, whether I initiated it or the principal, those conversations to me always really felt like, proof that trust exists.” Here the leader noted that in order to have these feedback conversations with principals that trust between her and the school leader was needed.

The superintendent also discussed providing feedback not just to school leaders but also to his central office leaders. He noted this feedback was targeted at ensuring his central office team was coming from a place of support and not disrespect of school leaders when there were significant concerns.

> …not to tolerate the disrespect and to call out some of that, like, well, why do you say that about the principal? Or how can you talk about the school when you were here, you hired that person, you know, or you've been in this supervisory role for all these years. And I'm just trying to understand, like, what did you do to help the matter?

Through calling out disrespectful statements from central office leaders he aimed to reinforce his vision of central office as a support to schools and to ensure the central office team was aligned to that vision.

> When disrespect happens having to have those tough conversations behind closed doors. I think it's important to point out that you're trying to go in a different direction, meaning we're trying to be empathetic. We're trying to be compassionate. We're trying to be supportive. If you're not that type of person, I think the more I talk about it, the more you will realize you're really not a good fit for the team.

The superintendent highlighted the need to have these feedback conversations to continuously message to his staff the value of support. He noted by directly addressing actions of central office leaders not aligned to these values the effect that had on individual leaders in assessing their fit with the direction of the team overall.

Overall, survey results showed that a vast majority of SPS school and central office leaders reported that they help and support each other. Over a quarter of school leaders surveyed discussed feeling most supported within the quarterly chats when their teams received affirmations for their work from central office leaders. Central office leaders through interviews also noted the importance of providing feedback to school leaders. The superintendent discussed the importance of this feedback being done in a one-on-one setting outside to the quarterly chat meetings. He also highlighted the importance of providing feedback to his central office leaders to align his team around

supporting schools and to deliver consistent messaging when he felt this was not happening.

Seeking Coherence. Findings showed the central office leadership role of support broker enacted through the practice of checking for alignment between school priorities and the supports and priorities of central office leaders. Half of central office leaders (n=3) interviewed pointed to the important practice of checking for coherence between their department as well as larger organizational efforts. The Director of English Learning (EL) stated:

> I find out what is important to each school, what each school is focusing on to match that with what I'm hearing from our instructional specialists, who work closely in the schools, to see if that's aligned and then to hear how we can best support them on what they're prioritizing.

The Director of EL offered that in checking for alignment, her goal was not to have schools conform to her department's efforts, but instead to adjust and refine how her department's supports best aligned with the priorities and needs expressed by schools while still aligning with their overall objectives.

On the other hand, the Director of Special Education gave equal priority to her department's agenda, emphasizing the alignment between the school improvement plans, her department plan, and what is actually happening in schools during the course of the school year. "We look for a relationship between those two plans…It is a way for me to open the door to that conversation, to see the interrelationship and the link between those

two plans and to understand how they're making decisions." The superintendent reinforced the role of alignment when he discussed the SPS strategic plan. "It allows me to observe how the high-level strategic planning components make it into our schools… it's hard to capture that in a metric, but it does allow me to see the strategic planning work come to fruition." These central office leaders used the quarterly data chats to check alignment between what was happening in the schools and their department's or district's overall plans. Some central office leaders used this alignment to make necessary refinements and adjustments to maximize their support efforts with schools, while others checked for alignment of schools to their plans.

Walking the Walk. Findings showed the central office leadership role of support broker was supported with the practice of central office leaders seeking coherence. Along with coherence, findings also conveyed the importance of the central office leadership practice of follow through in delivering supports to schools. In responses to open-ended survey questions, fourteen school leaders discussed the feeling of support when schools were asked the question within the chats what they needed to advance their school improvement efforts. One school leader shared in their open-ended survey response they felt most supported, "When the question was posed, how can central office support or what needs do we have." Twelve school leaders shared how the delivery of requested supports made them feel supported. One leader within their open-ended survey response said,

> We brought up a concern that we felt with support our instruction could improve. They [central office leaders] went right back and opened a task force to address

> the issue. The result was that there was a great need and funding was put toward it as well as resources.

The school leader notes that their concern was immediately acted upon by central office leaders and that they saw tangible results in the form of funding and additional resources to address their need. Another school leader shared, “There was additional support from the central office curriculum department following my meeting. I was pleased that the supports were specific, timely, and consistent.” This leader again noted the timely nature of the supports and that they were specific to their school’s context and delivered consistently.

While fourteen school leaders reported feeling supported through follow through from central office leaders, there were also examples brought up by five school leaders where supports discussed within quarterly chats were not delivered. One leader shared within their open-ended survey response,

> I was told that central office support would be coming. It not only did not show up, but after contacting personnel in the central office and not getting any response, I knew that I would not get the help that had been told to me by the superintendent.

This leader highlighted the lack of follow through on supports promised by central office staff and their frustration in not getting a response when they inquired about the supports. Two of the five school leaders discussed specific requests for additional personnel that either was not fulfilled or not completed in alignment with what the school felt was

needed. One leader shared in their open-ended survey response, “While that request was ultimately fulfilled in the sense that a position was created, the role of that person did not take into account any of the actual supports we recommended when defining what we needed.” The school leader notes the importance of not just the support being delivered, but also the need for the support when delivered to align and meet the expectations of school staff. These five school leaders reinforced the importance of follow through by central office leaders on agreed upon supports as the failure to do so left them feeling unsupported in their school improvement efforts.

A document analysis was conducted to investigate the nature of schools’ support requests through the quarterly chats and if those supports were in fact delivered. The analysis was conducted using the central office quarterly chat school request management file for the quarter one chats of the 2019-2020 school year. The document contained action item requested, school name, central office leader responsible, status of action item completion, and a notes area. There was a total of 78 action items listed. Prior to the start of the second quarter 22% (n=17) of items were completed, 31% (n=24) were in-progress, and 47% (n=37) were listed as not started. Sixty-five percent (n=11) of completed items were additional supports, resources, and refinements of existing programming. Examples of items falling in these categories were, “additional tier two math resources for high school students” or “review teacher schedules to address concerns of too many co-teachers and no common planning time.” Eighty-three (n=20) of items in-progress were additional supports for existing programs and professional learning for staff.

The largest category of action items, 47%, fell within the not started status. Fifty-one percent of not started items fell across a range of categories including: additional supports of existing programming (n=9), professional learning (n=6), and operations (n=4). The other 49% (n=18) of not started items fell into two areas of either requests for new programs (n=6) or requests for additional staffing (n=12). In total there were 15 additional staffing requests from schools and 80% (n=12) went unfulfilled within the timeframe. Likewise, 75% (n=6) of requests for new programming were marked as "not started" within the tracking document. There was a wide range of action items from schools stretching from additional resources and refinements for existing programming all the way to brand new programs and additional staffing.

School leaders reported feeling supported by central office when requested supports from the quarterly chats were delivered in a timely manner aligned with their expectations. School leaders highlighted feeling unsupported when requested supports were not delivered at all with no explanation from central office as to why. A document analysis showed almost half (47%) of all requests made within one round of quarterly chats were in "not started" status by the time the next round of chats occurred.

Better Together. Findings showed central office leaders within SPS attempted to act as a support for schools through the roles and practices noted in this chapter. Along with roles and practices, the conditions in which the quarterly chats took place were discussed by central office and school leaders. Specifically, leaders across schools and central office noted shared responsibility or lack thereof as a key component.

The SPS quarterly chats were designed to serve the purpose of having regular dialogue between school and central office leaders focused on their improvement efforts. One central office leader pointed out, "A part of the original plan for the chats was to create the space for shared conversations across school and central office staff." This central office leader highlighted that the structure of the quarterly chats with each school and central office leadership were built to allow for reciprocal dialogue across schools and central office focused on improvement efforts. A document review of quarterly chat minutes showed a diverse range of school staff attending the meetings in each school. School staff representatives including classroom teachers, special education teachers, English learner teachers, instructional coaches, student services staff (school counselors, social workers, nurses), and support staff were represented in each school's chat. One school leader in their open-ended survey response cited feeling particularly supported through, "…inviting other staff to our meetings. Central office staff and schools can speak to the level of collaboration and support."

Opening the doors and inviting a range of school staff to the meetings allowed for an opportunity to create a better shared understanding between school and central office staff and provided direct access to decision-makers. The leader of the SPS Curriculum office stated, "It reduces the silos…It puts people in a cross-functional sense that are not in school, in schools, and I think it gives us an opportunity to demonstrate the cross-functional work of the central office staff." The leader highlights how the chats reduced typical work silos and brought groups of staff together to work across central office and school roles.

One central office leader in speaking about the benefits of having this diverse group of staff come together said, “I really think that they, because the diversity of the individuals from the central office and the fact of bringing teachers in and the all the diversity says, you matter, your results are our results, we are in this together.” The leader highlighted how by having all the different staff come together for the quarterly chats sent a message of shared ownership and “we are in this together”. All central office staff interviewed (n=6) discussed the importance of coming together for these discussions with school staff. Capturing this sentiment, one central office leader said,

> We’re not going to sit in a central office and tell you everything to do. We're going to take time out of our schedules and be here with you and help problem-solve to show our commitment…In these chats we're not blaming anyone. We're taking full responsibility also, and we're not leaving it just to you to own making it better. We're saying together… that we are right here with you…

The leader noted the importance of through collective problem solving within the chats showing that both central office and school staff take responsibility for school improvement and mutually own the outcomes. The condition of shared responsibility was also highlighted by two school leadership staff when asked in an open-ended survey item when they felt most supported. One school leader stated they felt most supported, “when central office and school leaders took collective responsibility for a concern and problem-solved together.” The other school leader also focused on lowering the vulnerability for school staff through stating, “Roundtable discussions which did not point out what central office had already done for us or had already purchased, rather the discussion was

around how we (collective) would work together to improve teacher performance and student achievement."

The sentiment of shared responsibility, however, was not felt by all school leadership. One school leader shared via their open-ended survey response, "The space and feelings that are generated in these meetings, literally, the setup, school administration teams facing central office officials, and it epitomizes the defensiveness that is immediately present. It feels like the accused is facing the accuser." Survey results of school leaders showed that only 56% (n=25) of school leaders felt that most central office leaders take responsibility for improving schools. Central office leaders did not differ in this sentiment with 67% (n=4) feeling that most central office leaders take responsibility for improving schools. Conversely, school leaders expressed that 93% of school leaders take responsibility for improving schools. The gap between school and central office leaders' perceptions of who takes responsibility for school improvement efforts and the incongruence between central office leaders messaging of "together" represents a challenge for SPS in building the trust necessary to advance school improvement efforts across all schools.

Summary. SPS central office leaders viewed central office as a support mechanism for school improvement efforts and their specific roles within the quarterly chats of learner, support broker, and coach. However, some school leaders reported the quarterly chats as feeling inauthentic and performative while others reported being able to move past this "dog and pony show". Findings showed that the coaching practices of listening, questioning, affirming, and providing constructive feedback, seeking alignment

between division and school initiatives, and following through on supports for schools were practices intended from central office leaders as a means of expressing that they valued and were partners in supporting schools' improvement efforts, When these practices were present and perceived as being from a stance of support, school leaders reported that the practices made them feel supported in their school improvement work. However, findings showed school leaders reporting inconsistency in both the presence and the application of these central office practices leading some school leaders to report feeling unsupported in their improvement efforts and remaining in a "protective" stance within the quarterly chats.

The Influence of Accountability (Research Subquestions 3 and 4)

As shown in the conceptual framework standards-based accountability judgements may have a role in relational trust and central office leadership practices with schools. Chapter Two discussed the relevant literature highlighting the standards-based accountability environment within the United States education system over the past three decades. The quarterly chats and all school improvement efforts within SPS were happening within the broader environment of standards-based accountability systems in U.S. education. This section focuses on reporting findings related to how levels of trust vary, if at all, by schools with state or federal accountability sanctions, and what differences exist in central office leadership practices across schools either with or without these sanctions. Overall, findings show that trust levels between central office and school leadership did not vary based on school accountability statuses. Central office leaders did not describe different roles or practices when supporting sanctioned schools

but did emphasize the importance of affirming the work of the school, avoiding blame, providing constructive feedback, and modeling shared responsibility as ways to best advance school improvement. Through their roles and practices central office leaders positioned themselves as mediators for school leadership of the increased external pressure and scrutiny that accompanies a standards-based accountability sanction.

Accountability Context and Central Office Leadership Roles. When asked how their roles may vary for schools under standard-based accountability sanctions SPS central office leaders did not feel their roles changed. However, they did highlight the need for even more focus on emphasizing support and service and maintaining a role of learner. Four of six SPS central office leaders discussed the impact on school leaders of being labeled through sanctions within standards-based accountability systems and the need to assume the role of support and service. The superintendent shared, "…they're already beaten down. So continuing to beat them down is not going to help." Another SPS central office leader mentioned the increased stakes for school leadership, "that level of accountability, cranks up the fire a little bit." With the increased pressure on schools through sanctions another central office leader stated,

> It does increase their anxiety a little bit in terms of what needs to happen. I think that that results in increased attention. The question is what kind of attention is it? Do people feel like it's compliance rather than support attention?

This central office leader highlighted the increased anxiety and attention that these school leaders faced as a sanctioned school. They underscored the importance of how

these school leaders perceived central office leaders increased attention as either being from a support or compliance stance.

The superintendent spoke to the importance of maintaining a supportive role and not adopting the role of an oversight entity. If central office leaders assume the role of oversight the superintendent said, “You lose trust and you also are disrespectful. You're not respecting the profession of school leaders…and most people don't respond positively to that. People become defensive and they become paranoid.” The superintendent noted that if central office leaders took a punitive stance with “beaten down” school leaders it does not advance improvement efforts because trust is diminished and school staff respond by assuming a defensive and protective stance. In order to maintain the support and service role specifically with sanctioned schools’ three central office leaders pointed to the importance of prioritizing supportive relationships with these school leaders. The superintendent also highlighted the need for supportive relationships with these school leaders.

> You have to kind of meet them where they are and find something positive that they are doing, even if it's just showing up at work, you know, so that you can start there and begin to develop a roadmap.

The superintendent noted the importance of no matter how small starting with “something positive” to begin to build positive relationships and focus on the path forward and the roadmap to improving the school outcomes.

Two other SPS central office leaders discussed the initial defensiveness of school leaders under standards-based accountability sanctions and the importance to continue to assume a role of support and service.

> Every principal gets defensive and tries to figure out who goes under the bus. Which can, I think, start to erode some of the trust built up unless, the people who are there from central office come back and say, okay, so now that you've been able to take a deep breath, like how do we support you in doing this.

The central office leader reinforced the stress school leaders of sanctioned schools are placed under and the initial reaction to become defensive and blame others. The leader highlighted the role of central office leadership to display empathy and maintain a supportive stance for school leaders. Another SPS leader emphasized the need for school leaders in sanctioned schools to feel the role of support from central office and shared ownership. “How are we going to figure this out? How can we work together to resolve this? As opposed to you’re in trouble and I'm just going to hound you about it.” One central office leader shared that they perceived variability among some central office leaders in valuing the need to take a support frame with sanctioned schools.

> I think that varies from person to person, because I think that's about your own personal leadership style and how you best think you're going to produce outcomes. Some people really believe that like, relationship be damned, you just better do it, and that does not build trust as we know.

This leader noted the role that individual leaders' beliefs played their approach with sanctioned schools and how best to generate improved student outcomes. The leader perceived that some SPS central office leaders did ascribe to a belief of taking a more authoritative stance focused on actions and not relationships, supports, or shared ownership with sanctioned schools.

Beyond support three central office leaders discussed the need to maintain the role of learner. This is captured when one leader shared,

> How do we act like a learning organization where we take this as an opportunity to learn and to improve and to figure out what it is we need to do to close that gap? I think that if we had that perspective more often, that would inherently build trust.

The SPS central office leader states the desired reaction from central office leaders to school sanctions being centered on learning, inquiry, shared ownership, and improvement. The leader voiced that if SPS central office leadership had this reaction more often than they felt trust would be better built with sanctioned schools. Another leader shared the risk of standards-based accountability sanctions creating an environment that constricts school and central office leaders' learning, "It's more the idea that you're not going to be given the opportunity to learn, you're going to get kneecapped instead." This leader highlighted the role fear from school leaders can play in restricting learning and improvement efforts. The superintendent shared how the oversight approach demotivates staff and reduces their commitment to the organization and school improvement. "They become workers who just try to work to get their job done, not

working to move the organization to the next level." Another central office leader shared their experience from a previous district,

> I mean, it was a lot of resistance. We don't have that here. A lot of places when they get identified in a certain area, the central leaders have a lot of conflict with the school leaders. They don't trust the central office. They don't want resources from the central office.

The leader noted that in their previous districts central office leaders faced more distrust and resistance to supports from central office. This leader went on to say,

> Through the chats… we are right there with you. That's how we build that trust and that sense of commitment in each other. Because we have that system of getting in these schools and saying we're rolling up our sleeves. We got the superintendent there. So they're not in it alone.

This central office leader emphasized that through the quarterly chats central office leaders are attempting to convey shared ownership of the challenges faced within sanctioned schools. The leader felt that through the focus on being "right there with" school leaders that the relationship and trust with these school leaders is reinforced.

Accountability Context and Trust. Survey results from school leaders were analyzed for any significant differences on items within the Tschannen-Moran trust scale items between leaders who identified as being from a school with standards-based accountability sanctions in the past two years (n=18) and those who were not (n=19). No significant differences ($p < .05$) were found in running two sample t-tests of mean

response scores by schools with a standards-based accountability sanction to those not having a standards-based accountability sanction across all trust scale survey items. While no statistically significant differences of mean item scores emerged within the trust scale, there was a larger difference noted across the groups' responses on the item regarding central office leaders showing concern for school leaders. School leaders from standards-based accountability schools reported feeling higher levels of a lack of concern from central office leaders (M = 3.2; SD = 1.3) compared to school leaders in non-sanctioned schools (M = 2.5; SD = 1.3).

Two central office leaders spoke about recent changes in the state level standards-based accountability system and the impact that may have on trust between central office and school leaders within specific schools.

> We have seen schools that have historically been regarded as good schools now come into a state where they have these labels. I think that may have had an impact for some other folks on their trust. In terms of like what's really happening there because it's eye opening.

The leader noted the potential impact of a new standards-based accountability system changing historical central office leadership perceptions of schools that under the old system did not face sanctions. This leader went on to share,

> I think that that has the potential to have a negative impact on trust because the outcomes have been the outcomes for those kids for years. And at any given point, you could have been like, "hell, we're not doing a good job of serving these

> kids" but you didn't. Instead, you were like, "yep, go ahead and slap that fully accredited label on there and let's keep right on rolling."

The leader highlighted the impact of newly sanctioned schools potentially decreasing trust from central office leaders. The leader felt that central office leaders may perceive that the school leadership as not being transparent around challenges they had faced for a number of years and the fact that it took an external accountability system to bring these challenges to light would by laid at the feet of the school leadership.

Another central office leader shared that principals in these newly sanctioned schools would find how they interact with central office changing and continuing to build relationships and trust would be key. "Forging that relationship and building the trust where they can say like, do you know the answer? Can you help me figure out how to really improve my school?" This central office leader went on to discuss knowing that sanctioned schools would receive increased attention and needing these school leaders to be transparent and at times vulnerable in what can be difficult conversations. "It's because all these people now have to come in and examine. And I start asking you questions of why haven't you been teaching science? And just be honest, at least to me." In asking school leaders to assume an open stance, another central office leader discussed how important it is for central office leaders to model behaviors leading to trust from principals. In discussing how one central office leader on her team maintained trust with school leaders she said,

> I think that the level of trust is very high because of her relationship with them, because of the way she supports. I mean, she's just knowledgeable and very

> thorough. She does everything exact and right. So there's a high level of trust from principals. They don't have to worry about anything they just trust.

The central office leader noted the importance of school leaders feeling that central office staff is reliable and knowledgeable in their support efforts with schools. By building trust through these relationships the leader emphasized that school leaders were able to unburden themselves from the worry what central office was doing. In speaking to the importance of trust in school improvement efforts within standard-based accountability sanctioned schools one central office leader summed it up by saying, “I don't think that work can be done without trust. That is impossible.”

Accountability Context and Central Office Leadership Practices. SPS central office leaders and school leaders discussed the importance of coaching practices, seeking coherence, and follow through in supporting school improvement efforts and building trust. The conditions of shared responsibility within these efforts and the ability to be vulnerable in having authentic conversations were also found to be critical. Central office leaders when asked what differences in practices they employ with school leaders whose schools are under standards-based accountability sanctions did not differ greatly from those practices or conditions emphasized across all schools, but they did highlight the coaching practices of affirming, providing constructive feedback, and modeling shared responsibility as most important.

As mentioned in the previous section, SPS central office leaders noted that school leaders within sanctioned schools face increased pressure and anxiety in the school

improvement work that they do. The superintendent has noticed these school leaders being more defensive than their peers.

> It definitely causes people who have some form of label to be a lot more defensive and to feel like you're being more critical. So you do have to be even more compassionate and empathetic as a central office to schools that are in that situation.

The superintendent emphasized the need to be even more caring for these school leaders and not rush to judgement. He went on to offer a specific example of a school within SPS who had been sanctioned for many years,

> Everyone wanted to kind of like, just tackle the school about everything they're doing wrong, everything was bad. And, you know, whereas people might've thought that I was soft because I'm saying, well, look how hard they have worked and look at what they are trying to do.

The superintendent highlighted the initial reaction of central office leaders to be critical of the sanctioned school and noted that some central office leaders may have felt he was being too "soft" in attempting to affirm the positives he saw in the school's improvement efforts. Instead of focusing blame on the school the superintendent challenged his central office staff to reflect on their role in the school's sanction status. "How much support have we given them and do they have the resource that they need? Do they have the staffing that they need?" Here the superintendent is reinforced the message of shared ownership. Another central office leader said, "Not blaming the principal, but saying,

okay, so we did these terrible walkthroughs. The data are terrible. What do we do? Let's strategize." The superintendent felt that in order to move the school forward, first central office staff had to acknowledge the positive work done within the school, meet them where they are, and join them in the work of school improvement.

Four central office leaders discussed the shared responsibility and the interdependence of school and central office leaders on one another in conducting school improvement work under the increased pressure of accountability sanctioned schools. In discussing shared responsibility one central office leader felt that it was critical that schools know her commitment to their school improvement efforts. "It's also impossible for us to do it if you don't know that I care, if you do not truly believe that I am as committed as you are." Beyond shared commitment another leader discussed the interdependence of their work with school leaders. "We're not going to move the needle ourselves in central office and our few specialists. We can be there to try and help them change, but ultimately we're not going to be the ones making the change." With this interdependence another central office leader focused on the importance of trust.

> There has to be a degree of trust because as soon as we leave we really are expecting them to still carry out certain things. We trust each other enough to say we have one thing in common and that is to move things forward.

The leader highlighted that in working together and having shared responsibility of school improvement that trust had to be present across school and central office leaders.

Two central office leaders who work directly with and oversee school leadership reinforced the need for honest feedback to school leaders in standards-based accountability sanctioned schools. One central office leader shared,

> We had to have some brutal conversations when she first got to her school. And it wasn't fun. It wasn't fun for me. It wasn't fun for her. It was hard because it wasn't just her butt on the line. It was mine too.

The leader noted the standards-based accountability sanctions, the associated high-stakes, and the shared responsibility for improvement as forcing the need to have honest and hard conversations with school leaders. This central office leader went on to discuss the need to remind school leaders to attend to self-care as well.

> So take care of yourself. I think too is having a short memory. So like, after we would have these difficult conversations, when it was like every day, like, well, you suck now. It was okay. It was hard. Like, so now that was yesterday. Now today's the next day let's move forward.

The central office leader highlighted the need within his coaching conversations with sanctioned school leaders to help them not stay stuck in failures but to move forward to solutions. The central office leader went on to discuss the need to model vulnerability for these school leaders. “I think just being honest with her too, like, Hey, I made mistakes. There's no manual, not for supervising principals.” Through these coaching practices and shared ownership modeling vulnerability was noted by this leader as also important behavior.

Summary. SPS central office leaders viewed their roles in working with sanctioned schools not as different from their roles with non-sanctioned schools, but did feel the need to provide greater levels of support and to learn with the schools through their school improvement efforts. Trust levels were not significantly different between school and central office leaders for schools under standards-based accountability sanctions compared to those who were not. The central office leaders employed similar practices within these schools as well, but again highlighted the practices of affirming the work of the school, avoiding blame, providing honest feedback, and modeling shared responsibility as ways to best advance school improvement. Through their roles and practices central office leaders viewed themselves as a support and buffer for school leadership to the increased pressure and scrutiny that accompanies a standards-based accountability sanction.

Relational Trust within Standards-Based Accountability (Primary Research Question)

The primary research question of this capstone aimed to understand the role of quarterly chats in supporting or restricting relational trust between school and central office leaders in a standards-based accountability environment. This was explored through four subquestions focused on how central office leaders conceive their leadership roles in relation to schools; what practices do central office leaders employ within the chats and the impact on trust; how do levels of trust vary, if at all, by schools with accountability statuses; and what differences exist in central office leadership practices across schools with different accountability statuses. Data collected through semi-

structured interviews, surveys, and documents comes together in major findings focused on building trust through the role of central office and its leaders as a support agent to schools, central office leadership practices within the quarterly chats, and mediating external accountability pressures for school leaders.

Data showed that central office leaders unanimously felt that both the role of central office and their roles as leaders within it were to support schools in their work around school improvement. Central office leaders claimed that they achieved this within the quarterly chats by assuming the roles of learner, support broker, and coach. Through these roles central office leaders aimed to understand the school improvement work within each school, to align school-level work and larger district efforts, and to identify the highest-leverage supports they could provide to each school in advancing improvement efforts. Further, the specific conditions within quarterly chats of shared responsibility in school improvement and the ability to be vulnerable in authentic conversations around school improvement emerged as required ingredients to advancing central office support of school improvement efforts.

Findings suggest how central office leaders behave and the practices they employ within the quarterly chats had a direct impact on school leaderships' trust of central office and their willingness to engage meaningfully in shared work focused on school improvement. Despite central office leaders citing an orientation of support for schools and their improvement efforts, school leaders report lower levels of trust in central office leadership most often citing areas of openness, honesty, and reliability.

Finally, SPS central office leaders viewed their roles in working with sanctioned schools as a support and aimed to position themselves to mediate the increased external pressure and scrutiny that accompanies a standards-based accountability sanction. Central office leaders saw their roles as similar across all schools, but did feel the need to provide greater levels of support and to learn with the sanctioned schools through their school improvement efforts. The central office leaders employed similar practices within these schools as well, but again highlighted the practices of affirming the work of the school, avoiding blame, providing constructive feedback, and modeling shared responsibility as ways to best advance school improvement. Despite increased external pressure to sanctioned schools, trust levels were not significantly different between school and central office leaders for schools under standards-based accountability sanctions compared to those who were not.

These three major findings show the importance of central office leadership's orientation and practices in building and sustaining trust and supporting schools in advancing improvement efforts. Data suggests the interdependence between school and central office leaders and trusting one another in the work of school improvement can either launch schools forward or act as a significant barrier. In Chapter Five, these findings are placed alongside the relevant literature and used to adjust the capstone's original conceptual framework to reflect the new learnings from these findings. The result of this discussion leads to a refined conceptual framework and themes that are used to craft practical recommendations for central office leaders.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this capstone was to take a deeper look into the impact of central office leaders' roles and practices in supporting or hindering relational trust with school leaders in school improvement efforts within a standards-based accountability context. The capstone investigated this through one district's experience in implementing quarterly chats with school and district leadership teams coming together to discuss school improvement efforts. Findings were presented within Chapter Four, and in this chapter I will discuss these findings along with the literature and the original conceptual framework to put forward a revised conceptual framework synthesizing the literature and findings presented earlier chapters.

Overall findings reported in Chapter Four showed low levels of trust between central office and school leaders within SPS. I will discuss what findings from this study and relevant literature suggests that central office leaders can do to combat low levels of trust in school improvement efforts with school leaders. I will explore how the roles, practices, and conditions assumed by SPS central office leadership showed that they could build or hinder trust depending on the consistency and integrity of their application. Finally, findings show that school leaders facing sanctions reported no significant differences in levels of trust with central office leaders compared to their counterparts. I discuss how the impact of sanctions and potential negative impact on trust were mediated by specific central office leadership roles, practices, and conditions. I then present recommendations and action communications based upon my findings and discussion to support central office leaders in how to best position their organizations and schools for

improvement though the roles they assume as leaders, the practices they employ, and the supports and structures they put in place to support this critical work.

Trust between School and Central Office Leaders

Findings from this study showed over one in four (29%) of the SPS school leaders surveyed reported a lack of trust in central office leadership. At the center of this study is the importance of relational trust as a required ingredient for school improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). One SPS central office leader in discussing improvement efforts with school leaders shared, “I don’t think that work can be done without trust. That is impossible.” While not a plurality, one in four school leaders nonetheless shows a significant barrier in having the required ingredient of trust in advancing collaborative school improvement efforts across central office and schools. These results are consistent with the limited research showing lower levels of overall school leadership trust in central office (Chuon, Gilkey, Gonzalez, & Daly, 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2012). The impacts of low levels of trust are profound. The literature shows a lack of trust leads to a primary focus of self-protection and an unwillingness to take risks which inhibits innovation, learning and organizational improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Within SPS a lack of trust manifested itself in the “dog and pony show” performance in some of the quarterly chats with school leaders’ unwillingness to be fully transparent regarding the challenges they face. Some SPS school leaders also displayed their lack of trust through active resistance to central office support. These behaviors rooted in low levels of trust impeded the collective work of central office and school leaders to improve as an

organization. With that said, trust and distrust are not permanent states. The literature agrees that once breeched trust can be repaired through deliberate actions (Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnigham, 2002; Gillespie & Dietz, 2009; Schwartz, 2000). With an understanding of the low levels of trust present within SPS and the impacts that had on improvement efforts it is important to delve deeper into how trust can be built and sustained between central office and school leaders. What can central office leaders do to combat low trust and better facilitate trusting environments in support of improvement efforts? The next three sections of this chapter will focus on the specific roles, practices, and conditions that central office leaders can employ to build and sustain trust with school leadership in school improvement efforts.

Central Office Leaders' Roles and Trust

Two of the main research subquestions this study investigated focused on the roles assumed and practices employed by central office leaders and their impact on trust with school leaders in school improvement discussions. With an understanding of the low levels of trust in central office leadership from some SPS school leaders; I will next discuss the root causes of this finding by exploring the specific central office leadership roles, practices, and conditions within school improvement discussions and their impact on trust. First, I will discuss the central office leadership roles of learner, support broker, and coach which emerged from my analysis of the findings of this study along with the relevant literature.

Learner. SPS central office leaders attempted to decrease the power dynamic in quarterly chats by actively seeking to understand and learn from each school leadership

team so they could best support them. Leithwood (2012) emphasized that highly effective central office leaders created regular and reciprocal dialogue with school leaders focused on school improvement. SPS central office leaders echoed this by noting the importance of assuming the role of learner within school improvement discussions with school leaders. Daly and Finnigan (2012) found the need to lower preexisting asymmetrical power dynamics within school improvement discussions in fostering trust across school and central office leaders. While all central office leaders interviewed emphasized the role of learner, four school leaders also cited central office leaders assuming this role as leaving them feeling supported in their improvement efforts. Conversely, five school leaders discussed instances where central office leaders were inattentive or late to quarterly chats and how this left them feeling unsupported and hindered trust. The learner role further facilitated central office leaders' abilities to leverage what they heard within the quarterly chats to better prepare and provide the necessary supports for schools. However, school leaders reported central office leaders' consistency in assuming the role of learner was uneven. In moments of absence this was shown to hinder trust while when present built trust and feelings of support among school leaders.

Support Broker. All SPS central office leaders interviewed (n=6) voiced the importance of their role as a support agent and working alongside schools in advancing school improvement efforts. The view of SPS central office leaders seeing themselves as supports for schools contrast with the historical view of central offices as regulatory agents (Honig, 2012). Over the past two decades the literature did show a shift from central office as an oversight and management of schools to more frequently now also include a role of support agent for schools providing services such as curriculum,

professional development, and student support services (Honig, 2012; Mac Iver & Farley 2003). While all SPS central office leaders emphasized the need to act as support brokers for schools they also discussed the challenge at times of the role duality of support and oversight of schools within their day-to-day roles.

Overall, the limited research available has revealed a low level of trust between school and district leaders (Chuon, Gilkey, Gonzalez, & Daly, 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2012). Within SPS the role of support assumed by central office leaders positively impacted trust between school and central office leaders when enacted and detracted from trust when not. This will be discussed further in the upcoming section focused on the actual central office leadership practices that support trust. Central office leaders with more compliance driven job responsibilities, such as Special Education or Title I directors, did discuss the importance of also having specific oversight structures in place. Even these leaders with high accountability and compliance requirements, stressed the need for acting predominantly as a support agent for schools. SPS Central office leaders viewed their role as one of supporting schools in school improvement efforts and actively worked to buffer against required compliance roles so as to not deter from the overall role of support.

Coach. Half (n=3) of the SPS central office leaders interviewed discussed supporting SPS school leaders through the role of a coach. These SPS central office leaders discussed the need to support school leaders' growth and learning through assuming the role of coach. While Honig (2012) and Leithwood (2012) positioned central office leaders as needing to be main actors in working next to principals to support their

development and capacity as instructional leaders, much of the other literature discussed coaching within the field as a professional learning support for teachers or, if for principals, being delivered by individuals external to the district (Anderson, 2003; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Mac Iver & Farley 2003). The role of coach for central office leaders was perceived unevenly by school leaders through the coaching practices they observed within the quarterly chats. This will be discussed in greater detail in the upcoming section focused on practices. Through the role of coach SPS central office leaders aimed to empower school leaders to experience their own mistakes and then reflect and learn from them through central office leaders coaching. These experiences were intended to bridge new learning for school leaders through self-discovery while buffering them from overly damaging missteps.

By assuming the roles of learner, support broker, and coach the central office leaders attempted to position themselves alongside school leaders in confronting the challenges they faced, provide appropriate support, and increase trust through allowing regular and open communication with school leaders. School leaders reported experiencing these roles for central office leaders unevenly within the quarterly chats leading some to report feeling supported by and trusting of central office while in their absence school leaders reported feeling unsupported and their trust in central office leadership hindered.

Central Leaderships' Practices and Trust

Based on the findings of this study, central office leaderships' role of learner, support broker, and coach can serve to build trust between school and central office

leadership when enacted consistently. From a practitioner perspective, what do the roles of learner, support broker, and coach actually look like when assumed by central office leaders? To gain this level of understanding we must also discuss the specific leadership practices employed by central office leaders when in these roles. The literature review revealed that leadership practices play a direct role in either supporting or hindering levels of trust across staff. Yet, the role central office leadership practices have on trust with school leaders within school improvement efforts has been understudied (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004). In this section I will discuss the central office leadership practices of coaching, systemic coherence, and follow through which emerged from my analysis of the findings of this capstone alongside the relevant literature.

Coaching Practices. SPS central office leaders emphasized the need within quarterly data chats to listen, question, affirm, and provide constructive feedback to school leaders. Honig (2012) found the need for central office leaders to employ coaching practices in their work with school leaders to support their continued growth and development. The listening described by SPS central office leaders was described as active listening through the roles of supporter and learner. As discussed in Chapter Four, by listening, central office leaders reported that they hoped to make school leaders feel heard, validated, and supported by central office in their school improvement efforts. Connected to active listening, questioning from central office leaders was designed to restate what they heard, seek clarification, and open-ended questions intended to push group inquiry deeper were well received by school leaders in supporting them.

SPS school leaders also spoke to the importance of central office leaders affirming the improvement efforts of their school. The affirmations by central office leaders provided a boost of positive reinforcement and signaled to the school leaders that they were doing the necessary work to advance their school and to continue in their efforts. Along with affirmations, the superintendent and two other central office leaders highlighted the need to provide constructive feedback to school leaders in certain areas. These leaders discussed delivering feedback related to significant concerns directly to the principal and not in front of the entire school and central office team within the quarterly chats to allow them to digest and receive the feedback one-on-one. The literature reiterates the need for these reflective conversations and the importance of reducing power dynamics in interactions between central office and school leaders (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Daly & Finnigan, 2012).

Coaching practices when present were highlighted as supportive by school leaders; however, school leaders also noted instances where these practices did not occur or were perceived as not implemented well. Findings showed school leaders citing specific instances of central office leaders not engaged, tardy, or using questions as thinly veiled judgements. These breaches were reported by school leaders as specific instances in which they felt least supported within the quarterly chats. Researchers found once distrust is sensed within the environment that individuals will emphasize self-protection and are less willing to be vulnerable (Bies et al., 2018). The implications of this are further discussed within the conditions section.

Systemic Coherence. As discussed in Chapter Four, half (n=3) of SPS central office leaders discussed using the quarterly chats as a mechanism to check for alignment between school and department priorities and actions. While the literature was scant on the central office practice of seeking coherence across the system, Daly and Finnigan (2012) did find that district leaders can improve trust through serving as the conduit between schools in the sharing and alignment of best practices. Central office leaders discussed two different responses when they identified areas of misalignment. The Director of EL highlighted the need to adjust their supports to align with individual school priorities. On the other hand, the Director of Special Education highlighted using the alignment checks to ensure schools are aligned to the priorities of the Special Education office and if not aligned it served as a way to "open the door to that conversation". These formative coherence checks allowed central office leaders to course correct areas of misalignment rapidly either through adjusting their work or supporting schools in seeking tighter alignment to the overall district direction.

Follow-Through. SPS school and central office leaders stated the importance of reliability and follow-through in establishing trust. Fourteen school leaders identified feeling most supported by central office when promised supports were followed-through on in a timely manner aligned with the school leaders' expectations. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) found that reliability was one of the five key attributes leading to trusting relationships. Many school leaders cited instances of central office leaders follow-through on action items discussed as the point in which they felt most supported in their school improvement work. One school leader shared, through an open-ended survey item response, that when they presented a major challenge that central office leaders, "Went

right back and opened up a task force to address the issue." Within the limited research on trust between central office and schools researchers found that a lack of follow through from central office staff was a key contributor to distrust from school staff (Chuon et al., 2008). School leaders reinforced this when some shared their points of feeling least supported occurred when central office follow-through did not occur. School leader survey respondents showed that 24% disagreed that central office leaders were reliable. One school leader offered the example in response to an open-ended survey item, "I was told that central office support would be coming. It not only did not show up, but after contacting personnel in the central office and not getting any response, I knew that I would not get the help that had been told to me by the superintendent." The leader highlights the breach in trust by central office not being reliable in delivering promised supports and not showing enough care to respond to their subsequent inquiry about the support.

This section explored what the roles of learner, support broker, and coach look like in practice when assumed by SPS central office leaders within the quarterly chats and their impact on trust. Coaching practices, systemic coherence, and follow-through when perceived as present by school leaders were highlighted as instances within quarterly chats when school leaders felt most supported. However, school leaders also noted instances where these practices did not occur or were perceived as not implemented well and these instances left school leaders noting feeling least supported by central office leaders.

Central Office Leadership Conditions and Trust

Central office leaderships' roles and practices directly impact relational trust with school leaders. In the exploration of observable practices employed by SPS central office leaders within the quarterly chats the findings of this study and a revisiting of the literature also pointed to the importance of the conditions in which quarterly chats occur. In this sense I am using the term 'conditions' to describe the frequently implicit environmental norms in which groups operate. In this section I will discuss shared responsibility and psychological safety as conditions which emerged from my analysis of the findings of this study alongside the relevant literature and their impact on trust.

Shared Responsibility. SPS central office leaders voiced that in their role of support broker that they aimed to position themselves alongside school leaders in improvement efforts. Through working alongside school leaders they aspired to signal to school leaders the shared responsibility of school improvement work across central office and schools. One school leader shared, in response to an open-ended survey item, that they felt most supported, "when central office and school leaders took collective responsibility for a concern and problem-solved together." Bryk and Schneider (2002) found the importance of collaboration across staff under the condition of shared responsibility in the building of relational trust. Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) found that school staff felt supported in their school improvement efforts when central office staff shared in the responsibility of the efforts and outcomes. Yet, while all SPS central office leaders attempted to signal to school leaders the shared responsibility of school improvement efforts, only 56% of SPS school leaders surveyed felt central office leaders took responsibility for improving schools. The clear gap between central office leaders' messaging and school leaders' perceptions represents a challenge within SPS. Bryk and

Schneider (2002) saw the need for both belief and observable behaviors in the formation of trust. Messaging alone from central office leaders is not enough, it must be paired with the consistent assumption of roles and associated practices described above across interactions to build and sustain trust. Gillespie and Dietz (2009) highlighted the fragility of trust within organizations. The researchers found individuals are far more likely to remember and act upon a single instance breaching trust than they are to be influenced by a single instance building trust. This fragility is only amplified when the relationship has an unequal distribution of power between the two parties (Cuevas, Julkunen, & Gabrielsson, 2015; Kramer, 1999). The message of "we all are in this together" is important for central office leaders to say, however, the necessity of bridging this message with consistent actions eluded SPS central office leaders.

Psychological Safety. Psychological safety looks at the safety felt within a team allowing for individuals to take risks and be vulnerable (Edmondson, 1999). All SPS central office leaders discussed the "dog and pony show" of some quarterly chats. One central office leader shared that school leaders felt the chats were "a punitive measure" or information shared could be used in the future against them. The lack of transparency and willingness to be vulnerable by some school leaders served as a barrier for central office leaders in assuming the role of support and their collaborative work with schools. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) found that distrust leads to inefficiencies as individuals focus on self-protection from the fear of being victimized. One school leader shared in an open-ended survey item response, "I would say I have felt a power dynamic in quarterly chat meetings that makes the conversation unbalanced and just not candid. We enter the meetings in a protective stance." Bryk and Schneider (2002) pointed to self-

protection and the subsequent lack of risk-taking as significant impediments to innovation, learning, and organizational improvement.

SPS central office leaders and school leaders also discussed instances of moving past the performative nature of quarterly chats in some schools. Edmondson (1999) defined psychological safety in a seminal work as a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. The superintendent shared of one such instance where psychological safety had been gained, “I think they realized we weren't there to ridicule or to criticize. We were there to talk through what the data's saying and to see how we could support… they realized that exposing our deficits is not to your demise. It really is to support and to make it better.” Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) found that frequent face-to-face meetings between central office leaders and school staff supported school improvement efforts through lowering the level vulnerability of school staff. The superintendent went on to share that in a proceeding chat disparities in student outcomes was discussed and school staff became defensive in both that chat and the following chat. The superintendent pointed to the key being central office staff not being defensive back, but continuing to exhibit the role of support and the practices of listening, questioning, affirming, and constructive feedback. Research shows that using these practices to reach open communication allows for increased transparency, shared understanding, greater efficiency within school organizations (Honig, 2012; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006; Leithwood, 2012). With a consistent application of these practices from central office leadership over time the school leaders were able to enter a place of psychological safety allowing for rich discourse and true collaborative work in advancing improvement efforts.

The External Influence of Accountability

Having explored the impacts on trust of central office leaders' roles, practices, and the conditions in which school improvement discussions take place I now turn my focus to the influence of standards-based accountability. Standards-based accountability theorizes that through increased academic standards and rigorous assessment schools will improve performance. This improvement is pushed by holding underperforming schools publicly accountable for lower student outcomes through external sanctions and increased bureaucracy leading to changes in practice and improvement within these schools (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Lee & Reeves, 2012). While this was the theory behind the movement, the literature found that sanctioned schools faced increased pressure and more bureaucracy leading to decreased trust within the environment which is correlated to positive school improvement outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

As discussed in the preceding section on trust, one in four school leaders reported a lack of trust in central office leaders. Finnigan (2010) found lower levels of trust of the principal within staff of sanctioned schools when compared to their peers at non-sanctioned schools. Yet within SPS there were no significant differences in trust of central office leaders across school leaders facing sanctions and those not. Why is this? This section will discuss the conditions and central office leadership roles and practices in mediating the negative impacts of external standards-based accountability sanctions on relational trust between school and central office leaders.

Accountability Influence on Conditions. SPS central office leaders noted that standards-based accountability sanctions "cranks up the fire a little bit" for school and central office leaders. With the increased pressure, SPS central office leaders expressed that shared responsibility and psychological safety were conditions even more important to establish in school teams sanctioned under standards-based accountability. The literature found that sanctioned schools faced increased pressure and more bureaucracy reducing professional community, collaboration, risk-taking, and innovation which are all correlated to positive school improvement outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). SPS central office leaders felt these school leaders worked at times in fear with the aim of self-protection. In the face of external sanctions, the leaders faced the pull of preserving self and not feeling psychological safety. The superintendent felt this led to a lack of risk-taking and innovation which held the overall organization back. "They become workers who just try to work to get their job done, not working to move the organization to the next level."

While SPS central office leaders discussed the threat external accountability sanctions posed on relational trust and school improvement efforts they also discussed how they worked actively to mediate the impact of external sanctions. One leader pointed to the importance of shared responsibility, "…we are right there with you. That's how we build that trust and that sense of commitment in each other." The sense of shared responsibility is even more important to be stressed as a condition when threatened by external sanctions. SPS central office leaders shared the natural reaction of defensiveness and shifting blame in the face of the external threat, and the condition of shared responsibility across all school and central office leader in the external sanction helped

the focus remain on improvement. This aligns with Sahlberg's (2010) research that responsibility precedes accountability and grows from trust and that through this shared responsibility a mutual accountability emerges across professionals. This trust and shared responsibility were summed up by one central office leader who stressed the importance of principals in newly sanctioned schools working with central office, "Forging that relationship and building the trust where they can say like, do you know the answer? Can you help me figure out how to really improve my school?" At the root of this shift is the importance of trust and a focus on horizontal rather than hierarchal structures of holding one to account.

Accountability Influence on Central Office Leadership Roles and Practices. SPS central office leaders emphasized the need within accountability-sanctioned schools to focus even greater energy on assuming the role of support broker and the practices of coaching practices, systemic coherence, and follow through. As discussed in the conditions section, the central office leaders viewed these as mediating efforts to the potential negative impact of accountability sanctions on relational trust and school improvement efforts. Daly and Finnegan (2012) found the desire from central office to support schools must be negotiated through the standards-based accountability context which asserts higher levels of bureaucracy through increased rules, regulations, and sanctions to coerce school improvement. SPS central office leaders denounced the approach of internal negative consequences for sanctioned schools. Instead they discussed the need to maintain the role of support and not shift to increased oversight and bureaucracy as encouraged within standards-based accountability. These central office leaders worked with purpose to continue to convey to sanctioned schools that their role

remained one of support. This was supported through their practices which SPS central office leaders stressed employing the coaching practices of listening, affirming the positives, and providing constructive feedback to school leaders within sanctioned schools.

Revised Conceptual Framework

As discussed in the beginning of this study, within SPS poor academic outcomes have led to accountability sanctions for several schools impacting trust within the environment. The lack of relational trust between school and central office leaders serves as a barrier to efforts in general and, in particular, to school improvement efforts. However, little research investigates the role of central office leaders in school improvement efforts and the impacts of standards-based accountability on trust. This study aimed to investigate one district's context and how central office leaders' role assumption and practices impacted relational trust with school leaders within a standards-based accountability environment. I will next review the conceptual framework section by section, highlighting changes within each section, which will then culminate in the presentation of an overall revised conceptual framework.

Revised Framework: Central Office Leadership Role. The original conceptual framework highlighted the distinction found in the literature between central office leadership management versus support of schools. Based on the findings presented, I have shifted this to highlight the role of support broker as the dominant role taken on by central office leaders within SPS in working with school leadership on school

improvement efforts. Further, I have added the role of learner and coach to the revised conceptual framework (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Original and revised conceptual framework on central office leaderships' role.

Honig (2012) and Leithwood (2012) stressed the need for central office leaders to act not just in providing resources as supports to schools but also to support the professional learning and growth of principals as instructional leaders. This literature aligns with the pervasive stance of SPS central office leaders interviewed to enter school improvement discussions through an inquisitive stance and to listen, question, and support school leaders to new learning and understandings of their school improvement efforts. By assuming the roles of learner, support broker, and coach the central office leaders aimed to collaboratively advance school leaders' improvement efforts and support trust.

Revised Framework: Central Office Leadership Practices. The original conceptual framework based on the literature highlighted the central office leadership practices of collaboration, shared-responsibility and two-way communication. Based on the findings presented, I have refined this to coaching practices, systemic coherence, and follow through (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Original and revised conceptual framework on central office leadership practices.

Coaching practices of listening, questioning, affirming, and constructive feedback is more descriptive of actual practices within the original areas of collaboration and communication. The coaching practices speak to how central office leaders should engage in collaboration and communication with school leaders in school improvement conversations to best build and sustain trust. Follow through emerged as one of the top trust building practices for school leaders that central office leaders could employ. Finally, the ability to be able to align efforts and ensure coherence for school leaders and to be able to share this understanding with them was critical in trust building. Shared-responsibility will be discussed within the next section as a condition that supports trust.

Revised Framework: Conditions. The original conceptual framework based on the literature did not distinguish conditions. Shared-responsibility was grouped in with practices. Upon examining the findings from this capstone and reengaging with the literature I felt it was important to distinguish conditions from practices and added the conditions of shared responsibility and psychological safety (see Figure 6).

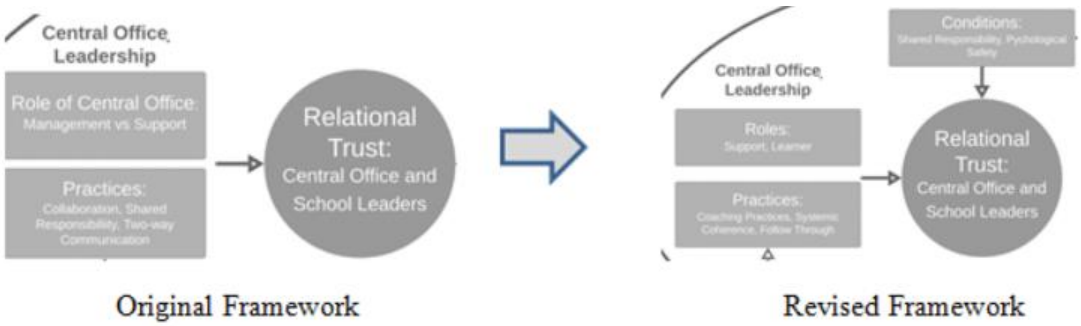

Figure 6. Original and revised conceptual framework on conditions.

Conditions I define as desired group norms in support of relational trust. Practices I define as the specific central office leadership behaviors and actions that support relational trust. Shared responsibility emerged as a critical condition in supporting relational trust as it served to lower the vulnerability of school leadership and worked in concert in allowing school and central office leadership chats to occur within a condition of psychological safety. These conditions allow teams and individuals to take risks, to innovate, learn, and maximize school improvement efforts.

Revised Framework: School Accountability Status. The original conceptual framework had school accountability status directly influencing relational trust and having an indirect impact on central office leadership practices. Through the findings discussed in this study and relevant literature I have revised this framework to show the impact of school accountability status on relational trust as not direct, but rather mediated through the conditions and central office leadership roles and practices which then have a direct influence on relational trust within the system (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Original and revised conceptual framework on school accountability status.

Revised Conceptual Framework. Through the discussion chapter I have described the findings from my study alongside the relevant literature. The following revised conceptual framework represents my current understanding of how central office leadership roles, practices, and conditions interact with mediating a standards-based accountability context in influencing relational trust between school and central office leaders.

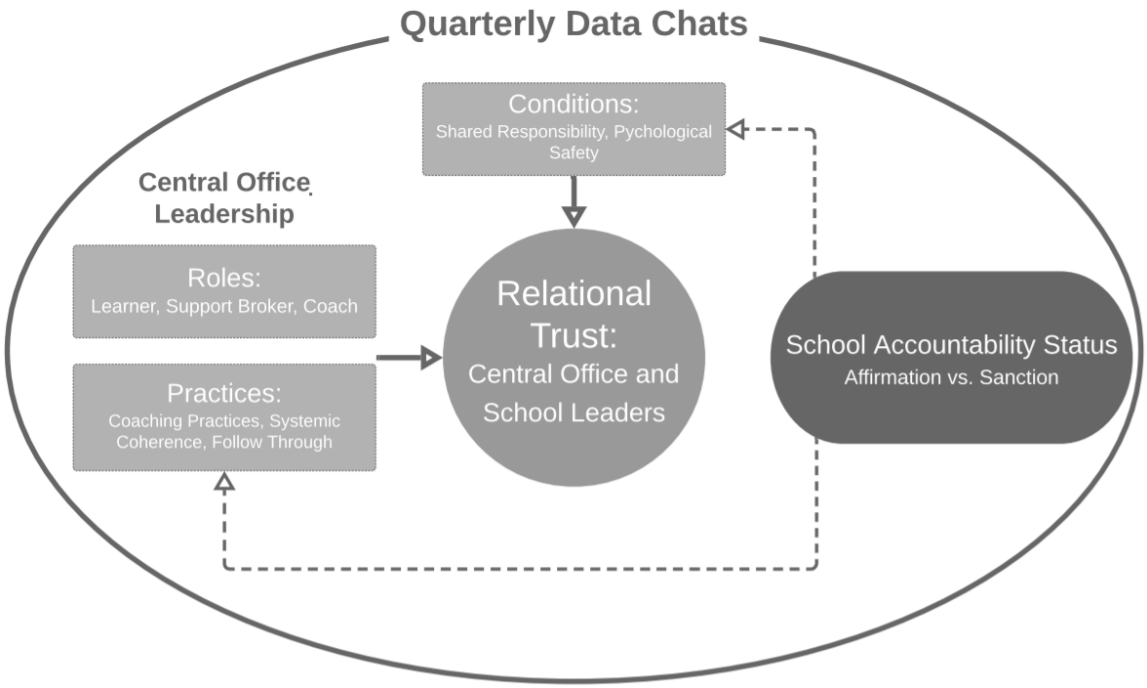

Figure 8. Revised Conceptual Framework.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings across areas lead to five recommendations for superintendents and central office leadership in their improvement efforts with school leaders. These recommendations are informed both by my revised conceptual framework, my findings presented in Chapter Four, and my literature review presented in Chapter Two. These recommendations focus on how central office leaders can best position their organizations and schools for improvement though the roles they assume as leaders, the practices they employ, and the supports and structures they put in place to support this critical work.

Establish and Model a Vision of Support for Central Office. Central office's find themselves at an inflection point between the past roles of management and oversight and new horizons of support and continuous improvement (Honig, 2012; Mac Iver & Farley 2003). With this evolution comes the discomfort of transformation where central office leaders find themselves being asked to serve both old roles and new roles at the same time (Daly & Finnegan, 2012). To assist leaders in how to navigate this challenge, superintendents must set a clear vision of the role of central office leadership as support agents in working with schools. The superintendent within SPS set this as a clear vision from the beginning and it has transformed how central office leaders see themselves and is beginning to impact how school leaders perceive central office as well. This was a key element to the success of the quarterly chats within SPS. They were not viewed by central office as an oversight tool, but rather a tool to learn, coach, and align

efforts to advance school improvement efforts working side by side with school leadership.

Support Division Leaderships' Capacity. In enacting a new vision of support for central office leadership superintendents must attend to their central office leaders' capacity to carry out this vision (Honig, 2012). Within SPS and in the literature specific coaching practices, systems thinking, and following through on action items were the key ingredients that led to schools feeling supported. Superintendents should consider executive coaching sessions for senior leaders so they may have first-hand experience in the application of coaching practices. Superintendents should also then develop a professional learning course on the key coaching practices of listening, questioning, affirming, and constructive feedback to ensure consistency across central office leaders. Finally, periodic 360 surveys for central office leaders should be administered to assist them in having the tools and self-awareness necessary to lead from a support stance each and every day. SPS did not attend to the capacity of central office leaders in enacting this new vision and while all leaders were able to repeat the vision they did not show consistency in enacting it with schools. This inconsistency led to areas of low trust as breeches in trust are more significant than the interactions that build trust.

Enact Structures for Frequent Formative Improvement Discussions with Schools. Both the literature and the findings from this capstone support having formative dialogues between schools and central office leaders focused on the shared work of school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Leithwood, 2012). These dialogues serve to ensure alignment of school and district efforts, allow for shared understanding, and to reinforce shared responsibility and the building and

sustaining of relational trust across the organization. Within these improvement discussions superintendents should also play close attention to a variety of stakeholders present from both school and central office to allow for open communication, increased transparency, shared understanding, and greater efficiency in carrying out improvement efforts (Honig, 2012; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006; Leithwood, 2012).

Develop Structures to Allow for Horizontal Accountability. Reliability emerged as a flashpoint for school leaders within SPS in discussing their trust and perceptions of central office leaders. Research has found that a lack of follow through from central office staff was a key contributor to distrust from school staff (Chuon et al., 2008). Many school leaders felt supported by the follow-through from central office staff while others cited a lack of follow through as a key point of feeling unsupported by central office. Sahlberg (2010) asserts the need for horizontal accountability across professionals as the guiding light of future accountability. Structures should be built for school and central office leaders to monitor and communicate updates on pending action items that emerged from the recent improvement discussion. Time should also be built into the beginning of the subsequent improvement discussion for central office and school leaders to provide and update on the status of previous action items. Within SPS there was an electronic monitoring tool; however, these items were never discussed again and subsequent meetings thus there was no follow-up on items not completed and why. This led to school staff feeling unsupported and the items agreed upon within meetings could not be relied upon as being completed by central office.

Manage Reactions to External Accountability Sanctions. The literature points to sanctioned schools facing increased external and internal pressures which reduces

school leaders' psychological safety, their sense of shared responsibility and thus restricts their willingness to collaborate, take risks, and innovate which are all correlated with improved student outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). SPS central office leaders pointed to the need to further embrace the roles of support and learner with school leaders in recently sanctioned schools. Their experience is in the face of sanctions both school and central office leaders instinctually resort to defensiveness and blame in an attempt to protect themselves. These reactions can serve to undermine the desired conditions of shared responsibility and psychological safety which the literature shows support school improvement efforts. Superintendents should be prepared to mediate the potential negative impact on trust from external accountability sanctions by framing sanctions within the established vision of support and maintaining the conditions of shared responsibility and psychological safety.

Summary

This capstone has been guided by the question, what is the role of quarterly data chats in supporting or restricting relational trust between school and central office leaders in a standards-based accountability environment? To investigate this question, I conducted a review of relevant literature, and created a conceptual framework which guided a mixed methods study of a district's approach to school improvement conversations between school and district leadership. I analyzed the findings from the research conducted within the research and discussed those findings in concert with the relevant literature leading to a new and deeper understanding of how central office leadership roles, practices, and conditions in school improvement discussions can support

relational trust and be used to mediate negative impacts on internal trust stemming from external standards-based accountability sanctions. I concluded the capstone with recommendations for practice.

Action Communication Product

In this section, I present an action communication product designed to effectively communicate key findings, themes, and recommendations that emerged from this study. The action communication, which is a presentation, is intended for a state-level superintendent conference. As the overall leaders of districts, the superintendent role is key in continuing the transformation of central offices and their leaders to best support school improvement efforts. My hope is that through the presentation of key findings superintendents will be able to reflect on their individual practices and roles as central office leaders and how that impacts trust with school leaders in improvement efforts. While acknowledging unique contexts across districts, I hope the recommendations resonate with superintendents and lead to meaningful actions taken by districts to support central office leaders in their abilities and understanding of how best to build trust and support school leaders in school improvement efforts.

Working together for improvement or compliance: Trust in central office leadership in school improvement efforts in the accountability era

Clinton Page

Superintendent's Conference
2021

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Problem of practice: Compliance or Improvement

- **Stapleton Public Schools (SPS) has had:**
  - Schools sanctioned through standards-based accountability for the past 15 years.
  - Sanctioned schools high oversight, increased requirements, and low autonomy.
  - High Turnover of Leadership and Staff
- **New quarterly data chats between EVERY school and central office leaders designed to:**
  - Position central office as a support mechanism
  - Increase trust across between central office and schools
  - Through support and trust accelerate school improvement

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A Question of Trust?

- **Research has indicated:**
  - Trust as a required ingredient for school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002)
  - Accountability sanctions lead to lower levels of trust in schools (Finnigan, 2010; Mausethagen, 2013)
  - Leadership practices support or hinder relationships, and specifically trust, across professionals within schools (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015)

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Purpose of the Study

- **Explore relational trust between central office and school-based leaders within school improvement efforts.**
- **Investigate potential impacts of standards-based accountability on levels of relational trust across leaders.**
- **Understand the central office leadership practices that support or hinder relational trust across school and central office leaders.**

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Research questions:

Primary research question:
What is the role of quarterly data chats in supporting or restricting relational trust between school and central office leaders in a standards-based accountability environment?

Subquestion 1: How do central office leaders conceive their purpose and role in the quarterly data chats with schools?

Subquestion 2: What central office leaders' practices in quarterly data chats support or hinder trust with school leaders?

Subquestion 3: How, if at all, do the levels of trust between school and central office leaders vary by school accountability status?

Subquestion 4: What are the differences in central office leadership practices within the quarterly data chats across schools with different accountability statuses?

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Methods

- **Two-phase mixed methods approach**
  - Phase I: Anonymous Survey of school and central office leadership and Document Analyses of Quarterly Chats Meeting Minutes and Division-Level School Support Request Tracking document
  - Phase II: Semi-structured interviews of six central office leadership staff expanding on results from Phase I.

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Methods: Survey Design and Analysis

Survey Design:

- School and central office leadership survey items based on Tschannen-Moran (1999) and Bryk and Schneider (2002) instrumentation.
- Modifications made to make items applicable to central office and school leadership comparisons.
  - Original: *"Teachers in this school trust the principal."*
  - Modified: *"School leaders in this division trust the central office."*

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Analysis:

- **Quantitative Analysis**
  - Ran descriptive statistics and mean scores
  - Compared Likert scale items using *t*-tests to check for significant differences across trust levels for schools in accountability status and those not.
- **Qualitative Analysis**
  - Recorded Interviews
  - Detailed field notes and memoing immediately following interviews.
  - Multiple cycles of coding, memoing and synthesis.
  - Initial deductive coding scheme based on literature and conceptual framework
  - Recrafting, organizing, and emergence of codes came through analysis.

Theme 1: Central Office as a Support (RQ1)

Stapleton central office leaders viewed the role of central office and their role as leaders to support school leadership in improvement efforts.

Central Office Leadership Support Roles

Learner | Support Broker | Coach

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Theme 1 *(cont.)*:
Central Office as a Support (RQ1)

School leadership experienced central office support unevenly leading some to report feeling unsupported and their trust in central office leadership hindered.

"I was told that central office support would be coming. It not only did not show up, but after contacting personnel in the central office and not getting any response, I knew that I would not get the help that had been told to me by the superintendent."

-Stapleton School Leader

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Theme 2:
Low Levels Trust Between CO and Schools (RQ2)

Over one in four (29%) of the SPS school leaders surveyed reported a lack of trust in central office leadership. This manifested in a "dog and pony show" performance in some quarterly chats and at times school leaders active resistance to central office support.

"I don't think that work can be done without trust. That is impossible."

-Stapleton Central Office Leader

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Theme 3:
C.O. Leadership Practices Influence Trust (RQ2)

How central office leaders behave and the practices they employ within the quarterly chats had a direct impact on school leaderships' trust of central office and their willingness to engage meaningfully in shared work focused on school improvement.

Central Office Leadership Support Practices

- Coaching Practices
- Systemic Coherence
- Follow Through

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Theme 3 (*cont.*):
C.O. Leadership Practices Influence Trust (RQ2)

"The response to our data sharing was validated by restating our work. It felt like we were actually being listened to when the central office staff were able to restate what we shared." –School Leader

"When some central office staff spent more time on their phones than engaged in our presentation." –School Leader

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Theme 4:
Accountability Sanctions and Trust(RQ3)

Trust levels were not significantly different between school and central office leaders for schools under standards-based accountability sanctions compared to those who were not.

"Every principal gets defensive…Which can, I think, start to erode some of the trust built up unless, the people who are there from central office come back and say, okay, so now that you've been able to take a deep breath, like how do we support you in doing this."

-Central Office Leader

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Theme 5:
Accountability Mediated by Practices(RQ4)

Central office leaders viewed their roles in working with sanctioned schools as a support and aimed to position themselves to mediate the increased external pressure and scrutiny that accompanies a standards-based accountability sanction.

"You have to kind of meet them where they are and find something positive that they are doing, even if it's just showing up at work, you know, so that you can start there and begin to develop a roadmap."

-Superintendent

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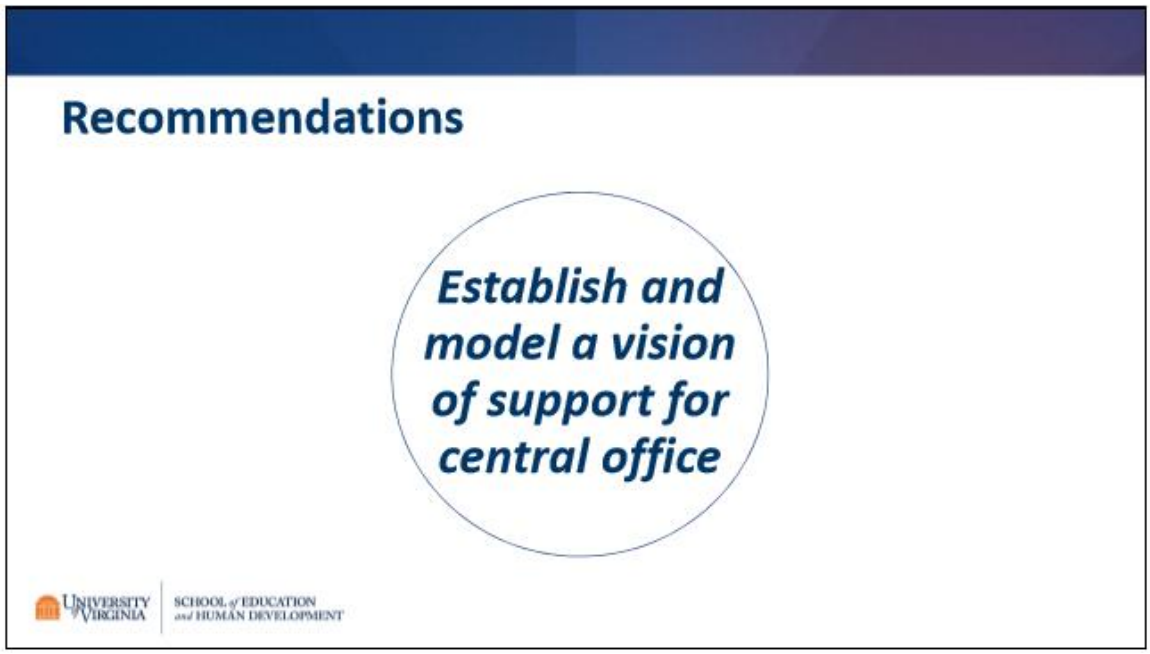
Recommendations
Establish and model a vision of support for central office
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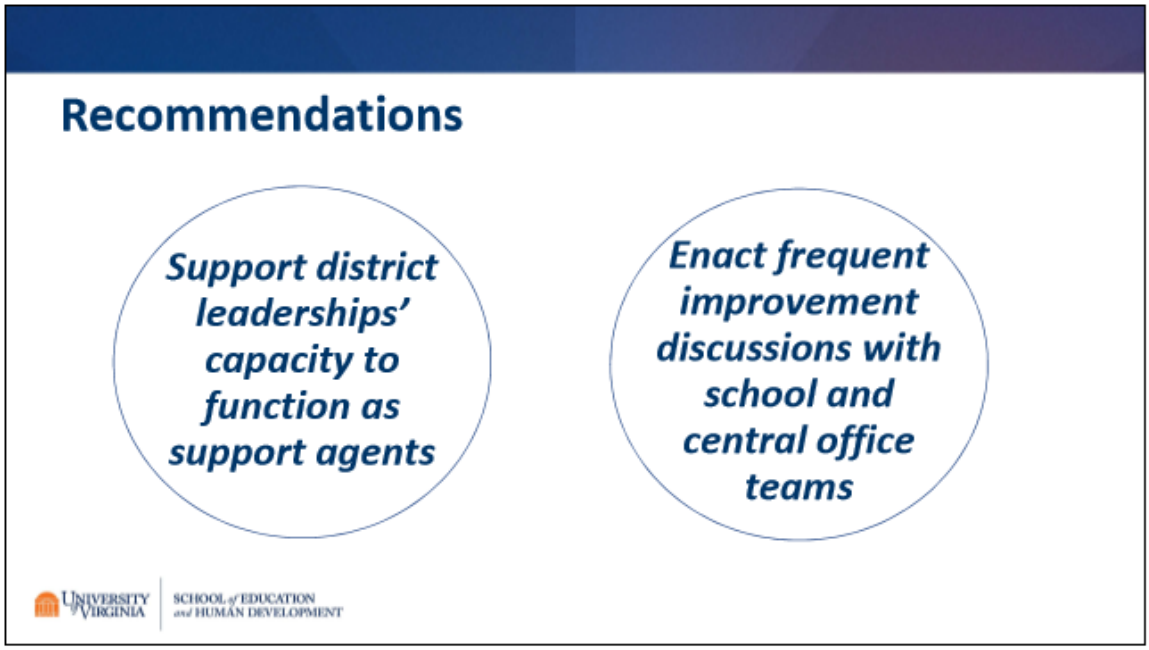
Recommendations
Support district leaderships' capacity to function as support agents
Enact frequent improvement discussions with school and central office teams
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Recommendations

Develop horizontal accountability structures within organization

Manage reactions to external accountability sanctions

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Thank you: Questions and feedback

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Appendix A: School and Division Leader Survey Instruments

The following survey instruments are designed to inform:

- What central office leaders' practices in quarterly data chats support or hinder trust with school leaders?
- How, if at all, do the levels of trust between school and central office leaders vary by school accountability status?

School Leader Survey Instrument

Directions: This survey is designed to help us gain a better understanding of your perceptions of the relationships between school and central office leaders.	
1. Central office and school leaders respect the professional competence of their colleagues.	*Scored on a six-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree*
2. Central office and school leaders help and support each other.	
3. Central office and school leaders make innovative decisions to improve the overall quality of schools.	
4. Central office and school leaders engage in collaborative inquiry in search of improved methods of instruction.	
5. Central office and school leaders put the needs of students ahead of bureaucratic rules.	
6. The division sets high standards for academic performance	
7. Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged by the division.	
8. How many central office and school leaders feel responsible to help each other do their best?	*Scored on a five-point Likert scale: none, some, about half, most, nearly all*
9. How many central office leaders take responsibility for improving schools?	
10. How many school leaders take responsibility for improving schools?	
11. How many central office leaders feel responsible that all students learn?	
12. How many school leaders feel responsible that all students learn?	

13. Central office leaders are friendly and approachable.	*Scored on a six-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree*
14. Central office leaders put suggestions made by school leaders into operation.	
15. Central office leaders explore all sides of topics and admit that other options exist.	
16. Central office leaders treat all school leaders as their equal.	
Trust Scale	
1. The school leaders in this division have faith in the integrity of central office leadership.	*Scored on a six-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree*
2. Central office leadership in this division typically acts in the best interests of school leaders.	
3. School leaders in this division can rely on central office leadership.	
4. School leaders in this division trust central office leadership.	
5. The central office leadership doesn't tell school leaders what is really going on.	
6. The central office leadership in this division does not show concern for school leaders.	
7. The school leaders in this division are suspicious of most of the actions of central office leadership.	
8. The central office leadership in this division is competent in doing their job.	
Directions: Please answer the following questions thinking about the quarterly data chats held during the 2019-2020 school year.	
Please describe a point within a quarterly data chat where you felt particularly supported by central office and what led to that feeling? Please describe a point within the quarterly data chats where you felt particularly unsupported by central office and what led to that feeling?	

Division Leader Survey Instrument

Directions: This survey is designed to help us gain a better understanding of your perceptions of the relationships between school and central office leaders.	
1. Central office and school leaders respect the professional competence of their colleagues.	*Scored on a six-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree*
2. Central office and school leaders help and support each other.	
3. Central office and school leaders make innovative decisions to improve the overall quality of schools.	
4. Central office and school leaders engage in collaborative inquiry in search of improved methods of instruction.	
5. Central office and school leaders put the needs of students ahead of bureaucratic rules.	
6. The division sets high standards for academic performance	
7. Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged by the division.	
8. How many central office and school leaders feel responsible to help each other do their best?	*Scored on a five-point Likert scale: none, some, about half, most, nearly all*
9. How many central office leaders take responsibility for improving schools?	
10. How many school leaders take responsibility for improving schools?	
11. How many central office leaders feel responsible that all students learn?	
12. How many school leaders feel responsible that all students learn?	
13. Central office leaders are friendly and approachable.	*Scored on a six-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree*
14. Central office leaders put suggestions made by school leaders into operation.	
15. Central office leaders explore all sides of topics and admit that other options exist.	
16. Central office leaders treat all school leaders as their equal.	

Trust Scale	
1. School leaders within this division are candid with me.	*Scored on a six-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree*
2. I have faith in the integrity of the division's school leaders.	
3. I believe in this division's school leaders.	
4. I question the competence of some of the division's school leaders.	
5. I am often suspicious of school leaders' motives in this division.	
6. When school leaders in this division tell you something, you can believe it.	
7. Even in difficult situations, I can depend on school leaders.	
8. I trust the school leaders in this division.	

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Research questions to be addressed:

- How do central office leaders conceive their purpose and role in the quarterly data chats with schools?
- What are the differences in central office leadership practices within the quarterly data chats across schools with different accountability statuses?

Introduction

As you know, I'm interested in learning more about how central office leaders think about their roles within quarterly chats. Through this interview I hoped to learn more regarding your perspective on this topic.

Logistics

I would like to record this interview so that I can be certain I get all of the ideas you share with me today. Using the recorder will assist me in this effort, as it will allow me to refer back to your responses after the interview is complete. I will be the only person to listen to your taped responses. I would also like to take some notes during the interview. The notes will help me keep track of your responses and what questions to ask next.
Do you consent to allow me to record our session today _____ (Yes/No)
Do you consent to allow me to take notes today _____ (Yes/No)
I will not be sharing my notes or transcripts with anyone outside of my graduate professor at UVA's Curry School of Education. Nothing you say will ever be identified with you personally as I will use a pseudonym in all my recordings and reporting.

(Turn on audio recording device)

1. Some people view central office as a management and oversight entity over schools. Others see central office as a support mechanism for schools. Overall, what do you feel the role of Central Office is in working with schools?
    a. (follow-up) Has your view shifted at all over time? If so, why?
    b. (follow-up) What are ways that you work with schools?

2. You have just described the role of central office as *(insert summary of response to Q1*). Can you describe how you view your role as a central office leader within the quarterly chats?
    a. (follow-up) Is your role the same across schools? Why or why not?

3. Shifting now to the quarterly data chats. What have been some benefits, if any, to having the quarterly chats with schools?
    a. (follow-up) Any differences in the benefits across schools?

4. What have been some drawbacks, if any, to having the quarterly chats with schools?
    a. (follow-up) Any differences in the drawbacks across schools?

5. What have you learned through the quarterly chats?

6. What do you hope schools learned from you through the quarterly chats?

7. Tell me about a time within a quarterly chat where you felt heard?
    a. (probe) What did others do/say leading up to….following?

8. Tell me about a time within a quarterly chat where you did not feel heard?
    a. (probe) What did others do/say leading up to….following?

9. In a recent survey 86% of central office leaders agreed that they trust school leaders within the division. How do you feel the quarterly chats have influenced central office trust of school leaders?
    a. (probe) Can you tell me of a specific instance where…

10. In a recent survey 71% of school-based leaders agreed that school leaders trust central office leaders. How do you feel the quarterly chats have influenced school leaders' trust in central office?
    a. (probe) Can you tell me of a specific instance where…

11. How, if at all, do the levels of trust between school and central office leaders vary by school's recently identified through state or federal accountability systems as needing improvement?
    a. (probe) What factors do you feel lead to this…

    b. (probe) What, if any differences, exist with central office leaders' practices within the quarterly chats with accountability identified schools?

12. That is the conclusion of the questions I have for you today. Is there anything else you would like me to know about the quarterly data chats and the role of central office leaders in them?

Appendix C: Interview and Open-Ended Survey Responses Codebook

Code	Description
Central Office Role	
Support	Ideas expressing that the role of central office is to assist schools and work collaboratively with school staff in school improvement work.
Oversight	Discussion of the role of central office to manage and oversee the work taking place in schools as a mechanism of internal or external accountability structures and systems.
Barrier	The expression of any challenges confronted by central office leaders and staff in attempting to assume the role of either support or oversight.
Purpose of Chats	
Support	Discussion specific to the quarterly chats serving as a mechanism for central office leaders to assist schools in their school improvement efforts.
Oversight	Discussion specific to the quarterly chats serving as a mechanism allowing central office leaders to monitor, judge, and/or provide critique of school improvement efforts.
Impact on Trust	Central office leaders explicit mention of the impact the quarterly chats had on either expanding or restricting trust with school leaders.
Shifting Mindsets	Ideas expressed by central office leaders as a purpose of the quarterly chats to change school leader and central office leader previous conceptions of structured interactions between central office and school leaders focused on school improvement.
Dog and Pony Show	The performative nature perceived by central office and school leaders of quarterly chats not being authentic and transparent conversations on current challenges and the most pressing issues within the school context.
Central Office Leadership Practices	

Collaboration	Specific actions either during or following the quarterly chats showing shared dialogue and/or actions between central office and school teams.
Shared Responsibility	Ideas expressed by leaders of ownership of the challenges, problem-solving, actions, and/or outcomes of school improvement efforts as shared across both school and central office staff.
Two-way Communication	Discussions in quarterly chats featuring active communicative participation across both central office and school leaders.
Focus Student Learning	Quarterly chat discussions by central office leaders focused on student learning.
Reflection	Central office leaders giving serious thought and consideration to quarterly chat discussions and school improvement efforts after the meetings.
Affirmation	Central office leaders providing positive feedback to school teams within the quarterly chats.
Time Management	Central office leaders arriving late or missing quarterly chat meetings.
Listening	Central office leaders showing active listening within the quarterly chats.
CO Follow Through	Central office leaders and staff meeting or failing to meet school requests for supports.
Accountability Influence	
CO Leader Role Variation	Discussion of any changes in how central office leaders perceive their roles in working with schools who recently have received accountability sanctions.
CO Practice Variation	Discussion of any changes in how central office leaders perceive their practices in working with schools who recently have received accountability sanctions.
Impact on Trust	Ideas expressed regarding the impact of accountability sanctions on the trust central office leaders have of those school leaders.
Other Codes	

Quote	Used as a subcode to highlight salient quotes within any of the above codes.
Example	Used as a subcode to highlight any narrative stories or examples of a concept within a code above.

Legend:

Indicates an inductive code added during the qualitative analysis

Appendix D: School Leadership Survey Results

Component	*Survey Question*	*Mean Score* N=45
Professionalism		
	Central office and school leaders respect the professional competence of their colleagues.	4.73
	Central office and school leaders help and support each other.	4.53
	Central office and school leaders make innovative decisions to improve the overall quality of schools.	4.44
	Central office and school leaders engage in collaborative inquiry in search of improved methods of instruction.	4.31
	Central office and school leaders put the needs of students ahead of bureaucratic rules.	4.38
	The division sets high standards for academic performance.	4.93
	Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged by the division.	4.71
	Component Composite:	**4.58**
Collective Responsibility		
	How many central office and school leaders feel responsible to help each other do their best?	3.67
	How many central office leaders take responsibility for improving schools?	3.49
	How many school leaders take responsibility for improving schools?	4.56
	How many central office leaders feel responsible that all students learn?	3.58
	How many school leaders feel responsible that all students learn?	4.51
	Component Composite:	**3.96**

Collegial Leadership		
	Central office leaders are friendly and approachable.	4.64
	Central office leaders put suggestions made by school leaders into operation.	3.93
	Central office leaders explore all sides of topics and admit that other options exist.	4.00
	Central office leaders treat all school leaders as their equal.	3.64
	Component Composite:	**4.05**
Trust		
	The school leaders in this division have faith in the integrity of central office leadership.	4.13
	Central office leadership in this division typically acts in the best interests of school leaders.	4.18
	School leaders in this division can rely on central office leadership.	4.16
	School leaders in this division trust central office leadership.	3.96
	The central office leadership doesn't tell school leaders what is really going on.	3.73*
	The central office leadership in this division does not show concern for school leaders.	4.27*
	The school leaders in this division are suspicious of most of the actions of central office leadership.	3.93*
	The central office leadership in this division is competent in doing their job.	4.39
	Component Composite:	**4.09**

Note. This table provides the mean score for individual survey items as well as the mean composite score for each of the survey components. The scale is 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) for all scales except collective responsibility which is on a 1 (strongly

disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale. Three item scales denoted by an asterisk in the Trust scale were reverse scored based on negative sentence stem to make them comparable to all other items.

Appendix E: Central Office Leadership Survey Results

Component	*Survey Question*	*Mean Score* N=6
Professionalism		
	Central office and school leaders respect the professional competence of their colleagues.	4.83
	Central office and school leaders help and support each other.	5.00
	Central office and school leaders make innovative decisions to improve the overall quality of schools.	4.00
	Central office and school leaders engage in collaborative inquiry in search of improved methods of instruction.	3.50
	Central office and school leaders put the needs of students ahead of bureaucratic rules.	4.67
	The division sets high standards for academic performance.	4.50
	Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged by the division.	5.17
	Component Composite:	**4.52**
Collective Responsibility		
	How many central office and school leaders feel responsible to help each other do their best?	3.67
	How many central office leaders take responsibility for improving schools?	3.50
	How many school leaders take responsibility for improving schools?	3.83
	How many central office leaders feel responsible that all students learn?	3.67
	How many school leaders feel responsible that all students learn?	3.67
	Component Composite:	**3.67**

Collegial Leadership		
	Central office leaders are friendly and approachable.	4.83
	Central office leaders put suggestions made by school leaders into operation.	4.50
	Central office leaders explore all sides of topics and admit that other options exist.	4.50
	Central office leaders treat all school leaders as their equal.	3.83
	Component Composite:	**4.42**
Trust		
	The school leaders within this division are candid with me.	4.83
	I have faith in the integrity of the division's school leaders.	5.00
	I believe in this division's school leaders.	4.83
	I question the competence of some of the division's school leaders.	3.33*
	I am often suspicious of school leaders' motives in this division	5.00*
	When school leaders in this division tell you something, you can believe it.	4.33
	Even in difficult situations, I can depend on school leaders.	4.67
	I trust the school leaders in this division.	5.14
	Component Composite:	**4.64**

Note. This table provides the mean score for individual survey items as well as the mean composite score for each of the survey components. The scale is 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) for all scales except collective responsibility which is on a 1 (strongly

disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale. Two item scales denoted by an asterisk in the Trust scale were reverse scored based on negative sentence stem to make them comparable to all other items.