

**INCREASING POVERTY:
HOW DO LEADERS IN ONE SUBURBAN DISTRICT RESPOND?**

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Contents

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES	5
ABSTRACT	7
Chapter One.....	9
Introduction.....	9
1.0 Purpose	9
1.1 Research Question	11
1.2 District Studied	12
1.3 Data	16
1.4 Findings	18
Chapter Two	21
Review of Literature.....	21
2.0 Poverty’s Rapid Increase in Suburbs	21
2.1 Poverty’s Out-of School Factors.....	25
2.2 Out-of-School Factors and Policy	26
2.3 Urban Reform Efforts May Contribute to Suburban Responses.....	29
Chapter Three	35
Methodology and Data.....	35
3.0 Research Question	35
3.1 Empirical Context.....	36
3.2 Data Collection Process	41
3.2.1 Interview Protocol.....	43
3.2.2 Qualitative Measures and Quality of Measures	45
3.3 Analysis	46
Chapter Four	48
Findings	48
4.0 A Story Unfolds	48
4.1 What did the Long-Standing Superintendent See Which Others Didn’t?.....	49
4.2 District Leaders Followed Superintendent’s Unrecognized Plan	53
4.3 Disparities in Test Scores Bring Attention to Student Poverty	57
4.4 Isolated Situations Bring Attention to Student Poverty	62
4.5 Recession Brings New Faces of Poverty & New Funding Challenges	66

4.6 What Did District Leaders Do in Crisis?	72
4.7 How Was Image a Problem?	76
Chapter Five	79
Findings	79
5.0 Lessons Learned	79
5.1 Demographics Changed, Mission Un-waivered	80
5.2 A Unified District, A Unified Board of Education	82
5.3 Traditionally Strong Community to Become a Strongly Engaged Community	85
5.3.1 Community Means Partner	86
5.3.2 Community Could Bring Additional Funding	90
5.4 A Lesson in Planning	92
Chapter Six	95
Discussion and Conclusion	95
6.0 Overview	95
6.1 Implications of Experiences with Poverty	96
6.2 Implications for Decision-Making	97
6.3 Implications for Use of Researched Practices	101
6.4 Implications for Suburban Districts	102
6.5 Suburban Districts Possess Special Advantage	103
6.6 Limitations	104
6.7 Future Research	106
References	108
Appendix 1	114
Interviewees and Interview Protocol	114
Appendix 2	116
Four-Frame Interpretations of Organizational Processes	116
Appendix 3	117
District Documents Included in Data	117

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1 Demographics Race/Ethnicity.....	14
Figure 2 Demographics Economically Disadvantaged.....	15
Figure 3 Students Receiving Free and Reduced Lunch County Data	16
Figure 4 Demographics Race/Ethnicity.....	37
Figure 5 Demographics Economically Disadvantaged.....	37
Figure 6 Free and Reduced Lunch Trends in County	39
Figure 7 Free and Reduced Lunch Support Increases	39
Figure 8 English Language Learner Increases	40
Figure 9 School District All Students by Ethnic Group	58
Figure 10 School District Free and Reduced Lunch by Ethnic Group.....	59
Figure 11 District AYP Reading Scores	60
Figure 12 District AYP Math Scores	61
Figure 13 Full Time Enrollment vs Free and Reduced Lunch Enrollment	65
Figure 14 Free and Reduced Lunch Support Increases.....	66
Figure 15 Residents Living Below Poverty Level.....	69
Figure 16 Children Living Below Poverty Level.....	69
Figure 17 County Poverty and Low Income Growth	71
Figure 18 Reduction in Real Income	72
Figure 19 School District General Fund by Year	74
Figure 20 Free and Reduced Lunch by High School	76
Table 1 2011 Poverty Threshold and County Living Wage	70

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses the question of how suburban school district leaders in one large Midwestern school district respond to increasing student poverty. The purpose of this study was to determine how suburban school district leaders respond to increasing student poverty in their decision making and actions. Data for this study came from one large suburban school district in Kansas. For decades, the district was known traditionally for wealthy areas and families as well as extremely high student achievement. Over a 15 year period, student poverty grew significantly. Free and reduced student populations grew from single digit percentages to nearly 40% of the district enrollment. A doubling of students' need occurred every four years with poverty forecasted to continually grow. As a result, this district was a prime source of study.

Current literature investigating suburban school district leaders' responses to the growing student poverty is sparse. Therefore, literature reviewed for this study included urban district leaders' responses to student poverty. Studies revealed urban school districts to possess similar demographic changes to suburban settings at the onset of growing poverty. Thus, urban studies contributed to the investigations of this suburban study. Out-of-school factors which poverty brings into school settings are also similar in urban and suburban settings. Housing and resources needed to manage poverty's out-of-school factors were common to both settings.

In this suburban district studied, these factors evolved as part of leaders' responses. Housing changed in the suburban district and students were less prepared for learning due to factors in their homes. Varied recognition of increasing student poverty contributed to purposeful versus lack luster responses. Leaders' efforts to respond to increasing student poverty were

occasionally founded in research; yet, others were implemented with no researched-based decision-making.

Literature describing organizational theory and leaders' decision-making was also utilized in this study. As poverty was recognized as a phenomenon needing district leaders' planning, greater effectiveness in decision-making was gained through use of multiple frameworks. Prior, suburban leaders hadn't been pushed to reframe their thinking due to homogenous populations. One-size fits all may have been effective before student diversity became present. Multiframed thinking evolved over time as leaders moved past singular framed decisions closely related to their own roles.

Using in-depth qualitative data from interviews along with quantitative data, this study sheds light on decision-making and actions of suburban district leaders as they responded to increasing student poverty. Key findings indicated initial decisions were made with little recognition to increasing poverty. Initially, decision making was made through a political framework. Therefore, initial decisions were made out of compliance versus decision-making with intent to respond to student poverty. As recognition of student poverty grew, true intentions to respond to increasing student poverty surfaced. Key areas were uncovered as foci in district leaders' responses: reinvestments in neighborhoods, improving programming, early intervention, and teacher professional development. Additionally, lessons learned for the future were uncovered in suburban district leaders' responses to increasing student poverty.

Chapter One

Introduction

1.0 Purpose

The purpose of my study was to investigate an understudied and unanswered question: **How do suburban school district leaders respond to increasing student poverty?** This study found specific responses to increasing student poverty on the part of school district leaders in one large, Midwestern suburban school district. The goal of this paper is to shed light on leaders' responses with analysis to determine how their responses occurred and the implications for future responses to the growing concern of increasing student poverty.

Poverty is a historical concern in our country. Since World War II, poverty has claimed geographical sections of our nation bit by bit. As a result, America is plagued with urban areas saturated by poverty in nearly all of our 50 states. Although the suburbs are historically known for wealth, this is changing (Patton, 2011). Suburbs are the newest victim of American poverty. In fact, experts would say some dramatic changes have gone largely unrecognized. Rates of poverty have been rapidly increasing in the suburban areas while growing quietly and causing great harm (Berliner, 2009). It is uncertain as to how suburban areas and educational systems within those suburbs are responding.

Concerns of increasing poverty in suburban areas have, however, gained more recent national media attention. For example, attention from 60 Minutes, a respected, national news program brought attention to the Metzker family and many like them living in central Florida. The initial program aired after the construction industry collapsed as the recession began in December of 2007. Suburban families with previous jobs in the industry found themselves running out of unemployment, out of savings, and out of welcome with extended family financial

support (CBS News, 2011). This particular national program shared story after story of families living in their cars as a result. Formerly secure families had learned to adapt to living in their cars by creating rules, a checklist of sort, for doing so. Security, lighting, a parking lot to be welcomed or hide through the nights, and a public restroom were necessary (CBS News, 2011). The media followed the lives of specific families from 2007 to 2011 while they struggled as a result of the recession. CBS news stated the longevity of homelessness was hidden in America where 1 out of 4 children were living in poverty. Homelessness had increased in the suburban county of Seminole, Florida resulting 1100 homeless students in the county by 2011 (CBS News, 2011). Media attention like this, of course, was due to the actual dilemma of poverty, but of unique interest was the setting of unexpected poverty: the suburbs.

Reports indicate rising poverty has occurred in the most unlikely of places. DuPage, for example, a county just west of Chicago, is the richest county in the Midwest. Quintessential of suburban life, DuPage is historically home to well-educated, white families. Yet, the last nine years represent significant changes. While the median incomes remain high in DuPage, more and more families have met the federal guidelines of poverty (Patton, 2011). Elizabeth Donovan, the director of agencies and programs at the Northern Illinois Food Bank noted a turning point in 2005 (Patton, 2011). About that time, DuPage's poverty growth surpassed the greater city of Chicago's poverty increases. This newsworthy phenomenon in DuPage has been replicated as a public concern across the country. As in DuPage, increase student poverty in many traditionally wealthy suburbs has surpassed poverty's growth of their neighboring inner urban cities. As Donovan describes, "People have this myth about what life is supposed to be like in the suburbs; the white picket fences and all that." They aren't aware that so much happens within a short drive of where they live. They prefer to think poverty happens only in the city" (Patton, 2011).

1.1 Research Question

My study investigates a significant, clearly unstudied, unanswered question: **How do suburban school district leaders respond to increasing student poverty?** Seeking answers to support my overall interest, the following assumptions were understood:

1. Poverty is a historical problem for schools but it is a new problem for suburban school districts.
2. Poverty brings out-of-school factors into schools which negatively affect student achievement. Urban schools with high-poverty enrollments have battled this concern with few successful reforms whereas suburban schools had not been faced with similar challenges until more recent years.
3. Community resources are less readily available to poverty ridden families in suburban surroundings.
4. Lastly, organizational decision-making impacts the effectiveness of the response to poverty.

Given these assumptions, I answered the question: **How do suburban school district leaders, in one Midwestern suburban school district, respond to increasing student poverty?** I determined:

1. Did suburban district leaders, in one Midwestern suburban district, see poverty as a concern? If so, how have leaders responded to the concern?
2. How have policies, practices, and educational research influenced leaders' decision-making?
3. Did suburban district leaders recognize and respond to "out-of-school factors" of poverty?

4. How have suburban district leaders in this district utilized organizational and leadership methods to influence their decision-making?

As an American society, we've widely recognized the importance of education as a tool used in attempts to break the cycle of poverty. Yet, we've also accepted schools in poverty ridden areas to be significantly challenged in educating children well (Berliner, 2009). High-school dropout rates have increased in urban and suburban areas dealing with poverty (University of Southern Indiana Center for Applied Research, 2010). Recently, we've recognized the challenges to be growing in suburbs. School districts throughout the country, regardless of historical wealth, have been engaged in educating children of poverty and beating challenges poverty brings to learning in schools. In reality, America no longer has geographical areas protected from poverty (Kneebone & Berube, 2013).

Although suburban research is limited in relation to poverty, previous research offers guidance for the growing problem of suburban poverty, poverty's out-of-school contributing factors, utilization of organizational frames in decision-making, and previous reform efforts specific to student poverty. With those to inform me, my research fills a missing gap regarding suburban school districts and the educational response to the concern of growing student poverty in the suburbs.

1.2 District Studied

Data for this study came from a suburban school district in northeast Kansas. This is a Midwestern suburban district situated within 72 square miles in northeast Kansas. The suburban county in which the district sits includes 480 square miles.

The district studied has been known for exceptional student achievement for more than 40 years. The area encompassed was the place to live and raise children from the mid-1960's to

present. On the east side of the district, families flocked to settle into small Cape Cod homes in the 1960's. Over fifty years later, families continued to settle in these same homes which were considered trendy. Occasionally, in recent years, one of those trendy homes was demolished for the land in order to build a much more substantial home on the desired street, in the desired school district. Of course, the expensive or trendy homes were not the only draw to the area. The school district's reputation of consistently impressive student achievement and bountiful options of extra-curricular activities drew in families. The district appeared to offer children the best in education and enriched experiences. For decades, the area was known for employment opportunities, beautiful homes, and high-achieving schools. For some, it offered a country club life-style tucked in an established suburban bed of wealth (Suburban District, 180, 2013).

In the recent decade, however, the district studied and referred to as Suburban District 180, unidentified for study purposes, has seen and felt great changes. The community gradually began experiencing these changes. The most significant change was the increase in student poverty (Suburban District 180 Assessment Department, 2012). Increasing student poverty was, in part, the result of factors within inner-ring suburbs as described by researchers (Hanlon & Vicino, 2007). Housing was a challenging factor for this particular district as outside neighboring districts were continuing to build new homes and offer housing for less than the homes present in this district's inner-ring. Moreover, as an inner-ring suburb, the area was landlocked with no room for new growth. Additionally, the growth of poor minority students had been a factor for the district as the greatest growth of immigrant students occurred in the school district in the recent 5 years. The district's increase of minority immigrants mirrored the metropolitan area as well as the increases across the state. As research indicates, increases in immigrant children offer additional explanation to increasing poverty as minorities are more likely to be poor.

The district studied has historically been comprised of 35 K-6 elementary schools, 5 middle schools for grades 7-8, and 5 high schools for grades 9-12. During this study, one middle school was closed for cost savings. The average enrollment for the district in the 2011-2012 school year was 27, 876. The average attendance rate was 96% which was nearly identical to the state’s average attendance rate (Kansas State Department of Education, 2012 & Suburban District 180, 2012). The demographics of the district were also comparable to the entire state’s demographics as seen in Figures 1 and 2. Interestingly, the state of Kansas encompassed 82,277 square miles, 98.7% of which was considered rural. (US Census Bureau, 2010). Therefore, finding the suburban school district studied to mirror the overall state’s demographics exemplified the unique transformation of the district’s population in a suburban area.

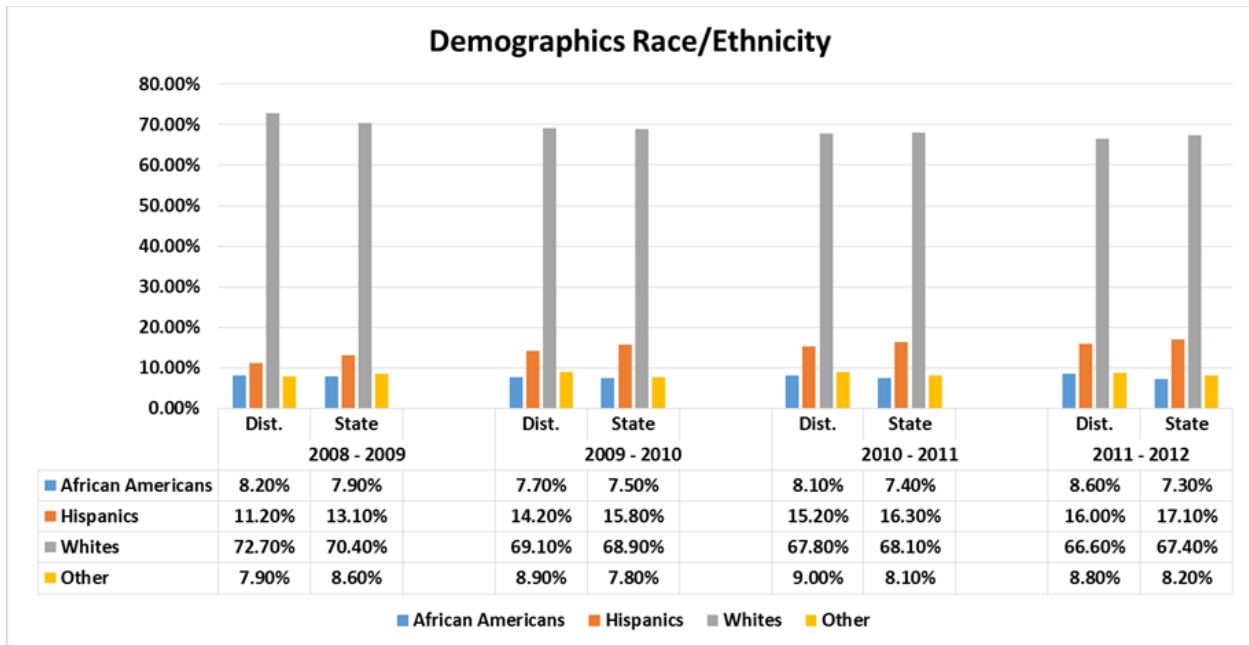


Figure 1 Demographics Race/Ethnicity

Data Source: Suburban District 180, 2013

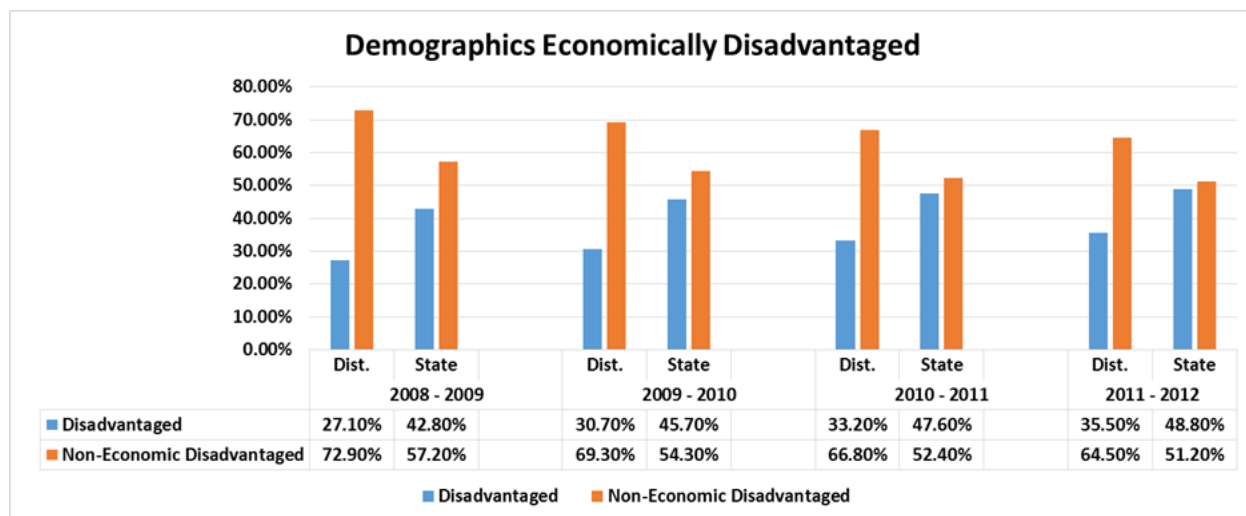


Figure 2 Demographics Economically Disadvantaged

Data Source: Suburban District 180, 2013

The school district lies within a historically wealthy county where pockets of significant wealth still exist. However, the overall financial wellness of the county has been declining. Within the county, the district studied has experienced the greatest increase of students needing federal lunch support (United Community Services, 2013). Moreover, the recession of 2008 created a new face of poverty: the educated poor. These households experienced job losses of one and sometimes both parents. These challenging financial circumstances were not expected for families in this suburban school district.

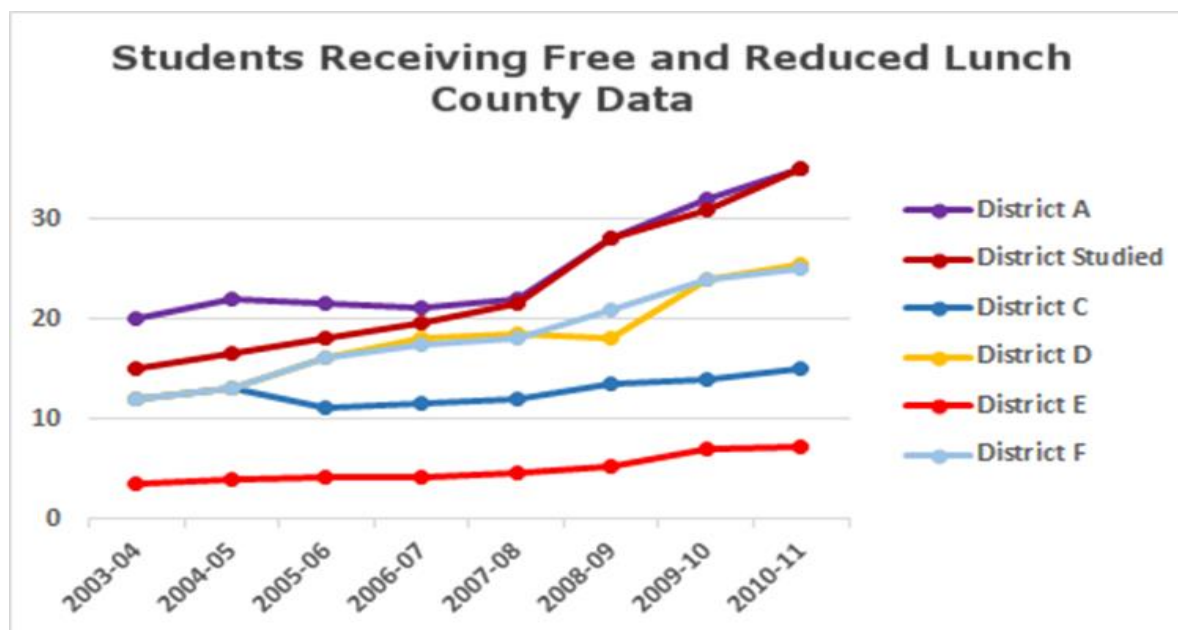


Figure 3 Students Receiving Free and Reduced Lunch County Data

Source: United Community Services, 2013

1.3 Data

Again, my study investigates a significant, clearly unstudied, unanswered question: **How have suburban school district leaders from one Midwest district responded to increasing student poverty?** Data for this study came from the one large, Midwestern suburban school district described. It was established and unified in the northeast part of Kansas in 1969. As shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5, district demographics have recently mirrored the state's more diverse populations.

This study relied on in depth interviews of district leaders including present and past superintendent, present and past Superintendent's Cabinet members, Board of Education members, and a community financial foundation leader. Also, informing my research are my personal experiences working in mostly suburban school settings for 23 years. I served the school district studied from 1999-2012, a total of 13 years. My personal experiences as an

employee informed my research as I was able to analyze data with a rich and deep understanding.

The school district studied precisely fits the description of a suburban area experiencing rapidly growing poverty. Rapidly increasing poverty has occurred in the last ten years. The school district's surrounding county has experienced circumstances similar to DuPage. In 2000, 15,320 of the county's individuals were living at or below the poverty level. In 2010, the U.S. Census indicated an increase of 134% with 35,800 individuals at or below the poverty level of \$22,300 a year for a family of four. Non-high school graduates comprised nineteen percent of poor working adults ages 25 to 64. The numbers began to unveil the changing face of poverty in suburban areas as over eighty percent of county's working adults in poverty graduated from high-school and about half had some training beyond a high-school diploma. Educated adults were among the poor.

One-third of the county's individuals counted at or below the poverty level were children (U.S. Census, 2010). Yet, children comprised one-fourth of the county's total population. The county's reality: children made-up the largest growing population of the county's poor. As of 2010, 8.3% of children in the county were poor as compared to 6.1% of poor working adults in the county (U.S. Census, 2010).

As circumstances for children changed, teachers were suddenly faced with serving large numbers of children lacking school readiness skills. Teachers had observed poverty's outside-of-school factors growing in classrooms of this suburban district. Therefore, assumptions of teaching were no longer the same. Teaching in a suburban classroom previously involved responding to students ready for the concepts taught. Students possessed social skills required for school, and students' basic needs were met. Therefore, students were ready to learn. With

increased student poverty, this was no longer the case for all students (Suburban District 180, 2013). Teachers were instructing students influenced by poverty's out-of-school factors including food insecure homes, missing medical attention, and homes with stressful family relations. (Suburban District 180, 2013). All of which were contributing to students' challenges coming into school with students and distracting them from the purpose of learning (Suburban District 180, 2013). Observations of teachers serving Suburban District 180 were supported by Berliner's research in 2009. Outside-of-school factors created by poverty impacts students' learning negatively (Berliner, 2009).

From my observations, such dramatic changes had resulted in an identity crisis for the school district. How did the organization define itself? Who did the organization serve? How was the organization best serving them? Answers to these questions were uncertain. Public persona still represented this suburban district as both wealthy and serving the wealthy. The presence of the obvious misnomer was growing across the suburban county and represented a problem found across our country. Suburban school districts like this one, traditionally serving the wealthy, were attempting to serve growing numbers of poor children without a plan for how to do so. How this district responded may be of interest to others with the same dilemma.

1.4 Findings

Seeking an educational, suburban response to poverty has become more important as the financial challenges of our country continue to escalate and the nation's demographics increase in diversity. In March of 2009, the National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH) estimated one in fifty children was homeless (NCEF, 2009). A 2008 recession, which by 2010 was known as a double-dip recession, caused by a collapse in the housing market, brought unfamiliar faces

to the plight of poverty. A growing gap between the wealthy and working class, a lack of affordable housing, and an increase in female-led households resulted in homeless families. These families were once stable financially and not historically identified groups in poverty. The new face of poverty included the middle-income bracket families who lost jobs and couldn't find new ones (NCEF, 2009). Barbara Duffield, policy director for the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth recognized the efforts of schools, "Many districts are absolutely stepping up to the plate, increasing their objectives, and doing their best under difficult circumstances to meet the new and old face of homelessness," (NCEF, 2009).

Although research has well described the significant influence of family, educators have often dismissed out-of-school factors which contributed to school success or lack of such (Coleman, 1966). Educators often viewed those factors as out of their control or even their realm of influence. Out-of-school factors, negative factors fostered in homes of poverty, need to be better understood in order for schools to find means to combat their negative influences on student learning. (Berliner, 2009). Moreover, suburban school districts are likely to have experienced greater challenges in identifying out-of-school factors given suburban schools have traditionally not engaged with these factors in the past.

Education has often missed the mark in understanding poverty's influence in our schools (Berliner, 2009). In short, poverty must be identified as a problem which influences student learning. Then, we may possibly determine how to lessen poverty's negative effects. Without this understanding, suburban schools could follow in the mistakes of urban counterparts. That is, poverty could grow until the environment is saturated due to lack of educational response. At such stage, poverty could be the unsolved challenge of suburban schools which it has been to urban education.

The response of school district leaders has also been influenced by the lens through which they view their organizations. Such lenses, filters, tools, and maps are referred to by researchers as frames (Bolman & Deal, 2008). “Learning multiple perspectives, or frames, is a defense against thrashing around without a clue about what you are doing or why” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 21). Our previous response against effects of poverty in schools could have been described as thrashing around. Jumping from notion to notion was evidenced by disconnected strategies in schools. The notions included the belief educators role was to simply keep students physically in school to assuming schools can’t do anything to lessen poverty’s negative effects to pretending poverty isn’t a problem for schools. Sounds like thrashing. Contrastingly, finding how to utilize organizational frames contributes to understanding how organizations implement effective decisions and responses to problems with purpose and results.

Currently, little research exists in relation to suburban schools and poverty. In fact, to-date, none specifically describe responses of suburban school district leaders as poverty increased in suburban schools. Therefore, in addition to research informing on organizational decision-making and poverty’s out-of-school factors, urban school reform efforts may be utilized. Urban reform was reviewed to in order to answer how suburban districts might respond as poverty’s newest victim.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

2.0 Poverty's Rapid Increase in Suburbs

Poverty is one, if not the greatest, challenge facing children throughout the world. In 2010, approximately 13 million households were food-insecure homes (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). In more than 20 % of these households, at least one member of the household reported nothing to eat on three or more days per month (Berliner, 2009). Unexpectedly, the suburban areas of our country have been increasing in poverty the most rapidly. Broke in the Burbs is not just the title of Kevin Clarke's 2011 magazine article, it has become a lifestyle of many American families. The 2010 Census data indicated 44 million Americans, or one in seven, struggled at the federal poverty line. For a family of four that struggle was on an income of \$22,050 a year. As a result, the percentage of American children living in poverty had increased from sixteen to twenty-one percent in the past ten years (Clarke, 2011). A new reality included nearly a quarter of our nation's children to be living in poverty. It was the highest measure of poverty in fifty years (Clarke, 2011). The greatest growth of poverty, in our nation's suburbs, where it hasn't been before, has been a unique battle in comparison to inner-city poverty.

Suburbs presented complexities involving a lack of awareness and moreover, a lack of resources present. Inner cities readily offered access to social services, whereas suburbs, being new to seek social service needs, had few means to offer families hoping for help. Safety-nets were just not readily available in the suburbs. "It's unlikely that such agencies are going to relocated or reconstructed there by hard-pressed, local state governments. And the nation's poor aren't likely to 'commute' to social services when just getting through the day is challenging enough" (Clarke, 2011). The Brookings Institution reported safety nets for suburban areas to

possess fewer social service agencies while serving much larger geographical regions than their urban counterparts. (Allard & Roth, 2010). When a family was able to find support in the suburbs, it's often their first time to need to do so. Brookings reports nearly three-quarters of suburban non-profits served more clients with no previous connection to support agencies. The clients were new to poverty and the cliental was growing rapidly.

Research, to date, has not caught up to address poverty's growth in the suburbs. Therefore, known researched interventions in suburban schools have not been targeted to address the cycle of poverty. Research indicates those raised in poverty are likely to stay in poverty (University of Southern Indiana Center for Applied Research, 2010). Coming from a poor family, a student is more likely to drop out of school. If a student drops out of high school, the student is more likely to stay poor. In 2004, 22 percent of 18-to-24 year olds in the United States had not completed high school. (NCES, 2004). The 2010 U.S. Census Bureau estimated the average annual income for individuals without a high school diploma or GED was \$18,734. In addition to previous stable suburban families joining the faces of poverty, suburban areas with growing student poverty have also grown in high school dropout numbers (Census, 2010).

Likely, we cannot wait for research targeting suburban poverty to catch up before we act. The problem of growing poverty specific to suburbia is real and has been noted by political arguments in the media: "The nation will be forced to make some difficult choices over the next few years as it confronts both the lingering effects of the Great Recession and the jaw-dropping annual deficits created by decades of bad tax and spending decisions. The nation's poor have few lobbyists to defend their interests" (Clarke, 2011). While research waits and politicians argue, school district leaders need to respond to growing poverty in suburbs. School districts respond in real time as greater populations of students living in poverty fill their enrollments.

According to the Brookings Institute, the greatest problems have been found in suburbs outside large metropolitan areas (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). These suburbs are currently home to one-third of those living in poverty and the numbers are increasing. Comparison of 2000 and 2010 census data revealed an increase of poor people living in the suburbs by 37.4 percent. Although greater numbers of people still suffered in urban poverty, the growth rate of suburban poverty doubled the rate in cities and was higher than the 26.5 percent national poverty growth rate.

In recent years, researchers turned their attention to a decline in suburban areas. In 2006, Lucy and Phillips acknowledged half of their study's sample of suburbs in 35 large metropolitan areas produced income levels below the greater area income levels. In an earlier study, Lucy and Phillips noted a decline in middle-age suburbs where the housing had been built between 1945 and 1969. Similarly, Hanlon found half of the housing stock in older suburbs to be built between 1950 and 1969. These areas, known as inner-ring suburbs, were most at risk due to age of homes, fiscal concerns, little or slow population growth, local economy downturns, and increased family poverty (Orfield, 2009). Hanlon (2007) offered insight into minorities migrating from central city environments to older, inner-ring suburbs. Immigrants settled first in the inner city and eventually shifted outward to the nearest suburb as their economic situation advanced. Hanlon described this as assimilation. Advancement, however, was defined as simply an ability to move locations, not movement out of poverty. Researchers suggested as such occurred, the housing market of older stock homes opened to low-income families. As low-income families moved into inner, also known as first-ring suburbs, higher-income families move outward to newer housing in new suburban areas (Bier, 2001). Thus, problems of the inner-city grew outward and into first-ring suburbs.

As poverty increased, the result became inner-cities and first-ring suburbs looked similar to one another but still discrepant from the outlying, newly established suburbs. Disparity became a suburban problem offering comparison between what were referred to as crisis suburbs, those in the inner-ring, and advancing suburbs found on the outskirts and growing (Hanlon, 2008). The conversation established in the 1960s comparing urban and suburban environments continued with an additional contrast added between older suburban neighborhoods and newer suburban growth.

A more recent Brookings Institution Study, *The Suburbanization of Poverty*, indicated suburbs outside the country's largest metro areas had experienced a twenty-five percent increase of poor families from 2000 to 2008 (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). That rate was near five times the increase of poverty in large cities. In addition to earning less when employed, greater numbers of suburban residents were unemployed. Much like the decentralization of jobs when employment moved out of large cities in the 1960s, "job sprawl" was likely, in part, responsible for the increases in suburban poverty (Brookings Institute, March 2010). City residents followed jobs to the suburbs. Yet, as a result of a recession in 2008, fewer jobs were available even in the suburbs.

Making the problem more challenging was the lack of resources available to respond to the increase in suburban poverty. A 75% increase in demand of non-profit agency support was reported in suburban areas outside Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington D.C. (Allard, 2010). Without a doubt, suburbs were not prepared to respond to rapidly increasing poor populations. Suburban poverty also went unacknowledged by stable suburban families. Many living in the suburbs donated food and other items to urban areas without a thought to those in need living and living next door in the same suburban community.

2.1 Poverty's Out-of School Factors

With such conditions, children arrived to school hungry, tired, and simply not equipped to work hard in their studies. Research supports “outside-of school-factors” (OSFs) in low income homes as causing much of the achievement gap (Berliner, 2009).

The following out-of-school factors limited what schools accomplished on their own in terms of student learning: (1) low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children; (2) inadequate medical, dental, and vision care, often a result of inadequate or no medical insurance; (3) food insecurity; (4) environmental pollutants; (5) family relations and family stress; and (6) neighborhood characteristics.

Immigrant status was also a consideration as an out-of-school factor. Borjas (2011) found immigrant children to have significantly higher rates of poverty than those native to the United States. His research noted nearly half of immigrant children raised in households receiving public assistance. The U.S. Census Bureau began collecting data on birthplace of immigrant children and their parents in 1994. Data collected from 1994 to 2009 indicated a significant increase in population of immigrant children ages seventeen or less. Recent researchers have built upon urban studies suggesting logic of spatial organization may be applied to changes and new challenges in the suburbs. As early as 1925, Burgess offered an ecological model of urban change suggesting one group “invades” a city neighborhood and “succeeds” over the preexisting residents (Hanlon, 2008). This research painted a picture of minority immigrants who arrived in the suburbs and displaced the preexisting non-Hispanic white population. “It is possible that this evolutionary process subsequently leads to the emergence of pockets of suburban poverty, because minority populations typically are poorer than non-Hispanic whites” (Hanlon, 2008).

As Hanlon's research described, all suburbs have become more ethnically diverse. Non-Hispanic blacks, Hispanics, immigrants, and other races increased in suburbs from 1980 to 2000. Additionally, non-Hispanic whites declined in the suburbs during this period. This trend continued from 2000 to 2010. Ethnic changes in suburban areas contributed to the advancing poverty rate and also to increasing numbers of students with limited English language proficiency.

2.2 Out-of-School Factors and Policy

Unfortunately federal policy has been a mixed bag when it comes to assisting schools in addressing poverty's out-of-school factors. President Johnson recognized poverty's negative influence on learning and targeted it with unprecedented reform. Specifically, Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was enacted to address the lack of resources in schools affected by low-income surroundings. However, political compromises necessary to pass the policy resulted in wide distribution of resources. Unfortunately, areas of concentrated poverty, such as major cities, saw little effect (Rury & Saaticioglu, 2011). The reauthorization of ESEA in 2001, known as the No Child Left Behind Act, had been noted by researchers to address the problem of poverty more comprehensively than the initial act and yet, to also miss the mark with use of accountability measures. In terms of addressing poverty, the statement of purpose of section 101 titled Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged is "to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments." Twelve actions were included as means to this

accomplishment. Of twelve, only one targeted low-achieving children in our America's highest-poverty schools. (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Policy, although positive in intent, robbed local decision-makers of power in examining student achievement in a broader way. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) held schools accountable in overcoming student differences with an emphasis on characteristics of race, students with special needs, and socio-economic status. The intent to ensure children of poverty were learning equal to their financially secure peers was present. The positive finding in this legislation was a basic recognition: students across the country in low-income homes deserve equal opportunities to achieve as their peers do. However, expecting schools to ensure student achievement of low-income students without using a broader lens to determine how to do so, may have set low-income students and schools up for failure.

The focus of NCLB was on output alone. Researchers supporting a "broader, bolder approach" to education describe: The potential effectiveness of NCLB has been seriously undermined by its acceptance of the popular assumptions that bad schools are the major reason for low achievement, and that "an academic program revolving around standards, testing, teacher training,...and accountability can, in and of itself, offset the full impact of socioeconomic achievement" (Berliner, 2009, p. 3). This was called an outcomes-oriented, input-ignoring philosophy. Yet, in any other success oriented industries, outputs had relationships to inputs which could not be ignored (Berliner, 2009). Output of students measured without consideration of comprehensive input (those out-of-school factors) mislead policy makers. In this discussion, output referred to student test scores and input referred to factors which positively or negatively influenced student learning. Poverty and the factors of poverty were excluded from the formula of inputs. This omission hindered accurate assessment of student achievement as well as

development of effective planning to addresses out-of-school factors embedded in poverty which hinders student learning. “Poverty limits student potential; inputs to schools affect outputs from them” (Berliner, 2009, p. 1).

In short, efforts to improve educational outcomes through the No Child Left Behind Act alone were unsuccessful. Schools exhibiting comprehensive student growth were often still penalized for those students not meeting testing standards. Again, such policy and assessment presumed poverty was not an input factor affecting student growth.

Ignoring poverty as a factor affecting student growth was a common mistake. While America was commonly criticized for its’ ranking of educational performance world-wide, those criticisms again omitted poverty as a factor in schooling. “On average, about 31% of American students of all races and ethnicities (about 15 million out of some 50 million public school students) attend schools that outperform students in 54 other nations in mathematics” (Berliner, 2009, p.4). These schools, however, have very few poor students (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). A conclusion of such data indicated America’s public schools were outperforming all but a few nations as long as poverty is was included as a major school challenge. In America’s poverty ridden schools, however, achievement was generally much lower. Again, findings reiterated the mistakes of federal policy as it focused almost exclusively on school outputs and very little on inputs. “The occasional school that overcomes the effects of academically detrimental inputs – high rates of food insecurity, single heads of households, family and neighborhood violence, homelessness and transiency, illnesses and dental needs that are not medically insured, special education needs, language minority populations, and so forth – has allowed some advocates to declare that schools virtually alone, can ensure the high achievement of impoverished youth” (Berliner, 2009, p.5). Of course, such successful schools

should be studied, evaluated, and replicated. Yet, to tackle poverty in such a narrow way did not give credence to the scale of problems related to poverty.

The efforts of NCLB to equalize education for the students regardless of race, income, or disability mirrored other reform efforts which missed the mark also due to a lack of connection between policy and practice. Often, written policy and practice are loosely coupled. As a result, most school reform efforts have failed repeatedly (Payne, 2008). However, success stories were found. For the purpose of this study, researched practices in urban schools have been utilized. In addition to examining the specific, successful responses, it was important to understand the organizational lens from which decisions were made. America has failed to tackle the sweeping problems poverty brings to schools through school-by-school responses alone. Poverty was simply growing too quickly to keep up and will continue to do so unless a more strategic, organizational plan is developed. Thus, it is important to understand how organizational theory applies to this study as well.

2.3 Urban Reform Efforts May Contribute to Suburban Responses

As discussed, schools traditionally have been expected to intervene and lessen or prevent negative outcomes of poverty of childhood poverty (Berliner, 2009). Yet, childhood poverty has predicted a range of negative adult outcomes. These outcomes included behavioral problems, disadvantages in the workplace, and more as a cycle of poverty was passed forward to the next generations. The negative impact of childhood poverty repeated itself as children of poverty have often had academic difficulty, exhibited social and emotional developmental delays, and experienced greater health concerns. Greater numbers of children living in poverty has resulted in greater numbers of adults living with negative outcomes of poverty and passing those along to

their children as well. To achieve personal successes and wellness as well as protect our nation's future economic strength, increasing childhood poverty must be addressed. Education has been the greatest weapon against such. Greater education has resulted in greater individual income potential and adult wellness (McNeely & Nonnemaker, 2002).

The Chicago Reform Act of 1988 is an example of policy which drove educational reforms as a response to poverty. However, unlike the reauthorization of ESEA known as No Child Left Behind, The Chicago Act empowered local schools to solve local problems. As a result, studies of Chicago's local reform efforts offered research as well as practical suggestions for educational responses to poverty. Byrk et al., (2010) studied elements of urban reform as it related to organizational change. Both an initiation phase, "where attempts to challenge a dysfunctional status quo" was implemented followed by a sustaining phase, "where individual roles, rules, and responsibilities" were redefined under a new structure (Byrk, 2010, p. 16). The study describes a story of three-thirds. Elementary schools implementing reforms varied in their success. One-third self-initiated improvement efforts, another third took similar steps but struggled to do so, and the final third indicated no authentic change.

Schools which were successful with initiation did so across differentiated communities of race. Most importantly, Byrk et al. (2010) studied how initiated reform was sustained in the top and middle thirds and as a result, a claim to improved student learning existed. A resulting framework of essential supports emerged and each support was tested. Key dimensions included: principals actively reaching out to parents and the local community; school leaders expanding the professional capacity of their faculty; and, leaders increasing amounts of discretionary resources toward improving instruction. In the end, data collected over a period of seven years from several hundred Chicago public elementary schools offered evidence

supporting essential elements needed for sustaining improvement. These five elements: school leadership, parent and community ties, professional capacity of faculty and staff, student-centered learning climate, and a system of instructional guidance were interdependent. Moreover, principal leadership must have been first effective for each of the other elements to have been sustained through the daily operations of the schools.

Similar to the Chicago Reform Act's empowerment of individual school responses to the challenges within high-poverty schools, *Hope for Urban Education*, completed in 1999, provides models of specific school responses credited with strong student achievement in high performing, high-poverty urban elementary schools. Nine schools with the following criteria were chosen from nine American cities:

- At least 80 percent of students met low-income criteria to receive free or reduced price lunches.
- The school was located in an urban area and did not have selective admission policies.
- Achievement in mathematics and reading was higher than the state average or higher than the 50th percentile using a nationally-normed assessment.
- The school did not exempt large percentages of students from assessments due to limited language proficiency or disabilities. (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Due to their similarities including high poverty and high student achievement, nine schools were chosen from across the nation for this study. Such speaks to the challenge of finding effective reform in high-poverty schools. These schools had their differences as well. Differences included enrollment sizes, student demographics, use of school reform models, amount of district-level involvement, and time needed for dramatic gains to be found. Although these differences existed, researchers reported eleven similar means to stronger student achievement in the majority of the nine schools.

These similar means were implemented in slightly different manners dependent on the school setting, student population and present-level of need. All, however, were noted as important to each school's efforts toward improved student learning when faced with poverty. The challenges and responses of these poverty surrounded schools were found in cities of Boston, San Antonio, Atlanta, East St. Louis, Detroit, Milwaukee, Houston, Washington D.C., and Chicago. Studies of school reform have often lacked in specific day-to-day examples of decisions and actions involved in the implementation of reform. However, these nine schools of nine separate cities offered insight with researchers' clear descriptions. Eleven means to high performance were found in school specific responses to poverty in urban settings:

- One important, visible, and attainable first goal was chosen by school leaders. Once that goal was accomplished, more ambitious goals were targeted.
- Principals worked to redirect time and energy previously engaged in adult conflict into efforts serving children.
- Discipline approaches were changed to emphasize students' sense of responsibility for their own behaviors. As a result, discipline problems were dramatically reduced in each school setting.
- Of great importance was the change in culture within the schools. A collective responsibility for school improvement, and ultimately student learning, was accepted among adults.
- Both the quantity of time and the quality of that time was greater focused on instructional leadership.
- Where lacking, instruction was aligned to state standards and assessment expectations.

- Principals obtained the needed materials, equipment and professional development for teachers.
- Time was restructured to provide authentic opportunities for teachers to collaborate, plan, and learn from each other regarding instructional issues.
- Significant efforts to gain parental trust and involvement of parents in students' achievement efforts were implemented.
- Additional time for instruction was created.
- In spite of serious challenges, school leaders were relentless in efforts to improve.

Each principal in the study faced serious roadblocks. Respective to each school, challenges included uncooperative staff, parents, and undisciplined students. Many began with a lack of funds, a lack of common instructional purpose among staff, and little to no parent involvement. Despite the hard realities, each of the leaders held to their originally expressed expectations while resources were gained and time resulted in staffing changes. Moreover, many of these leaders secured business partnerships which supported staff member's efforts and engaged families.

As described, measures of successful reform in high poverty school settings have been more rare than common. Research has also lagged in regard to district-level driven initiatives responding to poverty. In fact, urban researchers' recommendations included seeking out how school districts, not just individual schools, could systemically support improvement of teaching and learning in high-poverty schools (Charles A. Dana Center, 1999).

My study draws upon the conclusions found in aforementioned research. First, rapidly growing student poverty in suburban school districts must be recognized. Should school leaders

address poverty's out-of-school factors, the effect of such offers value in determining how to respond to increasing poverty. Additionally, school district leaders, as all organizational leaders, are guided in their decision making through an organizational lens or frames. Utilizing success stories of urban, poverty-ridden schools with an understanding of their organizational framing, I sought to learn how suburban school districts have responded to poverty. Embedded in this effort was the awareness suburban school districts have been less familiar with poverty, poverty's out-of-school factors, and therefore; may not recognize decisions need to be made in response to increasing poverty. To date, such research linking suburbs and poverty is extremely limited. My research fills multiple gaps in the current research.

Chapter Three

Methodology and Data

3.0 Research Question

My dissertation sought to answer how suburban school district leaders responded to increasing student poverty. I sought to find if suburban school district leaders identified poverty's out-of-school factors. If so, did district leaders choose to respond specifically to those concerns which researchers have found to negatively affect student achievement? Research indicates out-of-school factors such as (1) low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children; (2) inadequate medical, dental, and vision care, often a result of inadequate or no medical insurance; (3) food insecurity; (4) environmental pollutants; (5) family relations and family stress; and (6) neighborhood characteristics to negatively affect student achievement. Knowing immigrant families face these factors more often, I also inquired as to the effects of increasing immigrant student enrollment.

Additionally, I sought to learn if suburban district leaders were making decisions in response to poverty which had been utilized in high-poverty urban schools. This informed me in two ways. First, I determined if district leaders were seeking decisions specifically in response to concerns of poverty. Additionally, I learned if any replication of urban school efforts existed and if so, if it occurred to legitimize decisions, replicate a sincere reform effort, or if it was done without recognition of relation to urban reforms.

Moreover, understanding no singular reason exists for why leaders make decisions, it was of importance that I determined how leadership decisions were made. Were they developed through a single organizational lens or through multiple lenses utilized for maximum problem-solving? Given the complex problem of poverty, leaders' decision-making was expected to be

complex as well. Gaining insight regarding organizational lenses using Bolman & Deal's framework (2008) informed me in regard to why leaders' decisions were made as well as offered methods for greater analysis of leaders' decisions. I sought also to determine responses of suburban district leaders which could be identified as unique responses to increasing student poverty as a result of their suburban surroundings or circumstances.

3.1 Empirical Context

To contribute and extend the literature, I conducted a qualitative study of a historically high-achieving suburban school district experiencing dramatic changes in student demographics. In the recent decade, the school district located in Kansas, transformed in student population. Prior to 2002, the district experienced single digit percentages of students needing free and reduced lunch supports. By 2012, over 35 percent of the student population qualified for such support. Percentages of low-income students were doubling about every four years. At this rate, the suburban district could expect at least half of their student enrollment of near 28,000 students to need financial support by 2015 (Suburban District 180, 2013).

Additionally, the student population had become more diverse ethnically and began to mirror the mostly rural state's demographics versus the demographics of a traditional suburban area.

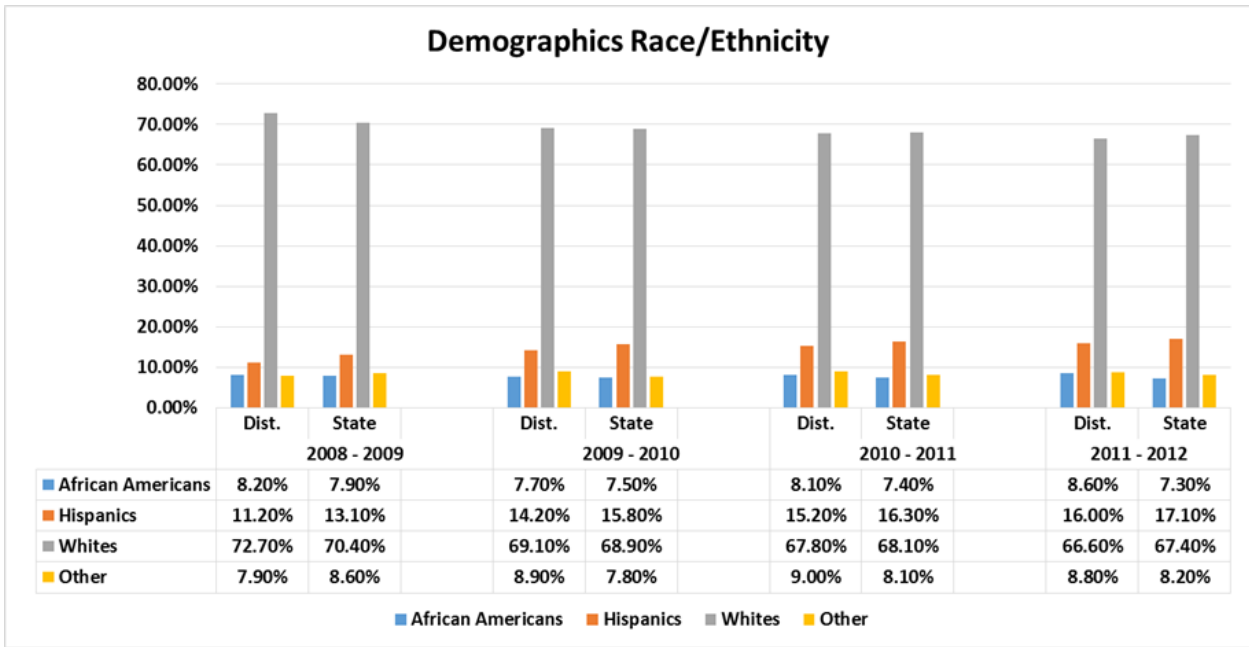


Figure 4 Demographics Race/Ethnicity

Suburban District 180, 2013

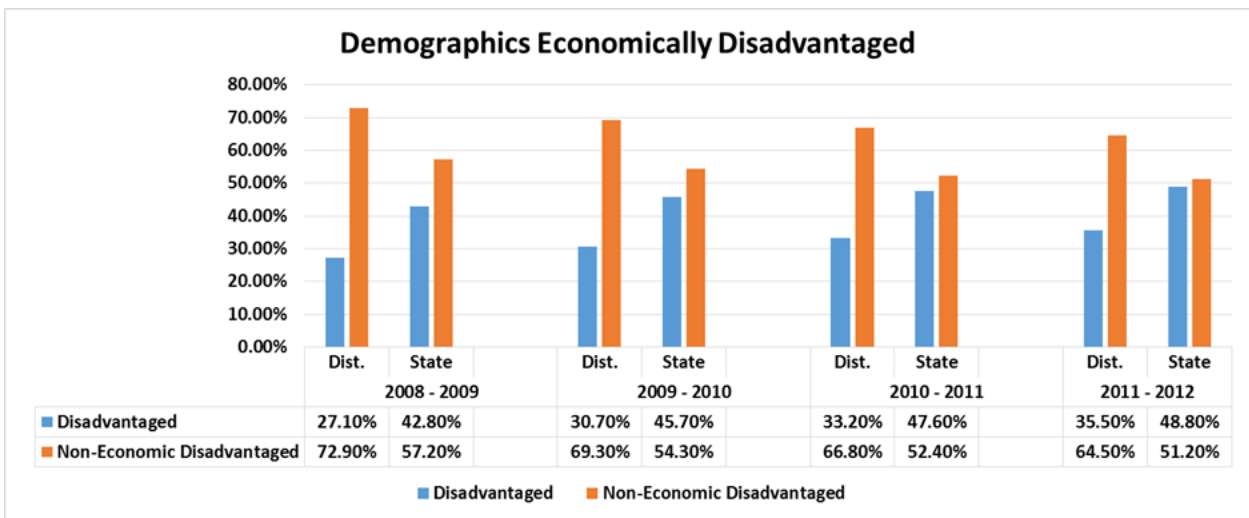


Figure 5 Demographics Economically Disadvantaged

Suburban District 180, 2013

I completed a qualitative study which analyzed decision-making of district leaders as they were faced with increasing student poverty. I studied the phenomenon of district level decision-making in the context of increasing student poverty in a suburban school district. I searched for meaning and understanding of district leaders' decisions directly related to issues of student poverty. I was not seeking information regarding district decision-making outside this context. This school district, located in the northeast part of a county in Kansas, was the bounded system which offered me prime circumstances for my research and the qualitative design of this study.

The suburban district possessed factors to answer my research question: **How do suburban school district leaders respond to increasing student poverty?**

Poverty was up 134% from 2000 to 2010 in this suburban county in Kansas, where the school district sits. The total suburban poverty increased in the metropolitan area by 119% between 2000 and 2010 (U.S. Census, 2000, 2010). School districts across this county had increased student populations needing federal lunch support as depicted by increasing numbers from 2003 as shown by Figure 6. The district studied, district A, had the greatest increase in student need.

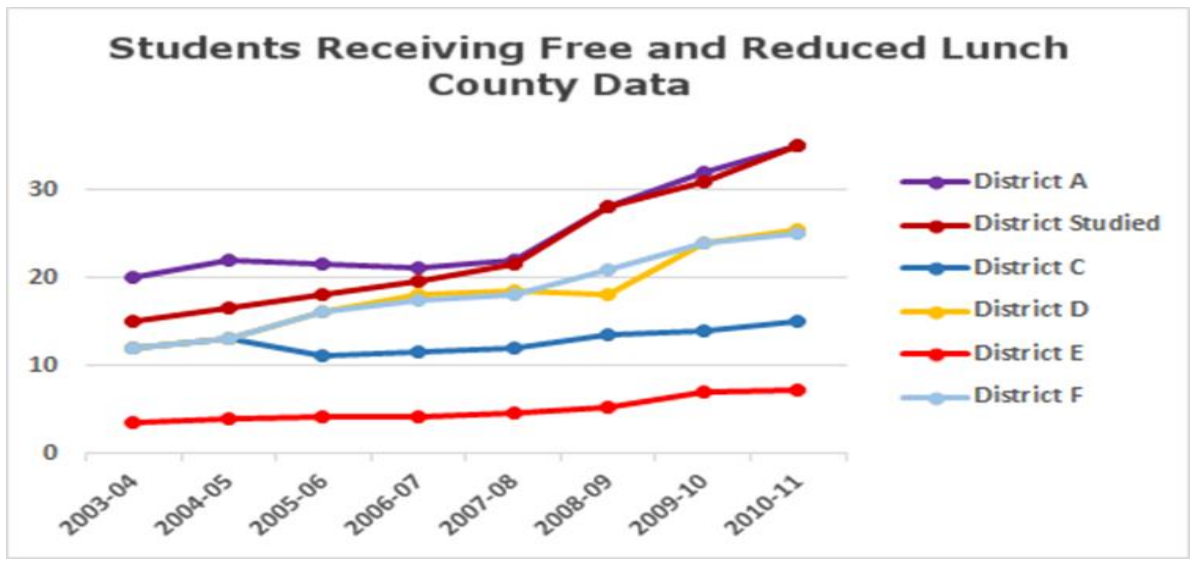


Figure 6 Free and Reduced Lunch Trends in County

Source: United Community Services, 2013

Free and reduced district lunch population increases are depicted in Figure 6. **The district studied experienced significant increases of students requiring free and reduced lunch support shown in a fifteen year comparison in Figure 7.**

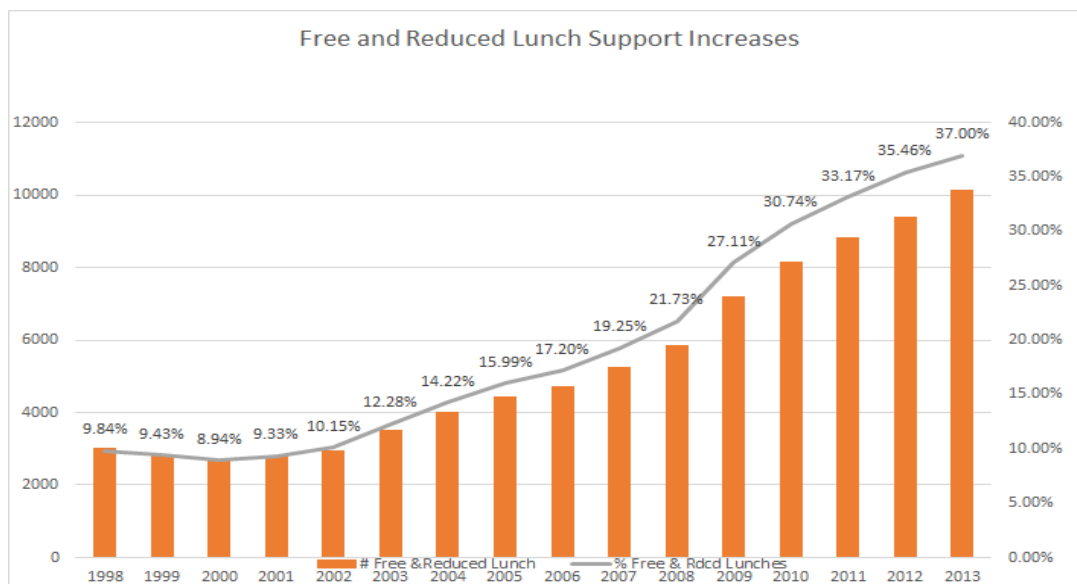


Figure 7 Free and Reduced Lunch Support Increases

Data Source: Suburban District 180, 2013

Increasing numbers of the suburban district's English Language Learner population is depicted in Figure 8 from 2007, when such data began to be collected in the district.

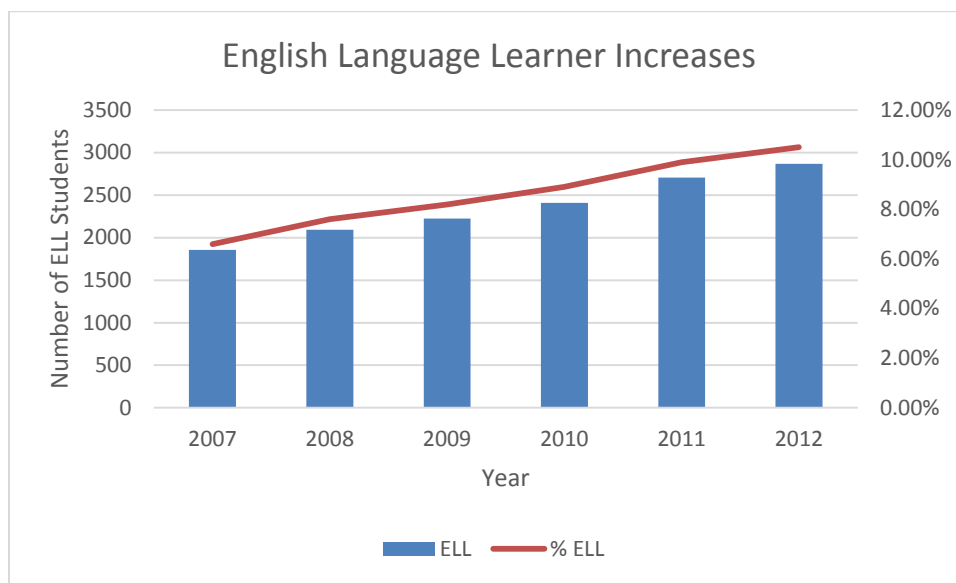


Figure 8 English Language Learner Increases

Data Source: Suburban District 180, 2013

By enrollment numbers, district leaders were presented an awareness of student poverty as English as Second Language Learners increasingly enrolled in the district. Prior to the study, it was uncertain, however, if district leaders recognized the out-of-school poverty factors which were attributed to a lack of student achievement by researchers. Life in the suburbs had previously assumed a quality of life which had not required school district leaders to consider how they might respond to increasing poverty and problems poverty brings to schools.

3.2 Data Collection Process

I chose specific district leaders based upon the following criteria:

1. Level of authority. I chose individuals who held significant authority influencing district-wide decisions. Some of these decisions were made as individuals and some were made among a few powerful individuals.
2. Depth of experience. Each individual possessed a historical understanding of the district in relation to needs and changes occurring within the last 10 years.
3. Connectedness to district operations. Each individual was connected to the operations of the district and naturally represented at least one of the Bolman & Deal's organization frames (2008) by title or function of the role. Therefore, responses were likely informed in relation to structural, human resource, political, and symbolic organizational lenses.

I interviewed district leaders and decision-makers who served the district in the recent decade of increasing poverty. Likewise, I interviewed a specific district leader involved with a variety of community leaders: the Educational Foundation Executive Director. This position held political power and influence on district leaders' decision making. Understanding the internal leadership responses as well as the external political powers informed me more specifically on the organizational frames utilized. I conducted interviews which offered me rich descriptions of district-decision making with an emphasis on decisions made in the recent decade.

To gain such, I recruited the current superintendent and the most recent past superintendent for interviews. The current superintendent served five years in this role and his predecessor served sixteen years. I interviewed both of them for better analysis of

superintendents' decision-making in the last 10 years. Additionally, I interviewed those closest to the superintendent known as the Superintendent's Cabinet. In this suburban district, the Cabinet was comprised of a deputy superintendent overseeing district finances, two associate superintendents overseeing operation of K-12 schools, and an associate superintendent responsible for educational services. An associate superintendent retired two years ago. I interviewed him due to his forty-year career in the district. He offered great insight on historical changes and specifically, the last decade's dramatic change in student population.

Board of Education Members were also recruited for interviews. Of this seven person board, four current members have experiences of five years or more. I utilized responses of these individuals as well as recruited responses from past board members who served during the last 10 years of student poverty increase or who were highly engaged with the district during these 10 years - even prior to their Board positions. In total, I interviewed, 5 of 7 Board of Education Members.

Lastly, I acquired an interview from the Executive Director of the Educational Foundation. As explained, I sought to learn if and how community leaders had influenced school district leaders' decision-making in response to poverty. The District's Educational Foundation included leaders throughout the community in financial discussions at the local level. Additionally, the Foundation hosts at least one significant fundraiser reaching out to multiple business and political leaders yearly.

Semi-structured interviews allowed me to interview each selected interviewee once and follow-up with additional questions within the first interview. A second interview was conducted as needed with the same interviewees. Each interview was recorded and fully transcribed for the purpose of analysis. My expectation was to elicit frank, candid responses

which unveiled each respondent's reality as well as his or her perspectives in terms of decision-making and responses to increasing student poverty. I sought detailed responses which provided me significant descriptions and in-depth understandings. I also piloted test interview questions for the purpose of determining if any of the questions needed to be altered or removed. Questions which yielded no significant data were removed. With pilot interviews, I also gained insight as to any leading or misleading questions in order to ensure a non-biased interview process.

3.2.1 Interview Protocol

In developing my interview questions, the following assumptions are understood. First, poverty has been a historical problem for schools and has become a new problem for suburban school districts. Poverty has brought out-of-school factors into schools which have negatively affected student achievement. Urban schools with high-poverty enrollments have battled this concern with few successful reforms. However, suburban schools could possibly learn from those urban success stories. Lastly, organizational decision-making has been most effective when problems are viewed through multiple organizational lenses. Given these assumptions, I answered the question: **How do suburban school district leaders respond to increasing student poverty?** I did do so with semi-structured interviews and the following sample interview questions. These questions assisted me in determining if district leaders recognized effects of increasing poverty in schools. I, then, determined if district leaders were making decisions in response to poverty, why those decisions were made, and from what organizational frame or lenses were they responding. The questions did not mention organizational frames but

instead, were designed to elicit responses which informed me as to what frames were utilized and by whom. Interview questions were delivered as follows:

1. As a long-time leader (or community leader) in the district, can you share with me about the district today and how it is the same or different from the district you served when began your leadership here?
2. When was there recognition of changing demographics, specifically growing student poverty, in the district? When did you recognize district leaders would need to respond to those changing student demographics?
3. I'd expect different points of view surfaced in terms of the degree to which the district would need to take note of increasing student poverty as well as then how to respond. Can you tell me, as a district leader, what it really means to be responsive to increasing student poverty in this district? Has it been necessary and if so, why?
4. Were there initial steps which began a formal planning process to respond to changes or did the response to changing demographics naturally evolve? Can you describe the conversations which took place among district leaders in this process?
5. As the person directly in charge of (_____), have you thought about the growing student poverty differently from your district office peers? For example, were or are there specific priorities or actions needed which you see differently than others? If so, could you describe those for me?
6. Given the change of demographics in the last 15 years, have there been district leaders' decisions of which you can now see the effects? If so, how would you describe those decisions and their effects?
7. Given the increased *rate* of growing student poverty in the district, are there decisions or actions which need to be made at this time to further the district's response to demographic changes? If so, please describe those.

8. As a long-standing suburban school district, the public persona of the district has been one of wealth along with high student achievement. Is this persona changing? If so, could you describe what you believe to be current and long-term persona of the district?
9. Are the decisions made by district office leaders to intentionally influence this public persona? If so, could you describe those decisions and their intentions?
10. Have there been factors of poverty which district decisions have left untouched? Possibly, these are factors outside of the district's educational influence? If so, how would you describe those?
11. Are there experiences which have influenced your own personal beliefs or thoughts about poverty? If so, how would you describe those?

Bolman's & Deal's Four-Frame Model comprised of Structural, Human Resource, Political and Symbolic Frames (2008) also informed my analysis of interview responses. The Four Frames offered interpretation to organizational processes as shown in Appendix B.

3.2.2 Qualitative Measures and Quality of Measures

By the interviewees' responses, I determined specific suburban school district leadership decisions made, why they were made, and how they were made in response to increasing student suburban poverty. I learned if suburban school district leaders identified poverty's out-of-school factors and if district leaders were choosing to respond specifically to those concerns which research has uncovered as out-of-school factors which negatively affect student achievement. Respondent's answers allowed me to determine if out-of-school factors or other respondent identified poverty related problems were addressed through replication of urban school reform efforts. If not, I was able to learn how leaders chose to respond to those factors for which they

had less control. Of significance, I determined through which leadership framework or multiple frameworks district leaders made their decisions. Specifically, I gained how leaders responded to poverty's rapid growth in a suburban school district and how suburban district leaders' decisions were made.

To ensure quality in my study, I interviewed with well-designed, non-leading questions. For example, I gained meaning from use of Bolman's & Deal's Four-Frame Model (2008), but posed my questions without mention of those frames. Likewise, questions specific to poverty were non-leading in that they elicited open-ended responses. Although I sought to determine commonalities in responses, it was the thoroughness of my questions and my interview processes which gained credible, valid conclusions. I chose district leaders with the greatest authority, experience, connectedness to all aspects of district operations. Each respondent answered from his or her personal leadership perspective or perspectives. I gave equal value to varied perspectives and individual realities. Moreover, I gained 13 in depth interviews giving me a cross section of district leadership and gathered district documents which validated interviewees' responses. Such documents included simple correspondence representing how district decisions were arrived at or implemented. Additionally, I viewed budgetary documents, staff development course documents, and curricular intervention program materials to compare to interviewees' responses. Such detailed processes ensured credibility of my study.

3.3 Analysis

Interview responses were categorized in multiple ways. I began by categorizing content of the answers in relation to poverty. The content informed me regarding poverty in terms of: leaders' recognition of increasing poverty, leaders' recognition of poverty's out-factors and

researched reform efforts. I then categorized the responses in terms of decision-making. First, I divided in two simple categorizes by role of responders: those decision-makers within the daily operations of the school district, and those in a role which do not engage in daily operations but make decisions informed by those daily operations. Next, I re-categorized responses for multiple analyses. Those analyses included finding common and uncommon responses among leaders and determining which lens each leader was using in those responses. I then determined if leaders responded most often from one organizational frame or from a multiple organizational frames and again, which frames. I then again organized responses by determining which frame was used most often alone and which frames were integrated with each other most frequently.

Finally, I analyzed district leaders' decision making through Bolman & Deal's Four-Frame Model (2008) determining how use of one of the four frames or a combination of frames created meaning around leaders' responses to increasing student poverty. According to Bolman & Deal, making sense of a complex situation is not a single-frame activity. Therefore to be most effective, district leaders would utilize a multiple frame approach, a combining of perspectives, in response to the complex concern of poverty. It is unknown as to whether such was occurring without such analysis. I determined if one of the four frames was utilized most often in decisions responding to poverty, if frames were commonly integrated with each other, and if so, which frames were so integrated. I ultimately provided a critical analysis of how organizational frames impacted district leaders' decisions and planning when responding to increasing poverty.

Chapter Four

Findings

4.0 A Story Unfolds

As a result of 13 in-depth descriptive interviews as well as budgetary and professional development documents, and the uncovering of documents used as presentations to the Board of Education, a rich and telling story unfolded. Of the interviews, seven central office administrators were interviewed along with five Board of Education Members, and one Executive Director of the School District's Educational Foundation. Central office administrators experience in the district ranged from 5 to 40 years and included both the past superintendent of 16 years and the current superintendent of 5 years. The Board Members interviewed served in their capacities with a range of experience of 2 to 20 years. The duration of the interviews ranged from 70 to 120 minutes in length with an average of 90 minutes per interview.

The response of school district leaders to increasing student poverty was both a story involving proactive and reactive measures. Of course, the response was dependent on the clarity with which district leaders were able to see their need to respond. The ability to see a needed response to increasing student poverty came quicker and more clearly by those leaders who had experiences with poverty outside of their work in this particular district. Leaders who responded with clarity and planning had experienced poverty in another school district with significant student poverty or had known a family member or friend poverty. As a result, only one leader believed the district possessed a defined plan specific to targeting increasing student poverty. Others shared the view of a Board of Education member who stated, "I was surprised. Next year's incoming superintendent wanted to know what the plan was. I thought, is there a plan? Is

the district leading or is the district letting others lead it?” Additionally, a 16 year veteran of the Board offered, “I don’t really remember a specific discussion or response to, ‘Oh, we see the number of free and reduced students increasing in the district, therefore; we must have a plan.’ Maybe we should have been forecasting that.”

Students living in poverty were once nearly unheard of in this Northeastern area of the county in the state. In fact, prior to 2002, students qualifying for free and/or reduced lunches remained in single digit percentages of the total enrolled headcount of the district. This had remained true since the unification of the district in 1969. In 2002, just over 10% of the student body qualified for free or reduced lunches. By 2005, that percentage was 15.99% and five years later, 30.74 % of the 27, 749 students were received federal support for free and reduced lunches. Those families’ incomes met poverty guidelines. As of 2013, 37 % of the student body needed such support (Suburban District 180, 2013).

Within a decade, suburban school district leaders who had never needed to consider factors of student poverty in their programming or classrooms were faced with over one-third of their students identified as children living in poverty. Growing student poverty had become a challenge which district leaders had not previously faced nor planned to experience.

4.1 What did the Long-Standing Superintendent See Which Others Didn’t?

Interestingly, the previous superintendent of 16 years, referenced as Dr. A for the purpose of this study, was certain a forecasted plan was in place. Within her 16 years as Superintendent, 11 were spent alongside the Board member who stated the district should have maybe forecasted a plan and hadn’t. What did the Superintendent during those years recognize

that others didn't? Why did she believe there was a plan in place to respond to increasing student poverty; and yet, others did not recognize such? Her thoughts included:

The district did not have a long-range plan when I came here, and I only work with long-range plans. So, I commissioned some studies from the county of our population growth. We started looking at just what was happening in the schools. Just before I got there, people told me there was a drive by shooting. That was when I wanted to put resource officers in the schools. We (in Arizona) had done that. I remember talking to one of the Board members – not a person on the Board now. She said, 'Well, then, people would think the schools are unsafe, or there's something wrong with the schools,' and I said I think people already know that and we didn't have near the problems that are happening around the country now. I said that we need to be proactive, and make sure that we're doing something about it. She didn't really like it because she thought we were projecting the wrong image. I was from the outside, so I saw it immediately, but the people inside didn't necessarily see it.

Those from the inside didn't necessarily see poverty as a concern needing a planned response. Dr. A., however, looked at the problems through her previous experiences which others didn't have.

Moving from Phoenix in 1992, Dr. A. was accustomed to many non-English speakers in schools. She really wasn't expecting to find the same in this district. Yet, she did. "That's one of the reasons I went back and got certified as an ELL teacher. I took eighteen hours at a state university because I was trying to figure out the best way to teach those students." She was shocked to find the district didn't have the mandated federal survey to determine a student's primary language to offer parents. It seemed no one was aware of it. "Probably because,

originally, they (the district) didn't have that many (non-English speaking) kids," she shared.

"So, we put in the survey so we could be in compliance, but also so we could find out who we had." Data guided Dr. A. and her Cabinet as she explained:

The leader of the district is the one who leads the planning process to assess what's happening in the schools and the school district. You gather your income levels and just who lives there, what your tax rate is and about people who default on their taxes. You need that anyway when you're working on the budget. You get all that information, and that gives you a true picture of the school district, and then you adjust.

Data coupled with her previous experiences led her plan a response to poverty. My findings, however, indicated other leaders didn't recognize her actions and theirs to be part of a plan. Dr. A's plan, Dr. A. thought, was a shared plan carried out with detail and purpose. She described it well. "You have to look multi-dimensionally. What you say is, well, educationally, you're going to look at where the students are, so you're going to have diagnostic and prescriptive programs so that you look at where your students are and where they should go." Her descriptions were offered with pride and feelings of success. They were rich with programming to "move them (students) along" and rich with understandings of varied student needs with varied backgrounds and ages. Thoughts such as,

We put in full-time ESL kindergartens because those kids can't do half-time kindergarten. There's too much material and information that they have to get in kindergarten. Then we said, "Okay, we have full-time kindergartens, what else can we do?" So, then we wrote a pre-school grant. That was so moving. The day parents came

for orientation, none of them spoke English. They were so happy. They were crying because they were, for the first time, connected to the school. They felt like their children were going to have an opportunity, which they did. It was one of the best things we did.

Throughout her responses, Dr. A elaborated on plans responding to increasing student poverty with details of K-12 efforts to support students and their families. She described offering parent courses to assist in parents in gaining employment, teaching parents to speak English, medical care for children, implementing a free breakfast program for students in poverty, and addressing other issues she noted as psychosocial. All of this was a part of a plan she deemed in place well before the 2008 recession and a plan which was not always well-received. “The same Board member who didn’t want SROs said, ‘I don’t see why we should be offering free breakfast’ and I said, ‘Well, we’re going to make it known we have it and publicize it and I bet we’ll get people.’ And you know what, we did.”

Teacher professional development was also a part of a plan Dr. A. described as a response to increasing student poverty. ELL students were overlooked and stereotyped as underachievers: “There was a boy at high school who was a Merit Scholarship qualifier, and the counselor never talked to him about going to college. Yeah, it was one of the most - one of the areas we needed to improve the most.” She continued. “I was surprised at one of the principals who shared a teacher comment regarding English Language Learners because it was something we were trying to eliminate. The teacher said, ‘Well, they should just get with the program, you know, learn English and don’t complain.’ Can you believe that?”

In addition to early intervention, programming, and teacher attitudes, Dr. A's plans also included reinvestment in facilities and neighborhoods. Dr. A. saw deep reinvestment, partly, as a response to increasing poverty whereas other leaders saw it through financial and political lenses. Most leaders, 12 of 13, saw rebuilding of schools as only a step needed to protect enrollment stability in the district.

4.2 District Leaders Followed Superintendent's Unrecognized Plan

A response plan to poverty was going into effect even though other leaders didn't recognize a formal plan for such. In everyone's hands, however, were district written long-range plans with actions steps for every objective. Yet, there was no recognition of any such planning specifically directed at increasing student poverty - outside of the Superintendent, that was. Therefore, when given a directive from Dr. A., members of the Superintendent's Cabinet simply carried it out expected actions to ensure compliance. Years later, however, leaders did recognize their former actions of compliance to be helpful responses to increasing student poverty.

A clear example of leaders' compliance with their superintendent's directives was the implementation of early childhood programs, the program described by Dr. A. as one of the best decisions made. An Associate Superintendent responsible for first writing a state-funded grant for the early childhood program described such candidly. "In Educational Services my first year (2006), I was learning about little people. I didn't know about little people." This particular district office administrator was experienced in secondary schools. She commented:

At that point, the state changed the way we operated and there was a grant from the children's trust. It was coming out of tobacco money, and there was a tobacco fund as well. So, we had two grant opportunities. We had not received a small learning

community grant and the Superintendent at the time was livid. I was thinking, ‘Oh, boy. I don’t want to be the brunt of anger.’ I was like, I have nothing to do with this. It didn’t matter. She didn’t hear it and she didn’t care. As a direct impact of her leadership, I was applying for every grant that ever came across. I had a grant notification website. Any time something came up, every single day, I got an e-mail. I read through it. If I thought we could do it, we did it...I thought, I don’t know anything about little people but I can do this.” We called it SMART Start Preschool and Summer School. I thought, I’ve got the barebones of it here. I think I could spin this for a preschool program. That was the start of our SMART Start program. Now, we have 180 kids.”

In their descriptions of effective past decision-making, 6 of 13 respondents referenced the implementation of this program as such with a positive impact on the problem of increasing student poverty. It was a direct decision of one person, the former Superintendent, and the only person describing it as part of an actual plan. Those reporting to the superintendent stated the effectiveness of the SMART Start program as a decision which later offered a positive effect combating challenges of increasing student poverty as almost an after-the-fact ah-ha. The Associate Superintendent for Educational Services described the effect:

For every dollar you spend in preschool, you save seven dollars down the road. That’s a tough concept to grasp when we’re not required to provide preschool. “When we got funded I thought, ‘Okay, 180 kids. Gosh, that’s a lot of money we saved in services.’ Now, some students will go into Special Ed or will need additional ELL support. That’s fine. But, at least we know they’re placed in the right spot and we’ve done everything we can.

After six years of implementation, district leaders experienced such positive effects of the program, they were seeking every way to continue it. The next Superintendent, with tenure of five years, referred to in this study as Dr. G, explained:

One of the biggest factors is our early education program. We have no (district) funding for it. We have 180 kids in Smart Start and you know that's totally grant funded. We have some 380 on the waiting list, that's criminal and we need to get these kids into school as soon as we can. I have seen the evolution of those kids from day one to the end of the year. The little kids by the end of the year – they get it. If you get a 4-year-old in school and give them a year's head start, I can tell you those kids are ready for kindergarten. I mean, that's just the way it is.

The Dr. G. elaborated on the students' ability to acquire new and rich vocabulary in pre-school settings to be valuable in learning but also in children's lives: "There's been a lack of vocabulary because the only things they've heard in the whole life is: shut up, sit down, eat, go to bed, you're bad. You know, they haven't had any cultural capital experiences." With this comment, the Superintendent was describing stress levels in homes of poverty which trickled down to the children. Research described this kind of stress as part of the out-of-school factors of poverty which find their way into schools (Berliner, 2009).

With no previous prescriptive plan for out-of-school factors, Early Childhood programming also became a focus of the School District's Educational Foundation. Although the Educational Foundation was perceived to be a feather in the cap fundraising organization for nearly 20 years, Dr. G. began almost single-handedly changing the platform in his first year as Superintendent. This was a political process as well. The Educational Foundation had operated in such a separate fashion from the school district; not one position of the 17 members of the

Foundation's Board were school also district Board members. Not one. When approached in the past, the Foundation's Board members were greatly opposed to such an idea. As a result, the financial priorities of the Foundation and the financial priorities of the school district were not the same. The Director of the Educational Foundation stated,

When I started in December (2008), my first meeting with the Superintendent was, 'I need a seat for my Board of Education on your board.' Okay, I said. That makes sense to me. It took all year to get through the politics - actually, more than a year. We began to address it in mid-09 to much disgruntlement and gnashing of teeth, and arms up in the air, and a lot of negativity. Then, it actually passed in 2010. At our annual meeting this year, we laughed about it. So, we have morphed as an organization. It's been good. It's been very good.

Although, clearly discrepant in the perceptions of planning, the previous Superintendent's initiatives to implement an early childhood program for students in poverty was established and supported in various arms of the district. Programming occurred through compliance first. Initially, district leaders carried out Dr. A's directives including those to establish future funding for early childhood services.

Early childhood programming was one of four areas which were revealed in district leaders' responses to poverty in which began with compliance of the Superintendent's directives. Data revealed this same pattern in the district's efforts to improve reading programs, reinvest in neighborhoods with rebuilding of facilities, and implementation of professional development to address teacher attitudes toward poverty. All were carried out as expected and recognized in hindsight as helpful responses to increasing poverty. The recognition of planned leader

responses to increasing student poverty had yet to surface. A federal mandate brought the next layer of attention.

4.3 Disparities in Test Scores Bring Attention to Student Poverty

Of the 13 respondents, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction was one of 11 describing district leaders' responses to increasing student poverty as 100% evolving versus planned. She, however, referenced clear instructional planning driven by data. The data, however, had not been data the district was seeking in their own right until No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a federal mandate was enforced for all schools in 2001. At that time, the district's student population qualifying for free and reduced lunch support was 17.2%. As a result of NCLB, data was collected in alignment with student test scores as well as students' ethnicity. The data led the district to target students achieving below their district peers. The C & I Director stated:

I think conversations began in earnest in the early 2000s and it was prompted because the district increase had a swell of immigrant movement into our district and with that came increased poverty. It started us looking at how those demographics were really changing around the district.

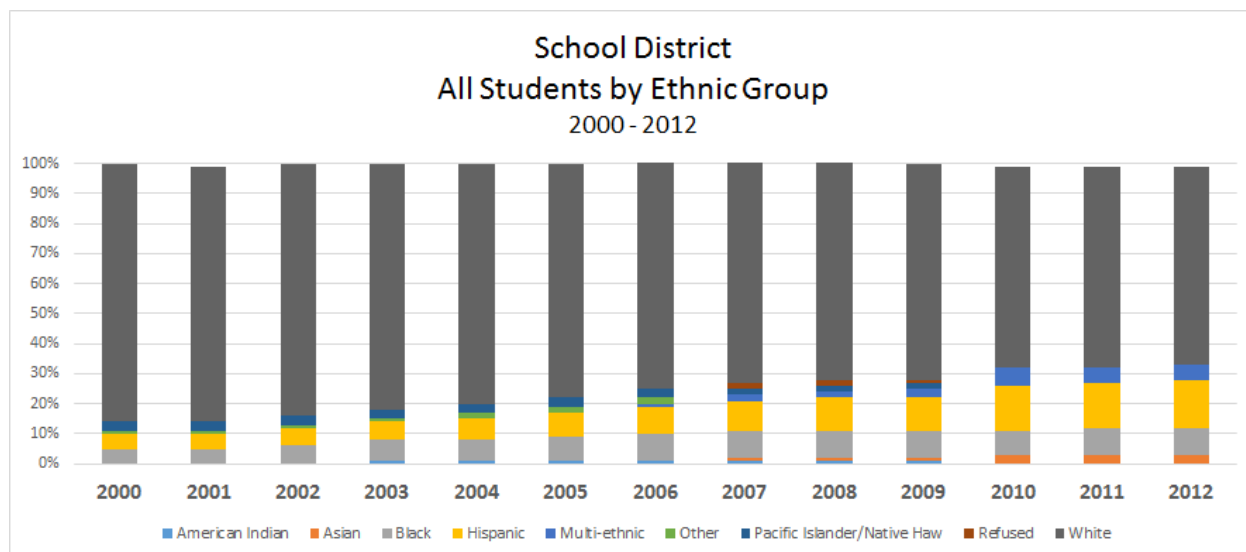


Figure 9 School District All Students by Ethnic Group

Data Source: Suburban District 180, 2013

The director also shared:

NCLB also prompted us to be much more aware of what those student groups were – who they included at that poverty level. It wasn't something we were doing with our data previously to No Child Left Behind. As much as there were problems with that act, it really did cause us to look at groups in a way we never had before.

The C&I director shed light on the district leaders' response to poverty with a conclusion which 12 of the 13 respondents confirmed through their interviews. The response to growing student poverty had not been an initial response to the concerns created in the lives of children – food insecurity, lack of medical attention, or family stress which challenges children's learning. Instead, the initial response of more than one superintendent began due to expectations of the No Child Left Behind mandate.

Despite its flaws, NCLB was targeting just that – no child, regardless of their backgrounds financially or ethnically should be left behind in their learning. As a result, English Language Learners were the first to be identified as a growing group of children not meeting the academic expectations of a federally mandated law. This group was also the district’s largest growing group of students in poverty.

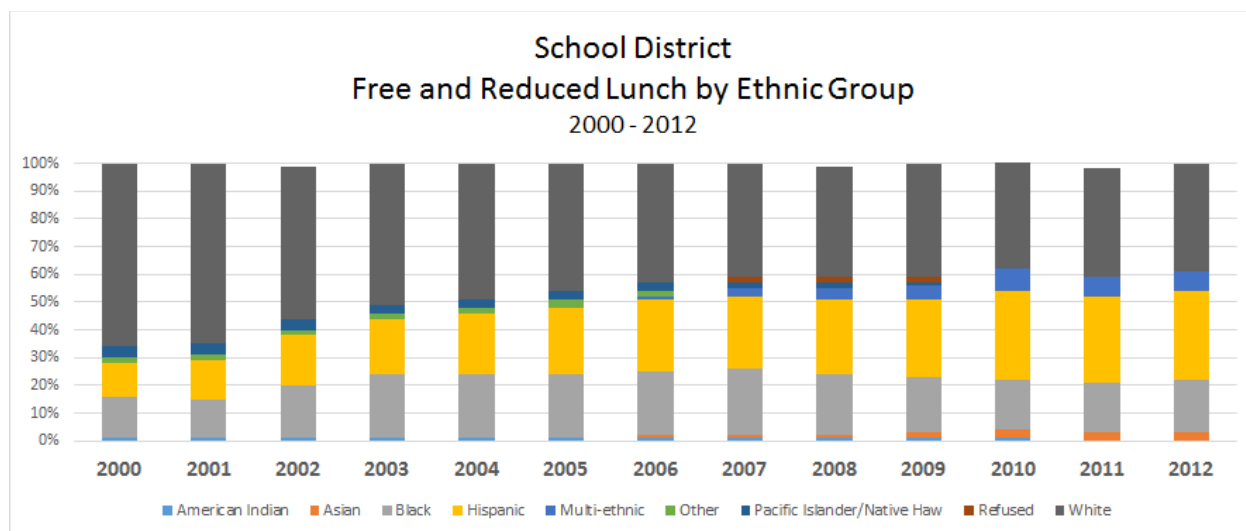


Figure 10 School District Free and Reduced Lunch by Ethnic Group

Data Source: Suburban District 180, 2013

In 2000, 8.9% of 30,337 enrolled students qualified for free and reduced lunch support. Of those, 12% were Hispanic. By 2013, 37% of the 27,443 enrolled student population qualified for lunch support and 32% of those students were Hispanic (see Figure 10). Although English Language Learners comprised students of many ethnicities, most of those students were Hispanic (see Figure 9). The Hispanic subgroup in the district increased the most significantly in terms of the numbers of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch support. This increase has also been a trend across American suburbs. As a Brookings’ Report noted, “Because poverty rates tend to be higher among the foreign-born population, immigration has played a role in the suburbanization of poverty.” (Brookings Institution, 2013, p.46). In 2009, 10% of native born

residents and 14% of foreign-born residents were poor in 2009. Among the suburban poor that year, 1 in 5 was foreign born (Brookings Institution, 2013).

As district leaders addressed the academic challenges of English Language Learners, their awareness to see the larger issue of growing student poverty grew slowly. Twelve of thirteen respondents agreed this evolutionary thinking had occurred and continued to occur over a few years' time. In these years, students considered at-risk were targeted for academic support. The at-risk indicator, however, wasn't poverty. The at-risk indicator was low test scores. "You didn't care what the risk factor was or why they (students) were at-risk. It's just the fact that they were based upon their achievement," the Director of Curriculum and Instruction stated. The English Language Learner population, the district's largest at-risk group, had grown significantly and the majority of those learners were scoring below their peers on high stakes tests.

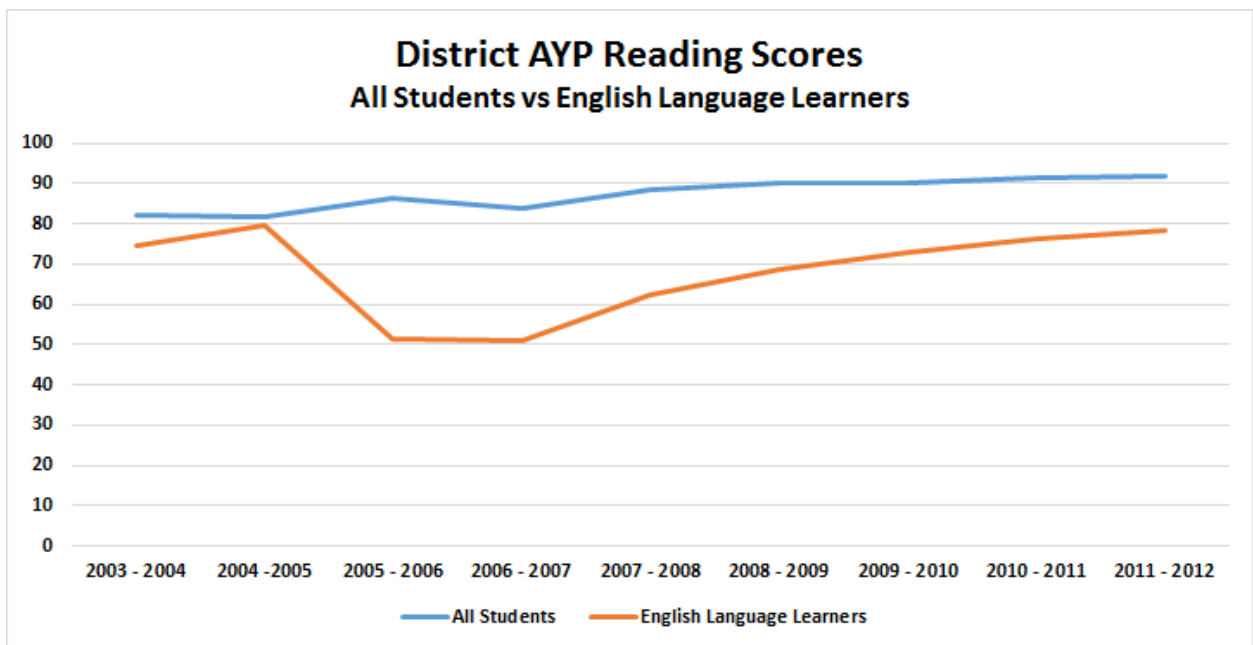


Figure 11 District AYP Reading Scores

Data Source: Suburban District 180, 2013

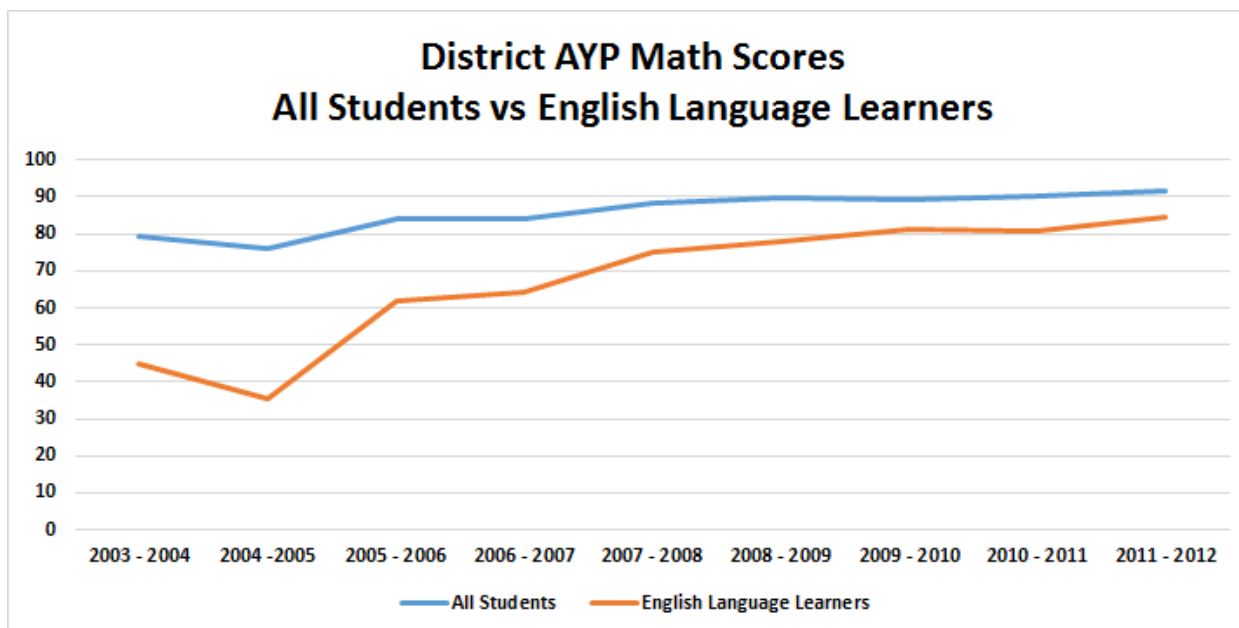


Figure 12 District AYP Math Scores

Data Source: Suburban District 180

“We really had an accountability system that was really forcing us to do it. Those two things combined: increased numbers and then the accountability system on top of it,” an Associate Superintendent shared. All 13 of the respondents interviewed agreed academic support for at-risk students were put in place through systemic, district-wide planning based upon student achievement data. This district leader of eight years and a thirty-three year district employee addressed the formalized academic plans: “In my tenure in the district, we have never been as directive in a process as we have been with Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). It was probably the most coordinated district response to increasing changes in our district demographics that we had.” Changing demographics were only identified to this point, by the majority of leaders, as subgroups of students not meeting academic expectations of the federal mandate, NCLB. Subgroups of students, such as English Language Learners, were expected to

score as well as their peers. Interestingly, however, was Dr. A's stand-alone recognition to address needs of English Language Learners well before NCLB was mandated.

Additionally, a portion of these students not meeting academic expectations were also identified to have more significant incidents of behavior. Documents indicate Multi-tiered Systems of Support was a model implemented slowly in 2007 in a few elementary schools. The model targeted specific missing skills, first in reading and then in math, and implemented tiers of support in place for students needing additional instruction and monitoring. The MTSS model was then implemented in all elementary schools first, again, in reading and then in math as a systems approach to early academic intervention for at-risk students. By 2009, the model was also implemented to address improving behaviors improvements of at-risk students. This was the first indication of district leaders' decision-making to be outside of NCLB's expected, mandated academic targets or stretch beyond a directive of some kind. The model known as MTSS wasn't mandated, but instead, adopted with intent to become more prescriptive in meeting student needs.

Outside of Dr. A, the recognition of changing demographics and growing student poverty was first found embedded in a requirement to improve students' test scores. By 2007, increasing student poverty had not yet become a clear target of everyone's conversation.

4.4 Isolated Situations Bring Attention to Student Poverty

Although Dr. A, the former superintendent, felt strongly planning had been in place as far back as 15 years, Dr. G, the next superintendent, as well as 3 other district leaders described their awareness to have grown as a result to specific student situations. An Associate Superintendent stated,

Today, our learners have so many issues they're coming in with. They are expecting to get breakfast, they get lunch, they get a snack, we provide clothing, we provide financial assistance, and Christmas presents. Dental care at our schools and sometimes the nurse assistants we provide is the only nursing or medical care some of our families are getting. So, school is meeting more needs than we've ever had to meet before, and it's still not enough. You saw changes happening in a building.

An Associate Superintendent of Secondary Schools also recalled changes in students' needs she felt were related to poverty:

There was a group of girls who were not involved academically. They were struggling. They weren't clean. They weren't well-kept, and they would come to school late. I couldn't figure out what was going on. It turns out they were girls looking to fit in, looking for a connection with somebody, looking to be loved. So, they were involved with two boys. They had a dance card so to speak, but it wasn't dancing. They were meeting before school behind the trash dumpster at 7-11 and having sex. Then, these girls would stroll in to school feeling nasty and used, and hoping to get a need met to feel valued and loved. Needs were colliding. The boys' needs were completely different from the girls. How could this happen? It's because these girls were coming from homes unequipped to support them emotionally.

Although a lack of emotional support can occur in any home, students living in financial poverty are also often living with emotional stress. This was one of many examples of those out-of-school factors finding their way into school as described in some way by all 13 respondents.

All respondents offered rich descriptions of new challenges brought to the schools and to students' learning due to increasing student poverty. Even those who could not recall formal steps of initial planning in regard to increasing student poverty could describe the evolution of school district leaders' responses as they saw student needs growing. An Associate Superintendent of Elementary Schools stated, "Finally, the problem is on your doorstep and you go deal with it one way or another." Both this district leader as well as his successor described concerns of student absences as a result of siblings caring for siblings while parents went to work. Situations unknown to this school district in past had grown more common. He noted:

There was a sixth grader, a third grader, a fifth grader, a first grader, and a new born baby in a family. They were living in a motel room until they could find housing. Mom had gotten a job at a restaurant. One day the sixth grader would stay home. The next day the fifth grade student would stay home to take care of the baby. The mom was a great lady who cared about her kids, but the situation she was in - she wanted to fix but just couldn't do it.

The school district couldn't meet the out-of-school needs of daycare, yet, the Associate Superintendent worked with the principal to set up Individual Education Program meetings for two of the students in the home after the mother got off work in the evenings. The leader's response to the situation was in the interest of children and empathetic to the family's poverty

ridden situation. Interestingly, he did not mention calling social services which is expected of mandated reporters if suspicion of neglect is present. Likewise, truancy wasn't discussed. The district leader, to the extent possible, was offering support versus putative measures. Similar stories unfolded across the respondents and interview responses. In fact, six district leaders' initial responses to growing poverty were case-by-case and incidental situations in which students' basic needs were unmet.

Students' basic needs were increasingly unmet and as enrollment decreased, such began to bring attention to increasing poverty. The increase of food insecure homes was represented by increasing numbers of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch in a 15 year period as represented in Figure 6 and 7. As district enrollment decreased, free and reduced lunch support increased.

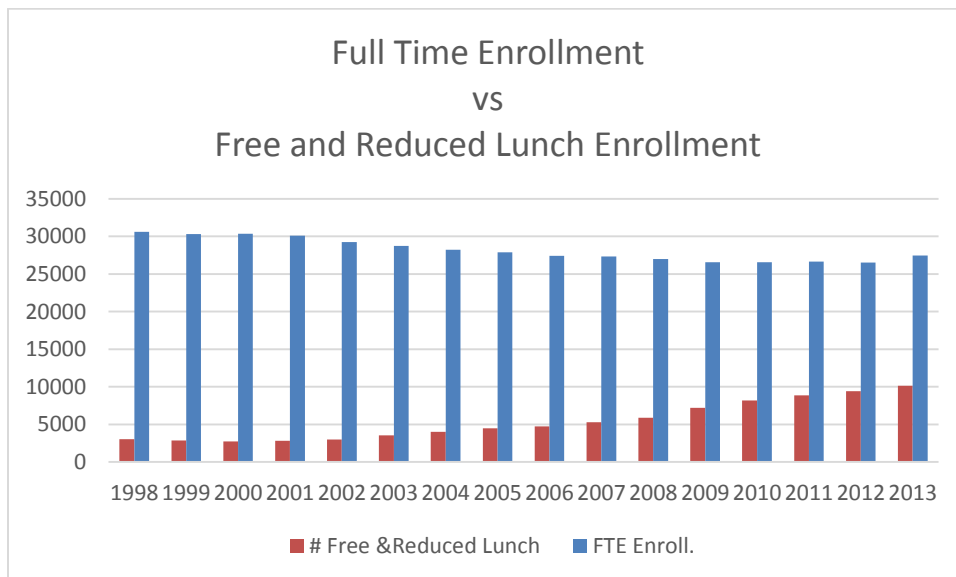


Figure 13 Full Time Enrollment vs Free and Reduced Lunch Enrollment

Data Source: Suburban District 180, 2013

Free and Reduced Lunch Support Increases

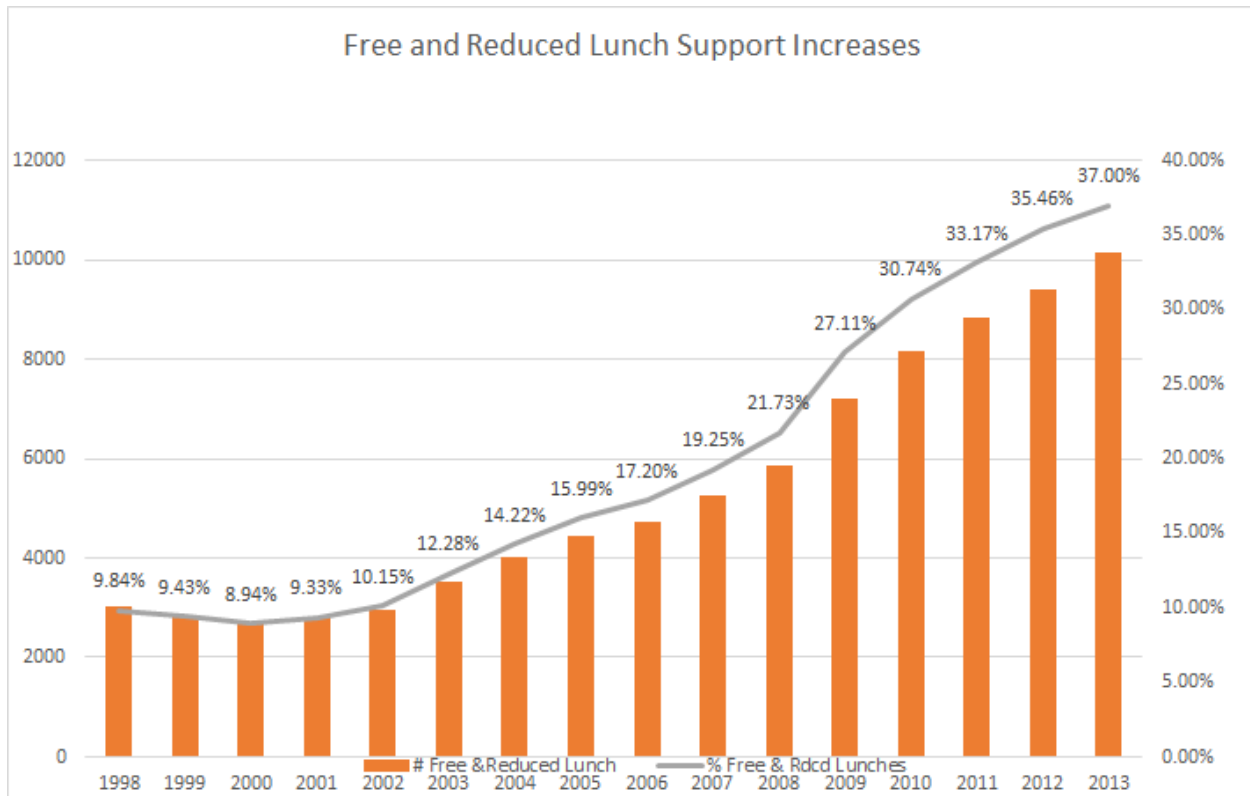


Figure 14 Free and Reduced Lunch Support Increases

Data Source: Suburban District 180, 2013

4.5 Recession Brings New Faces of Poverty & New Funding Challenges

Although district leaders had responded to isolated situations of poverty including students missing school to watching siblings and negative student behaviors increased as their basic needs went unmet, leaders' more coordinated response to growing student poverty didn't unfold until after a recession hit the nation in 2008. Until this date, my research indicated student interventions were driven by state and/or federal mandates or guidelines or offered to specifically help an individual student or family. In hindsight, district leaders recognized the unanticipated mandates to have been helpful in bringing awareness to student needs. On the flip

side of that coin, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was unfunded. The funding of such mandates placed new stresses on a district trying to meet the basic needs of students with less funding.

The recession brought about the intersection of students' needs and district needs which forced a more planned, collective district response to increasing poverty. Of the Board of Education members surveyed, 4 of 5 discussed the recession of 2008 as a catalyst or a force of change in the district. Similarly, 7 of 8 central office leaders interviewed aligned with such thinking. The recession hit just as one superintendent, Dr. A, retired and a home-grown central office administrator, Dr. G., took her place. The retired superintendent recognized financial challenges even before the recession. "Our goal and challenge was to plan programs that met the needs of the students with the resources we had." In this light, the former superintendent was describing what she felt was a challenging situation. Little did any of the district leaders know – it would become much more difficult.

As Dr. G, a district employee of 27 years, became Dr. A.'s successor at the start of the recession and 5 years beyond, he stated, "So much has changed since the former superintendent has been gone. I mean tremendously. When she left, there was no indication that the economy was going to tank."

A Board of Education Member shared her thoughts regarding the effect of the recession on previously stable families:

The middle class is shrinking. I think people are either very successful, or have lost jobs and are struggling with the economy as it is now after the recession. I'd say my personal beliefs have been pretty shattered actually, of what I thought our community was about. We have well-educated parents with no way to support their families.

Another Board member supported the recession as a turning point for decision-makers:

When our budget cuts came, it was when the economy was also going in the tank there. I think, with that economy crashing as it did and so many people out of work and immigration was very prevalent – that's when we started to realize the problem (of poverty).

As a result, district leaders looked at the deck of cards they were handed more clearly and openly. Families had less financial stability to meet their children's basic needs.

Simultaneously, the school district had less funding to use to serve students and their growing needs. The Associate Superintendent of Educational Services discussed the recession as follows:

That really pushed us off the cliff in terms of really seeing how interconnected all these fiscal variables are just within the United States. Then, you factor in what's happened in Europe as well. In many ways, it was the perfect storm of very tough and challenging fiscal conditions that led us to being where we were. Of benefit to us was that we were beginning to see a shift in demography in the school district. We weren't completely blindsided.

The suburban county, however, seemed to have been completely unprepared. The upscale suburban county was known for a tradition of wealth. According to the United Community Services (UCS) 38,000 of the 535, 211 residents were below the federal poverty income level in 2009, an increase of 150% in the number of poor residents from 2000 to 2009 (United Community Services, 2013). This was the greatest increase in the six county metropolitan area.

Numbers in the following years, although declining slightly from 2009, held as significant increases of residents in poverty from 2008 forward.

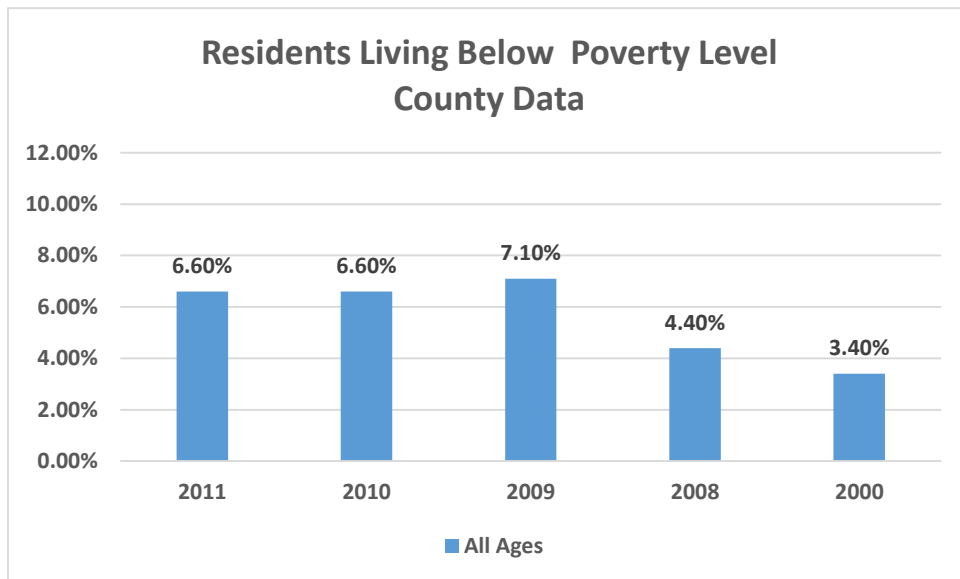


Figure 15 Residents Living Below Poverty Level

Data Source: United Community Services, 2013

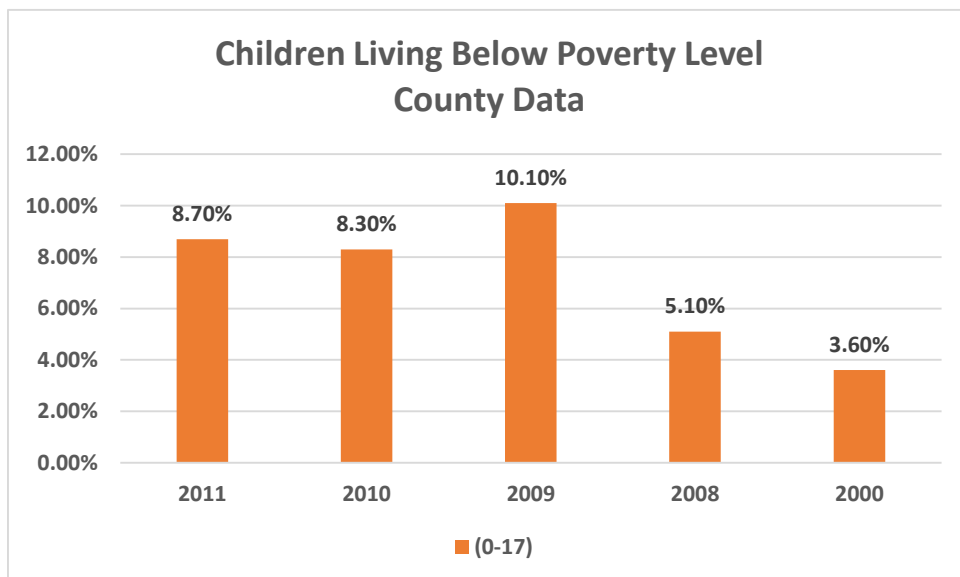


Figure 16 Children Living Below Poverty Level

Data Source: United Community Services, 2013

Table 1 2011 Poverty Threshold and County Living Wage

Family Size	2011 Poverty Threshold	2011 County Living Wage
1 adult	\$11,344	\$19,460
1 adult, 1 child	\$15,030	\$39,982
1 adult, 2 children	\$17,458	\$48,686
2 adults, 2 children	\$22,113	\$40,429

Data Source: United Community Services, 2013

The financial situation was described by leaders as the perfect storm for this suburban school district. In the storm, poverty could no longer be ignored. The State of Kansas implemented a new finance formula for education over 10 years prior. This finance formula had not been kind to this suburban district. First, as an older suburban area, the district enrollment had been declining. For every child lost, funding from the state was also lost. In 1998, the school district's headcount was 31,795 students. Ten year later in 2008, the district enrollment had declined over 3,500 students and fortunately, the decline slowed slightly. The headcount in 2012 was 27,770. That decline, changes in the finance formula, and less financial support for education across the state during a recession equated to the district receiving significantly less funding from the state department. So much less, 30 million dollars were eliminated from the budget in a 3 year period from 2008-2011. As a result of these budget reductions and difficult conversations among district leaders, respondent's offered rich descriptions which unveiled the intersection of financial instability for families and fiscal challenges for the district. This intersection was the tipping point. Increasing student poverty and in reality, growing student needs, became an explicit part of district leaders' conversations. District leaders knew they needed a plan.

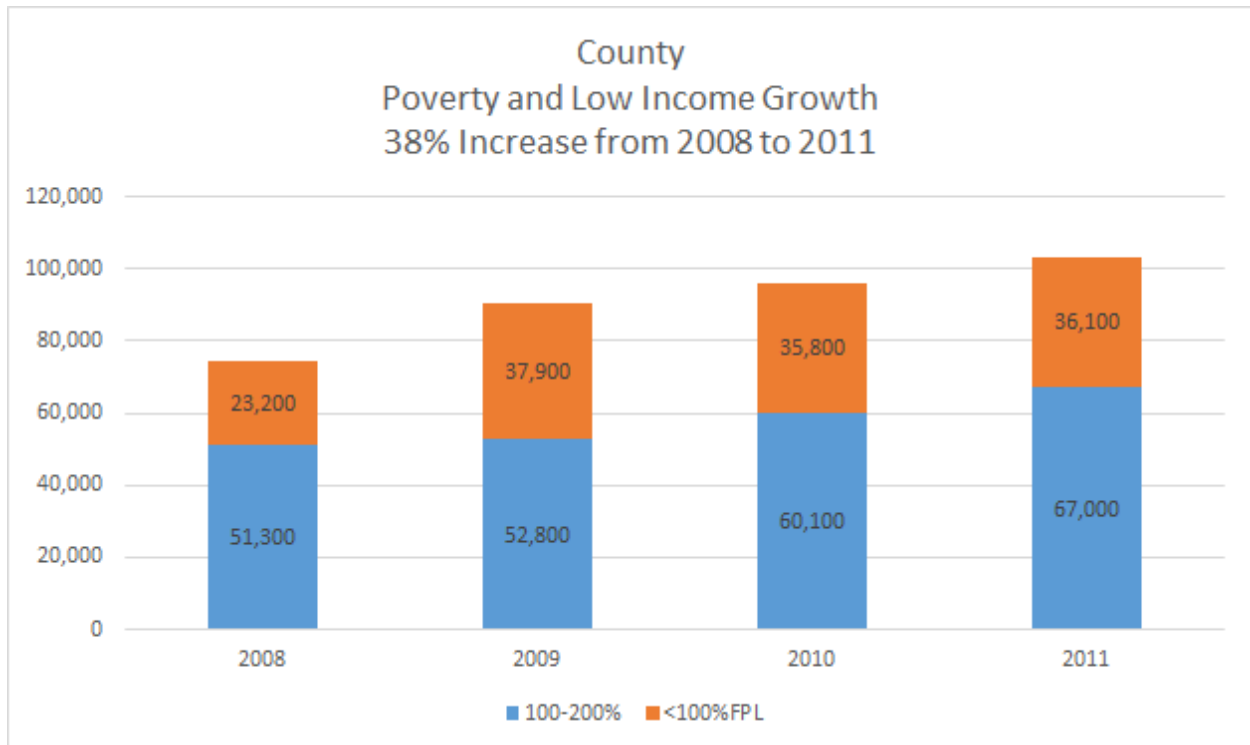


Figure 17 County Poverty and Low Income Growth

Data Source: United Community Services, 2013

A central office administrator shared, “It was three recent years of economic downturn years with economic downturn on that national level before everyone had recognition this (growing student poverty) is a district-wide system concern that we need to be addressing and not just issues for those Title schools or pockets of them.” The spread of poverty is depicted in wage earner’s decreases of real income across the county in Figure 18 and a reduction of real income on Figure 19.

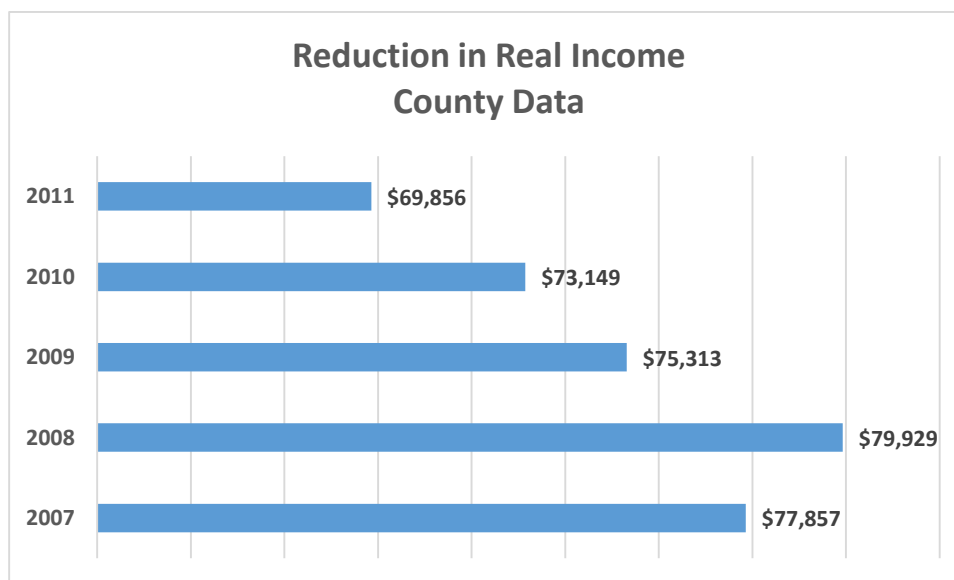


Figure 18 Reduction in Real Income

Data Source: United Community Services, 2013

4.6 What Did District Leaders Do in Crisis?

Through the process of significant budget reductions, students' needs across a greater portion of the district along with awareness of have and have not sectors of the district gained attention. These conversations grew with intensity in 2008 and continued through 2013, the year data was collected for this study. A focus was directed on greater needs of students and growing numbers of students living in poverty. District leaders first began asking the right questions and trying to answer them: What does equity look like? With growing student poverty, can we avoid greater have and have not situations within the school district? Are we prepared for more schools to have greater student poverty?

Early on, these conversations, however, weren't unified with a focus of how to respond to more students coming to school from homes of poverty or those out-of-school factors brought to school by poverty. The conversations, at first, were stressful battles among a small group of central office administrators followed by additional stressful conversations at the Board level.

Stress and discord were outcomes of needing to do be able to do more with less funds. Leaders needed to determine which reduction of general budget proposals to support. Varied priorities on the table had to be hashed out to determine what decisions central office leaders and Board members could support unilaterally. These conversations were confidentially described as potential blood baths among leaders.

Although many disagreements transpired and required leaders to regroup, rethink and reprioritize, all 13 respondents, central office administrators and Board of Education members alike, sought to protect the classroom learning from reductions as best they could. Students needed consistency in the classrooms at a time when less consistency was present in some of their homes. This meant trying to protect class size and programming. To avoid reducing significant numbers of teaching positions, recommendations to close schools were presented and many jobs, jobs of “non-essential staff”, were cut. Then, of course, the fight became about who was essential and who was not. Which jobs were absolute necessities and which jobs could go in order to protect teacher positions and classroom environments? The district’s general fund was reduced significantly after 2009 as depicted in Figure 19. Attention on student poverty was found through a district in financial crisis.

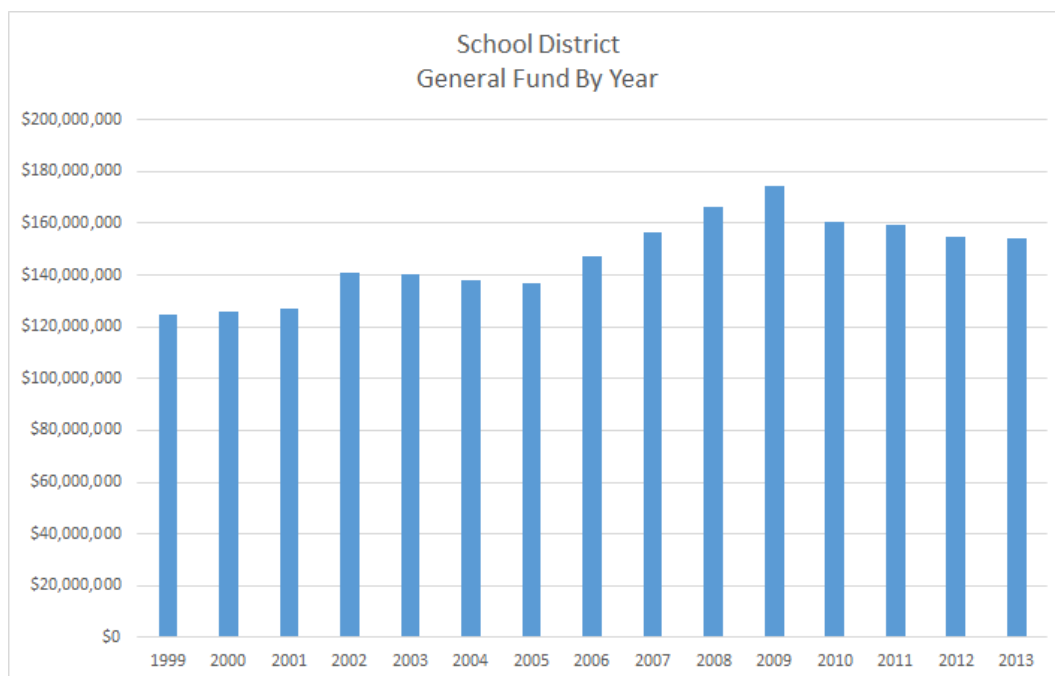


Figure 19 School District General Fund by Year

Data Source: Suburban District 180, 2013

Decisions felt even more important as student needs were growing across the district, not only in schools supported with federal Title funding. One central office administrator offered,

I think the Board of Education would be unhappy with this answer, but this is what I really think is true. We did not want to admit we had a high poverty level until probably 2009-2010 and we still don't want the PR image. We hadn't tried to make the class sizes a little smaller in at-risk schools in the district. We tried to keep it the same all over. So, to me if you're going to address a high free and reduced population, there are some things you have to put into place. If you don't have the money, if you're a declining school district in Kansas you have less money, you can't put that in every school. There are some schools that really don't need it in the same ways. Some schools in our school

district have their own 501 (C)3 foundations. In other schools, parents can't afford food, medicine, and school supplies. Now, that's in the same school district. We are a true have and have not district. That's part of the problem.

Growing student poverty was felt differently in the 5 high schools as depicted in Figure 20. The Associate Superintendent of Education Services explained, "The things that arose kind of organically might've even come because one building is different than another and you're responding to what the need is in that place." Discrepancies among middle and elementary schools existed similarly dependent upon the feeder high school attendance areas. The high school with greatest percentage of poverty had four times over the number of students living in poverty than a neighboring district high school within a 15 minute drive.

"If you're in high school area A, their kids are doing well. It's a special deal. It's like ahh... I don't know, it's like people are moving back, tearing down old houses that are nice houses and building bigger houses. None of the other (high) schools quite have that. They have a whole different picture of the district," a former Associate Superintendent explained. A short drive away, 40% of the families were living in food-insecure homes.

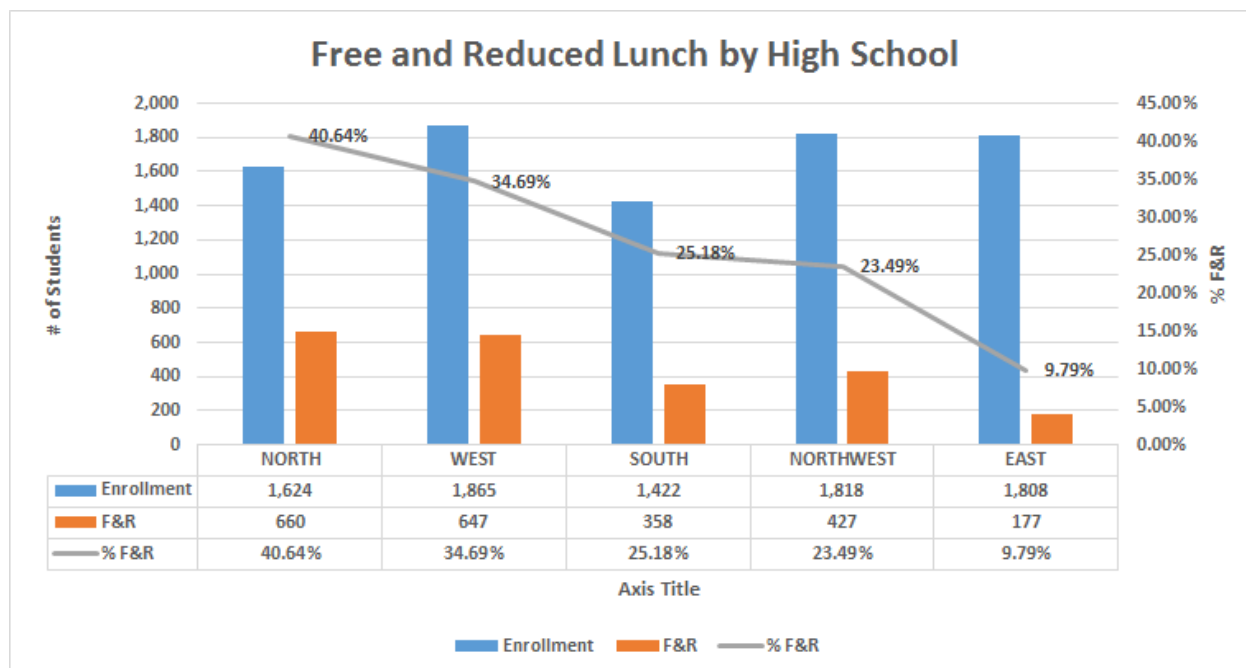


Figure 20 Free and Reduced Lunch by High School

Suburban District 180, 2013

4.7 How Was Image a Problem?

Poverty for this suburban district, my study revealed, was a scary word. It offered a negative image. In the eyes of one district leader, the worry of image was similar to the experiences of neighboring school district in the 1960s. Many families in the 1960's were afraid of desegregation. A former Associate Superintendent recalled his personal experience as a 16-year-old living in that area:

An example is when I grew up in the neighboring city. They had what was called blockbusting. This was 1960, okay. A lady bought a house across the street. Her name was Mable. She was a widow woman. She buys the nicest house. Within a week, 25% of the houses had For Sale signs that went up. Within a year, almost all of the neighbors moved away. We weren't moving. I'm really proud of my dad for that. So we were working in the yard and Mable was working in her yard and my dad asked her over for

dinner. At dinner, my dad asked, ‘Mable, why did you put bars on your windows for?’ I was 16 and I’ll never forget this response. She said, ‘Bill, you don’t get it. She said, ‘I’ve worked all my life to get out of the ghetto where I could feel safe and fell like I could walk to the store and I could walk around the neighborhood without fear. And the moment I move in, all you white people run away. You’re not leaving. So, if you’re smart, you’ll put bars on your windows too.’ And by God, she was right.

This district leader had personal experiences which gave him insight on human perceptions, fearful thinking, and people’s flight from their homes as a result. He went on to describe the professors, doctors, lawyers, and business owners all moving from his area across the state line in the white flight of the 1960s. He was certain some of this suburban district’s leaders felt this very kind of thing could happen in their own district. Except, it wasn’t about race; it was about money. If those families with money understood there were many families without money who’d moved into the district, the families with money might flee. The Associate Superintendent’s comparison of White Flight revealed the true fear district leaders felt about possible affluent flight. It wasn’t something everyone was admitting, but a true concern regarding the persona of the district.

I asked each respondent, “As a long-standing suburban district, the public persona has been one of wealth along with high student achievement. Is that changing?” All 13 respondents agreed with the past public image of wealth and high achievement. They also each agreed such was changing. When followed with the question, “What do you think the current persona is and long-term persona will be?” five respondents hesitated in their answers. They then responded with confirmation the current public persona was changing only in the immediate geographical

area. Those five who hesitated to respond and five others, a total of ten respondents, were concerned patrons whom were aware of increasing student poverty might misinterpret the strength of the district as a result. The historical public image had also made it difficult for district leaders to tell an accurate story. The story included a district which had achieved gains in achievement in all student sub-groups while student poverty was rising.

All 13 respondents stated the image of wealth in this suburban district had not changed around the state. Yet, the school district, historically perceived as wealthy, had multiplied in student poverty percentages four-times over in 15 years. As leaders learned a clearer plan for more effective responses to increasing student poverty was needed, they also recognized the misperceptions in the public's understanding. Outside of the district and throughout the state, the mention of this suburban school district's name was still connected to a perception of wealthy students and wealthy surroundings. Therefore, when needing others to understand their financial plight as a district and the need to preserve small class sizes, district leaders couldn't get a listening ear from the politicians. The district's reputation of wealthy families settling into a wealthy district as far back as the 1960s was hurting them with legislators in 2013. As respondents confirmed, the same reputation, however, was keeping their affluent families from fleeing the district. Leaders held a double edged sword. The district's identity crisis was something to solve as a response to increasing student poverty. Yet, no solution had been found as district leaders determined next steps.

Chapter Five

Findings

5.0 Lessons Learned

My research revealed five key areas which were consistently uncovered as part of the next steps to district leaders' response to increasing poverty. Next steps could be planned as a result of lessons learned. Although seven district leaders did not see their own prior actions as a response to growing student poverty, those respondents indicated the former Superintendent's directives must have been intentionally directed at poverty. Initially, district leaders were not willing to upset their Superintendent and so, they complied with her directives. Unbeknownst to them, they participated in response to growing student poverty. Unbeknownst until, they too, saw the same need to respond. In hindsight, meeting the former Superintendent's expectations resulted in key decisions which later assisted the district leaders in their own more purposeful responses to growing student poverty

The factors which led district leaders to respond to poverty beyond the directives of their former superintendent, included: a mandate to target student achievement of English Language Learners, addressing challenges of have and have not sectors of the district, and surviving a recession with 30 million dollar budget reduction over a period of 3 years. These factors began to gain attention slowly from 2006-2009. At which time, increasing student poverty could no longer be ignored by district leaders. In the beginning the planning was organic, evolving, and poverty was less spoken about in public forums, but the recognition of needing a true plan surfaced. Efforts simply evolved until 2009. This year was uncovered as the tipping point. Moving forward, by 2010, an improved, intentional response to increasing poverty was recognized as various factors fell together to indicate an overwhelming need to improve a

district-wide response. The tipping point was forced upon the district when resources were dramatically reduced. A tug-o-war was played with district resources. Students' needs created often by poverty stricken situations, gained the attention of the district leaders in the battle of resources and tipped the district in a direction to plan for the future.

Through detailed analysis of respondents' interview answers, 4 areas were found to be components of district leaders' plans for intentional responses to increasing student poverty. These components were uncovered as areas to be consistently addressed in future efforts as a result of lessons learned. Lessons learned led to efforts in the following areas: recommitment to one district mission, ensuring a unified Board of Education, expanding efforts and funding through an engaged community, and continued proactive planning.

5.1 Demographics Changed, Mission Un-waivered

When each respondent was asked what has changed in the district since the inception of his/her service to the suburban school district, 5 of 13 respondents offered not only factors of dramatic change, but also mentioned what *hadn't* changed. Expecting high achievement, a part of the district's persona, hadn't changed. Five respondents described what had stayed the same the school district: mission. Not only did they respond with this idea unsolicited, they described the mission similarly. After a rich description of what had changed in his 27 years with the district, the Superintendent shared,

So, if you asked me what hasn't changed, really what hasn't changed is the mission. The mission has always been the same. I mean, just because we are a school district with free and reduced lunch students, doesn't mean anything if you're running the school district the way you ought to. Mission, you know, is how that works.

Likewise the Associate Superintendent of Secondary Schools began answering my question of how the district had changed with the following statement: “Well, I think the same high expectations for students to learn and grow are present. That’s not changed.”

The focus on expecting students to learn and grow no matter what factors were present aligned as a uniquely shared focus of Board of Education members as well. Unsolicited, a Board member of 11 years and a patron of 16 years in the district, stated,

The district is the same in terms of our expectations of student achievement. I don’t mean achievement in terms of test scores, but our belief every student can learn. There’s not a difference. A poor student can learn every bit as much as a student with means. So, that seems unchanged: our expectations of our community, and our staff, and our students. The longest-standing Board of Education member with 20 years of service reflected,

What we’ve always strived for and continue to strive for is the fact that all of them (students) are capable of doing great things in the classroom. We continue to have good test scores on all the nationally normed tests so, we know we’re getting it done, but it does take more work on everyone’s part

A focused purpose and unchanging expectations were embedded in the suburban school district’s symbolic spirit and were likely contributors to improvement of test scores despite increasing poverty. Illustrations of this were found as the district’s overall student achievement

opposed the downward trends of student achievement expected with poverty growth.

Respondents pointed this success back to the district's constant mission.

5.2 A Unified District, A Unified Board of Education

As poverty increased, allocating resources based on needs across the district evolved as a decision supported by the district's Board of Education. Over time, the Board of Education, had recognized collectively that what's fair and what's equal were not the same. This was a lesson learned. Schools' needs across the district had grown differently due to student poverty. The lesson to follow was the need to stay unified as a Board. The longest standing Board of Education Member described,

Twenty years ago when I became a board member we had some poverty, but not at any great percentage in the district. There were maybe 3 or 4 school areas that needed to be dealt with. We certainly have increased over these 20 years to the point now that I think we're between 35% and 40% free and reduced lunch.

Similarly, the former Board President stated,

When you sit in the white suburb you think – I don't know, that's someone else's problem and that it's elsewhere. It's not on our doorstep. That's how my thinking was just because it was really the truth when my kids were back in school. Now, it's a whole different world, and it's something we have to embrace. Three sixty-five, I think, is our homeless population, which I think people in our community would be stunned to know.

As another Board of Education Member described, the student population had shrunk from 45 to about 27 thousand in those 20 years. Along with a shrinking population, poverty had grown. Twenty years ago, Board of Education members, although elected to serve the district's entire area, were greatly focused on serving the constituents living inside their specific high school voting boundaries. All five Board of Education respondents described a struggle to serve the suburban constituents who voted them into office, support a wealthy persona while also trying to serve the reality of the entire district's needs. Geographically, their reality had changed from consistent student wealth in each polling area to diverse polling areas with significant pockets of poverty across many sections of the district.

Early in Dr. G's transition to Superintendent, central office leaders were challenged to make recommendations to the Board which balanced political needs along with realities of increasing poverty. For example, as new schools were built across the district to re-establish neighborhoods, older schools with smaller populations were combined. This was a political challenge in most areas, and yet, often tackled successfully. That is, except for the outlier of one wealthy pocket of the district with political strength. A new school was built with 77,000 square feet ready for students and staff. Three years after the new school was built, however, the combining of schools originally discussed among the Superintendent's Cabinet had not become a recommendation to the Board of Education. This decision exemplified a handful of outliers in the decision-making process of district leaders. Decisions, at times, had been made within the constraints of what was good for an area of the district, not what was good for the entire district. Four of five Board Members described their lesson learned as the intent to focus on the district as one district versus areas of polling pockets. As one Board Member described,

It needs to be the whole district. We're only going to be as strong as the whole district. We aren't going to be one high school area. We can't just think we can take care of ours (within the high school area). We're going to have to expect the whole district to step up extremely strong to be able to continue successfully. We are trying to navigate and figure out ways to get there.

An Associate Superintendent described her recent decision to allocate resources based on poverty driven student needs and make recommendations of such to the Board of Education:

It used to be, in staffing as an example: every school gets 1 teacher for every nineteen and a half kids in secondary schools. Well, you know what? I've got to do it differently at North because they have a higher number of kids that are on free and reduced. They have a higher number of kids that are labeled disabled. They have a very expensive, labor intensive, teaching program. I've got to give them more staff. Consequently, East (the wealthiest student body), takes the brunt of it because we can overstaff there. So, that's not fair to East, but maybe it is. Fair isn't equal. East should have only lost 4 teachers but they lost 5 because they get to support what's happening at North.

A similar decision would not likely have been supported in past years when the needs across the district were initially becoming diverse. As student poverty increased, the lesson learned - fair is not always equal - was being applied. Board Members knew such decisions might be challenged. By 2012, they were using their past lessons to respond as one unified Board: The newest Board member shared,

We have a spectrum of ideology on the Board. But, I think what's really great is we've done this, putting kids first in addressing poverty. I think we're all on the same page. There's not a lot of dissent. I feel like I can say whatever is on my mind. I have a voice. I feel safe; it's welcomed. I think in that regard, we're all very alarmed by what we're seeing happen (increasing poverty), and the lack of resources that we are given to deal. That said, we'll do it together. Similarly, a Board member of 16 years summarized,

Sometimes board members feel the need to make a statement. In the end, whatever the board decides, all seven members fall in line and say. "That's what the Board decided, that's what we're going to do. So, we don't have outliers or outriders running a separate campaign for something.

Although cohesiveness was shaken as student poverty increased and district leaders were making decisions to meet greater needs of students, Board of Education of members had been forced to look at things differently and to refocus their united efforts.

5.3 Traditionally Strong Community to Become a Strongly Engaged Community

The suburban school district was traditionally known for its significant community support. Of the respondents, 11 described such as a unique factor of the district. Over the course of 44 years of unification as a district, every bond issue taken to the public for a vote had passed. Such support has allowed for renovations and rebuilding school facilities as well as a vast array of improvements to infrastructures through the evolution of the school district. Needless to say, community support had always been a source of pride. Findings of this study in regard to

lessons learned, however, indicate growing a new kind of community support was an area which needed attention.

5.3.1 Community Means Partner

According to 9 of 13 respondents, as student poverty continued to grow, the strength of the district's future would be founded in community support. In fact, 8 of 13 district leaders indicated a need to involve or utilize the community more effectively. Both the current and former superintendent discussed the value of such. The current Superintendent stated, "You know we have such a great community and I think we benefit from having so many police departments and so many Chambers of Commerce." When asked what it really means to be responsive to increasing student poverty, he replied, "There's got to be a community approach within the school district, then the community of parents and patrons outside the school district."

He explained the importance of this with a comparison of a neighboring, large school district just on the other side of the state line – the same school district another district leader had made comparisons to as well: "In the early 60s, *that* school district was a premier school district. As soon as the black population started moving south, people sold their homes. Like, it was just amazing how quickly people just deserted. If they could move across the state line, they did."

A lesson learned was gained by looking outside their boundaries to a neighboring urban setting which was similar to their own suburban district 50 years ago. As a result, suburban district leaders were looking for a way to continue to the support and reciprocal affection with the community. Sixteen years prior, the previous Superintendent also recognized a need to solidify community support. She described the importance of such for the future as well:

You need to keep those relationships up with organizations that work with people in poverty. You can identify a lot of those organizations and they have a lot of data about the county. The county collects data. They can tell you where the pockets of poverty are. They can tell you everything. You want to keep your connections or strengthen them with all of these support organizations.

Again, referencing the struggling urban district on the other side of the state line, Dr. G. described the difference in suburban and urban settings abilities to rely on community as he defended the urban district next door:

You know, we hear this all the time. I wish that district would get going or do the right thing or whatever. I get so sick of that because I ask people when was the last time they drove around the urban core. Have you seen what that is? I mean there is community here. There, it's Sister Berta and that's about it and if you go there at 4:00 in the afternoon there's a good chance you're going to get mugged or shot. I mean that's the reality. We have a community to support us. They don't.

Of those Board of Education Members interviewed, 4 of 5 specifically referenced this type of support organizations or the need for business support. Once awareness of growing poverty took hold among district leaders - community connections, information, and supports became seen as tools to be used to respond to increasing student poverty. In his first year leading the district, Dr. G. placed greater focus on volunteers in the classrooms. Initially, due to a lack of support elsewhere, volunteering came from the district leaders themselves. Holiday parties

were accomplished at one of the highest poverty schools through the use of the Superintendent's Cabinet. These district leaders led elementary classroom parties with treats and games the students would have otherwise not had. The sense of taking care of one's own by the district leaders lead to greater conversations of community involvement as a way of meeting the needs of the district, the staff, and the students as student poverty continued to rise.

Needs, not just good public relations, were met through outside volunteer organizations such as YouthFriends. Eight of thirteen total respondents discussed the need to grow volunteers but also move beyond volunteerism. They described the need to better involve business leaders' as a part of those supportive connections for not just political, but for very practical reasons. The suburban district was comprised of 13 different cities. Such created an opportunity for the district leaders to bring varied community leaders' into conversations regarding increasing poverty in the suburban area as well as into the school district.

Likewise, a practical means of involving the community on a day-to-day basis surfaced. An Associate Superintendent described her hope for the school district to work collaboratively with apartment complex managers.

I think we need to do a better job partnering with those managers, providing more resources. What happens with a lot with these families is the apartment building will rent a special, the family would have been evicted or whatever, so a new family comes in. It's just that constant, revolving door. So, if we're providing more services for the families that live there, maybe they'd stay and not go to the next apartment. We need to provide more services to keep people rooted.

This Associate Superintendent spoke of services provided by community volunteers. She expanded her description of a vision given to her by a student whom she served as a YouthFriend. The student described a previous school district and apartment complex she had lived in which offered her tutoring in the apartment clubhouse. The Associate Superintendent realized this suburban district could gain from a little girl's retelling of her previous experiences.

She was telling me they had a computer lab and a tutoring opportunity 3 days a week at the club house of her apartment building. So 3 days a week, she went from school to the clubhouse where they had a snack, they got to play on computers, they got to be tutored, and they had diner at the clubhouse before going home. That whole clubhouse concept, that she had on-site tutoring and could play on the computer because she doesn't have one, and she had a good snack and dinner. I thought, isn't that incredible? I think we need to do more things like that. The reality is we're going to continue to serve families in poverty. So let's serve them so we can keep them and the longer we have them, the better off they're going to be.

According to the majority of respondents, community support came through in practical ways. I asked, "What's next? What's next regarding what the district should do to better respond to increasing student poverty?" A former Associate Superintendent offered his view, "If you can't make the class sizes smaller, then you have to get some community involvement." His point being: money for additional teachers was simply not present; and yet, students needed to be taught in small groups with more adults, adults found in the community. A new concept of using community members in the classrooms surfaced. This was beyond typical community

involvement and was a lesson learned as a planned response to engage the community was discussed. The Director of Curriculum and Instruction noted: “If you have a single mom at the poverty level and she’s working two jobs, she’s trying to put food on her table. So, you can understand that this is where I think it’s been lacking. We need a coordinated community response to this concern and that’s the piece that’s not quite there.”

5.3.2 Community Could Bring Additional Funding

As awareness and planning for greater community engagement surfaced, the Director of the Educational Foundation was also beginning a transition of the Foundation’s work. The Educational Foundation, a non-profit 503c entity, was created 22 years ago when times weren’t economically challenging for the school district or for families in the suburban area. In 2013, the majority of school district leaders, 7 of 8, still saw the Foundation as an organization completely separate from the district. For decades, the Foundation was perceived to provide icing on the cake: additional supports or materials for classroom teachers. Moreover, some employees didn’t even know the Foundation existed.

Yet, by 2010, a few key players, including Dr. G. and a long-time Board member, had begun to utilize the Foundation differently. They recognized how it could engage the community differently as well as support the district financially. In small group conversations led by the Superintendent, leaders began to address how such could occur after budgets were cut drastically. The current superintendent shared how this was applied in the fall of 2012:

Last year’s theme for our Educational Foundation Breakfast was Defy Gravity. I’d say we’re defying gravity. Yes, our kids are doing better than before. Why? Because we’re

smarter. We've done MTSS. We're focused. We now have a laser-like focus, and it's very intentional. The programs that we have, the reductions that we've had to make have been done or taken into careful consideration, trying to keep the cuts away from the classroom and the areas that matter the most. So, we've been able to defy gravity, and that's a tough sell because legislators think. 'Well you say your achievements are better, but your money is low. Obviously, it doesn't take money to get high achievement.' What do we do?

District leaders understood how wrong legislators were. Money was necessary in the formula to continue high achievement. It took money to keep from cutting teaching jobs and from increasing class size. Funding was important and district leaders recognized they could not rely upon legislators to assist. This lesson learned led them to focus on how they might increase their own local dollars. Without such, greater cuts would need to be found to protect cutting teaching positions. The Superintendent explained what they had to protect these jobs without additional funding: "It means we're not cleaning our classrooms every day, we clean up every three days. It means there's 2.8 more kids per class at each grade level. It means parents are paying \$90.00 for their kids to participate in activities."

As a result, The Educational Foundation surfaced as a catalyst for greater change in the approach to financial fundraising and the thinking of school district leaders. The decision was unique. Other school districts with the same factors of growing poverty often missed or never had the opportunity to seize such community engagement. Engaging the community in financial partnerships beyond what was already known to them was a commitment offered by 9

of 13 district respondents. Specifically, district leaders began to consider fundraising campaigns like those held at the university level known to target alumnus funds and connections.

5.4 A Lesson in Planning

At the time of this study, recognition of district office leaders' need to respond specifically to poverty and willingness to discuss it as such publically had been years in the making. With a recession bringing to light true financial concerns of the district and of families, came a greater understanding of the reality of the district: increasing student poverty was a concern which needed a more proactive plan. By 2013, this lesson had been learned and was recognized by 10 of 13 respondents.

After 5 years as Superintendent, the current superintendent offered his resignation and retirement. He did so after my interview of him but prior to my interviews with Board of Education members. Board members reflected upon the challenges – many unexpected – which had occurred in the district during the current superintendent's tenure. Board members did not place blame on the current superintendent, but recognized challenges they wanted to avoid in the future.

Lessons learned from those challenges engaged the refocused Board to stay united in their priorities as they sought a new district leader. All of the Board of Education members interviewed included their search for a new superintendent as part of a response to increasing student poverty. A Board member and past President explained, "We're learning all the time. I hate to see Dr. G. go. I think he's been a great superintendent to work with and stuff. But, it's time and it's time for a fresh eyes. So, we really need an outside look to kind of reinvent our district – to keep up with what is working, and what we're proud of, but to start from the ground up and say "What is it that we really need?"

All 5 Board members referenced the search for the next Superintendent to have been an emotional journey. Emotional, and some, also described it as taxing. Two in-house district administrators desired the position of Superintendent. One was an expected front-runner for it. Board members, however, although torn by their fondness of those current employees, agreed the district needed to find a leader who had experiences with increasing poverty and who had proven successes with such. Unified in their thinking, Board members were able to balance the political pressure to hire from within with their common goal of finding a leader with background involving student poverty. Each Board of Education member respondent fully supported the new hire from outside the district. Describing the Board's choice for Superintendent, one Board member shared: "Fresh blood, fresh eyes. He's a very astute listener and he will do his listening to us first. Because our emotions sort of taint maybe the objectivity of things, he'll come in completely objective."

Describing again the same need for an objective point of view, another Board of Education Member offered,

I had my first one-on-one meeting with the new superintendent yesterday. I get excited because first of all, what we wanted was a fresh pair of eyes on this district. I mean he is a fresh pair. I mean, just the little bit of interviewing and talking and he's done, and he's already seen some things that needed change. He also, because of his experience in a district that has poverty issues, has very different ideas about how to engage community and address increasing student achievement. What I find interesting is that, he also might be ideologically in agreement with many of the legislators that are more conservative. I think this is going to be a really interesting journey. I'm very excited because I think he

will be heard in terms of policy. I also have the sense that he's going to make use of the Board in a way that we have not been used. We have been managed and reported to, but not necessarily asked for input. At least, I haven't been used as a resource to the extent that I feel I could be. I have the sense that in this situation, we are about to be put to work.

With Board members I felt comfortable pushing, I asked, "What's next? What's next in your plans or other Board members' plans to respond to increasing poverty?" A Board member responded:

What's next? Some of that may truthfully come with a new Superintendent, too, yes, who is coming from far more poverty and concerns. I don't know that we've had a plan laid out, so to speak, but I would say that may well be something that we do fairly shortly with a new Superintendent coming in and really trying to look at how we can keep serving children from families with less means.

In terms of the chosen new Superintendent, a different Board member supported the expectations for a plan responding to student poverty:

The new Superintendent coming in asked, 'What is your plan for kids living in poverty?' He will put that in place. I think it is an encompassing plan that we need to have in place because it's (poverty) not going to change. But, I'm hoping we find better ways to meet all kids' needs, so a plan is crucial. It's time we actually contracted and forecasted the future to determine how we're going to meet those needs.

Chapter Six

Discussion and Conclusion

6.0 Overview

I researched and answered the question: *How do school leaders in one suburban district respond to increasing student poverty? To answer this, I investigated what was involved in district decision-making as a response to increasing student poverty in a suburban district. I learned what informed leaders' decisions, how those decisions were carried out, and barriers to responding.*

The findings of this study indicate district leader's responses to growing student poverty to have been, initially, more reactive than proactive. Although the number of students qualifying for free and reduced lunches increased for 15 years, district leaders were not prepared for the rapid increase from 2002 to 2013. The former superintendent believed her plans for dealing with demographic change were globally shared by other leaders. Yet, most other district leaders did not recognize growing student poverty would need greater attention and planning until 2009, after responding to dire financial concerns of the district. As the problem of student poverty grew, so did awareness and responsiveness on the part of the district leaders. Initial responses were extremely limited in their impact in comparison to decisions which were made as multiple leaders began to utilize multiple organizational frames in their decision-making. Leaders' decisions were also impacted by their own experiences with poverty. Leaders with some kind of experience related to poverty saw growing student poverty more quickly and were able to reflect upon the concern through different viewpoints. Instructional researched-based responses were implemented based upon best practices for academic intervention unrelated to poverty. At the

time of this study, researched-based practices were not studied or implemented for their effectiveness in relation to increasing student poverty.

6.1 Implications of Experiences with Poverty

District leaders' responses to poverty were impacted, initially, by experiences each previously had or lacked with poverty. The one leader who had professional experiences with poverty in a previous school district, the previous Superintendent of 16 years, saw the concerns of increasing student poverty much more quickly than her colleagues. As a result, she sought use of district data as well as data gathered by the county to adapt her planning for increasing student poverty. Other leaders' initial lack of response to increasing student poverty aligned with their limited prior experiences with poverty.

Of the respondents, 4 of 13 described professional experiences with poverty. These four included the past and current superintendents, and an associate superintendent, and the newest Board member. The Associate Superintendent and the Board member's experiences came from previous teaching in high poverty schools. None of these 4 respondents, however, shared personal experiences with poverty. Of the remaining 9 respondents, none had previous professional experiences with poverty and only 2 had indirect personal experiences with poverty. Those two respondents described their friends or family members who'd lived in poverty ridden situations.

Leaders having past professional or personal experiences with poverty were able to see the need to respond to poverty more quickly than those who had no past experiences with poverty at all. Previous professional experiences with poverty brought an awareness of a need for a district response more quickly than personal, indirect experiences with poverty. Therefore,

district response to increasing student poverty evolved from the leadership of a few, who, one by one, recognized the need for a true plan. Those few were also able to see poverty through different points of view more quickly than their colleagues.

6.2 Implications for Decision-Making

Connected to their past experiences with poverty, district leaders' collective responses to poverty were slow due to a lack of varied frameworks or viewpoints utilized to address the problem. As a result, each leader made decisions based upon his/her role in the district versus making decisions through a lens which looked at the concerns of increasing poverty. This implies responses were slowed partly due to a lack of multiframe thinking, which as researchers describe, is more effective than single-minded approaches offered to decision-making.

Over a span of 15 years, district leaders' responses to increasing student poverty expanded. Toward the end of this 15 year span, leaders engaged various organizational frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Such organizational frames are founded in the research of Bolman and Deal (2008). Upon the onset of increasing poverty, however, most leaders used each of Bolman and Deal's 4 frames singularly versus simultaneously. Meaning, each leader, initially, viewed poverty through the one lens which related most closely to his/her position. This was true of each respondent excluding only the previous superintendent. Given her past experiences, the former superintendent's utilization of multiframe thinking occurred quicker and guided other school district leaders to begin responding to poverty with varied lenses. Such resulted in broader, more varied responses, from district leaders as they followed her lead.

Multiframe thinking requires moving beyond narrow, mechanical approaches for understanding organizations. We cannot count the number of times managers have told us that they handled some problem the ‘only way’ it could be done. Such statements betray a failure of both imagination and courage and reveal a paralyzing fear of uncertainty. It may be comforting to think that failure was unavoidable and we did all we could. But it can be liberating to realize there is always more than one way to respond to any problem or dilemma. Those who master reframing report a sense of choice and power. (Bolman and Deal, 2008, p.19).

Implications of multiframe decision-making were first found in the power of the Dr. A’s Superintendent’s role as well as the power of the political framework of the long-standing district. The former superintendent recognized her power within the structural framework or the rules, roles, and policies of the district, and used such to effectively leverage decisions. The power of her position politically, then, influenced others to follow her decision-making – even if others weren’t sure of the thinking behind her decisions. Her decision-making involved many different frames of thinking in relation to poverty when others’ decisions did not. Leaders reporting to her supported her initiatives initially due to her power. They did recognize her use of varied frameworks, yet, she continued to apply them to decisions she expected everyone to carry out.

As an example, Dr. A’s use of the human resource lens was a driving force behind avenues of building relationships with families of ESOL students and efforts to educate those families in the English language. Bolman & Deal’s human resource perspective is founded in psychology. The organization is seen as an extended family and tailors to individuals’ needs.

Although other leaders did not express the need for such actions when they were implemented, Cabinet members followed her lead. Dr. A focused attention on relationships with families deficient the skills to help themselves and their children. The former superintendent also sought new organizational resources to implement evening programs for parents and early childhood programs for children. These actions also, of course, involved a political viewpoint as Dr. A determined how to best gain support from the Board of Education as well as other community resources. All the while, she also understood she had to work within the rules, roles, and policies – the symbolic framework - which was established in the school district historically comprised of student and family wealth. Dr. A. utilized multiframed thinking, reframing the same problem in varied ways, to respond with an effective decision and action step.

Fifteen years later and after another superintendent announced retirement as well, Board of Education Members recognized the value of experiences which brought about multiframed thinking related to student poverty. This required frame breaking. Bolman & Deal describe the need for such:

Like maps, frames are both windows on a territory and tools for navigation. Every tool has distinctive strengths and limitations. The right tool makes a job easier, but the wrong one gets in the way. Tools thus become useful only when a situation is sized up accurately. Furthermore, one or two tools may suffice for simple jobs, but not for more complex undertaking. (Bolman & Deal, 2008. Pg.13).

Board of Education members sought their next superintendent with intent to find a leader who had applied such thinking applied to student poverty. This required Board members to break their own models of decision-making. Board members grew to see poverty from different

perspectives and viewed their school district as one versus entrenched political subdivisions of the district – even though their decisions were still politically influenced. Board members broke away from narrow decisions embedded in structural and symbolic viewpoints. They broke from the traditional culture, stories, and actors roles of a wealthy suburban area and replaced their thinking with a combination of viewpoints influenced by multiple lenses. Collectively, they understood they needed to respond to students’ increased needs, decisions became growingly founded in the human resource framework while political, structural and symbolic viewpoints were utilized simultaneously, but secondarily to the idea of an expectation to take care of their own – their students.

By such time, other district leaders had evolved in their thinking as well. Although their decisions, initially, were founded in political and structural frames which kept them following Dr. A’s lead, eventually, broader thinking and decision-making was implemented effectively from varied points of view in the Superintendent’s Cabinet as well. The process of reducing budgets required Cabinet members to think outside their roles and walk in the footsteps of workers in every district department. As a result, Cabinet members were pushed outside their prior comfortable decision-making processes and each of Bolman & Deal’s frames was utilized to collectively make difficult choices. Cabinet members’ viewpoints expanded through lessons learned which resulted in multiframed thinking and planning for future responses to increasing student poverty.

Leaders, according to Bolman and Deal, are imprisoned only to the extent that their menu of ideas is impoverished (2008, p.19). Such understanding of leaders’ decision-making applies tremendous implications for all organizations. Those who approach problems through varied lenses will be more effective and successful than those viewing and responding with a singular

view. More effective decision making was found in this suburban school district's leaders' responses to growing student poverty as they approached the problem through varied frames.

6.3 Implications for Use of Researched Practices

Findings of my study also suggest use of research based practices were implemented based upon their instructional effectiveness. Instructional effectiveness, that is, as practices applied to all learners – not to student populations increasing in poverty. District leaders implemented effective researched-based practices related to reading, early childhood, and early intervention for students falling behind their peers' academic achievement. All were practices leaders were proud to share as they recognized research supporting practices with a researched benefit for all students. The practices, however, were not chosen for their effectiveness as they related to poverty. In fact, reliance on educational research specific to increasing student poverty was absent in the actions of the suburban district leaders.

An example of evidence of missing research was the choice of district leaders made in addressing teacher professional development – specifically, teacher attitudes toward students in poverty. Researched-based practices were not reviewed or chosen for such training. Instead, the chosen training, Ruby Payne's *Understanding Poverty*, was found by two district resource staff members who attended a Ruby Payne conference. The resource staff accepted it at face value, assuming materials would be appropriate and effective for the district needs as it appeared to come from a place of common sense. Most district leaders, having little previous experience with increasing student poverty, gained information from their resource staff members and didn't question it. Even those leaders with past experiences related to poverty didn't question the underlying content or strategies offered in Payne's training. As a result, district decision makers didn't recognize the lack of research behind Ruby Payne's work or seek to find other materials

for teacher training. A review of research relating to poverty and teacher attitudes wasn't completed. This could be used as a lesson for the future.

Likewise, consideration of effective urban reform efforts, supported in available bodies of research related to increasing student poverty, was not apparent. Applications of researched practices found in urban settings as a response to increasing student poverty were minimal and unplanned. Of eleven effective specific reform efforts found in urban studies, five were minimally aligned with the actions of the suburban district in my study. Those five efforts were connected to improving programming, choosing to address teacher attitudes, and a continued relentless focus on the mission of high achievement despite serious challenges. Other identified effective urban responses to poverty were not present in my study of the suburban school district. This implies three ideas.

- 1.) A suburban school district faced with increasing student poverty responds differently than urban settings when faced with the same problem of increasing student poverty. This may be due to the differences in recognition of the problem.
- 2.) Focus on student output (achievement) in suburban school districts has an unintended side-effect of less attention on inputs for students which are found in school specific urban reform efforts.
- 3.) The suburban school district studied was viewed differently than an urban setting and doesn't desire to be associated with an urban setting.

6.4 Implications for Suburban Districts

The goal of this study was to determine how suburban school district leaders respond to increasing student poverty. My findings indicate suburban school districts are unlikely to quickly see student poverty as a legitimate concern requiring district leaders to make decisions based on this characteristic. Suburban districts are historically known to receive students ready to learn and coming from stable home environments. Therefore, student poverty hasn't proven

to previously have been a focus for suburban school districts. However, my study reveals a need for suburban school districts to be more prepared as the increase of poverty in suburban areas is doubling that of urban and rural areas in America today.

In my study, as student poverty increased, leaders expanded their thinking through an evolution of events beginning with a federal political mandate, NCLB. On the heels of the political mandate, student poverty continued to rise and out-of-school factors of poverty brought about leaders' responses to meet basic life needs of students. The combined challenges of out-of-school factors in students' homes, decreased state funding, older neighborhoods, teacher apathy, and the original concern of discrepant test-scores brought increasing levels of concern. Although the combination brought about new ways to think about and respond to student poverty, better ways emerged as leaders utilized multiple frames of decision making triggered by a recession. The lack of district funding combined with the above factors forced leaders to think about old considerations in new ways. Such resulted in more purposeful decision-making in the moment as well as planning for future wellness of the suburban district.

My study indicates suburban school district leaders recognize and should proactively plan for student poverty increases before characteristics of crisis are present. Tangible indications for district leaders to plan include: changing neighborhoods, have and have not divides within a district's boundaries, discouraging teacher attitudes toward children with less readiness for schooling, and an increasing population of students with less school preparedness.

6.5 Suburban Districts Possess Special Advantage

As described in my findings, suburban district leaders recognized the strength of the district's future would be founded in community engagement. A community response to

increasing student poverty was beginning to be planned. District leaders described urban settings on the other side of the state line to be without the same opportunity and hope of utilizing their communities. Using multiframe of thinking, suburban district leaders began to determine how they could prevent a similar story of district decline as student poverty increased. As a suburban district, a special advantage was the capacity of civic leaders and communities with a desire to fulfill civic duties – including those which could benefit the school district.

The expectation, therefore, was to retain highly engaged families in the district as well as request for support from business leaders in new ways. Business leaders, of course, possessed a financial interest in maintaining strong schools. This was true of city leaders as well. Cities would continue to be strong given a strong population in each city. Therefore, a stronger reciprocal relationship among business leaders, city leaders, and school district leaders was beginning to form. The suburban school district leaders' plan was to engage the entire community in the response to increasing student poverty. As a result, school district leaders would not be responding alone. Plans to capture community engagement in response to increasing student poverty unveiled a significant difference between suburban and urban settings. The suburban district studied, as other suburban areas, had a capacity to respond differently than urban settings due to the civic capacity of their surroundings.

6.6 Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations. The first limitation of the study, and possibly the greatest, is my small sample size. The school district studied is one of the largest suburban districts in the state. However, if replicated in all other suburban school districts in the state, it is

not feasible to assume all would offer the same results. The interviews, although in-depth, were conducted of only 13 district leaders. Although, I chose such leaders with specific criteria, additional interviews of other leaders may have offered discrepant findings.

Another limitation of this study involves unique characteristics of this suburban district. Just as it is not feasible to assume all other suburban school districts would offer the same results, it is not feasible to expect all other suburban districts to have concerns due to unique characteristics of the district studied. Unique characteristics include: decreasing enrollment causing greater financial concerns, significant division of have and have-not areas within the district, and history of a highly involved and supportive community.

Secondary limitations of the study included quantitative documents utilized to gain information to compare to qualitative data. The first limitation was related to budget documents. The documents gained did not offer an actual amount of funding spent on concerns related to student poverty. The District's Director of Finance extracted line-items of revenue and expenditures related to supporting students needing lunch support. Such offered data indicating greater expenditures and greater need. However, determining the precise cost of all programs which were implemented to respond to increasing student poverty was unattainable. Such information would have provided a clearer understanding of district leaders' decision-making as it related to student poverty.

Another secondary limitation was the lack of consistent coding of staff development courses. Presenters created a title and a description of each course offered. This leaves an opportunity for courses related to increasing student poverty to be missed in the data collection. Courses titled with the poverty in the title were found easily; whereas others were possibly not

uncovered. Determining the number of courses related to increasing student poverty was reliant upon the titles and course descriptions submitted by the presenters.

6.7 Future Research

The purpose of this study was to determine how suburban school district leaders respond to increasing student poverty. This study focused on a very small sample. It relied on in-depth interviews and archival data to substantiate the qualitative research.

Should there be studies related to this topic in the future, a suggestion would be to determine consistency in district leaders' responses from more than one school district. Just as urban studies have sought to understand various reforms across various settings, suburban settings increasing in student poverty could be compared.

Additionally, future research could include student achievement data after programming in response to increasing student poverty had been implemented. Such requires seeking a suburban district with intentional responses to poverty in place for a number of years. In fact, the school district in this study could be considered for study again in a just a few years with such data gathered.

Moreover, studying one specific response of suburban school district leaders', such as the engagement of the community, would provide specifics as to the effectiveness of one such initiative. Such research could offer greater insight into the effectiveness of district leaders' responses in addition to the effectiveness aligned with multiframed decision-making. This might potentially provide unexplored research to address the effectiveness of district leaders' in their responses to increasing student poverty.

Lastly, the idea that urban and suburban district leaders respond differently to student poverty due to their different environments, could be specifically studied. A study could specifically determine if the focus on student achievement in suburban school districts distracts from specific actions for students which are found in school specific urban reform efforts. Additionally, a future study could examine the civic capacity which suburban district leaders utilize to respond to poverty differently than the urban districts without a similar advantage.

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Appendix 1

Interviewees and Interview Protocol

List of Interviewees	Questions for Each Interviewee
<p>Current Superintendent</p> <p>Past Superintendent</p> <p>Recently Retired Associate Superintendent of Elementary Services</p> <p>Current Associate Superintendent of Secondary Services</p> <p>Associate Superintendent of Educational Services</p> <p>Director of Curriculum and Instruction</p> <p>Five Current Board of Education Members</p> <p>Executive Director of the Educational Foundation</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As a long-time leader (or community leader) in the district, can you share with me about the district today and how it is the same or different from the district you served when began your leadership here? 2. When was there recognition of changing demographics, specifically growing student poverty, in the district? When did you recognize district leaders would need to respond to those changing student demographics? 3. I'd expect different points of view surfaced in terms of the degree to which the district would need to take note of increasing student poverty as well as then how to respond. Can you tell me, as a district leader, what it really means to be responsive to increasing student poverty in this district? Has it been necessary and if so, why? 4. Were there initial steps which began a formal planning process to respond to changes or did the response to changing demographics naturally evolve? Can you describe the conversations which took place among district leaders in this process? 5. As the person directly in charge of (_____), have you thought about the growing student poverty differently from your district office peers? For example, were or are there specific priorities or actions needed which you see differently than others? If so, could you describe those for me? 6. Given the change of demographics in the last 15 years, have there been district leaders' decisions of which you can now see the effects? If so, how would you describe those decisions and their effects? 7. Given the increased <i>rate</i> of growing student poverty in the district, are

	<p>there decisions or actions which need to be made at this time to further the district's response to demographic changes? If so, please describe those.</p> <p>8. As a long-standing suburban school district, the public persona of the district has been one of wealth along with high student achievement. Is this persona changing? If so, could you describe what you believe to be current and long-term persona of the district?</p> <p>9. Are the decisions made by district office leaders to intentionally influence this public persona? If so, could you describe those decisions and their intentions?</p> <p>10. Have there been factors of poverty which district decisions have left untouched? Possibly, these are factors outside of the district's educational influence? If so, how would you describe those?</p> <p>11. Are there experiences which have influenced your own personal beliefs or thoughts about poverty? If so, how would you describe those?</p>
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Appendix 2

Four-Frame Interpretations of Organizational Processes

<u>Process</u>	<u>Structural Frame</u>	<u>Human Resource Frame</u>	<u>Political Frame</u>	<u>Symbolic Frame</u>
<u>Decision-Making</u>	Rational Sequence to produce right decision	Open process to produce commitment	Opportunity to gain or exercise power	Ritual to confirm values and provide opportunities for bonding
<u>Strategic Planning</u>	Strategies to set objectives and coordinate resources	Gatherings to promote participation	Arenas to air conflict and realign power	Ritual to signal responsibility, produce symbols, negotiate meeting
<u>Goal Setting</u>	Keep organization headed in the right direction	Keep people involved and communication open	Provide opportunity for individuals and groups to make interests known	Develop symbols and shared values
<u>Approaching Conflict</u>	Maintain organizational goals by having authorities resolve conflict	Develop relationships by having individuals confront conflict	Develop power by bargaining, forcing, manipulating others to win	Develop shared values and use conflict to negotiate meaning
<u>Communication</u>	Transmit facts and information	Exchange information, needs, and feelings	Influence or manipulate others	Tell stories
<u>Reorganizing</u>	Realign roles and responsibilities to tasks and environment	Maintain a balance between human needs and formal roles	Redistribute power and form new coalitions	Maintain an image of accountability and responsiveness; negotiate new social order
<u>Motivation</u>	Economic incentives	Growth and self-actualization	Coercion, manipulation, and seduction	Symbols and celebrations

Adapted from Bolman & Deal, 2008, Four Interpretations of Organizational Processes.

Appendix 3

District Documents Included in Data

Archival Data	What is addressed in relation to poverty?
Current and past budgets for the district	Spending in relation to meeting needs related to poverty's outside-of-school factors. Decisions of leaders through organizations frames.
Staff development course offerings	Spending in relation to teacher and staff training related to poverty Decisions of leaders through organizational frames.
Intervention Programs	Understandings of adoption/implementation of academic and behavioral interventions as a result of district decision-making related to poverty.