Leveraging the Power of the School District: A Mixed Methods Study of Accreditation Reports

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the nature of recommendations made to school districts by accreditation teams. The review of literature examined the standards used for district accreditation and found congruence with best practices for district improvement. School districts can contribute in specific ways to the improvement of education.

Examining the recommendations of peer-review teams and correlating these by size, spending, and poverty provided information about district-wide improvement. Participants included 138 districts in the states served by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on School Improvement (SACS CASI) who received District Accreditation from 2002-2007.

Text analysis using the constant comparative method was executed to create numerical data, which was then analyzed using an ordinal regression technique. Districts had wide variances in recommendations made by peer-review teams. Results also showed that per pupil spending, percentage of students in poverty, and school district size were only marginally related to the elements of successful district practices. Further research is needed to clarify the relationships between demographic factors and factors of successful district practices.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

American education has been seen as a means to an end since the mid-19th century when Horace Mann proposed that "a free school system, it knows no distinction of rich and poor...it throws open its doors and spreads the table of its bounty for all the children of the state" (Mondale & Patton, 2001, p. 29). Out of this philosophy sprang the "common schools" (Cremin, 1980). Paid for through tax dollars and enforced by the state, the common schools movement grew to include 12.7 million students in 1890 (Mondale & Patton).

As society's desired outcomes shifted from agricultural to industrial; the nature of schooling also shifted (Mondale & Patton, 2001). School systems grew larger, more complex, and began requiring specialized expertise. This gave rise to the efficiency movement in education paralleling the same movement sweeping through the business world (Wells & Holme, 2005). In 1957, the Soviet launching of Sputnik jarred the entire nation into panic regarding its security (Cohen, 1995). Education was seen as a part of the bigger problem of falling behind the Soviets in terms of scientific and technological advances (Mondale & Patton). In response, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 directed $906 million into the coffers of public education (Flatteau, et al, 1996). Businesses continued to see national education as a means toward promoting a more competitive, profitable economy (Mondale & Patton). Faults in the educational system

were blamed when the economy faltered in the mid and late 1970s; *A Nation at Risk* (1983) outlined the connections between low student test scores and low economic performance. This set off a flurry of top-down policy directives, marking the first wave of reform (Marks & Nance, 2007; Smith & O'Day, 1991). However, reports calling for increased student achievement continued to be published calling into question the utility of top-down policy mandates (Marks & Nance). Subject-specific reports included *Everybody Counts: A Report to the Nation on the Future of Mathematics Education* (National Research Council, 1989) which concluded that ineffective mathematics education posed a potential threat to American economic security in a technological world; this spurred radical reforms in mathematics teaching. Other publications that promoted reform included the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) report, *Science for All Americans* (1989), the National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools project *Charting a Course: Social Studies for the 21st Century* (1989), and the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) project *Essential changes in secondary science: Scope, Sequence, and Coordination* (Aldridge, 1989).

The climax of these reports was Goals 2000, established in 1989 at the Education Summit of then-President George Bush by a coalition of state governors; it was subsequently signed into law by President Clinton as the GOALS 2000: Educate America Act (Superfine, 2005). The policy response to this series of reports resulted in the second wave of reform, characterized by calls for bottom-up restructuring and local decision-making (Marks & Nance, 2007; Smith & O'Day, 1991). It also expanded the role of the federal government in education policy (Cohen, 1995; Superfine).

multiple stakeholder groups, with a variety of needs, and expectations (Wagner, 1995). Education is at once a shaper of society and is shaped by society (Ballantine, 2001).

NCLB relies on yearly standardized test data as measures of accountability, and according to the 39th Annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll (Rose & Gallup, 2007) the public seems to endorse that notion. However, according to Rose and Gallup, support may be eroding. The survey results indicated that communities want the data that tests provide but the percentage has dropped each year from 2002 to 2007 (Rose & Gallup). Still, 55% of respondents support the current level of emphasis on testing or want more (Rose & Gallup). The challenge for schools is still to demonstrate quality in ways that include, but are not limited to, test data (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2005). This suggests that the demonstration of quality needs to be in a metric understood by the public in order to gain their trust and meet their expectations so that test scores are not the only way to communicate quality (Guzenhauser & Hyde, 2007).

School Improvement

Key parts of the education system are unaligned (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003). Poll data from a 2003 Public Agenda survey showed that 66% of principals and 62% of superintendents polled felt like they have to "work around the system" (Farkas et al., p. 7) in order to get things done and feel that their "hands are tied because of the way things are done" (Farkas et al., p. 8). Quite eloquently, Wheatley (1999) provided this description of the current school reform outcomes.

> We have suffered from the unending fads that, like great tidal waves, crash down on our schools, creating more destruction than growth. As the most recent wave recedes, we look over our organizations and see debris scattered everywhere—relationships torn apart, survivors struggling to come up for air, ideas and plans tossed askew. (p. 1)

Dramatic shifts in education including a turbulent policy environment, overwhelming scale and pace of change, and a new view of teacher expertise has created role ambiguity, overload, and confusion (Marsh, 2000).

Despite these changes, the current organization of schools is supported (Rose & Gallup, 2007). The 2007 Gallup/PDK poll suggests that the 72% of the public have a strong interest in reforming the existing education system. Furthermore, the public endorses the school the oldest child in the family who was polled attends, with 67% of the sample rating the schools as either an A or a B (Rose & Gallup). This suggests that school improvement efforts should build on the strengths of current practices, rather than abandoning them. In 2005, a research study by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) found it is not necessary to reorganize schools because the structures of high and low performing schools are similar. Rather, they differ on measures of school environment, instruction, and leadership (McREL). This supports the notion of continuous improvement for existing schools and systems, focusing on the levers that produce the most gain. The current wave of reform looks to the systemic nature of schooling, attempting to identify levers that can prompt widespread change demonstrated by high test performance and the elimination of performance gaps (Marks & Nance, 2007). This premise that districts can identify levers for improvement is the basis for the present study.

Statement of the Problem

In the face of increased accountability, districts are responsible for scaling up successful school improvement processes. Much is known about the features of successful schools while less is known about the features of successful districts (Mac Iver

& Farley-Ripple, 2008). Furthermore, the literature provides little direction for a local solution given district circumstances; this information is necessary for districts to target their improvement efforts. If the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) District Accreditation process (AdvancED, 2007a) identifies the presence of research-based constructs indicative of successful districts, then what does it say about districts with specific demographic profiles? This research identifies themes in the recommendations made to districts through the District Accreditation peer review process and then disaggregates the themes by demographic characteristics in order to clarify and facilitate the continuous improvement efforts of school districts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory sequential mixed method study is to examine the recommendations from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) District Accreditation team visits to identify trends in recommendations to districts similar in student population, per pupil spending, and socioeconomic status. This will help to identify district practices that support continuous improvement. Although research identifies successful district practices (Mac Iver & Farley-Ripple, 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004), few avenues exist for those practices to be examined and evaluated in the demographic context of the district. Thus, district accreditation is one method for obtaining feedback and information that is vital for systemic improvement.

The present study consists of two phases. The purpose of Phase 1 is to deconstruct the recommendations resulting from District Accreditation Quality Assurance Review

visits in order to construct themes. The purpose of Phase 2 is to examine the relationship between the themes and specific demographic variables toward expanding the results regarding District Accreditation findings. Phase 1 identifies the constructs but does not address to whom they speak. Phase 2 gives specific direction and adds meaning to the constructs from Phase 1.

The purpose of this study is not to evaluate or to pass judgment on specific schools or districts; nor is it to review team findings. Similar to cluster evaluation methods in philanthropic work, the outcomes of this research are intended to increase capacity and improve programs (Woodwell, 2005).

Research Questions

Phase I:

1. What themes emerge when analyzing SACS District Accreditation recommendations?

Phase 2:

2. Is there a correlation between district size and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit?

3. Is there a correlation between per pupil spending and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit?

4. Is there a correlation between levels of poverty and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit?

Definitions

Central office. The constellation of administrative functions of the school district, distinct from schools.

Southern Associations of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI). One of six regional accrediting bodies in the United States (AdvancED, 2007a).

District Accreditation. A form of accreditation that focuses on the school district rather than the individual school. Districts are assessed on meeting accreditation standards, engaging in continuous improvement, and quality assurance (AdvancED, 2007a).

Quality Assurance Review. An external peer review process to examine evidence of meeting standards, achieving goals, and engaging in continuous improvement (AdvancED, 2007a). According to AdvancED (2007a), the review provides recommendations for districts to use in their improvement efforts and results in an accreditation recommendation.

Socioeconomic status. The number of people ages 5-17 living under the poverty line.

School district. Curricula, funding, teaching, and other policies are set through locally elected school boards authorized by provisions of state law for a collection of schools, usually defined geographically.

System. Interconnected parts or subsystems where actions of the individual parts affect the whole (Ackoff, 1998). The term *system* is not used as a synonym for school district in this paper.

Theme. A specific, distinct, reoccurring quality that will be established through the qualitative methodology of the present study.

Systems Thinking: A Theoretical Context

Systems thinking offers a framework for understanding school improvement and the relationship between schools, school districts, and student achievement; it is the

theoretical context that will be used to answer the research questions. Systems theory was originally introduced by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968). In this view, systems theory posits that a system is an organized collection of parts that are highly integrated to accomplish an overall goal. If one part of the system is changed then the nature of the overall system is often changed (von Bertalanffy). Furthermore, a system is a functioning whole that cannot be divided into independent parts and still be effective (Ackoff, 1998). This shifts the focus from the parts to the relationships between the parts. In a complex system involving humans, in this case a school district, this theory allows people to look beyond the immediate context and appreciate the impact of actions upon others. To this extent, it holds the possibility of achieving a more holistic understanding of the school district.

According to Peter Senge (2006), systems thinking is the practical application of systems theory. He describes systems thinking as a "shift of mind: seeing interrelationships rather than linear cause-effect chains, and seeing processes of change rather than snapshots" (p. 73). Senge argues that is possible to move beyond a focus on the parts, to begin to see the whole, and to appreciate organization as a dynamic process. Improvements can be made so that they affect the weakest structure, patterns, or cycles of the system leading to powerful positive change (Ackoff, 1998). Systemic thinking allows us to see the complexity of a problem, to explain why past solutions have not worked, and to identify possible solutions not previously considered (Senge).

In contrast, Ackoff (1998) posits that traditional western thought can be characterized as mechanistic. He asserts that the whole is made up of parts, and to fix or improve the whole, one must fix or replace a part. Problems can be isolated and solved in

a linear cause-and-effect method (Torres & Voyce, 2008). Systems thinking rejects the mechanistic paradigm by arguing that this effort to control and make order creates more problems (Wheatley, 1999).

To understand systems, the concept of feedback must be understood; feedback is any influence in response to an action (Argyris, 1990). This influence is reciprocal including both cause and effect. This means that, in a systems view, blame cannot be assigned; rather it is shared (Senge, 2006). Solutions must be devised that avoid breakdowns in other parts of the global system (Argyris). Argyris argues that conventional understanding of feedback is when an opinion is shared or when data are gathered, however; systems thinking enlarges the concept of feedback to illustrate the continuous nature of systemic thinking. When information is received, the feedback which was previously a result then becomes the impetus for another part of the system hence continuing the cycle (Argyris).

Using a systems view can help to identify areas of improvement in the underlying structure of the organization (Fullan, 2005; Senge, 2006). Argyris (1990) posits that if results are not used to inform ensuing practices then the system is not healthy. He concludes that feedback can be negative in order to spur change or positive to sustain behaviors.

One source of feedback for schools is the accreditation process. Accreditation is a way to obtain feedback from outside the organization. It could be considered both a cause and an effect of change within the system.

Importance of the Study

Schools, as a right of the citizens, must be accountable on many fronts to preserve the integrity of the education system (Leithwood, et al., 1999; Wagner, 1995). This study examines a relatively new avenue of accreditation, which is an accountability mechanism that focuses on the school district as a system with individual schools as the parts. According to AdvancEd (2007a), accreditation has stood the test of time; it is a tool for schools to maintain good standing with the public by meeting standards of quality. Accreditation is important to many of the stakeholders in the education process including communities, students, families, and school district personnel (AdvancED).

This study is relevant because it continues the dialogue regarding quality schools by refocusing attention on the systemic power of coalitions of schools that we have in school districts that may not be fully leveraged. It sheds light on the concept and process of district accreditation in order to inform directions of not only accountability, but also continuous improvement on a larger scale. The accreditation process can be a valuable source of feedback for districts to use in their continuous improvement efforts (AdvancED, 2007a). It is also important from the perspective of the people in the districts and schools that the work related to accreditation is congruent with the other efforts undertaken regarding school improvement and school accountability.

The issue is timely, as NCLB legislation matures, and as reauthorization of the bill is considered (Harrison-Jones, 2007). Examining accountability in relationship to school improvement and, in particular, to the component of capacity building, can deepen our understanding and promote better policy decisions that support sustainable reform with the outcome of increased student achievement.

Lastly and importantly, this study broadens the research on the relationship of the central office to the school. This research can inform principals' practices in relation to district level initiatives and central office staff with the outcome of nurturing positive and productive relationships. The relationships have to be redefined as the responsibilities and focus of the organizations evolve.

Organization of the Study

The review of literature, Chapter 2, begins with a selective examination of the literature on successful district practices followed by a discussion of the SACS CASI district accreditation process (AdvancED, 2007a). Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 then reports the findings of the investigation including both qualitative and quantitative results. Chapter 5 then provides the summary and discusses the results of this study.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter provides a review of the literature pertaining to the district's role in the continuous improvement of schools. The review begins with a selective examination of the literature on the importance of school districts and successful district practices. This is followed by a systems perspective of continuous improvement that is developed by focusing on student learning, leadership, building capacity, and accountability. Finally, quality assurance is shown to serve the dual purposes of providing districts with valuable data for continuous improvement and of meeting accountability demands. The district accreditation model is described in detail including beliefs, standards, and process. The standards of district accreditation are then aligned with the literature on successful district processes. According to AdvancED (2007), the process of district accreditation aligns with continuous improvement efforts and provides a clear model for districts to follow in order to be accountable and to gain the trust of communities.

Taking a District View for School Improvement

How can the educational community address the countless challenges put forth by policy, communities, and families in order to nurture a sustainable, productive system? Part of the solution is found in the district, which is the very structure of school organization (Mac Iver & Farley-Ripple, 2008). NCLB has re-energized the discussion

about the role of the district in the goal-setting, high-expectations, and accountability framework prescribed by the legislation (Wallace Foundation, 2006).

Currently, the NCLB legislation requires all students to meet their state's standards by 2014 (PL 107-110, 2002). In order for this to occur, communities cannot focus on one school at a time; rather, entire districts need to improve (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Given the pace and scale of change, focusing on districts is more meaningful; this leverages the collective power of teams for the good of students (Togneri & Anderson). The anxiety associated with such change is compounded in education, given the importance and immediacy of providing the best education for all students (Fullan, 2004; Schmoker, 2006).

No school is completely independent; each school needs the fiscal, knowledge-based, and administrative resources of external stakeholders, and perhaps most importantly, the school district administration (Massell, 2000; Supovitz, 2006). This suggests that it is necessary to move away from the idea that schools can solve their problems completely on their own. For example, teachers need to maximize learning time; all other personnel outside the classroom, but within the district, need to work with the goal of supporting the teacher and students in mind (Elmore, 2004).

Cawelti and Protheroe (2003) noted four reasons for focusing on districts rather than schools.

1. Literature from the business sector increasingly points to "systems improvement" and a school district can be seen as a system.

2. State and federal accountability data systems create the ability to track progress and disaggregate results.

3. School-by-school reform is too slow and is difficult to accomplish given a current political climate that is expecting rapid and widespread reform across districts.

4. Districts recognize this as their responsibility and are seeking out literature on best practices at the central level.

The problem pertains to the scaling up of successful school processes from these few schools to all schools (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Fullan (2005) argued that making reform widespread relates to replicating the conditions of successful change, not to the transferring of products. Each school district needs to empower individual schools to find a process that works for the students they serve rather than merely implement a solution that worked elsewhere (Fullan). Wheatley (1999) also advocated for local solutions, asserting that they are the only changes that will be sustainable.

Schools must develop the ability to solve their problems and meet their challenges internally while participating fully as part of a school district (Elmore, 2004). According to Elmore, this is the essence of building capacity. School districts can facilitate this development by providing the needed resources and overall direction (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003).

The focus on school districts reflects the understanding that schools often cannot manage the change process without the assistance of district-level administration

(Shannon & Byslma, 2004). David and Shields (2001) examined districts that undertook reform. They found that no significant improvements were realized without active support and leadership from the district. They further stated that two of the main functions the district can provide are vision-making and the alignment of the parts of the system to support individual schools. The district cannot maximize its resources to meet the needs of many different schools as well as it can when schools are in a more aligned system (David & Shields). Fullan (2004) asserted that schools should go through the discussions of purpose and how to conduct business; however, they must work within the framework of the district in order for the improvement process to be manageable. When schools collaborate as a district, change can be lasting, and leadership can survive any particular individual or group. Improvement then becomes sustainable, which is a hallmark of continuous improvement (Fullan).

In addition to facilities and business functions, the district can do much to improve teaching and learning (Anderson, 2003; David & Shields, 2001; Elmore & Burney, 1998; Firestone, Mangin, Marinez, & Polovsky, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). Setting a vision, aligning resources toward instruction, and increasing capacity (Massell, 2000) are just a few of the instructionally-oriented strategies a district can take (Campbell & Fullan, 2006; Elmore, 2000). Supovitz (2006) argued that instructional improvement is the "central lever" in the improvement of all students' performance and that districts must assume leadership in order for that to occur. A focus on student learning will be developed further in a subsequent section. In order to understand the

resulting in high achievement districts. In 2003, noting that additional studies had been conducted in the field, they conducted a follow-up study, which synthesized the findings of four studies including their original study. The 2003 study identified the impact of state accountability programs, leadership and vision, movement toward a systems approach, emphasis on curriculum and instruction, reorganization of resources to support improvement efforts, clear assignment of accountability to the school level, use of data, increased opportunities for staff communication and collaboration, use of professional development to support instructional improvement, and change in the role of central office staff as elements that were common to the improvement efforts. Cawelti and Protheroe (2003) were also quick to point out and repeated often that "student success is an achievable goal" (p. 76). This point is made emphatically when they stress that intangibles such as "passion, excitement and pride" in addition to "the hard work required" (p. 75) were the keys to district success.

Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools (Togneri & Anderson, 2003) was a study conducted by the Learning First Alliance. This permanent partnership of 18 educational associations has the primary goal of engaging parents and community members in helping students achieve high academic standards that have been set in a safe and supportive place of learning (www.learningfirst.org). The study examined five districts that showed improvement in reading and math over three or more years; improvements were also found for subgroups of students including those with free and reduced lunch eligibility of at least 25%. The researchers solicited recommendations of districts from educational

leaders, which resulted in 50 recommendations. The final sample of five districts ranged in size, per pupil spending, and percentage of students in poverty. In their examination of districts which had demonstrated improvement but were not necessarily high-performing, Togneri and Anderson found seven factors essential to improvement. They also listed the following 10 lessons learned for district-level improvement:

1. Districts can make a difference.
2. Let truth be heard.
3. Focus on instruction to improve student achievement.
4. Improving instruction requires a coherent systemwide approach.
5. Make decisions based on good data.
6. Rethink professional development.
7. Everyone has a role to play in improving instruction.
8. Working together takes work.
9. There are not any quick fixes.
10. Current structures and funding limit success. (p. 49-50)

Togneri and Anderson emphasize that these lessons are important because they begin to acknowledge that success has an action component, and the process can be messy. While these ideas by themselves are not new, together they move from a mechanistic linear description to a more integrated combination of behaviors, attitudes, and actions.

Campbell and Fullan (2006) identified eight not necessarily high achieving Canadian districts that have demonstrated improvements at the elementary level. Similar to the other studies reviewed, their study was done purposefully to illustrate growth, not

achievement, across a variety of districts. They also noted that components are not mutually exclusive and must be considered interdependently to reach full potential. They found four areas of successful practice: leading with purpose and focusing direction; designing a coherent strategy, coordinating implementation, and reviewing outcomes; developing precision in knowledge, skills, and daily practices for improving learning; and sharing responsibility.

Displaying data in a matrix permits ease of comparisons and mitigates the difficulties of text summary that include data being dispersed over many pages, sequentially, poorly ordered, and bulky (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Table 1 is a matrix that shows the relationships between the four studies highlighted in this section. The themes are named on the end line. The elements in each of the four studies are listed in the columns.

Table 1

Themes of Successful District Practices

	Cawelti & Protheroe (2003)	Shannon & Bylsma (2004)	Togneri & Anderson (2003)	Campbell & Fullan, (2006)
Focus on Student Learning		Focus on all students learning	Vision that focused on student learning and guided instructional improvement	Vision and shared focus on student achievement as the priority
Curriculum and Instruction		Coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment Quality classroom instruction	Systematic approach to improving instruction that articulated curricular content and provided instructional support	Curriculum development, instruction and interventions
Leadership	Leadership and vision	Dynamic and distributed leadership Sustained improvements over time	Redefined leadership roles *Committed to sustaining reform over the long haul*	Moral purpose informing strategies and practices Leadership for learning
District roles	change in the role of *central office staff*	Clear understanding of school district roles and responsibilities		Positive and purposeful partnerships
Accountability	Clear assignment of accountability to the school level Impact of state accountability programs	High expectations and accountability for adults	Courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions Interpreting and managing the external environment	Monitoring, review, feedback and accountability

Table Continues

Table 1 (continued)

Themes of Successful District Practices

	Cawelti & Protheroe (2003)	Shannon & Bylsma (2004)	Togneri & Anderson (2003)	Campbell & Fullan, (2006)
Systemic Thinking	Move to a systems approach	Policy and program coherence		Overarching strategy Effective organization
Professional Communication and Collaboration	Increased opportunities for staff communication and collaboration	Professional culture and collaborative relationships		Communication
	Cawelti & Protheroe (2003)	Shannon & Bylsma (2004)	Togneri & Anderson (2003)	Campbell & Fullan, (2006)
Professional Development	Use of professional development to support instructional improvement	Coordinated and embedded professional development	New approaches involving a coherent and district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction	Capacity-building for professional learning
Resource Allocation	Resources reorganized to support improvement efforts	Strategic allocation of resources		Resources allocation and prioritization
Use of Data	Use of data	Effective use of data	Made decisions based on data, not instinct	Use of data and assessment literacy

Examining trends across studies, the following categories or patterns emerge: focus on student learning, curriculum and instruction, leadership, district roles, accountability, systemic thinking, professional communication and collaboration, professional development, resource allocation, and use of data.

Leaders of districts must manage their efforts and judge their efforts in these areas (AdvancED, 2007; Leithwood, et al.2004). Additionally, a systemic perspective requires that the focus be on process and relationships, not elements in isolation (Fullan, 2004; Senge, 2006). A systemic view of continuous improvement provides a framework that organizes the leaders' efforts and therefore warrants further discussion.

A Systems Perspective of Continuous Improvement

Elmore (2000) defined continuous improvement as "change with direction, sustained over time, that moves entire systems, raising the average level of quality and performance while at the same time decreasing the variation among units, and engaging people in analysis and understanding of why some actions seem to work and others don't" (p. 13). Continuous improvement has also been defined as "an unwavering commitment to progress" (Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004, p. 17). Continuous improvement asserts an active stance where, no matter what the current condition, a better way is always sought by embracing change, goal setting, and high standards (Schlechty, 2005). These definitions cooperatively form a clear agenda for schools.

For a standards-based system to work, the underlying framework has to be one of continuous improvement, rather than assessment of mastery (Schlechty, 2005). According to Schlechty, an assessment of mastery indicates a finish point, which is not

congruent with the notion of continuous improvement. Reform does not end; it is an ongoing effort to constantly improve and build change into the structure of the organization (Schlechty). The most successful organizations are the ones that can adapt and move forward (Senge, 2006). Wheatley (1999) defined success with the following two questions: "Did we develop capacity or just stage an event? Are people more prepared for the next wave of change?" (p. 63). In summary, effective districts support schools by ensuring that strong leadership develop capacity-building structures focused on continuous improvement with the goal of student learning at each school.

Michael Fullan (2004) argued for a tri-level solution including the school, district, and state or national policy levels working together. He argued that the recipe for continuous improvement is to integrate student learning and capacity-building with a focus on results. Zmuda et al. (2004) proposed one process for continuous improvement involving the following: "establish core beliefs, develop a vision, analyze data, identify innovation, develop and implement an action plan, embrace collective autonomy as the only way to close the gap, and establish responsibility for closing the gap through collective accountability" (p. 6).

Continuous improvement must be considered from a systems perspective. The complexity of understanding and solving educational problems means that a solution may not be evident at the start; rather, it may emerge (Wheatley, 1999). Resulting action may be the catalyst for future events, which eventually clears the path to a solution. Fullan (1998) asserted that the solution to meaningful change is to give up the search for the silver bullet rather than rely on the dependency that is created by the overwhelming

demands and the seductiveness of prepackaged solutions. Wheatley asserted that imposed solutions stifle creativity and destroy local initiative. In this view, teacher frustration is no surprise; their capacity to grow as professionals to develop their own solutions has not been unleashed, developed, or nurtured; they are accustomed to having ideas done to them. In order to solve perplexing issues, clarification can be gained by looking at the whole system, not just the parts (Argyris, 1990). Further clarification can be gained by inspecting the connections between the parts rather than the way they fit together and the purpose of the system rather than the parts (Wheatley).

Continuous improvement is a strand that pulls through the other strands. It is a process rather than an element (NSSE, 2004). Viewing the elements systemically, Figure 1 suggests that a focus on student learning, leadership, capacity-building and accountability emerge as levers for continuous improvement. For the purposes of this study, the elements are collapsed into these four levers for continuous improvement. The elements will be discussed further as part of the four levers.

- Focus on student learning
    - Vision
    - Curriculum and Instruction
- Leadership
    - Governance
    - District Roles
- Capacity-building

- Professional Communication and Collaboration
- Professional Development
- Resource Allocation

- Accountability
  - Data Use

Systemic thinking and accountability need to be evident in all elements of the district (Fullan, 2004). Next, each of these four levers will be discussed individually.

Focus on student learning

The centrality of student learning and instruction in district improvement is a common theme in research (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Elmore & Burney, 1998; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). Actions do not matter if they are not the right actions; districts can focus on the wrong areas (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Elmore (2000) argued that schools have not focused on instruction and learning, which is why we have not yet seen the wide-scale improvements that are needed. What is needed, in his view, is the creation of a strong culture where accountability is high for student academic performance (Elmore).

One way to shift the focus to student learning is to increase observation and feedback regarding what is occurring in the classroom (Elmore, 2004). "Clear expectations for instruction are as critical as clear expectations for student learning" (David & Shields, 2001, p. 6). In a study of standards-based reform in urban districts,

David and Shields concluded that the traditional logic of standards, aligned assessments, and accountability need to be adjusted due to their weak outcomes. Their modifications moved the priorities of "expectations for instructional practice" (p. 40) and "aligned professional development systems" (p. 40) to the forefront ahead of "aligned assessments and accountability" (p. 40). David and Shields then argued that instructional practice and professional development came before assessment and accountability. This placed the instructional practices at the center of school improvement process, and it ordered the elements of standards-based reform in a way that balanced the pressure of accountability with the support for capacity-building (David & Shields).

Elmore (2004) argued that school reform requires a new kind of educational leader to succeed in the current age of accountability. He suggested that instructional leaders will not succeed unless the relationship between teacher, student, and content is altered substantially. More specifically, the success of these leaders will be inextricably tied to the ability to improve the instruction for students (Elmore). This directly connects student learning to leadership.

Leadership for Continuous Improvement

The importance of leadership is undeniable; a study conducted by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) stated that leadership is second only to instruction as influencers of student achievement. Similarly, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), in a large meta-analysis of research, found that leadership has a significant effect on student achievement. Their analysis included 69 studies completed or published from 1978 to 2001 that examined the relationship between principal

leadership and student academic achievement measured by either a standardized achievement test or state test. Overall, school principal leadership was found to have a correlation with student achievement of .25 (Marzano, et al.). That is, if a principal's leadership effectiveness increased from the 50th percentile to the 84th percentile then the corresponding increase in student achievement would be from the 50th percentile to the 60th percentile (Marzano, et al.). In a related study, Waters and Marzano (2006) examined the effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement and found a correlation of .24. If a superintendent is at the 50th percentile and moves to the 84th percentile then students in that district would improve an average of 9.5 percentile points (Waters & Marzano).

When the focus is on continuous improvement, the leadership roles in a district change (David & Shields, 2001). Heifetz (1994) and Heifetz and Linsky (2002) argue that leadership is situationally based; it requires different skills based on the context of the organization. In this view, the four major strategies of leadership are the following: approaching problems as adaptive challenges by considering values when diagnosing the situation, working on bringing more people to the team, regulating the level of stress caused by confronting issues, and shifting responsibility for others to do their jobs creating accountability (Heifetz; Heifetz & Linsky).

Distributed leadership is a complementary view of leadership that encompasses the skills needed to support continuous improvement (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, 2006). In this conception, the role is shared among many in the organization and is a systemic quality, not the providence of a few people (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995; Wheatley, 1999).

Distributed leadership "means...that the job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result" (Elmore, 2000, p. 15). The strength of leadership does not reside in the people that share the leadership roles but in the relationships that develop among those sharing those functions (Leithwood, et al., 2004). Leithwood et al. proposed that the benefits of these relationships include opportunities for greater commitment, more creative solutions to problems, and mutual accountability.

Leadership cannot be fragmented (Fullan, 2004; Wallace Foundation, 2006; Wheatley, 1999). A study by the Wallace Foundation found that school leadership that does not work systemically results in

> state, district and school policies and practices that are out of synch and even at odds; a perennial search for superhero leaders who are, by definition, in short supply, especially in schools and districts that need them most; leaders who must continually try to beat an unsupportive system and rarely succeed or last; and a climate where effective practices are rarely documented or shared, where progress is limited to single teachers, classrooms or schools, and where successes are not institutionalized so they survive after the superhero leaves. (p. 5)

This research addressed the importance of leadership across the various roles in the school environment and stressed the importance of a systemic perspective (Wallace Foundation). With schools being urged or mandated to reform by districts, state governments, and national initiatives, districts must consider how these reforms work together or at cross purposes prior to implementation (Datnow, 2005). In summary,

leadership or a focus on student learning is not enough for continuous improvement. Leadership and a focus on student learning work interdependently to support efforts to build capacity or competence at all levels in the district. Next, capacity-building is discussed as a lever for continuous improvement.

Building Capacity for Continuous Improvement

Capacity-building involves the "development and use of policies, strategies, and actions that increase the collective power or efficacy of whole groups, organizations, or systems to engage in continuous improvement for ongoing student learning" (Fullan, 2005, p. 23). It includes the factors of motivation, skill, positive learning, organizational conditions, and infrastructure of support (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Newmann, King, and Youngs (2000) provided a comprehensive explanation of school capacity, presenting the following elements of the construct: knowledge, skills and dispositions of individuals (individual human resources); professional community (social resources); program coherence (organizational integration); technical resources; and principal leadership.

Lateral capacity-building is a powerful mechanism for improvement and change in a school district (Fullan, 2004). Fullan defines lateral capacity-building as learning across peer groups and professional learning communities. The benefits to those that participate include access to practical solutions, collective problem solving, and an opportunity to develop an awareness of the larger context of educational issues (Fullan).

In a comparison of schools, Bascia (1996) found that highly effective schools had more capacity to handle the reform process, whereas the less effective schools did not

have the resources to capitalize on the reform effort—a finding with clear implications for a district trying to facilitate change. When scaling up improvement efforts throughout the district, a capacity-building mentality is necessary including providing resources, walking schools through implementation, and following up for quality assurance (Bascia). Since they are the gatekeeper for funding and policy-making, districts have to take responsibility for the capacity-building of schools. (Massell, 2000). Increasing accountability requires increasing capacity-building (Elmore, 2004).

Massell (2000) found that the major strategies used by districts to build the capacity of schools are as follows: interpreting and using data, building teacher knowledge and skills, aligning curriculum and instruction, and targeting interventions on low performing students and schools. Leung (2005) asserts that separating the concepts of capacity-building and continuous improvement is difficult because they are insufficient apart from each other. Capacity-building is what makes continuous improvement a possible endeavor (Copeland, 2003; Elmore, 2004; Leung).

Evaluation is another way to build capacity for learning in that it serves as a source of feedback for the system (Woodwell, 2005). Continuous improvement includes a measure of constant self-evaluation (Fullan, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). Schmoker (1999, 2006) illustrates that evaluations provide data from which analyses can be done. Singular data measures are not as useful as transforming data into information which fuels the system (Schmoker, 1999; Senge, 2006). Skillful analysis builds capacity, but also provides a measure of accountability (Schmoker, 1999; 2006).

Accountability for Continuous Improvement

As described in the first chapter, the accountability process is the responsibility of schools to provide a quality and equitable education for students (Wagner, 1995). Related to continuous improvement, accountability refers to the responsibility for results (Schmoker, 2006). Elmore (2004) made a distinction between internal and external accountability. His research asserted that internal accountability occurs when individuals inside the school share a vision about effective schooling. Internal accountability is contrasted with external accountability, which is made up of the demands originating from outside the school. In Elmore's view, internal accountability is a prerequisite for external accountability. Furthermore, internal accountability is dependent on capacity-building because only once capacity is built is it reasonable to expect results (Elmore).

By intensifying capacity-building efforts and increasing the use of data throughout the system, the measures of accountability are altered (Elmore, 2004). While current efforts are based primarily on test scores, multiple measures of accountability are needed to ensure quality at all levels within the system (Wagner, 1995). Further, since measures of accountability serve as data for additional efforts in an aligned system, the measures must be robust (Leung, 2005; Supovitz & Klein, 2003).

Gunzenhauser and Hyde (2007) argued that accountability, as conceptualized in federal policy, is unlikely to be a catalyst for systemic capacity-building. However, accountability has other functions which can spur capacity-building. Increasingly, accountability serves as a reciprocal process where the individuals and the school shape the accountability policy; consequently, the said policy shapes the individual and the

school (David & Shields, 2001). Although district accountability policies are used differently depending on the context of the school, they serve as leverage for continuous improvement (Leithwood et al., 2004). Further, accountability policies serve as a tool for the instructional leader to promote the change agenda (Honig, 2004).

While schools and districts may have various accountability models to choose from including state or locally developed processes, the focus of the present study is SACS CASI district accreditation. The next section outlines the concept of accreditation and then further elucidates the process and benefits of the accreditation model.

Accreditation

According to AdvancED (2007a) since their inception in 1871, accrediting bodies have provided the public with assurances of quality in our schools. Beginning at the University of Michigan, high schools were evaluated on their ability to prepare students for postsecondary education (AdvancED). As the process of teaching and learning evolved, so did the processes of accreditation (AdvancED). What began as a quality assurance tool for universities has now expanded to all levels of schooling, both public and private (AdvancED). Currently, six regional agencies exist to accredit schools as follows: the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement, the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, and the Southern Association of Colleges, and the Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI). SACS CASI, founded in 1895, serves Alabama,

Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (AdvancED).

In April of 2006, the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI), and National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) came together to form AdvancED, which is a unified organization dedicated to advancing excellence in education through accreditation, research, and professional services (AdvancED, 2007a). They collectively serve 30 states, the Navajo nation, the Department of Defense Education, and Latin America (see also www.advance-ed.org).

Traditionally, accreditation for schools has included a self-study and peer review visitation at each school site (AdvancED, 2007a). However, SACS CASI developed district accreditation as a response to school leaders who wanted to coordinate accreditation activities with ongoing system initiatives and state mandates (AdvancED). By recognizing and capitalizing on the systemic nature of the organization of schools, district accreditation leverages the power of the district to affect change and continuous improvement (NSSE, 2004).

District Accreditation

District accreditation is "accreditation for quality school systems" (NSSE, 2004, p. 9). It adds accountability to the district level by focusing on what the district is doing to support schools and students instead of what each school is doing for students (AdvancED, 2007a). Wheatley (1999) asserted that as systems increase in complexity,

they must organize in order to stay productive. According to AdvancED, the district accreditation process recognizes this systemic quality in education. Like NCLB, district accreditation is based on the belief that high expectations, goal-setting, and accountability measures will result in success for all students (NSSE). However, the accountability scheme is based on multiple data sources instead of high-stakes testing (AdvancED).

According to AdvancED (2007b), accreditation benefits districts by supporting and ensuring a common language of school improvement across district lines of accountability; ensuring continuity and collaboration in planning for improvement anchored in a common vision for education and coherence between the district and school-level goals; providing the school district and community with external review, recognition, and recommendation for improvement efforts; supporting a systemwide approach to achieving results; ensuring alignment and coordination among schools; and, providing an internationally recognized mark of quality for school districts. This framework of district accreditation includes high standards, continuous improvement, and quality assurance (AdvancED). No one element is assigned more importance than any other; all three are interdependent (AdvancED). Next, each component is described in detail.

Accreditation Standards for Quality Systems

Table 2 displays the seven standards on which school districts should appraise their standing, according to NSSE (2004, p. 12-22). These seven standards are described with multiple indicators and an impact statement. As districts become more fluent in

these areas, capacity to positively affect student learning is increased (NSSE; AdvancED, 2007b).

Table 2

Standards of District Accreditation

STANDARD	EXPLANATION
Vision and Purpose	The system establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for improving the performance of students and the effectiveness of the system.
Governance and Leadership	The system provides governance and leadership that promote student performance and system effectiveness.
Teaching and Learning	The system provides research-based curriculum and instructional methods that facilitate achievement for all students.
Documenting and Using Results	The system enacts a comprehensive assessment system that monitors and documents performance and uses these results to improve student performance and school effectiveness.
Resources and Support Systems	The system has the resources and services necessary to support its vision and purpose and to ensure achievement for all students.
Stakeholder Communications and Relationships	The system fosters effective communications and relationships with and among its stakeholders.
Commitment to Continuous Improvement	The system establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that focuses on student performance.

One strength of the district accreditation model is that it goes beyond a list of characteristics to include processes and actions that the district should use to organize and assess itself (AdvancED, 2007a). According to AdvancED (2007a) these standards must be connected, aligned, and integrated within a process of continuous improvement in order to be recognized as a quality school district. AdvancED (2007a) provides indicators for each standard, which can be used as the basis for rubrics to guide district efforts. After reviewing the literature on high-performing school districts, several themes reoccur in the District Accreditation Model. Table 3 is an update to Table 1 that adds the accreditation standards showing alignment.

Table 3

Alignment of Accreditation Themes to Successful District Practices

	Cawelti & Protheroe (2003)	Shannon & Bylsma (2004)	Togneri & Anderson (2003)	Campbell & Fullan, (2006)	Accreditation Standards (AdvancED, 2007a)
Focus on student learning	Emphasis on curriculum and instruction	Focus on all students learning	Visions that focused on student learning and guided instructional improvement	Vision and shared focus on student achievement as the priority	Vision and purpose
Curriculum and Instruction		Coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment Quality classroom instruction	Systematic approach to improving instruction that articulated curricular content and providing instructional support	Curriculum development, instruction and interventions	Teaching and learning
Leadership	Leadership and vision	Dynamic and distributed leadership	Redefined leadership roles	Leadership for learning	Governance and leadership
		Sustained improvements over time	Committed to sustaining reform over the long haul	Moral purpose informing strategies and practices	Commitment to continuous improvement

Table Continues

Table 3 (continued)

Alignment of Accreditation Themes to Successful District Practices

	Cawelti & Protheroe (2003)	Shannon & Bylsma (2004)	Togneri & Anderson (2003)	Campbell & Fullan, (2006)	Accreditation Standards (AdvancED, 2007a)
District Roles	Change in the role of central office staff	Clear understanding of school district roles and responsibilities		Positive and purposeful partnerships	Governance and leadership
Accountability	Clear assignment of accountability to the school level Impact of state accountability programs	High expectations and accountability for adults	Courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions Interpreting and managing the external environment	Monitoring, review, feedback and accountability	Documenting and using results
Systemic Thinking	Move to a systems approach	Policy and program coherence		Overarching strategy Effective organization	Governance and leadership
Professional Communication and Collaboration	Increased opportunities for staff communication and collaboration	Professional culture and collaborative relationships		Communication	Stakeholder communication

Table Continues

Table 3 (continued)

Alignment of Accreditation Themes to Successful District Practices

	Cawelti & Protheroe (2003)	Shannon & Bylsma (2004)	Togneri & Anderson (2003)	Campbell & Fullan, (2006)	Accreditation Standards (AdvancED, 2007a)
Professional Development	use of professional development to support instructional improvement	Coordinated and embedded professional development	new approaches to professional development that involved a coherent and district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction	Capacity-building for professional learning	Teaching and learning
Resource Allocation	resources reorganized to support improvement efforts	Strategic allocation of resources		Resources allocation and prioritization	Resource and support systems
Use of Data	use of data	Effective use of data	made decisions based on data, not instinct	Use of data and assessment literacy	Documenting and using results

According to NSSE (2004), the district accreditation process builds the capacity of a system and its schools to increase and sustain student learning by doing the following:

- Ensuring that all people, processes, operations and functions of the system work in concert
- Strengthening efforts to meet accountability requirements
- Supports schools and systems to grow beyond compliance and achieve excellence
- Promoting continuous versus episodic improvement
- Inspiring a professional culture of learning, collaboration and reflective practice.

Quality Assurance

SACS CASI district accreditation is one method for obtaining feedback and information that is vital for systemic improvement (AdvancED, 2007a). Quality assurance consists of documentation with self-study and validation through an external review (NSSE, 2004). In a systemic perspective, evaluation is vital to strategy development because the "organization gets a better sense of what is happening so it can fine-tune its approach" (Woodwell, 2005, pp. 13-14). Woodwell argues that program evaluations can provide data needed for organizations to learn. Thorton, Shepperson, and Canavero (2007) asserted that shifting the focus of program evaluations from single programs to examining multiple programs across an organization will provide data to inform continuous improvement. By aligning evaluation, benefits are multiplied across the system thus enlarging capacity (Leung, 2005). This perspective is reflected in the district accreditation process (NSSE).

District Accreditation Process

SACS CASI follows a protocol to verify standards, make recommendations and commendations, and monitor the practices of the districts. These procedures are articulated in AdvancED (2007a). The procedures state that in order to be eligible for district accreditation, districts must complete a readiness process. To begin the process of district accreditation, the district superintendent must send a letter of interest to SACS CASI, who then conducts a readiness visit to review the expectations, components, and process of district accreditation. The readiness visit, typically a few hours long, may be combined with District Accreditation training for the superintendent and key leadership team members including cabinet members, directors, and a representative group of principals.

According to the procedures (AdvancED, 2007a), during the readiness visit, regional and state SACS CASI representatives dialogue with district leaders about quality school improvement, systemic change, and the general conditions of the district. Following the checklist and guidelines previously shared with the district, both parties are ensuring that this undertaking is appropriate for the district and that sufficient commitment can be made to the process. Additionally, the guidelines (AdvancED, 2007a) specify that all schools in the district have to have been accredited previously. If not, then initial school accreditation will be sought for that school. In order for AdvancED to begin the process, the district has to show growth and progress towards meeting the district accreditation standards and show a system of continuous improvement including vision, profile, plan, and results (AdvancED, 2007a). AdvancED asserts that if leaders of a

district cannot address and speak to these components in a dialogue, they will not likely be considered ready for a rigorous accreditation process. However, if the visit is successful and if the superintendent and local Board of Education commits to the process then a date is set 6 to18 months later for a quality assurance visit (AdvancED, 2007a). All districts reviewed in this study followed these steps to be able to host a Quality Assurance Review (QAR) visit. The data reports used in this study are the result of those visits.

The purpose of the Quality Assurance Review (QAR) is to determine the extent to which the district meets the standards and to assess the efficacy of the district and school improvement efforts (AdvancED, 2007a). Further, the process reviews the effectiveness of the district and school quality assurance methods, provides high-quality feedback with clear recommendations, and provides actionable next steps. Finally, the review team makes an accreditation recommendation (AdvancED, 2007a).

Prior to the QAR, members of the review team examine the Standards Assessment Report (SAR), which is a guided self-study that the district has prepared using the standards and rubrics provided by AdvancED (AdvancED, 2007a). This self-study consists of documentation of compliance with the standards for accreditation; identification, observation, and demonstration of a continuous process of improvement; and implementation of methods that provide for quality assurance. The self-study process permits the school to demonstrate that it is meeting the requirements for accreditation.

During the review team visit, evidence is gathered in the forms of data, documentation, observation, and dialogue. This results in an oral exit report submitted to

the school board, a written report submitted to the superintendent, and documentation submitted to SACS CASI Board of Directors. The template and instructions for completing the report are provided to the school district by AdvancED. The report consists of several sections; the first section, *Strengths*, includes the conditions that the district should build upon. Section two includes the *Achievements*, which are the accomplishments of note that contribute to and validate the work of the district. Section three, *Commendations,* includes the items the review team feels the district exemplify in the district. The fourth section, *Limitations,* include the potential barriers to success. The fifth section, *Challenges*, includes the opportunities for improvements. Finally, the sixth section, *Recommendations*, include the actions the team feels would advance the district along their path of continuous improvement. This last section is the focus of the present study. At the termination of the visit by the review team, the report is presented orally at a school board meeting, and the written report is sent to SACS CASI for review and acceptance at the following SACS CASI board meeting (AdvancED, 2007a).

Schools and districts have a responsibility to justify and explain their actions to the public; only then do schools earn trust and resulting support (Elmore, 2004). This study aims to show that district accreditation is a potential avenue that addresses issues of quality and accountability while providing a model for schools and districts to gain the trust of communities.

Chapter Summary

This literature review outlined effective school district practices for continuous improvement. The district accreditation process of SACS CASI was then described and

aligned with research on best practices (Campbell & Fullan, 2006; Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Given that the district accreditation model supports multiple best practices, as presented in the literature review, looking at the results of the quality assurance review team report may provide insight into district improvement efforts. Accreditation assists districts to overcome barriers to sustainable change thereby identifying those barriers through a systematic process resulting in recommendations and commendations (NSSE, 2004).

The present study examines district accreditation review team recommendations to identify patterns. In the face of increased accountability, districts are responsible for scaling up successful school improvement processes across the entire district (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Understanding where a district could get the most leverage helps to target improvement efforts. This study also identifies strengths and weaknesses of districts with similar characteristics, which is critical in order for districts to target their improvement efforts.

Chapter III
METHODOLOGY

The review of literature examined the standards used for district accreditation and found congruence with best practices for continuous district improvement (Campbell & Fullan, 2006; Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). The purpose of this chapter is to detail the plan for the execution of the study, which explores the nature of recommendations made to school districts by accreditation teams. First, the research design is described and justified. This is followed by a description of the selection of the participants in the study and of the eligibility requirements for district accreditation. Next, the description of the procedures used in the study is presented in terms of both the data collection and the data analysis. The description of the data collection is described in terms of both the sources of qualitative (i.e., Phase 1) and quantitative (i.e., Phase 2) data. The description of the data analysis is also described in terms of both the qualitative (i.e., Phase 1) content analysis procedures and the quantitative (i.e., Phase 2) quantitative analytic procedures.

Research Design

The purpose of the study is to cluster recommendations of district accreditation quality assurance reviews (QAR) in order to identify themes among districts that have achieved district accreditation. It is also the purpose of the study to identify the relationship of three demographic variables (e.g. district size, level of poverty, and per

pupil spending) and the categories of recommendations. The research questions were as follows:

Phase 1:

1. What themes emerge when analyzing SACS District Accreditation recommendations?

Phase 2:

2. Is there a correlation between district size and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit?

3. Is there a correlation between per pupil spending and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit?

4. Is there a correlation between levels of poverty and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit?

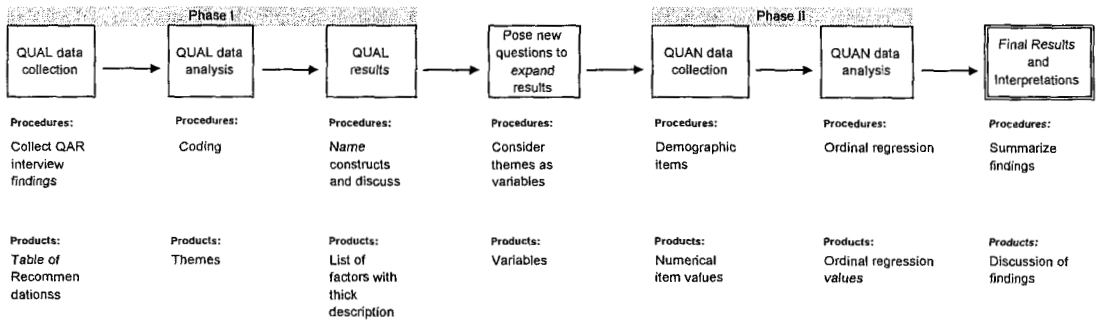
In keeping with the stated purpose, this research employed an exploratory mixed methods sequential design. Following the typology of Creswell and Plano Clark (2006) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998, 2003) this study consists of two phases. The first phase is exploratory with themes emerging from the data. The second phase disaggregates the results by examining the distribution of themes when considering demographic factors.

A mixed method sequential approach was selected to comprehensively answer the research questions. Using a mixed methodology allows for the development of a complex understanding and expansion of the results (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989;

Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The quantitative data describes the qualitative research findings, providing clarity and robustness to the conclusions. Qualitative data results connect to quantitative data analysis and overall results as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Visual Diagram of the Study



Participants

This study used a sample of 132 districts in the states served by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) that received District Accreditation status from 2004 to 2007. These states included Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Table 4 lists the breakdown of districts by state.

Table 4

Description of Participation by State

State	Number of Districts
Alabama	12
Florida	16
Georgia	38
Kentucky	8
Louisiana	9
Mississippi	5
North Carolina	22
South Carolina	5
Tennessee	8
Texas	3
Virginia	12

Convenience sampling was used in that all districts were included that received District Accreditation from 2004 until June 2007. The same school districts serve as participants in both phases.

Ethical Considerations

The use of archival data and public information prevented unethical procedures. All identifying information is confidential, and districts are not referred to by name. As confirmed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), this study does not require interaction or intervention with participants, and no private identifiable information is collected. Thus, this study was not subject to IRB oversight.

Data Collection

Phase 1: Quality Assurance Reports

This study used archival data in the form of SACS Quality Assurance Review (QAR) Reports, which were generated during the accreditation QAR team visit (AdvancED, 2007a). According to AdvancED, QAR reports provide professional (peer) evaluation and feedback, which serves to verify, validate, and enrich district accomplishments and improvement efforts.

The report consists of several sections; the first section, *Strengths*, includes the conditions that the district should build upon. Section two includes the *Achievements*, which are the accomplishments of note that contribute to and validate the work of the district. Section three, *Commendations,* includes the items that the review team believes the district exemplifies. The fourth section, *Limitations,* include the potential barriers to success. The fifth section, *Challenges*, includes the opportunities for improvements. Finally, the sixth section, *Recommendations*, includes the actions that the team believes would advance the district along their path of continuous improvement. This section is the focus of the present study and provides the specific items used in the analysis.

For the purposes of this study, QAR team reports were electronically collected from AdvancED. A data table was constructed using the recommendations, which are in the report as bulleted lists. Text was copied into the data table exactly as written.

Phase 2: Demographic Variables

The second phase of the study incorporated the demographic variables of district size, per pupil spending, and level of poverty. The table of district recommendations generated in phase 1 was expanded to include the demographic data, including per pupil

spending, poverty level (as measured by percentage of students under the federal poverty line), and size (as measured by district enrollment). This data were accessed from the public database maintained by the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (Education, 2008) and was then entered into the data table.

Data Analysis

Phase 1: Qualitative Content Analysis

Data were analyzed using methods thought to be most appropriate to answer the research questions. For phase 1, the question was as follows: What themes emerge when analyzing SACS District Accreditation recommendations? With the aid of SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys 1.0, a content analysis procedure was conducted in which data were simultaneously analyzed and coded. Analysis of data followed the constant comparative guidelines developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Their method takes a large amount of data and organizes it into themes with the purpose of grounding abstractions about phenomena in the data. Preliminary data analysis began with reading through the data for a general understanding. Creswell (2002) suggests that researchers reflect on the overall depth, credibility, and use of the information. Coding began by identifying similar words or phrases called "chunks" (Creswell). Chunks were grouped together to become categories that were labeled with a keyword. Subsequent iterations or instances of the word or phrase were then added to the categories. Discrepant codings became their own category. This process was repeated to ensure completeness and was shared with an outside researcher for data-checking. The resulting categories are described in length as part of the results section of this dissertation.

Descriptive statistics relevant to the purpose of the present study included frequency counts and cross-tabulations. Frequency counts are used to describe data more clearly and are applicable for a single variable (Thorndike & Dinnel, 2001). Cross-tabulations show the joint distribution of two or more variables (Thorndike & Dinnel). These are presented as part of the results in Chapter 4.

Phase 2: Quantitative Analysis

The second phase of the research study asked three questions relating the results from phase 1 to the demographic variables of the districts. These were questions 2-4 presented earlier in this chapter:

2. Is there a correlation between similar district size and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit?

3. Is there a correlation between similar per pupil spending and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit?

4. Is there a correlation between similar levels of poverty and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit?

Independent Variables

The three independent variables for the present study were as follows: the percentage of school age children below the poverty line, district per pupil spending, and school district size. All three variables were transformed into categories for further analysis. The threshold for forming categories was the mean for each variable. Those categories will be described in the analytic issues section of the results.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables are the emerging themes, which were derived from recommendations in Phase 1 of the study. The number of instances of the theme was summed by district. For example, a district may have three instances for the theme labeled Governance and Leadership, zero instances for the theme labeled Vision, and one instance relating to the theme labeled Teaching and Learning. This results in an ordinal scale of measurement.

Ordinal Regression

Ordinal regression was used to predict the number of instances for the themes from the demographic variables. Ordinal regression was chosen because the number of instances for the themes is noncontinuous and ordered. Unlike linear and logistic regression, ordinal regression does not assume normality and homogeneity of variance (McCullagh & Nelder, 1989). However, it does assume low intercorrelations between independent variables and parallel lines across all levels of the outcome variable (Agresti, 1996).

According to Stevens (2002), variables used in ordinal regression should have low intercorrelations (i.e., collinearity) in order to clearly partition the contribution of each variable to the model. However, variables should be included if they provide practical meaning to the model (Stevens). Hence, to determine whether there was excessive collinearity among the independent variables, a correlation coefficient matrix was created and examined. Raw data (i.e., without the coding scheme) were used.

Several ordinal regression models were constructed to answer the research questions. Using SPSS 15, an emergent theme (e.g. Governance and Leadership) was

entered in as a dependent variable where the data for the variable consist of the ordinal number of incidents. The variables of per pupil spending, district size, and level of poverty were entered in as factors because they are represented by categorical values as described previously. This process was repeated on all emergent themes from the study (e.g. Vision and Purpose, Governance and Leadership, Teaching and Learning, Resources and Support Systems, Documenting and Using Results, Stakeholder Communications and Relationships, Commitment to Continuous Improvement).

Chapter Summary

In summary, the present study used a mixed methodology whereby the outcome variables were ordinal categories derived from qualitative data. The independent variables were demographic (i.e. district size, per pupil spending, and percentage of students living in poverty). An ordinal regression procedure was used to predict the ordinal independent variable from the categorical independent variables. Chapter 4 presents the results of the analyses.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this research study was to examine the nature of recommendations made to districts as part of the district accreditation process. Archival data were collected in the form of bulleted lists of recommendations for each district that received district accreditation from when it started in 2004 through June, 2007. The data were qualitatively analyzed to produce themes. Further analyses of the data involved collecting and correlating demographic items (e.g. district size, per pupil spending and level of poverty) with the themes to examine the relationships between similar demographics and emerging themes. This chapter includes a description of the data collection procedures, the sample, the analytical issues, and the results of the analyses.

Data Collection Procedures

One hundred thirty-seven districts received accreditation during the period under study. However, two districts were excluded due to unusable data. Three cases were excluded because, although they were recognized as districts for the accreditation purposes, they were not geographic school districts recognized by the United States Census. This resulted in a sample size of 132 districts for the analysis.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the 132 districts in the sample. Poverty level was measured as the percentage of students under the federal poverty line (M =

18.06, *SD* = 8.41). District size was measured in terms of district enrollment (*M* = 18,349.08, *SD* = 33,328.02). Per pupil spending was measured as the average dollars spent per student per year (*M* = 8,484.95, *SD* = 1,305.14). Table 5 displays these results.

Analytic Issues

Coding

Table 5 displays the dichotomous category codes derived from the demographic variables. The threshold for forming categories was the mean for each variable. A school district serving fewer than or equal to 18,349 students was coded 1, and a district size with more than 18,349 students was coded 2. The percentage of students in poverty was calculated by dividing the number of students under the poverty line by the total number of students served in that school district. Both numbers are derived from the 2000 Census data. Districts with less than or equal to 18.061% of the student population under the poverty line were coded 1, and districts with more than 18.061% of the student population under the poverty line were coded 2. Per pupil spending was recorded directly from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website (NCES, 2008). Districts that spent $8485.00 or less per student were coded 1, and districts that spent more than $8485.00 were coded 2.

Table 5

Coding For All Variables

	Coded 1	Coded 2
Poverty Level (%)	≤18.061%	> 18.061%
District Size	≤ 18,349	> 18,349
Per Pupil Spending	≤ $8,485.00	> $8,485.00

Assumptions

One of the assumptions of ordinal regression is low intercorrelations between independent variables (Stevens, 2002). However, as shown in Table 6, there is a moderate correlation between district size and poverty level for the districts included in this study. Both variables are useful and will be included; however, findings will be interpreted with caution.

Table 6

Spearman Rank-Order Correlations

	Poverty Level (%)	District Size	Per Pupil Spending
Poverty Level (%)	1.00		
District Size	-0.46*	1.00	
Per Pupil Spending	0.02	0.02	1.00

* $p < .05$

Results of the Qualitative Analyses

Research Question 1. What themes emerge when analyzing SACS District Accreditation recommendations?

The themes that emerged from the qualitative treatment of the data are presented in Table 7, followed by a narrative description of the themes.

Table 7
Themes and Coding Frequencies

Themes	Districts Coded	% Districts Coded
Stakeholder partnership	59	44.7
Facilities and growth	57	43.2
Curriculum	52	39.4
Qualified personnel	49	37.1
Quality assurance	46	34.8
Parental involvement	43	32.6
Professional learning	42	31.8
Continuous Improvement	42	31.8
Technology	41	31.1
Instructional strategies/practices	36	27.3
Vertical planning and collaboration	36	27.3
Achievement gap	34	25.8
Budget and finance	33	25.0
Communication	33	25.0
Student support programs	32	24.2
Data analysis	32	24.2
Governance	31	23.5
Assessment	31	23.5
District/school alignment	27	20.5
Vision and mission	22	16.7
Graduation	20	15.2
Strategic planning	20	15.2
Program evaluation	19	14.4
Academic rigor	18	13.6
District level leadership	16	12.1
Equity	16	12.1

The table displays the themes emerging from the recommendations as well as their frequencies and percentages by district. These were derived in Phase 1 through coding the recommendations made by peer review teams as part of quality assurance review visits for district accreditation. The recommendations are found in the Quality Assurance Review (QAR) written reports submitted to the school district and to SACS upon completion of the review. Each of the themes are described below.

Stakeholder partnerships. Stakeholders were defined as parents, students, teachers, and the communities. Communicating with and involving stakeholders in the process of improving school districts and strategic planning were of specific interest. Additionally, advisory groups were mentioned as a strategy.

Facilities and growth. Recommendations in this area emphasized planning and execution of plans to improve facilities, often as districts grew in student enrollment. They also addressed shifting attendance patterns and related issues such as transportation and shared facilities.

Curriculum. Recommendations included suggestions for addressing "breadth, depth, rigor, and complexity within the curriculum." District-wide curriculum documents outlining scope and sequence or pacing guides were needed the most, followed by expanded electives including career/technology, arts, and gifted services.

Qualified personnel. This category included all aspects related to staffing such as recruitment, pay, retention, and diversity. Overwhelmingly, the review team recommendations indicated a need for districts to "identify effective ways to develop leaders and hire teachers that exhibit the skills to continue the progress being made by the school system and reflect the ethnic diversity of the student population."

Parental involvement. Parents could be included with stakeholders; however, due to the direct mention of parents in the recommendations, it constitutes a category for further examination. Improved parent involvement was encouraged at all levels of education including input on the strategic plan, district improvement initiatives, and involvement in instructional efforts.

Professional learning. This was addressed in many different terms with each implying the building of capacity of individual teachers.

Continuous improvement. Recommendations for continuous improvement highlighted the need for a systemic and constant process of needs evaluation, development, implementation, and evaluation of improvement plans at the school and district level. The recommendation stressed the importance of the process to "implement and communicate to all stakeholders the structure and schedule for analysis and revision of improvement plans." This recommendation demonstrates that collaboration is a key part of continuous improvement.

Continuous improvement often overlaps other categories. For example, the theme which states to "Provide training and support to improve the capacity of the instructional staff at the school level to identify, execute and monitor the impact of proven strategies for improving student learning," indicates both professional learning and continuous improvement. Often, quality assurance and continuous improvement were paired, as in the recommendation to "establish a clear, concise, uniform system and systematic process for school improvement including quality assurance measures and continuous improvement strategies to address the district goals."

Technology. This category was concerned with the use of technology to facilitate learning in schools.

Instructional strategies/practices. Recommendations often cited differentiated instruction and meeting the needs of all students. Instructional strategies recommendations were often paired with comments about the achievement gap or with recommendations for professional learning. Since professional learning includes more than instructional strategies, recommendations specifying instructional strategies were included in this category. Mentioned less often, but more than twice, were the recommendations of the following: protecting instructional time, promoting best practices, providing pacing guides, and encouraging the need for improvement at the high school level.

Vertical planning and collaborative planning. This category was concerned with students transitioning from school to school and slightly less so from grade to grade. It called for districts to "implement systematic and systemic vertical articulation...processes that support and sustain K-12 teaching and learning to ensure they are used to promote communication, enhance continuity and improve instruction." This process was often referred to as "vertical alignment."

Achievement gap. There was concern regarding the academic achievement differences between groups of students. The recommendation in all cases was to "close the gap," mostly by identifying and implementing strategies. Further direction was rarely given.

Budget and finance. Many recommendations included a wide range of concerns regarding the budget and budget processes. Most often, mentions included planning for

increased costs and exploring alternative revenue (grants, partnerships and federal and state funds). Alignment of the strategic plan and budget expenditures were cited less often but were included in the category.

Communication. Improvement was suggested in the area of communication with stakeholders in these districts via websites, surveys, and data-gathering. This category referred to board-stakeholder communication rather than school-parent communication.

Student support programs. This encompassed English language learners, student health, discipline programs, mentoring/advising, counseling, and afterschool programs. All comments in these areas recommended increasing student support services, either budgetary or by expanding community partnerships.

Data analysis. Data analysis addressed the use of data, access to data, going beyond test scores to collect other data, and comparing data against other school districts. Data use that related to students was excluded from this study. The recommendations cited most often pertained to availability of data and data displays.

Governance. This specifically addressed the school board and superintendent leadership. Training was most often cited along with the recommendation to implement "strategies to enhance the capacity of the governing board to engage in systems thinking." Also mentioned was specific training on the roles and responsibilities of board members.

Assessment. This category called for the use of student assessment data in planning instruction. Two cites were as follows: "Include baseline data and benchmarks in school improvement plans to measure student performance," and "Implement use of formative assessment data to ensure flexible, appropriate placement of students and direct

adjustments in curriculum and instruction," The recommendations called for the creation of a comprehensive assessment system and tools to organize the data.

District/school alignment. Alignment of efforts was discussed in several different areas including instruction and assessment, school and district goals, cross-functional planning, and communication. Most often, alignment between the district strategic plan and school-based efforts was reflected in recommendations such as "Build understanding and provide support for departments and schools to purposely and seamlessly align goals, strategies, and assessments with the strategic direction of the district." Communication and collaboration were often suggested as strategies to improve alignment.

Vision and mission. Districts must establish a shared vision that includes the community in the development stage. It must then communicate, use, update, review, clarify, post, and align the school, division, and district mission and vision.

Graduation. This recommendation called for raising the graduation rate.

Strategic planning. Recommendations called for either establishing or improving a strategic plan. Improvements included alignment of efforts, involving stakeholders, using data, or developing action plans. The three recommendations that follow reappeared numerous times: "Establish a dynamic, strategic planning framework that includes goals, measures, and action plans to support the implementation of systemic initiatives," "Build a systems perspective of and common language for strategic planning as it impacts school improvement," and "Accelerate the deployment of system-wide strategic planning to every school, including integrating the many existing quality assurance strategies already in place." These recommendations stress the importance of a systemic and cohesive planning process.

Program evaluation. These recommendations called for a systematic process for evaluating a variety of programs. Most often, they called for evaluation in terms of the impact on student achievement or learning. While the recommendations often referred to school-based programs, they also related to district-level functions such as professional development and support services programs. Most often, the recommendation was to develop an objective and systematic approach to determine the programs and procedures for effectiveness in student achievement.

Academic rigor. Rigor was noted in eighteen districts. Often this was paired with higher order thinking skills, advanced coursework, and high expectations. Suggestions were to synthesize technology, advanced coursework, higher standards, gifted services, and innovative delivery methods.

District level leadership. District level leadership focused on cross-functional strategies to integrate curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development departments in support of continuous improvement. It included horizontal and vertical improvement planning as illustrated by the following quotations: "Cross-functional strategies at the district level to establish a systemic focus among and between the role and responsibilities of the central office departments and divisions." "Action planning for building central staff capacity and leadership for shared decision making." "System-level action plans that engage district-level leaders in implementation while enhancing direction to the schools." Effective district level leadership creates organizational structure with the goal of providing direction for the school, identifying best practices, coordinating data analyses, and crafting curriculum documents.

Equity. Equity primarily related to the perceived or actual allocation of resources throughout the system. This allocation was often based on geographic boundaries. Technology resources were specifically mentioned as were a "balance of educational experiences at all school sites." Also mentioned were personnel, course offerings, and facilities. Suggestions included establishing specific board policy, monitoring the use of curriculum guides, and implementing quality assurance controls.

Results of the Quantitative Analysis

For the purposes of analyses, the themes were grouped using the seven standards of district accreditation (NSSE, 2006). Those seven standards were presented in chapter two and are as follows: vision and purpose, governance and leadership, teaching and learning, resources and support systems, documenting and using results, stakeholder communications and relationships, and commitment to continuous improvement. Table 8 details how the themes that were derived from the recommendations were grouped for the second phase analysis.

Table 8

Themes Grouped by Standard

Standard	Theme
Vision and purpose	Vision and mission
Governance and leadership	Professional learning Governance District/school alignment District level leadership
Teaching and learning	Curriculum Technology Instructional strategies/practices Vertical planning and collaboration Academic rigor
Resources and support systems	Facilities and growth Qualified personnel Budget and finance Student support programs Equity
Documenting and using results	Assessment Achievement gap Data analysis Graduation
Stakeholder communications and relationships	Stakeholder partnership Parental involvement Communication
Commitment to continuous improvement	Quality Assurance Continuous Improvement Strategic planning Program evaluation

These themes, which emerged from the qualitative analysis of district accreditation reports to answer research question 1, set a clear agenda for district improvement efforts. This will be discussed further in the conclusion of this paper. Seven separate analyses were required to answer the remaining research questions. The frequencies for the seven themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis were treated as ordinal dependent variables. First, the results of the seven analyses are presented; this is followed by a reorganization of the results to answer the research questions.

Ordinal Regression Results to Answer Research Questions 2-4

Governance and Leadership. Each district report contained zero to four of the themes categorized as Governance and Leadership. Interest was in predicting the number of themes from poverty level, district size, and per pupil spending. In ordinal regression, the levels of the ordered response variable (i.e., Governance and Leadership) are analyzed as cumulative probabilities calculated as a function of the predictors in the model. According to Agresti (1996), "the cumulative probabilities are the probabilities that the response Y falls in category j or below (e.g., three themes or less), for each possible j. The jth cumulative probability is

$$P(Y \leq j) = \pi_1 + \cdots + \pi_j, \quad j = 1, \ldots, J.\text{" (p. 210)}$$

They are cumulative because each category j includes all categories less than that j. For example, if $j = 3$ (i.e., three themes) then the probability of $j = 0$, 1, 2, and 3 are analyzed. The final category, J, is not analyzed since its probability must be 1.0. Similar to binary logistic regression, the log odds (i.e., logit) of the response variable must be analyzed (Agresti). Hence, for the Governance and Leadership variable, the model for the response variable is

$$\text{Logit}[P(Govlead \leq j)] = \alpha + \beta_1(PPS) + \beta_2(DSIZE) + \beta_3(POV), \qquad j = 1, \ldots, J-1.$$

Where *PPS* is the abbreviation for per pupil spending, *DSIZE* is the abbreviation for district size, and *POV* is the abbreviation for poverty.

A particular regression coefficient is interpreted as "the effect of X on the log odds of response in category j or below" (Agresti, 1996, p. 212). Note that Agresti also asserts there is not a separate regression coefficient for each response category; the curves relating the probability of a particular j to a particular X are assumed to have the

same shape regardless of j. He claims that probabilities differ only by the proportionate amount (i.e., the regression coefficient). It is for this reason that ordinal regression is also commonly called the proportional odds model (Agresti). This assumption is typically examined using the score test for the proportional odds assumption (Lawal, 2003).

For Governance and Leadership, there were five possible response categories because there could be zero to four themes for a particular district. However, only two district reports contained all four themes. Categorical methods for data analysis assume a minimum of five responses for each level of a variable (Agresti, 1996); the solution was to include the reports containing four themes with those containing three themes. Hence, the analyzed response variable had four levels with 44.7% (n = 59) zeros, 36.4% (n = 48) ones, 12.1% (n = 16) twos, and 6.8% (n = 9) threes/fours.

The results suggest that only district size is a significant predictor of Governance and Leadership, $t(1) = 15.275$, $p < .001$. More specifically, larger districts are predicted to have a greater number of themes corresponding to Governance and Leadership. The aforementioned proportional odds assumption (i.e., parallel slopes) was not violated, $\chi2(9) = 9.72$, $p = 0.37$. The results also suggest excellent goodness of fit $\chi2(521) = 297.19$, $p = .99$. Table 9 displays the regression coefficients, standard errors, confidence intervals, and other statistics related to this test. Figure 2 is a boxplot illustrating that, although the median district size is small for those districts with zero, one, or two themes, the variability increases to include schools with approximately 80,000 students. For those districts with all four themes, the median district size is nearly 70,000 with the maximum being nearly 130,000 students.

Table 9

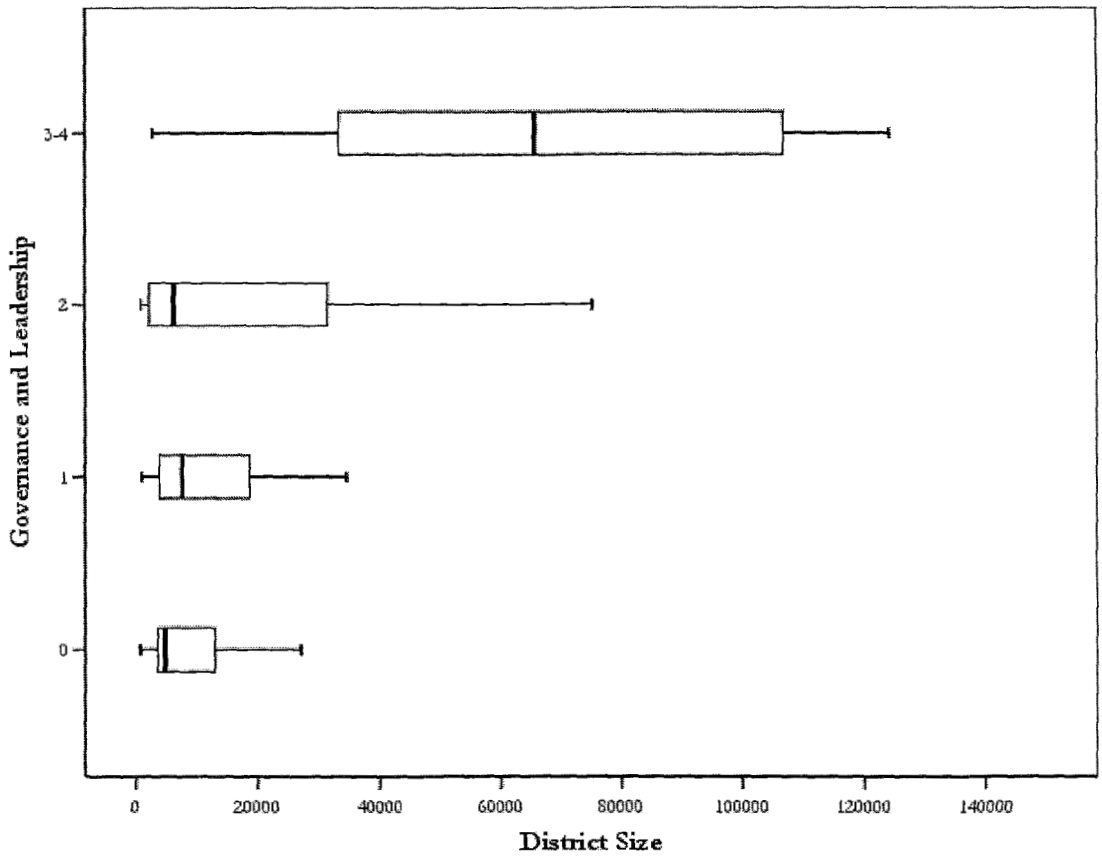
Ordinal Regression Results with Governance and Leadership as Dependent Variable

	Estimate	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*P*
Intercept 0	-1.194	1.219	0.960	1	0.327
Intercept 1	0.672	1.219	0.304	1	0.582
Intercept 2	2.105	1.268	2.755	1	0.097
PPS	0.000	0.000	0.843	1	0.359
District Size	0.00003	0.000	15.275	1	0.000
Poverty	-0.020	0.022	0.847	1	0.357

*Note: Values of 0.000 are values extremely close to zero.

Figure 2

Boxplots for Governance and Leadership Themes as a Function of District Size



Teaching and Learning. Each district report contained zero to four of the themes categorized as Teaching and Learning. Interest was in predicting the number of themes from poverty level, district size, and per pupil spending. For Teaching and Learning, there were five possible response categories because there could be from zero to four themes for a particular district. However, only three district reports contained all four themes necessitating merging the two highest response levels. Hence, the analyzed response variable had four levels with 22.0% ($n = 29$) zeros, 35.6% ($n = 47$) ones, 29.5% ($n = 39$) twos, and 12.9% ($n = 17$) threes/fours.

The results suggest that only per pupil spending is a significant predictor of Teaching and Learning, $t(1) = 4.052, p = .044$ More specifically, districts with greater per pupil spending are predicted to have fewer themes pertaining to Teaching and Learning. The aforementioned proportional odds assumption (i.e., parallel slopes) was not violated, $\chi^2(6) = 9.458, p = 0.15$. The results also suggest excellent goodness of fit, $\chi^2(390) = 390.36, p = .49$. Table 10 displays the regression coefficients, standard errors, confidence intervals, and other statistics related to this test. Figure 3 is a boxplot illustrating that the variability in per pupil spending is similar regardless of the number of themes; however, the median per pupil spending decreases as the number of themes increases.

Table 10

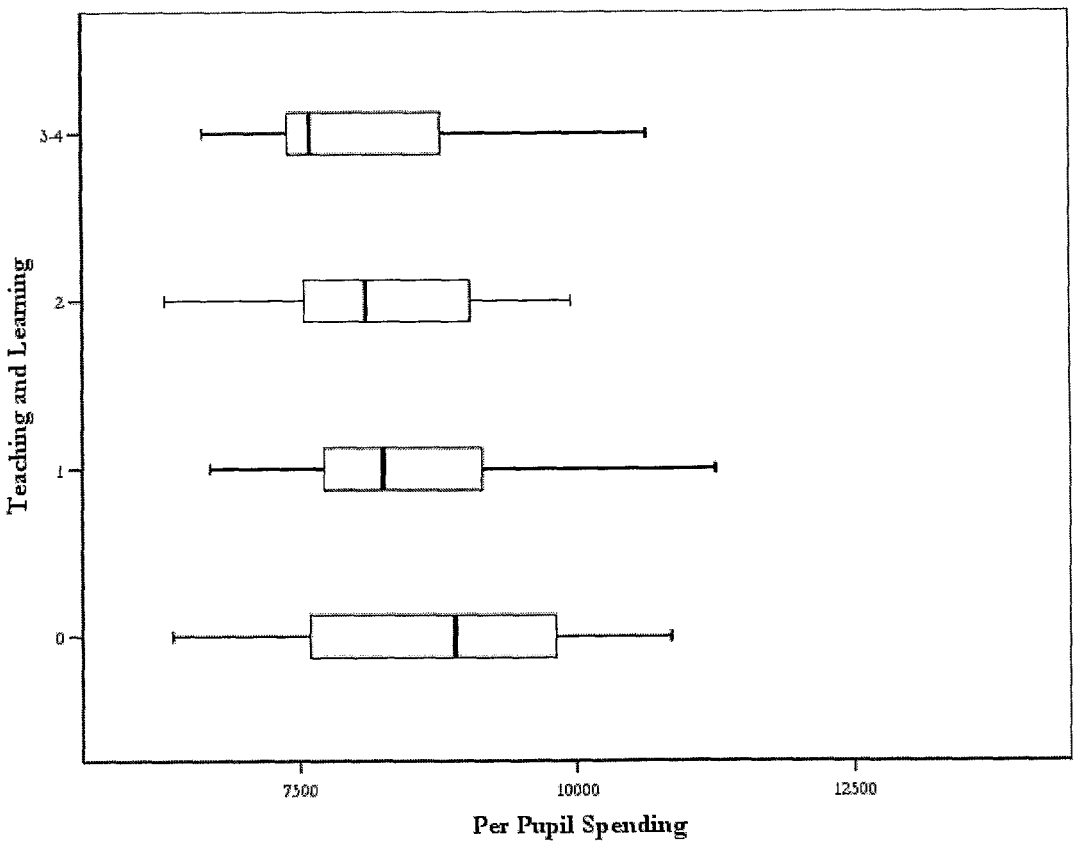
Ordinal Regression Results with Teaching and Learning as Dependent Variable

	Estimate	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*P*
Intercept 0	-3.901	1.191	10.72	1	0.001
Intercept 1	-2.246	1.155	3.781	1	0.052
Intercept 2	-0.581	1.151	0.255	1	0.613
PPS	-0.00025	0.000	4.052	1	0.044
District Size	-0.000	0.000	2.642	1	0.104
Poverty	-0.013	0.020	0.424	1	0.515

*Note: Values of 0.000 are values extremely close to zero.

Figure 3

Boxplots for Teaching and Learning Themes as a Function of Per Pupil Spending



Documenting and Using Results. Each district report contained zero to four of the themes categorized as Documenting and Using Results. Interest was in predicting the number of themes from poverty level, district size, and per pupil spending. For Documenting and Using Results, there were five possible response categories because there could be from zero to four themes for a particular district. However, only two district reports contained all four themes necessitating merging the two highest response levels. Hence, the analyzed response variable had three levels with 18.9% ($n = 25$) zeros, 38.6% ($n = 51$) ones, 29.5% ($n = 39$) twos, and 12.9% ($n = 17$) threes/fours.

The results suggest that only poverty is a significant predictor of Documenting and Using Results, $t(1) = 6.381, p = .012$. More specifically, districts with greater poverty are predicted to have fewer themes pertaining to Documenting and Using Results. The aforementioned proportional odds assumption (i.e., parallel slopes) was not violated, $\chi2(6) = 7.218$, $p = 0.30$. The results also suggest excellent goodness of fit, $\chi2(390) = 404.82$, $p = .29$. Table 11 displays the regression coefficients, standard errors, confidence intervals, and other statistics related to this test. Figure 4 is a boxplot illustrating that districts selecting either two or three-four themes have similar median poverty percentages. These medians are lower than those districts with zero or one theme. It is also notable that there is considerable variability in poverty percentages for those districts selecting three-four themes.

Table 11

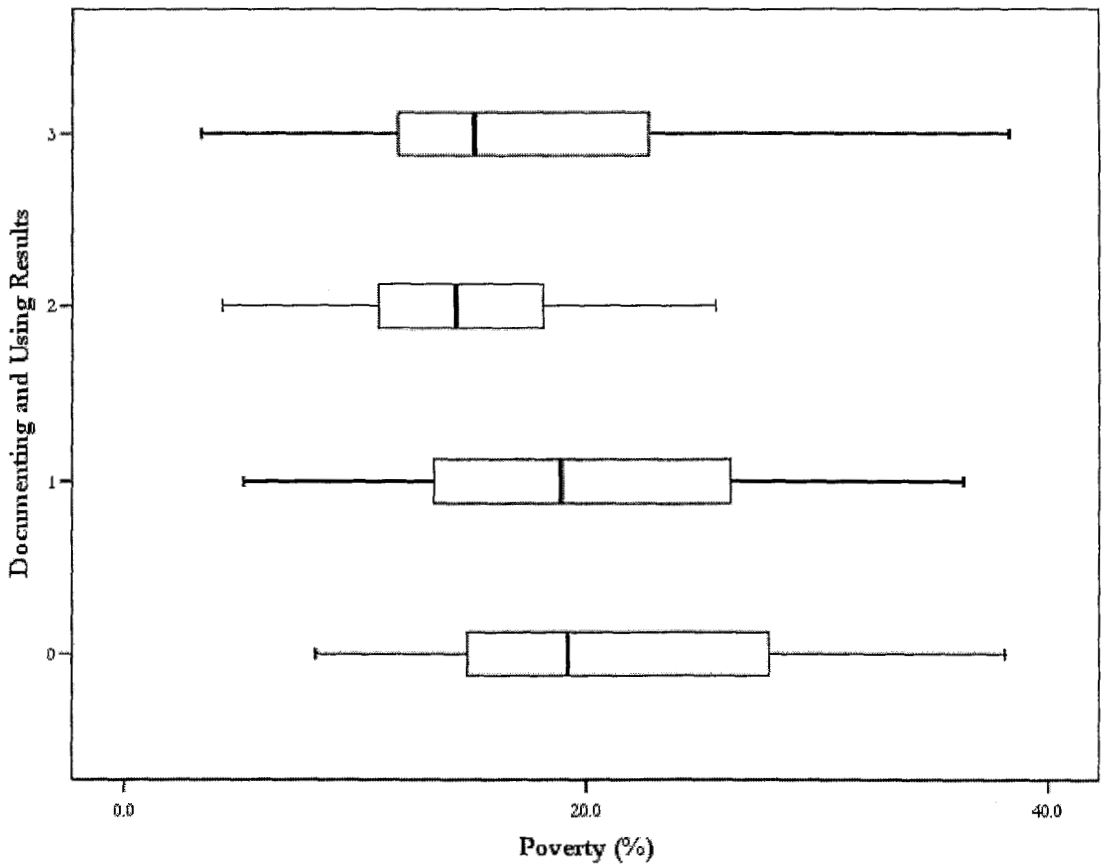
Ordinal Regression Results with Documenting and Using Results as Dependent Variable

	Estimate	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*P*
Intercept 0	-2.483	1.167	4.528	1	0.033
Intercept 1	-0.620	1.144	0.292	1	0.588
Intercept 2	1.049	1.155	0.826	1	0.363
PPS	0.000	0.000	0.010	1	0.921
District Size	0.000	0.000	0.699	1	0.403
Poverty	-0.052	0.020	6.381	1	0.012

*Note: Values of 0.000 are values extremely close to zero.

Figure 4

Boxplots for Documenting and Using Results Themes as a Function of Poverty



Stakeholder Communication. Each district report contained from zero to four of the themes categorized as Stakeholder Communication. Interest was in predicting the number of themes from poverty level, district size, and per pupil spending. For Stakeholder Communication, there were four possible response categories because there could be from zero to three themes for a particular district. However, only three district reports contained all three themes necessitating merging the two highest response levels. Hence, the analyzed response variable had four levels with 34.8% ($n = 46$) zeros, 36.4% ($n = 48$) ones, and 28.8% ($n = 38$) twos/threes.

The results suggest that only per pupil spending is a significant predictor of Stakeholder Communication, $t(1) = 4.517, p = .034$. More specifically, districts with greater per pupil spending are predicted to have more themes pertaining to Stakeholder Communication. The aforementioned proportional odds assumption (i.e., parallel slopes) was not violated, $\chi^2(3) = 3.126, p = 0.37$. The results also suggest excellent goodness of fit, $\chi^2(259) = 261.579, p = .44$. Table 12 displays the regression coefficients, standard errors, confidence intervals, and other statistics related to this test. These results are illustrated in Figure 5.

Table 12

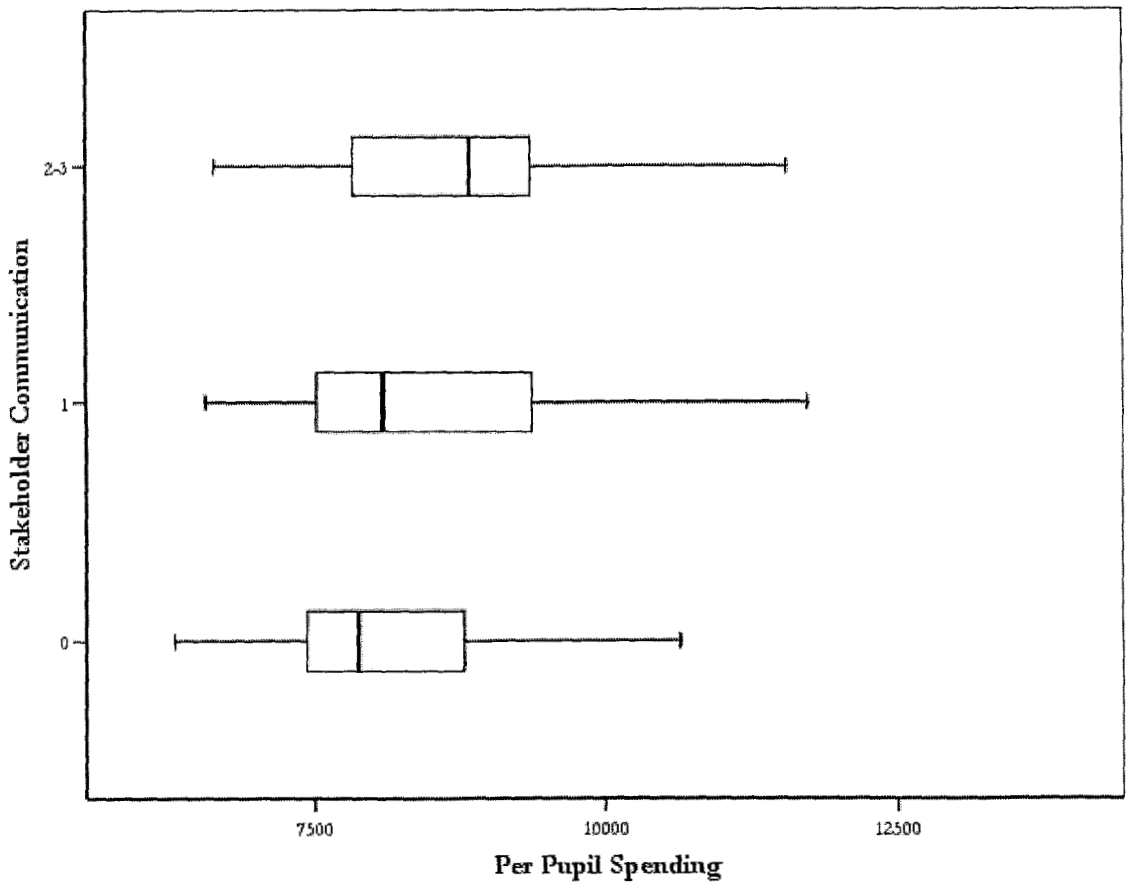
Ordinal Regression Results with Stakeholder Communication as Dependent Variable

	Estimate	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*P*
Intercept 0	1.897	1.184	2.568	1	0.109
Intercept 1	3.484	1.213	8.251	1	0.004
PPS	0.0003	0.000	4.517	1	0.034
District Size	0.000	0.000	0.612	1	0.434
Poverty	0.016	0.020	0.596	1	0.440

*Note: Values of 0.000 are values extremely close to zero.

Figure 5

Boxplots for Stakeholder Communication as a Function of Per Pupil Spending



Commitment to Continuous Improvement. Each district report contained zero to four of the themes categorized as Commitment to Continuous Improvement. Interest was in predicting the number of themes from poverty level, district size, and per pupil spending. For Commitment to Continuous Improvement, there were four possible response categories because there could be from zero to three themes for a particular district. However, only one district report contained all three themes necessitating

merging the two highest response levels. Hence, the analyzed response variable had three levels with 54.5% (n = 72) zeros, 32.6% (n = 43) ones, and 12.9% (n = 17) twos/threes.

The results suggest that none of the variables significantly predict the number of themes related to Commitment to Continuous Improvement. The aforementioned proportional odds assumption (i.e., parallel slopes) was not violated, $\chi^2(3) = 244.439$, p = 0.662. The results also suggest excellent goodness of fit, $\chi^2(259) = 262.628$, $p = .43$. Table 13 displays the regression coefficients, standard errors, confidence intervals, and other statistics related to this test.

Table 13

Ordinal Regression Results with Commitment To Continuous Improvement as Dependent Variable

	Estimate	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*P*
Intercept 0	-0.584	1.233	0.224	1	0.636
Intercept 1	1.223	1.244	0.967	1	0.325
PPS	0.000	0.000	0.120	1	0.729
District Size	0.000	0.000	2.985	1	0.084
Poverty	-0.030	0.022	1.911	1	0.167

*Note: Values of 0.000 are values extremely close to zero.

Resources. Each district report contained zero to three of the themes categorized as Resources. Interest was in predicting the number of themes from poverty level, district size, and per pupil spending. For Resources, there were four possible response categories because there could be from zero to three themes for a particular district. Hence, the

analyzed response variable had four levels with 28.8% ($n = 38$) zeros, 35.6% ($n = 47$) ones, 18.9% ($n = 25$) twos, and 16.7% ($n = 22$) threes.

The results suggest that only per pupil spending is a significant predictor of Resources, $t(1) = 11.454$, $p = .001$. More specifically, districts with greater per pupil spending are predicted to have fewer themes pertaining to Resources. However, in this case, validity of the results is reduced since it cannot be assumed that the proportionality assumption is met, $\chi^2(6) = 24.157$, $p < 0.001$. The results do suggest excellent goodness of fit, $\chi^2(390) = 420.063$, $p = .14$. Table 14 displays the regression coefficients, standard errors, confidence intervals, and other statistics related to this test.

Table 14

Ordinal Regression Results with Resources as Dependent Variable

	Estimate	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*P*
Intercept 0	-4.613	1.275	13.084	1	0.000
Intercept 1	-2.922	1.235	5.691	1	0.018
Intercept 2	-1.856	1.231	2.274	1	0.132
PPS	-0.0005	0.000	11.454	1	0.001
District Size	0.000	0.000	1.183	21	0.277
Poverty	0.029	0.020	2.084	1	0.149

*Note: Values of 0.000 are values extremely close to zero.

Vision/Mission (using logistic regression for binary outcomes). Each district report contained either zero or one of the themes categorized as Vision/Mission. Interest was in predicting the number of themes from poverty level, district size, and per pupil spending. With only two options, zero or one, the analytic technique was simplified from ordinal regression to logistic regression for a binary response variable. Overall, 83.3% (*n*

= 110) of the districts did not report the vision/mission theme while the remaining 16.7% (n = 22) did report the theme. The results suggest that none of the variables significantly predict the probability of a district including this theme. These results are displayed in Table 15.

Table 15

Logistic Regression Results with Vision/Mission as Dependent Variable

	Estimate	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Intercept	-1.628	1.688	0.931	1	0.196
PPS	0.000	0.000	0.002	1	0.967
District Size	0.000	0.000	0.043	1	0.837
Poverty	0.003	0.029	0.011	1	0.915

*Note: Values of 0.000 are values extremely close to zero.

Summary of Results

The results of the regression analyses assisted in addressing the research questions. They suggest four instances where variables are significantly related to the identified accreditation themes. First, district size was positively related to the number of themes reflecting Governance and Leadership. Second, per pupil spending was negatively related to the number of themes reflecting Teaching and Learning; third, it was also positively related to the number of themes reflecting Stakeholder Communication. Fourth, poverty was negatively related to the number of themes reflecting Documenting and Using Results. These overall results are summarized in Table 16.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION

This chapter contains an overview of the study, summary of the findings, limitations, conclusions, and implications. The purpose of this study was to examine the recommendations that are the result of Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) District Accreditation team visits to identify constructs among districts similar in student population, per pupil spending, and socioeconomic status in order to identify district practices that support continuous improvement. Using an exploratory sequential mixed methodology, this study sought to clarify and enrich the research on successful district practices.

Overview of the Study

The present study investigated district practices that support continuous improvement by examining the recommendations of peer-review teams and correlating these with size, spending, and poverty in a two phase analysis. Participants included 138 districts in the states served by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on School Improvement (SACS CASI) who received District Accreditation from 2002-2007.

Phase 1 consisted of computer-assisted text analysis using the constant comparative method creating emergent categories such as stakeholder partnerships, facilities and growth, communication, professional learning, and program evaluation.

These categories were collapsed further into the seven standards of the district accreditation model. This yielded numerical data indicating the number of instances recommendations were made for each standard per district.

Phase 2, the quantitative phase of the study analyzed the numerical data derived from phase 1 with categorical data regarding school district demographic variables (e.g. district size, spending and SES). An ordinal regression technique allowed for statistical conclusions to be drawn. Ordinal regression only allows one categorical variable to be compared at a time. Therefore, each of the seven standards was analyzed independently of each other using the three variables of district size, per pupil spending and level of poverty, resulting in seven analyses yielding twenty-one possible relationships.

Summary of the Findings

Research question 1. What themes emerge when analyzing SACS District Accreditation recommendations?

The work of school districts is expansive and multi-faceted. Twenty-six different themes were identified from the recommendations in 138 district accreditation reports. The themes and the number of districts coded for each theme were presented in Table 8. Results also show that no one theme was cited in more than 42.8% percent of districts.

The results for research question 1 provided the data for the second phase, a quantitative examination of the relationship between themes of recommendations and demographic items. It was proposed that examining possible relationships could help describe districts and create profiles of districts in order to inform improvement efforts. The remainder of the research questions were addressed in Phase 2.

Research question 2. Is there a correlation between district size and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit?

Results indicate that district size was positively related to the number of recommendations reflecting Governance and Leadership. That is, if a district was in the larger district size category, they were more likely to have a greater number of recommendations made by visiting peer review teams regarding Governance and Leadership. No relationship was found between district size and any of the six other standards, including Vision/Mission, Teaching and Learning, Resources and Support Systems, Documenting and Using Results, Stakeholder Communications and Relationships, or Commitment to Continuous Improvement.

Research question 3. Is there a correlation between per pupil spending and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit?

Two relationships were found relating to spending. First, per pupil spending was negatively related to the number of themes reflecting Teaching and Learning; district was identified as being in the higher per pupil expenditure category were likely to have fewer recommendations related to Teaching and Learning. Per pupil spending was also found to be positively related to the number of recommendations reflecting Stakeholder Communication. In this case, districts in the higher category of per pupil spending were likely to have more recommendations regarding Stakeholder Communications. No relationship was found between per pupil spending and any of the five other standards, including Vision/Mission, Governance and Leadership, Resources and Support Systems, Documenting and Using Results, or Commitment to Continuous Improvement.

Research question 4. Is there a correlation between levels of poverty and emerging themes from a successful district accreditation visit? A negative relationship between level of poverty and Documenting and Using Results was found. The school districts with a lower level of poverty had more recommendations regarding Documenting and Using Results. Alternatively, fewer recommendations were made to school districts that had higher poverty levels. No relationship was found between level of poverty and any of the other six standards, including Vision/Mission, Governance and Leadership, Teaching and Learning, Resources and Support Systems, Stakeholder Communications and Relationships, or Commitment to Continuous Improvement.

The results of this study indicate that certain demographic variables (e.g. per pupil spending, district size, and level of poverty) do not substantially predict the types of recommendations made to district as a part of accreditation. Regardless of the kinds of students served, the challenges remain the same. This does not mean that each district faces the same set of challenges; the recommendations for improvement vary across districts.

Limitations and Delimitations

Reviewer bias is a possible limitation of this study. Results are limited by what was written in report findings. This study does not examine the validity and reliability of reviewer findings. Findings are coded as written.

A related limitation of this study is the data source. It should be noted that the researcher did not personally serve on any review teams included in this study, or discuss the specific reports with any person who did serve. Therefore, the context of the commendations and recommendations were not known.

Generalizability is limited due to a homogeneous population (only schools in states served by SACS). The design of the district accreditation process contributes to this limitation, in that the only districts that may apply are ones who have successfully completed a readiness visit, as described in the section about participants. Furthermore, districts self-select for district accreditation. The full spectrum of districts is not represented in this study. Related research exploring the nature of districts self-selecting for the district accreditation process would be beneficial.

Discussion

The examination of literature outlined what research indicates districts should be doing to support school improvement. Findings of the current study indicated that the district accreditation process does align with current best practices for district improvement. Findings of the current research concur with the assertion of AdvancED (2007a) that the district accreditation process embraces continuous improvement and accountability. Specifically, the current research found that the literature supports all seven areas outlined in the district accreditation process: Vision and Mission, Teaching and Learning, Resources and Support Systems, Documenting and Using Results, Stakeholder Communications and Relationships, and Commitment to Continuous Improvement (AdvancED).

The results of the current study explores the district accreditation teams' suggestions regarding the next steps for districts in their continuous improvement process. The current study also shows that demographics may only play a slight role in determining what a district needs to do to improve outcomes for students. Given that this study was exploratory in nature, the intent is to provide insight rather than provide

conclusive evidence. This section discusses specific findings and then expands to a more global perspective of the results.

The literature provides a wealth of information regarding district improvement, but much of the information is gathered using case-study methodology (Mac Iver and Farley-Ripple, 2008). Because the data used in this study were gathered using a protocol based on the same set of standards, data can be more readily compiled. While the themes were determined with the primary purpose of preparing data for Phase 2, the themes themselves provide interesting data. Results of the Phase 1 show that the work of school districts is expansive and multi-faceted, confirming the findings of Togneri and Anderson (2003) and Cawelti and Protheroe (2003). Furthermore, these results also underscores the recommendations of Fullan (2005) and Wheatley (1999) who argue that districts have to work through the change process rather than imposing a solution that works under a different set of circumstances.

The large number of themes discerned in the current study highlights the importance of a central office or other organizing body to coordinate the overall improvement efforts of the school district. These findings are consistent with Shannon and Byslma (2004), David and Shields (2001), Fullan (2004), and Senge (2006) who found that the organization has the responsibility not just to organize, but to also lead through establishing a vision of improving teaching and learning, with a focus on student learning (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003; Elmore, 2004; Supovitz, 2006).

The current study found that no one theme was cited in more than 42.8% percent of districts. Therefore, no one area is significantly more problematic for school districts. In other words, less than half of districts are cited for any one theme. This finding further

underscores the need for localized analysis and problem-solving (Wheatley, 1999), and confirms what Fullan (2004) asserts is the lack of a "silver bullet" for district and school improvement. Togneri and Anderson (2003) stress the action and process component of district-level improvement, moving from a static list of characteristics.

In Phase 2, the three variables of district size, per pupil spending and level of poverty were examined in relationship to the themes found in the recommendations to the districts. The only relationship found regarding district size was a positive relationship with Governance and Leadership. This relationship is not surprising given that governance issues could reasonably be expected to increase as the size of a district increases. In a review of the literature, Hentschke, Nayfack and Wohlstetter (2009) conclude that "despite possible scale economies, increases in organizational size tended to be associated with problems of communication, collusion, coordination, delegation, control and overall managerial effectiveness" (p. 318). They also found that district reform efforts were not different in large and small urban districts. Hentschke, et al found considerable differences in the behaviors of superintendents in large and small districts, theorizing that this is due to organizational issues of size, span of control, and economies of scale.

However, it is interesting to note that district size did not correlate to any other standard, including Vision or Stakeholder Communication, which both could be complicated by an increase in size. Bickel and Howley (2000) also cautioned that it may be more useful to link school and district size for the purposes of such analysis, as schools could be large in a small system, or schools could be small in a large system. This could confound the results at the district level (Bickel & Howley).

Much is written about the effect of per pupil spending (Archibald, 2006; Hanushek, 1997; Hedges, Laine & Greenwald, 1994; Okpala, 2002); however, the results are mixed. Archibald theorizes that results are inconclusive because spending needs to be disaggregated into categories in order to be useful. Nevertheless, the present study found few relationships between recommendations to the district and district spending. A negative relationship was found between per pupil spending and the number of recommendations reflecting Teaching and Learning. That is, districts identified as being in the higher per pupil expenditure category were likely to have fewer recommendations that related to Teaching and Learning. It is plausible that districts that spend more per pupil are more likely to be addressing the teaching and learning needs in their schools than districts that have fewer resources.

Per pupil spending was also found to be positively related to the number of recommendations reflecting Stakeholder Communication. In this case, districts in the higher category of per pupil spending were likely to have more recommendations regarding Stakeholder Communications. This finding indicates the need for districts with higher per pupil spending to communicate clearly with their stakeholders. A potential explanation for this may be that a relative abundance of resources could lessen the perceived need to reach out to stakeholders, or districts may have already established relationships with stakeholder groups.

Few relationships were found regarding the level of poverty and recommendations in the current study. A negative relationship between level of poverty and Documenting and Using Results was found. The school districts with a lower level of poverty had more recommendations regarding Documenting and Using Results.

Alternatively, fewer recommendations regarding the use of data were made to school districts that had higher poverty levels. Often served by federal programs which require documentation (Goertz, 2004), districts with a high concentration of poverty may have data utilization practices in place. Districts with a higher percentage of students in poverty may have experienced dissatisfaction with the condition of the district, which provides impetus to examine and change practices. According to Senge (2006), dissatisfaction with current conditions often occurs prior to restructuring. Documenting and using results are critical steps in continuous improvement of districts (Campbell & Fullan, 2006; Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

The current study suggests that all districts, regardless of district size, level of poverty, or per pupil spending can benefit from best practices found in literature. The themes of recommendations rarely correlated with specific demographic characteristics, but there were a variety of themes for districts to address. With such diverse recommendations, it then becomes clear that there has to be a way of addressing many issues at once. That is, there has to be levers in which to affect widespread change. Returning to the literature, systems thinking provides a possible solution (Fullan, 2004; Senge, 2006). The idea is that if the underlying process of continuous improvement is attended to, it could affect many areas at once, creating coherence, alignment, and sustainability (Fullan, Massell, 2000; Schlechty, 2005, Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

By focusing on levers for continuous improvement such as leadership, capacity building, and accountability, the system is better able to affect outcomes in multiple areas (Fullan, 2004). A systemic approach, where district leadership considers the relationship

between the parts of the system to affect powerful change, is necessary for widespread improvement (Senge, 2006). For example, a change in the professional learning policies may impact not only student learning, but also teacher retention, resource allocation, and equity issues. Attention must be paid to the intended and unintended consequences (Ackoff, 1998).

Therefore, results of the current study support the research indicating that districts need to look at continuous improvement from a district level rather than the school level (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001, 2003; Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003), and with a systemic view (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003; Fullan & Campbell, 2006), to sustain improvement efforts. The current study also suggests that districts do not have to face the same set of issues, and that the issues are diverse. Therefore, it is more important to problem-solve within the district, use data, involve stakeholders, focus on learning, constantly learn and develop professionally, and build capacity.

The present study suggests that while districts have unique challenges regarding specific recommendations, the themes are similar. Districts need to identify their challenges through peer review or other method of quality assurance, while maintaining and applying a process of continuous improvement. This continuous improvement stance can ameliorate many specific issues at once. For example, a district that identifies issues with the curriculum may want to revisit their vision of teaching and learning to identify strengths and weaknesses. They may also want to examine how instructional strategies affect access to the curriculum, how technology could improve access, and if the delivered curriculum is sufficiently rigorous. Alternatively, if a district has carefully

planned and executed around the seven standards, fewer issues are likely to arise. In both cases the process used is Senge's (2006) systemic continuous improvement model where change is managed as a process rather than an event.

Recommendations for Further Study

Further research is needed for both the research questions of the present study and regarding larger issues of district improvement and the sustainability of such improvement. Enlarging the sample size of the present study may improve statistical outcomes.

The validity of the quantitative results is tied directly to the adequacy of the theme categorization. Moreover, these themes are not mutually exclusive; they could possibly fit into multiple categories. Replication of this study could provide a measure of triangulation, which would extend the research.

More information about the characteristics of districts helps to target efforts and resources. Longitudinal research regarding district improvement is needed to detail process issues in continuous improvement. Specifically, fidelity of implementation efforts would be helpful.

In phase 2, the demographic variables were divided into two categories, one above and one below the mean. Different categorizations could yield different results. Future research may want to look at results when additional categories are created. For example, district size could be split into small/medium/large rather than small/large.

Conclusion

The present study results in three essential conclusions. First, a district central office is critical for widespread improvement, and should not be overlooked or ignored.

Mac Iver and Farley-Ripple (2008) conducted a thorough literature review concerning the role of the central office, concluding that "the role of the central office in positively influencing those factors that raise the quality of classroom instruction cannot be ignored (p. 82)." This recognizes both the centrality of student learning, but also the necessity of the district-level organization in school improvement.

In order to meet the challenges of accountability for improvement, schools must be supported by the district in their efforts to build capacity, develop leadership and focus on learning. A careful balance of school autonomy and district accountability has to be maintained in order to support the work of schools (Mac Iver & Farley-Ripple, 2008; Wong, 2001). Spillane, et al (2002) described school leaders who utilized district accountability policies to leverage change in instruction. However, without corresponding increases in capacity, accountability measures are destined to fail (Elmore, 2004). Returning full circle to the broad policy implications, Elmore (2004) is critical of accountability without capacity-building measures. "Accountability systems cannot mobilize resources schools do not have...the capacity to improve precedes and shapes schools' responses to the external demands of accountability systems" (p. 117).

Second, the current research further defines the elements of district improvement efforts. By compiling the recommendations of district accreditation team visit reports, a clearer picture emerges regarding what peer reviewers are looking for when visiting other districts. This provides a different type of information than what currently exists in the school improvement literature. Although most studies cited in the current study used observational methods to collect data (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; David & Shields, 2001; Elmore & Burney, 1998; Firestone, et al, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003;

Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Snipes et al., 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003), none of them included data on over 100 districts using the same framework and protocols for all the districts. Therefore, the current research is exploratory in nature, answering questions about the continuous improvement process of school districts. In the current study, the themes emerging from recommendations are grouped and examined from a systemic perspective to identify levers for change in many areas simultaneously. The literature shows that a systemic approach is superior for district improvement (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2004; Senge, 2006). This research presents themes of recommendations made as a result of the district accreditation process, but does not prescribe solutions.

Lastly, this study begins to explore the relationship between themes of recommendations and demographic variables (size, spending, SES). Certainly, these variables define the unique characteristics of a district, but they do not need to limit the improvement efforts or provide an excuse. This research suggests that while there are some correlations between recommendations and demographic variables of size, spending and SES, perhaps the relationships are not consistent enough to determine that size, spending or the SES of a district is a limitation to continuous improvement efforts. That is, districts of diverse demographic profiles do not differ much in terms of the recommendations for improvement by peers. This research suggests that districts are more alike than different, not in what they look like, but in how they can improve and experience success, however they each define that success.

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