

THE ONBOARDING OF CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERS

by

JAMES M. YOUNG

(Under the Direction of Sally J. Zepeda)

ABSTRACT

School districts across the nation face complexities that include human resource shortages, legislative mandates that arrive with little funding, heightened accountability, and increased politicization. Leading these districts are educators who successfully led at the school building level. Unlike the preparation and support they received when becoming principals and local school administrators, little-to-no such training or onboarding is provided to them when they are elevated to central office leadership roles. As the challenges facing school systems continue to intensify, the need to intentionally prepare a new generation of district leaders is more important than ever.

The purpose of this action research study was to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership. The theory of change centered on using organizational socialization tactics to deliver interventions that focused on reducing uncertainty, adjusting to new leadership roles, and developing learning agility.

The findings indicated that leaders moving from school settings to central office leadership positions had to grapple with the weight and breadth of their new roles, while also facing levels of isolation not experienced at the school level. Helping newcomers to refocus their

leadership lenses on a new context of leading, to develop the learning agility required to shift from one environment to another, and to establish networks of support during the onboarding process were vital to successful transition experiences. Working together, veteran district leaders who designed and implemented common onboarding practices were able to enhance system-level coherence in one suburban school district, as detailed in this study.

Keywords: Central office leadership development; District coherence; Leadership development; Leadership induction; Leadership role clarity; Leadership shortage; Learning agility; Onboarding; Organizational socialization; Role adjustment; Uncertainty reduction; Volatile-Uncertain-Complex-Ambiguous (VUCA)

THE ONBOARDING OF CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERS

by

JAMES MITCHELL YOUNG

B.S., Florida State University, 1996

M.A., University of Georgia, 2005

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2025

© 2025

James Mitchell Young

All Rights Reserved

THE ONBOARDING OF CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERS

by

James Mitchell Young

Major Professor: Sally J. Zepeda

Committee: Jami Royal Berry
Karen C. Bryant

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2025

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Nashlee, who married me on the promise that she would remain forever *Young*. She has.

It was also completed in honor of Harold and Erma Mitchell of East Smithfield, Pennsylvania.

I know they would have been extremely proud of this endeavor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

History has a funny way of repeating itself. Seventeen years prior to starting this most recent academic adventure, Dr. Sally J. Zepeda inspired, nudged, cajoled, and pushed this once youthful public-school educator to get his Master of Education Degree in Education Leadership, promising that one day it would come in handy. She was correct, of course. She also encouraged me to continue my graduate studies. Although I resisted her insistence to move on from the masters to the pursuit of a doctorate, she finally won out—as she almost always does. It just took two decades. I sincerely appreciate Dr. Zepeda for her encouragement, for her ongoing feedback, for the differentiated approaches she used to motivate me (enter the winking emoji here), and for not giving up on a much older graduate student than the one she first encountered. Sally J. Zepeda is a one-of-a-kind educator, coach, motivator, and friend. I hope to make her proud—now and in the future.

I also wish to acknowledge Dr. Karen C. Bryant and Dr. Jami Royal Berry, both of whom served on my dissertation committee. Having spent some time with Dr. Bryant during her work to develop our school system’s principal preparation program, I was honored to have this esteemed, classy, articulate educational leader providing me with encouragement and thoughtful feedback along the way. Dr. Berry was the first professor that our cohort interacted with, and with good reason. Her ability to keep new students upbeat and believing in themselves comes directly from her perpetual positivity. Her enthusiasm for her graduate students was contagious throughout the entire program. What a blessing it was to have Drs. Zepeda, Bryant, and Berry guiding me through this experience. I will be forever grateful.

Another blessing who must be acknowledged is Dr. Debra Harden, whose work in preparing new district leaders inspired this study. A former superintendent of schools who developed a statewide professional development program for the role, it was Dr. Harden who realized the need for training all new central office leaders. I found very few sources throughout the nation that came anywhere near the level of work that Dr. Harden has produced, and I am thankful to her for her generosity in sharing with me.

I need to acknowledge two important gentlemen. My unofficial life coach, spiritual accountability partner, and one of the deepest thinkers I have ever associated with—Dr. Tom Fowler—helped launch me into this world of research. Challenging my thinking for nearly 20 years, Tom has made me a better researcher and practitioner and is among the people I try to make proud. I also wish to acknowledge retired superintendent Dr. Jeff Bearden. My boss when this endeavor began, Jeff provided flexibility, encouragement, words of wisdom, and an ear to bend. Along this journey, we became close friends, and I am supremely grateful for him.

I must also thank the members of the East Smithfield School District central office, who volunteered to participate in this study and were amazing partners. Improving their work lives, along with those of future leaders in our district, was the primary goal of this study.

Finally, I am blessed to have an amazing support system in my family. Linda (mom) and Bob, Jim (dad) and Kim, and Erin, Marni, Brittini, and Heather (sisters) all cheered me on. On a day-to-day basis, though, it was the loves of my life that kept me going. My incredibly patient wife, Nashlee, and our two wonderful children, Alexis, and Joseph, gave me the encouragement needed to run this race to the finish line. These three amazing people, along with my savior, Jesus Christ, are my driving forces to be a better, wiser, and more caring man today than I was yesterday. No words can do justice to the depth of appreciation I feel for them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Research Questions.....	9
Definition of Terms.....	9
Theoretical Framework.....	11
Logic Model.....	18
Overview of the Methodology.....	22
Interventions.....	27
Significance of the Study.....	29
Organization of the Dissertation.....	30
2 REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE.....	31
Uncertainty Reduction when Onboarding Newcomers.....	33
Leadership Clarity for New School District Leaders.....	44
Developing Learning Agility in New School District Leaders.....	58

School District Coherence.....	71
Chapter Summary	80
3 ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	83
Rationale for Qualitative Research.....	84
Overview of Action Research Methods.....	86
Action Research Design.....	89
Context of the Study.....	101
Data Sources.....	108
Data Collection Methods.....	111
Interventions.....	123
Data Analysis Methods.....	133
Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability.....	139
Researcher’s Perspective.....	142
Limitations.....	144
Chapter Summary.....	146
4 FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE.....	148
Context of the Study.....	149
Participants in the Study.....	159
Findings.....	165
Participant Recruitment and Orientation.....	167
Action Research Cycle 1.....	169
Action Research Cycle 2.....	194
Action Research Cycle 3.....	225

Chapter Summary.....	259
5 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH	
CASE	263
Experiences of School Leaders Transitioning to the Central Office.....	264
Improving the Experiences of School Leaders Transitioning to the Central Office.....	274
The Impact of Developing, Facilitating, and Participating in an Onboarding Program.....	280
Chapter Summary.....	286
6 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICES.....	289
Summary of the Study.....	290
Findings and Themes.....	295
Limitations of the Current Study.....	315
Implications of the Study for Policy Makers.....	316
Implications of the Study for Researchers.....	318
Implications of the Study for Practitioners.....	321
Concluding Thoughts.....	324
REFERENCES.....	328
APPENDICES	
A Empirical Findings Table.....	343
B Action Research Implementation Team Individual Interview Protocol.....	348
C Action Research Design Team Individual Interview Protocol.....	352

D	Action Research Implementation Team Questionnaires.....	354
E	Action Research Implementation Team Focus Group Protocols.....	361
F	Action Research Design Team Focus Group Protocol.....	363
G	Leadership Situation Scenario Examples.....	365
H	Orientation Meetings: Overview of the Study.....	367
I	Action Research Design Team Questionnaire.....	370
J	ARIT Onboarding Program Proposal Example.....	373

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1.1: Six Common Tactics Used to Socialize New Employees.....	12
Table 1.2: Predictable Responses to Socialization.....	13
Table 1.3: Interventions.....	28
Table 2.1: The Four C’s Framework for Onboarding.....	43
Table 2.2: Levels of Unlearning Needed for Newly-Hired District Leaders.....	48
Table 2.3: District Office Leadership Lens Shifts.....	51
Table 2.4: Categories of Learning Agility.....	65
Table 2.5: Learnable Behaviors Needed for the Development of Learning Agility.....	69
Table 2.6: Right Drivers vs. Wrong Drivers in Developing District Coherence.....	73
Table 3.1 Action Research Design Team Members’ Experience and Action Research Roles....	97
Table 3.2 Action Research Implementation Team Members’ Experience and Roles.....	99
Table 3.3 Action Research Timeline Activities.....	100
Table 3.4: East Smithfield School District Demographic Growth and Change Overview.....	102
Table 3.5: The East Smithfield School District Learner Profile.....	104
Table 3.6: The East Smithfield School District Leader Profile.....	105
Table 3.7: The East Smithfield School District Central Office Administrative Organization...	107
Table 3.8: Sampling of Interview Questions.....	114
Table 3.9: Sampling of Questionnaire Items.....	116
Table 3.10: Sampling of Focus Group Questions.....	118

Table 3.11 Sampling of Observation Notes.....	120
Table 3.12 Sampling of Researcher’s Journal.....	122
Table 3.13: Organizational Socialization Response Definitions.....	125
Table 3.14: Four Organizational Socialization Tactics Used to Deliver Interventions.....	126
Table 3.15: The Inform-Welcome-Guide and the Four C’s of Onboarding.....	128
Table 3.16: Coding Samples.....	136
Table 3.17: The Six Stages of Thematic Analysis.....	138
Table 3.18: Trustworthiness Criteria and Qualitative Processes.....	140
Table 4:1: The East Smithfield School District 2022-2027 Strategy Map.....	151
Table 4:2: The East Smithfield School District Strategic Performance Objectives.....	152
Table 4:3: The ESSD Leader Profile and Learning Agile Behaviors.....	158
Table 4:4: The Action Research Design Team.....	160
Table 4:5: The Action Research Implementation Team.....	163
Table 4:6: ARIT and ARDT Relationships in the ESSD.....	165
Table 4:7: Action Research Cycle 1 Timeline of Activities.....	170
Table 4:8: Samples from ARIT Questionnaire 1.....	171
Table 4:9: ESSD Leadership Onboarding Matrix of Interventions.....	175
Table 4:10: The ESSD Newcomer Coaching Assignments.....	182
Table 4:11: Action Research Cycle 1: The First Round of Interventions.....	183
Table 4:12: Sampling of ARIT and ARDT Individual Interview 1 Questions.....	185
Table 4:13: Action Research Cycle 2 Timeline of Activities.....	195
Table 4:14: Action Research Cycle 2: The Second and Third Round of Interventions.....	205
Table 4:15: Sample Discussion Questions from ARIT Focus Group 1.....	207

Table 4:16: Samples from ARDT Questionnaire 1.....	221
Table 4:17: Action Research Cycle 3 Timeline of Activities.....	225
Table 4.18 Action Research Cycle 3: The Final Round of Interventions.....	231
Table 4.19 Sampling of ARIT Individual Interview 2.....	233
Table 4.20 Sample Questions from ARDT Focus Group 1 and ARIT Focus Group 2.....	244
Table 4.21 Samples from ARIT Questionnaire 2.....	256
Table 4.22 Findings and Sources of Triangulation.....	261

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1: Theoretical Framework for Socializing New District Leaders.....	17
Figure 1.2: The Determine, Select, Implement, Assess and Adjust Logic Model.....	19
Figure 3.1 The Action Research Process.....	88
Figure 3.2 The Spiraling Cycles of Action Research.....	91
Figure 3.3 The Determine, Select, Implement, Assess, and Adjust Logic Model.....	93
Figure 3.4 Theoretical Framework for Socializing New District Leaders.....	95

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The business of public-school education continues to grow in its complexity. While schooling still centers on the core mission of teaching and learning, the responsibilities of school level administrators and district office leaders have grown exponentially (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). State and federal funding challenges, intentional focus on equity in student and staff opportunities, human resource shortages, legislative mandates, and state accountability reporting have all led to increased educational roles—roles that go far beyond the traditional teacher, principal, and superintendent positions of which school systems were once comprised (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021). Not only are the variety of responsibilities growing, but also the backdrop of the world is everchanging in which all educators are practicing their trade.

Simultaneously, the focus on accountability—and the *sources* of that accountability—continues to grow. These trends have led to the need for more district support of local school leaders (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021). While it remains that the teachers in the classrooms and principals in the buildings continue to have the most significant direct impact on learning, research has also shown that effective district leaders have the power to create the necessary conditions for success for schools within a system (Leithwood et al., 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021).

Often, those filling school district leadership roles come from those who were deemed effective leaders at the school level. Successful leadership in one realm, though, is no guarantee of success in another. Leaving the environment of a school building for the more corporate-like atmosphere of a district office can result in a culture shock for those making the move (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). As building leaders are promoted into district office positions, their leadership skills are tested in new ways. Their perceptions of district responsibilities are altered as they assume a broader view of schooling as a business. Regardless of whether leaders are promoted from within or recruited and hired from outside the system, employees are socialized as they assume new roles (Bengtson et al., 2013), whether they guided by the organization or left to their own devices.

It is widely suggested that intentional socialization activities should be developed by organizations to assimilate employees into their new roles and departments, as well as to set them up for personal success (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013; Klein et al., 2015). In the case of school system leadership promotions, these shifts in positions require a new understanding of the relationship between the district office and school leadership (D. Harden, personal communication, March 6, 2023). Arguably, the skills and qualities that these newly appointed district leaders demonstrated at their local schools made them attractive candidates for district vacancies. However, the application of those skills will likely be very different than what they are used to, as will the expectations their supervisors have for their daily work (Harden, personal communication, March 6, 2023).

Given the increased complexity in school leadership, the abilities and skills needed to lead effectively have rapidly evolved, particularly in the wake of the global pandemic that started in 2020. Superintendents, principals, and public-school administrators were asked to develop

learning strategies and delivery methods never previously contemplated. Challenges stemming from mask mandates to COVID-19 vaccine requirements were not something for which school officials had formalized training. These debates have played out on a public stage in local board of education meetings—as did the ensuing debates over social justice, reading materials, and instructional curricula—in a period that Harvey and Valerio (2022) called “our volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA)” new world (p. 269).

According to Schmitt and de Courcy (2022), the percentages of incoming college freshmen intending to major in education have gone down dramatically. While remaining consistent with other service-oriented fields such as health professions and the social sciences throughout the early 2000s, by 2018 the percentages of students entering college as education majors have fallen by more than half, from approximately 11% in 2000 to 4.3% in 2018 (Schmitt & DeCourcy, 2022). A 2022 Phi Delta Kappan survey shared that approximately only 3.7 out of 10 parents would want their children to go into teaching (Schmitt & DeCourcy, 2022). Worse, a 2015 report issued in Georgia stated that nearly 7 out of 10 teachers were *unlikely* to encourage their students to pursue the teaching profession after graduating (Owens, 2015). These statistics were collected *prior* to the COVID-19 pandemic, the wave of new legislation aimed at classroom instruction, and the challenges of a politically and culturally polarized society.

The combination of lower numbers entering the field of education, along with the VUCA world, leads to predictions of an accelerated shortage in quality educators teaching in the classrooms of the future. The predicted long-term impact of this is a domino effect where fewer entering or remaining in classrooms will eventually lead to shortages in school building leadership. These shortages ultimately result in the drying up of district office leadership pipelines as well. This shrinking pool of leaders with district office potential is not the only

threat, as the effects of VUCA will likely lead to growing numbers of superintendents and district administrators leaving the field. Recruiting, developing, and retaining district leaders must, therefore, become a priority for school system decision makers, just as it has been for teachers.

As part of recruitment and retention efforts, it is incumbent on sitting district leaders to be able to articulate their roles when working with school level leaders. In addition to serving as, what Honig (2012) called, “buffers” who “shield principals” from time draining activities (p. 757) and “brokers” who “bridge” school administrators with supportive personnel and resources (p. 755), school district leaders largely engage in strategic, systemic planning that aims to support the teaching and learning of children (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Serving as traditional brokers, buffers, and bridges, while developing strategic plans in a VUCA world, requires a combination of skills and abilities that allow school leaders to navigate the unknown. Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) coined the phrase *learning agility* to describe the ability to apply lessons from past experiences to new, unknown situations. Church and Seaton (2022) suggested that people with learning agility are the ones most likely to be effective leaders over the long haul.

The concept of learning agility, therefore, becomes a key ingredient when developing a pipeline of school leaders through identification of high potential (De Meuse, 2017; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000), the development of capacity-building programs (Fullan & Quinn, 2016), and when providing onboarding and professional learning for new and veteran leaders (Honig & Rainey, 2019). Equally as important, incorporating learning agility into both the identification and onboarding processes could help districts to attract, develop, and retain high quality, diverse staffs that will be vital to future success (Zepeda et al., 2021).

Aside from the more technical positions found in finance, operations, facilities, and technology departments, the individuals filling district roles that support teachers and school administrators most often come directly from within schools. These positions include roles in district level departments such as curriculum and instruction, special education, student support services, leadership development, and human resources. Fullan and Quinn (2016) shared that when these positions are filled from within a system, districts can develop a more collaborative and, ultimately, more coherent culture. Intentionality, when socializing these new leaders, is essential to ensure that coherence.

Whether a recently hired teacher, principal, or even superintendent, new employees want to know what their responsibilities will be, how they will be evaluated, and what their direct supervisor expects of them. Where effective onboarding programs exist, anxiety goes down and retention rates go up (Kang & Berliner, 2012; Rogers & Van Gronigen, 2021; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). When those same programs provide ongoing support that goes beyond the reduction of uncertainty, including activities that help new employees adjust to their new roles and increase their learning agility, that higher rate of retention is coupled with increased workplace engagement, as well (Saks & Gruman, 2018).

Unfortunately, except for school superintendents, intentional onboarding is rarely the experience provided for newly appointed school district office leaders. The risk to school systems who do not consider the induction of new district leaders is the same risk faced by any industry who fails to socialize their new employees: dissatisfied personnel, higher turnover rates, and a loss of productivity (Kang & Berliner, 2012; Rogers & Van Gronigen, 2021; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Of equal importance, particularly in larger

school districts, those who fail to intentionally socialize their newcomers also miss the opportunity to develop greater levels of coherence throughout their school systems.

Statement of the Problem

The East Smithfield School District (ESSD, a pseudonym) is the public-school system in which this action research study was conducted. Between 2010 and 2020, the system grew tremendously, adding nine new schools during that time. To prepare for the inevitability of school leadership needs, the system developed programs to build leadership capacity through aspiring leader and aspiring principal cohorts. Additionally, to better support the transition and ongoing needs of its newly hired school building leaders, ESSD provided new administrator induction, mentoring, and coaching programs.

While much investment was put into the development and support of these leaders, the same could not be said for those leaders promoted to central office positions. Since 2020, 15 district leaders have moved into central office positions at the Assistant Director level or higher. Unlike the professional learning provided to new building administrators, no capacity-building, no onboarding, nor any systematic programs of support were provided to the new district leaders.

Overview of the Research Site Context

The only public-school system within the county, the East Smithfield School District (ESSD) is situated in a suburban bedroom community that borders a metropolitan southern city. The school district's home county was ranked among the fastest growing in the nation since the turn of the century in 2001. Along with the growth of the community, the school district nearly doubled in enrollment between 2006 and 2022. Employing over 8,000 people, in 2022 the district was home to 23 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, 7 high schools, and one college and career preparation school.

Once a predominantly homogenous school district, the ESSD saw a significant change in its demographic makeup. The white population that accounted for 84% of student enrollment in 2006 dropped to 50% in 2022, with the fastest growing population being that of Asian students, who grew from 4% to 27% in that same time span. Additionally, the percentage of gifted students rose from 6% to 15% over that period, while students with special needs remained relatively steady.

As the ESSD rose to become the 5th largest school system in its state, growth and changing demographics were not the only extraordinary developments experienced by the district. Guided by the mission statement “To provide an unparalleled education for all to succeed,” the ESSD became known for its exceptional academic achievement. By the end of 2022, the school system was home to the metro-area and large school district honors for highest graduation rates (96%), highest Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) scores, and highest state College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) ratings.

While the expectation for continued academic success remained high in the community, leaders of the ESSD were also expected to be financial stewards of taxpayers’ money. The county in which the school district is housed was considered a very conservative community, with each elected board of education member and all members of the state legislative delegation reaching office as Republicans. Within that political context, the ESSD governance team kept the operational budget much lower than its fellow large school districts, ranking number one in terms of the lowest millage rate among large systems at 17.3 mills in 2022. The ESSD spent the lowest amount of money per pupil among the 12 largest districts in the state in that same year.

As the ESSD experienced growth and success by multiple measures, retirements of those in leadership positions also emerged in significant numbers, taxing the system's ability to maintain high quality leadership in its schools. In 2023, 26 of the of the district's 42 schools welcomed new principals since 2019, along with the appointment of over 60 new assistant principals throughout the system. While formalized capacity-building and induction programs for new school administrators prepared and supported these novice leaders, a new challenge emerged for the school system in the form of central office retirements. Unlike the programs that prepared the ESSD's pipeline of school level leaders, nothing had been developed to formally prepare and onboard new leaders to the district office. The ESSD's central office saw the appointment of 15 new leaders during the stretch of time between 2020 and 2023.

The problem of practice in this study centered on the lack of a formalized induction program in ESSD to transition district leaders into their new roles and responsibilities and, ultimately, to intentionally provide them with the ongoing support needed to perform their new responsibilities effectively. This problem of practice led to the development of the purpose for this action research study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this action research study was to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). Framing this study began with broad questions: What makes for an effective district office and school building relationship? How do district leaders identify those who are best equipped to fill leadership vacancies in the central office and to provide them with ongoing support? Why is the transition from school building leadership to district office

positions seemingly so challenging for so many? Are there measures that can be taken to provide new district leaders a smoother, more effective transition that leads to greater job satisfaction and, ultimately, greater effectiveness? These were the key, big-picture questions that led to the purpose of this study, as well as to the more specific research questions that gave the study its focus.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to guide the action research conducted in this study:

1. How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level?
2. How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership?
3. How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding model on their own professional practice?

The key terms used throughout this study are defined within the context of ESSD.

Definition of Terms

- “Coherence” in the context of this study is a systematic approach to school district leadership that includes the use of common vocabulary, clear protocols to identify and develop potential leaders, collaboration between district departments and schools, and an emphasis on creating conditions for success through a collective focus on strategic goals (Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021).

- “District level leaders” in the context of this study refers to educational administrators working in ESSD’s central office. Individual roles in ESSD’s central office range from associate superintendents to content specialists to instructional technology and facility directors. This study focuses primarily on those administrators who are most directly involved with local school functions centered on teaching and learning, assessment, human resources, student support, and special education services. The term district level leaders is used interchangeably with “central office leaders” throughout the study.
- “Learning agility” in the context of this study describes the ability of people to apply lessons from past experiences to new leadership situations (De Meuse, 2017).
- “Onboarding” in the context of this study referred to the intentional and/or formalized approach to transitioning an employee into a new role. The term was used interchangeably with induction throughout this study, as “onboarding today often includes both the traditional induction elements and the socialization components” (Jeske & Olson, 2022, p. 64).
- “New employees” in the context of this study referred to people who are beginning any new position in an organization. While this includes those hires coming from outside of the organization, it also refers to those moving into a new role from within the organization.
- “Socialization” or “Organizational Socialization” in the context of this study describes the process by which new employees learn the skills, knowledge, and values needed to succeed in their new positions (Bengtson et al., 2013; Jeske & Olson, 2022; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

- “Workplace engagement” in the context of this study is described as the combination of the positive energy, self-efficacy, and resiliency that leads to strong connection to one’s work and with the organization (Bakker et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2016; Saks & Gruman, 2018).

These definitions were provided to give contextual meaning to the terminology used throughout this study. The theoretical framework provides the overall construct in which the study was conducted.

Theoretical Framework

No formal onboarding process existed in ESSD for administrators promoted to district leadership roles from school building positions within the system. The action research conducted in this study focused on formal onboarding new ESSD central office leaders to support effective, successful transitions to their new work and work environment. Organizational socialization provided the theoretical framework in which a series of action research cycles were facilitated. Socialization, in the context of this study, described the process by which new employees learned the skills, knowledge, and values needed to succeed in their new positions (Bengtson et al., 2013; Jeske & Olson, 2022; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

The concept of organizational socialization began with Van Maanen and Schein’s (1977) seminal work, which focused on how newcomers reacted to a range of activities aimed at transitioning new employees into a company. The prospect of working with strangers, of not knowing expectations, and the fear of failure are common emotions felt by newcomers at the initial point of starting a new position. The early aim of research in organizational socialization centered on the reduction of that “new job” uncertainty and was rooted in Van Maanen and Schein’s (1977) six dimensions of common tactics used by companies to socialize their new

employees.

These tactics were validated through an empirical study conducted by Jones (1986), who further classified the tactics, as presented in Table 1.1, into two opposing organizational approaches: *institutionalized*—tactics intentionally initiated by the organization on a planned bases; and *individualized*—tactics that are not planned out or initiated by the organization, thus leaving newcomers in a “sink or swim” situation where they must figure out the organization’s culture on their own (Ellis et al., 2015, p. 209).

Table 1.1

Six Common Tactics Used to Socialize New Employees

Institutionalized		Individualized	
Tactics	Description	Tactics	Description
Collective	Groups of newcomers go through socialization together; high peer influence.	Individual	Newcomer goes through socialization alone; high Influence by mentor or supervisor.
Formal	Very structured preparation; socialization occurs away from other organization members; Effort to disconnect from previous thinking and learn new protocols and values.	Informal	Job-embedded socialization; little effort to distinguish prior and current thinking.
Sequential	A series of steps must be completed as prerequisites for obtaining the role.	Random	No clearly defined steps are required; role movement is Seemingly fluid.
Fixed	A specific timeline determines movement into a new role.	Variable	No timeline is used to Determine movement into a new role.
Serial	Experienced employees take a major role in preparing newcomers or their potential replacements	Disjunctive	No mentoring or previous role holders are involved in grooming or assisting newcomers.

Institutionalized Tactics	Description	Individualized Tactics	Description
Investiture	The newcomer's personal traits are valued and built upon.	Divestiture	The newcomer's personal Traits – deemed secondary to the value of the work, itself – are stripped away.

Note. Adapted from Bengtson et al. (2013); Jones (1986); Van Maanen and Schein (1977).

The combination of socialization tactics generally leads to one of three predictable newcomer responses (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Explained further by Bengtson et al. (2013), “The responses can be viewed as resting on a continuum from an extreme custodial stance where no attempt at innovation is made to one of the utmost innovation where the existing mission is challenged” (p. 147). The responses to socialization tactics are explained in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2

Predictable Responses to Socialization Tactics

Socialization Tactics Leading to Predicted Responses	Predicted Response	Response Defined
Collective, Formal, Sequential, Fixed, Serial, Divestiture	Custodianship	The newcomer accepts the organization's mission, the existing approach to the work, and their role in it.
Collective, Informal, Random, Fixed, Disjunctive, Investiture	Content Innovation	The newcomer accepts the overall mission, but wishes to make changes in the approach to the work and the strategies used.
Individual, Informal, Random, Variable, Disjunctive, Investiture	Role Innovation	The newcomer wishes to change the overall mission, approach to the work, and redefine their role within the organization.

Note. Adapted from Bengtson et al. (2013); Van Maanen and Schein (1977).

By applying tactics in an intentional manner, organizations can help shape newcomer responses to fit the needs of the company. Questions regarding the organization's need for a custodianship, content innovation, or a role innovation response must be answered from the start so that appropriate onboarding tactics can be employed.

In the context of onboarding new leaders for ESSD's central office, the tactics selected for this action research study included the collective, formal, serial, and investiture approaches related to socialization. The sequential steps required to gain a position in the district office, as well as using a fixed timeline that determined movement into the new role, were not within the purview of the action research design and implementation teams of this study. As explained by Bengtson et al. (2013), the sequential and fixed tactics occur in the form of "formal preparation programs" that prepare educators for school system positions and that school leaders "once having received their formal training and leadership certification, may have to wait for a job opening before they move into a leadership position with the same school system" (p. 149). While the action research design and implementation teams did not employ these institutionalized tactics, they were, in fact, part of the preparation for the leaders on which this study focused.

With research design and implementation objectives that included the reduction of uncertainty and improved district coherence, a primarily custodial response was sought by the action research design team. However, some level of content innovation was deemed appropriate, as the district office roles that were the focus of this study were all leadership positions. The school administrators promoted to district roles were chosen, presumably, because of their success and effectiveness as building leaders. The ability of leaders to innovate in the

realm of strategies and approaches to the work would be necessary for them to meet the needs of an increasingly vulnerable, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world.

Despite the use of unlearning practices and reapplication of leadership skills, the tactic of divestiture was not one employed, as the leaders' personal traits were valued and, in fact, integral to their assuming their new roles. It should be noted that the definitive impact of investiture versus divestiture tactics on predicted outcomes has been debated since Van Maanen and Schein's (1977) work was released and remains unsettled among scholars (Bauer et al., 2007; Jones, 1986). The practice of investiture was deemed appropriate as a tactic for this study, given the nature of the work of new school district leaders and the VUCA environment in which they led.

According to Harter (2023), 2022 Gallup data indicated that more than 50% of American workers were not engaged in their workplace, with an additional 18% actively *disengaged*. These numbers mean only 32% of American workers are engaged on the job (Harter, 2023). By including intentional efforts to integrate newcomers socially and culturally (Bauer, 2010), as well as to provide resources such as “feedback, personal planning, training and development, and recognition and appreciation” workplace engagement can be improved as part of the socialization process (Saks & Gruman, 2018, p. 25). To increase workplace engagement, newly appointed leaders must quickly adjust to their new roles with a clarity of purpose in their leadership knowledge, dispositions, and applications that make sense within the context in which they lead.

While the research of Van Maanen and Schein (1977) and Bauer et al. (2007) focused primarily on the vulnerabilities associated with uncertainty, the onboarding process provides an opportunity to go further with newcomers (Bauer, 2010; Becker & Bish, 2021; Saks & Gruman,

2018). For those going into leadership roles, a clarity of purpose is extremely vital, as they have an impact on so many others. This is particularly true for those transitioning from one leadership role to another, as prior assumptions and attitudes may not align with their new role and set of responsibilities (Becker & Bish, 2021).

Given that school district leaders are most often drawn from those already in education, they will come into their new roles with knowledge of how schools are led, but that may not translate into how school systems need to be led (Harden, personal communication, March 6, 2023). Considering previous knowledge when designing onboarding activities was, therefore, imperative in this study (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013; Fiol & O'Connor, 2017).

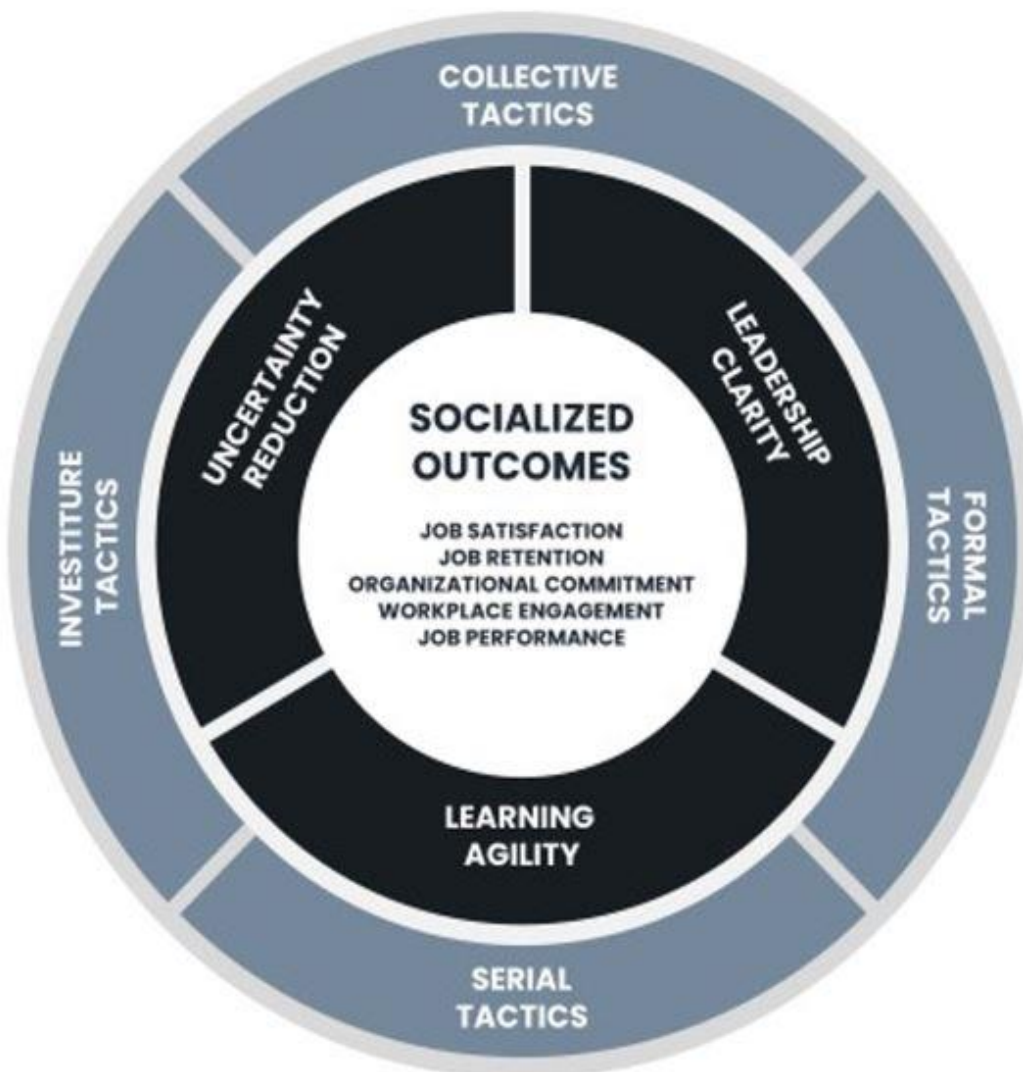
In addition to reducing their natural, “new job” anxiety, as well as helping them to clarify and adjust to their new leadership purpose, it is necessary to prepare newly appointed school leaders with the agility needed to face unprecedented challenges in the field of public education. Developing skills and abilities to be more innovative, flexible, and nimble must be part of the onboarding process if new leaders are to be successful in navigating a VUCA environment (Church & Seaton, 2022; De Meuse, 2022; Harvey & Valerio, 2022; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Learning agility requires continuous focus on applying previous lessons to new and different situations (Church & Seaton, 2022; De Meuse, 2022; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Learning agility, therefore, became an important element in this action research study.

The interventions developed by the action research design team (ARDT) for this study were grouped into three major categories of socialization foci: uncertainty reduction, leadership role clarity, and learning agility. While four organizational socialization tactics framed the modes of socialization, the content of the activities came in the form of the ARDT's role adjustment interventions. The theory of change at the heart of the study was that the combination of

socialization tactics and role adjustment interventions would result in more satisfied, engaged, committed, high performing newcomers to ESSD central office leadership positions, as envisioned in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Theoretical Framework for Socializing New District Leaders



Note. Adapted from Jones (1986); Van Maanen and Schein (1977).

Additionally, by including a cross-section of district leaders working together on the ARDT, the theory of change proposed would also produce a more coherent, unified purpose of leadership

development in the large, growing school system that is ESSD. The process by which cycles of change were planned and studied are described by examining the logic model.

Logic Model

This action research study was conducted within the parameters of organizational socialization theory. As the researcher and the action research design team (ARDT) members interacted throughout the design and feedback of this study *while* it was being conducted, it was important to provide an action-based blueprint to guide those interactions. A logic model was developed to do that, as well as to provide a visual representation of the connection between the tactics employed, interventions used, and the changes resulting from those activities (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014).

The logic model developed for this study sought to provide steps for the ARDT and the researcher that addressed these key questions regarding change theory:

1. What is the desired outcome we seek to achieve?
2. Based on our review of related research, what interventions and tactics need to be employed to reach the desired outcome we seek?
3. Did the interventions and tactics employed achieve the desired outcomes?
4. Upon analysis and reflection, what adjustments or new thinking will be needed as we move forward?

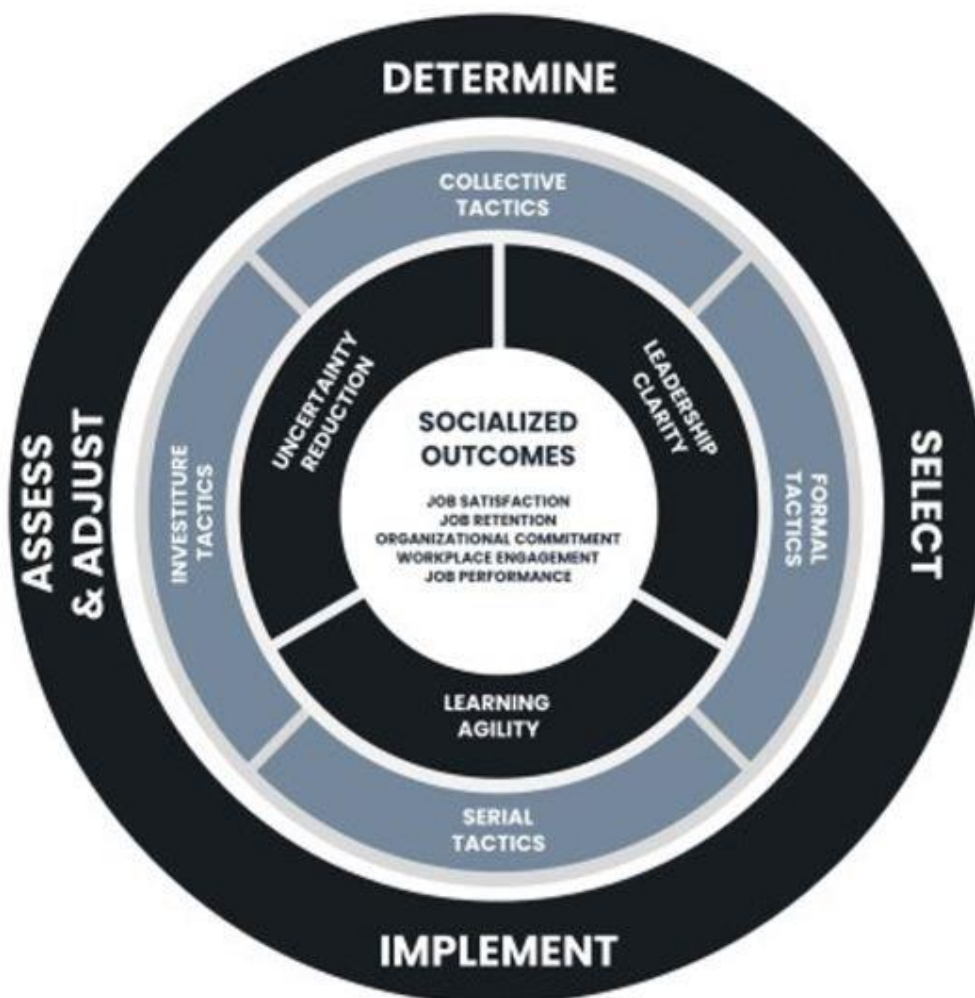
Drawing from Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) work on cycles in action research and Deming's well-cited *Plan-Do-Study-Act* sequence for learning and improvement (Bryk et al., 2015; Moen, 2009), this action research study adapted a logic model that provided a road map for participants.

The logic model used in this study provided for a series of steps that included defining the problem, developing interventions, measuring results, and adjusting as needed before moving

into new cycles of improvement. The Determine-Select-Implement-Assess (DSIA) for Organizational Socialization logic model was the process developed specifically for this study. Depicted in Figure 1.2, the DSIA model provided the logical steps and foundation that guided the socialization of new leaders in the ESSD central office.

Figure 1.2

The Determine, Select, Implement, Assess, and Adjust Logic Model



Note. Adapted from Bryk et al. (2015); Coghlan and Brannick (2014); Jones (1986); Moen (2009); Van Maanen and Schein (1977).

The DSIAA for Organizational Socialization logic model included four steps:

1. Determine the root causes and the desired outcomes.
2. Select the interventions and organizational socialization tactics to be used.
3. Implement the interventions and organizational socialization tactics.
4. Assess the results of the interventions and organizational socialization tactic used and make adjustments prior to beginning a new cycle of change.

At the core of each step was the need for the researcher and ARDT members to review related literature and to consider the potential cause-and effect-relationship of each research-based intervention, as well as the organizational socialization tactic through which the intervention would be implemented.

Determine the Desired Outcome. During this step, the researcher and the ARDT reviewed the challenges faced by newly appointed leaders in the ESSD district office. These included experiences that led to job dissatisfaction, a lack of workplace engagement, a sense of being ill-prepared for the challenges of the role, and a lack of commitment to the school district. Literature was reviewed that provided insights into the nature of these challenges and potential antecedent behaviors, interactions, or experiences that led to various struggles. Based on these findings, the ARDT determined the desired outcomes they believed should be the focus of the change cycle that they were undertaking.

Select the Interventions and Tactics. From here, the ARDT continued to review related literature on methods and practices to produce the desired outcomes. In this stage of the change cycle, the ARDT selected the interventions aimed at helping the newly appointed ESSD leaders to adjust to their new roles. The ARDT chose from three categories of role adjustment interventions that were developed for this study. They included strategies or interventions

aligned to the reduction of uncertainty, greater role clarity in their new leadership positions, and the development of learning agility. Once selected, the ARDT then chose the organizational socialization tactics through which to deliver the interventions. This choice included collective, formal, serial, and/or investiture tactics.

Implement the Interventions and Tactics. During this step, the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) put into practice the interventions and socialization tactics developed by the ARDT that they believed would result in greater job satisfaction, increases in workplace engagement and organizational commitment, and improved job performance. The ARDT was able to glean the effectiveness of their chosen interventions and tactics by collecting data in the forms of feedback from ARIT members and participants, as well as observational notes from supervisors.

Assess the Results and Adjust. Armed with the data, the researcher and ARDT members individually and collectively analyzed the results of the change cycle. Common methods and protocols were used by ARDT members and the researcher to determine levels of success and areas where the interventions and/or tactics failed to yield desired outcomes. In this stage of the DSIA process, each ARDT member and the researcher reflected on potential changes that needed to be made in interventions, in data collection methods, or on timelines. In short, the ARDT reflected on three questions: What went well? What did not go well? What additional research might need to be considered?

The final step in this DSIA action research cycle became the first step in the next cycle. The researcher and the ARDT addressed the questions of what was needed moving forward. Adjustments and new research-based strategies were decided on, thus determining the desired outcome (step one) of the next cycle in the action research process.

The researcher and the ARDT were able to apply this logic model over the course of three cycles of interventions and analysis. This study was built on the premise that educational leaders could articulate the challenges associated with moving from school building leadership into a district office role, that they could review existing literature and develop interventions to meet those challenges, and that they could adjust between cycles to increase the successful socialization of those new to their roles.

Overview of the Methodology

Facing the simultaneous challenges of rising numbers of retirements among central office leaders and rapid growth as a school system, ESSD continues to welcome new leadership talent into its central office at an increasing rate. As many of these new appointees have come directly from the school level, an area of concern centers on the transition from one type of leadership role to another. This qualitative action research study was conducted to produce a timely solution to that problem through the collaborative efforts of practitioners within ESSD (Mertler, 2021), as well as to tell the story of what occurred and why it may be of significance to others (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014).

Consistent with the nature of action research, the author of this study served as both a researcher and a practitioner in pursuit of school improvement (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The goal, as is the case with action research studies, was not only to find a resolution to ESSD's specific transition concerns, but to analyze, reflect on, and document the entire process of developing that solution in the hopes of adding to the greater body of scholarship surrounding leadership transitions (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014; Melin & Axelsson, 2007).

Throughout the study, the action research design team members were challenged to review related literature and ESSD data, to develop interventions designed for those transitioning

into district office leadership, and to reflect on the impact of the interventions. Ultimately, this team sought to provide a process to meet the needs of new district leaders, as well as to develop structures for the ongoing support of those leaders.

Action Research

Beginning with Lewin's (1946) seminal work on bringing "science" into the study of the social sciences, the idea that an organization's problems can be studied and resolved by those working *within* that organization led to an entire body of scholarship focused on the applied science known as action research. Corey (1954) extended the utility of action research to the field of education, stating that "the people who actually teach children or supervise teachers or administer school systems attempt to solve their practical problems by using methods of science" (p. 375).

The goal of an action research study is two-fold. First, action research is conducted by using the existing research and organization-specific data to craft a solution to a narrowly defined problem within the organization. At the same time, by documenting the entire process—with the researcher going from participant to third-party observer—observations, findings, and conclusions can be drawn that could add to the larger body of scholarship surrounding the problem being addressed (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014; Melin & Axelsson, 2007).

As Glanz (2014) pointed out, findings from action research studies do not result in the theories that basic research aims to provide, nor do they produce generalizable outcomes that other studies hope to create (Karagiorgi et al., 2018). In action research studies, solutions are found through the collaboration of the researcher and fellow members within the organization working together (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). It is the use of a disciplined, reflective, cyclical approach to problem solving—and the documenting of the *process* used to make

improvements—that allows others to learn from action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014; Lewin, 1946; Melin & Axelsson, 2007).

The fact that action research studies are practitioner-driven, that they involve a repeatable process, and that they can be conducted much more quickly relative to other scientific studies make them a more efficient, more effective approach for practicing educators who wish to make improvements (Mertler, 2021). As stated by Somekh and Zeichner (2009), “combining action with research inevitably challenges the routines of the *status quo*,” (p. 19, emphasis in the original).

According to Glanz (2014), an educator armed with basic research strategies will, ultimately, find action research to be a less than complicated undertaking. Continuous improvement is—or *should be*—the goal of education practitioners. From a teacher moving from unit to unit to a principal developing the annual school improvement plan, disciplined reflection is key to achieving success. When reflection is done in an intentional, cyclical manner, that success is more likely to be sustainable. While all researchers have their own conceptualization of this process, the basic elements are consistent.

Each action research study cycle begins with a clear understanding of the problem that is being addressed. Based on analysis of data specific to that organization, along with research literature related to the problem, an improvement strategy or intervention must be designed. Once designed, the intervention must be facilitated. On completion, results should be gathered to determine what worked well, what did not, and what needs to come next, including, potentially, new interventions. At this point, a new cycle—following the same steps—should commence (Bryk et al., 2015; Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014). For this study, three action cycles were conducted using qualitative approaches.

As Bryk et al. (2015) stated, “being user-friendly means respecting the people who actually do the work by seeking to understand the problems they confront. It means engaging these people in designing changes that align with the problems they really experience” (pp. 32-33). To bring these experiences to life, to better understand these experiences in the context of time and place (Merriam & Grenier, 2019), and to descriptively share the impact of research-based interventions on their experiences, a qualitative approach to this action research study was deemed to be the appropriate methodology.

Data Collection

The qualitative methods to collect data for this study included:

1. analyzing documents and reports. The documents reviewed included ESSD retention reports, exit interview questionnaires, and “stay” interview results. All documents are part of the ESSD Human Resources Department processes. The purpose was to identify trends in the realm of job (dis)satisfaction among district leaders. These documents were analyzed by the researcher and members of the ARDT.
2. conducting individual interviews. As suggested by Glanz (2014), “Interviews enable the researcher to learn the complexities of participants’ experiences from their point of view” (p. 127). For this study, it was vital to hear directly from the participants their articulation of the differences in leading at the school level compared to leading from a district post in ESSD. Understanding the impact of the interventions and organizational socialization tactics was key for the ARDT to assess results and to adjust when moving from one cycle to the next in the study. Additionally, members of the ARDT were interviewed individually, providing important insights to the researcher about the study, itself.

3. facilitating focus group discussions. In addition to individual interviews, focus groups—or group interviews—were facilitated to hear directly from participants. This format of data collection allowed for candid conversations about experiences participants had in common, as well as differences in their individual work settings. As shared by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), “One strength of focus groups is that this method is socially oriented, studying participants in an atmosphere that is more natural and relaxed than a one-to-one interview” (p. 195). This method was facilitated not only with participants, but with ARDT members, as well. ARDT focus group discussion were facilitated within each cycle of the study when interventions and socialization tactics were selected, as well as when results were analyzed.
4. distributing and collecting questionnaires. This method of collecting data allowed for participants to respond to the researcher’s questions about their leadership and socialization experiences in the comfort of private setting and at their own pace. The questionnaires provided within each cycle of the study included a combination of closed and open-ended questions. While the closed-ended questions allowed for an efficiency of analysis, the open-ended questions allowed the participants the opportunity to elaborate on their answers (Glanz, 2014).
5. observing district department meetings. Acting as an observer-participant in ESSD department meeting, as well as a participant-observer in system director meetings, provided the researcher multiple opportunities to collect data within the natural setting of participants’ work (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). When facilitating ARDT discussions about the study, the researcher was also able to collect data as a participant-observer.

6. journaling. A research journal was used throughout the study. It contained the researcher's observation notes, as well as comments on interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. The researcher's thoughts on patterns that emerged at each stage of the study were recorded in the journal, providing an avenue for reflection both during and at the end of the study.

Coding methods were applied for the analysis of the results that each data collection approach generated. Coding allowed for the grouping of results and the development of themes.

Equally as important, use of the multiple data collection methods provided a multidimensional view of the concerns facing ESSD leaders, offered the ability to triangulate data for greater clarity of the problem, and allowed for improved understanding of trends related to the perceptions of the participants (Glanz, 2014; Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Interventions

Data were collected around the implementation and assessment of the interventions conceived by the ARDT and as implemented by the ARIT. These interventions were grouped into three main categories of focus: uncertainty reduction, leadership clarity, and learning agility. Each of the interventions was delivered through either one or a combination of the following organizational socialization tactics: formal, collective, serial, or investiture. The interventions implemented are described in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3*Interventions*

Intervention Focus	Socialization Tactics	Intervention Activities
Uncertainty Reduction	Formal	Expectation meetings with supervisor
Uncertainty Reduction	Formal/Collective	Strategic planning alignment
Leadership Clarity	Collective	Welcome social events with superintendent and senior staff
Leadership Clarity	Formal/Collective	District leadership workshops
Leadership Clarity	Serial/Investiture	One-on-one coach meetings and Supervisor Expectation Check-in
Leadership Clarity	Serial/Collective/Formal	Scenario/simulations with coach, supervisor, and in district leadership workshops
Learning Agility	Collective	Mindfulness training
Learning Agility	Investiture	Professional growth plan
Learning Agility	Formal	Feedback/reflection activities

Note. Adapted from Harvey and Prager (2021); Jones (1986); Van Maanen and Schein (1977).

Successfully onboarding new ESSD district leaders meant helping them to more quickly adjust to their new roles and more thoroughly preparing them for the challenges they will face as educational leaders. Given the impact that school leadership has on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021), it was critical to prepare ESSD central office leaders for their new roles and support their development in the early stages of their new leadership journey.

Significance of the Study

Second only to the teachers who deliver classroom instruction, school leaders have significant impact on student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2019). Capacity building, onboarding, coaching, and mentoring are all examples of support provided to those taking on principal and assistant principal responsibilities. Research has also shown that effective district leaders have the power to create the necessary conditions for that student achievement within a system (Leithwood et al., 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021). Given those facts, succession planning and clear selection processes have become vital to attracting, appointing, and retaining high quality building leaders. However, no such supports are provided to those assuming central office roles, nor are clear processes for succession planning when district level leadership positions emerge.

The size of a school district, the economic makeup of the community it serves, and the overall nature of the locale (urban, suburban, or rural) in which it is situated can and does affect the culture of a system (Zepeda et al., 2021). However, neither size, affluence, nor geography can make a school system immune from pandemics, polarizing politics, labor shortages, and retention challenges. The tests faced by education leaders require a learning agility not seen in modern times, thus furthering the need for professional development and systems of support for those leaders charged with creating conditions for successful schooling (Church & Seaton, 2022; Harvey & Valerio, 2022; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000).

This study looked specifically at identifying the challenges and needs faced by those moving from leadership positions at the school building into roles at the district office. This study added to the gap in research around the onboarding and support of new district leaders, with a focus on intentional socializing, developing learning agility, and increasing workplace

engagement. As the members of the action research design and implementation teams all serve as district leaders, this study will also contribute to the research around the development of school system coherence, particularly in the realm of leadership development.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the action research study, an overview of the research questions that drove the study, the problem of practice addressed, and the methods used to conduct the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the related literature for the study, with focus on the impact of school district leadership, the importance of intentional onboarding practices, and the need for system coherence. Chapter 3 describes the methodology involved in action research and the qualitative methods employed in this study. It also describes the context in which the study was conducted.

Chapter 4 examines the findings from the action research conducted. Chapter 5 provides a detailed analysis of the action research cycles facilitated and their results, as related to the research questions used to guide the study. This chapter also examines the interventions employed by the action research team and the researcher. Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the study, discusses the findings related to the research questions, offers potential implications for school leaders, and proposes suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The challenges of preparing leaders for a world in which unforeseen challenges are constantly emerging has led to the need for new thinking and greater intentionality in the realm of educational leadership development (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021). As school district leaders are responsible for setting the conditions for success through strategic planning and culture setting (Leithwood et al., 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021), it is vital that they become equipped with the learning agility necessary for them to succeed in an increasingly vulnerable, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world that presents teacher and leader shortages, increased accountability, and growing politicization (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Harvey & Valerio, 2022; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Zepeda et al., 2021).

In cases where succession planning has not been intentional and capacity-building programs for district leadership do not exist, the opportunity for preparing new leaders must take place at the onboarding stage. Successful transitioning to new roles will occur when uncertainty is reduced (Bauer et al, 2007; Bauer, 2010; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977), clarity in leadership roles is established (Bauer, 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021), and learning agility is developed (Church & Seaton, 2022; De Meuse, 2022). While the literature related to organizational socialization and role clarity is robust, the relatively new concept of

learning agility is rapidly growing in response to the VUCA conditions that leaders currently face (De Meuse, 2022).

The purpose of this action research study was to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). The following questions were used to guide the action research conducted in this study:

1. How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variation of leading at the district office with leading at the school level?
2. How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding model on their transition from school level to district office leadership?
3. How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding model on their own professional practice?

This study looked specifically at identifying the challenges and needs faced by those moving from leadership positions at the school building into roles at the district office.

This action research study presented findings around the onboarding and support of new district leaders, with a focus on organizational socializing, clarifying leadership roles, and developing learning agility. As the members of the action research design and implementation teams all serve as ESSD district leaders, this study will contribute to the research around the development of school system coherence.

This chapter serves as a review of the related literature that led to the development and execution of this study. The first section of the literature review explores the research conducted on organizational socialization theories and practices. Organizational socialization serves as the foundation for onboarding new leaders and is vital to reducing the anxiety and uncertainty of starting a new job or role within an organization. The second section focuses on the research surrounding role clarity as newly appointed leaders shift from one leadership position to another position.

The third section explores the literature surrounding the need for leadership agility, particularly in a world growing ever more vulnerable, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). The final section reviews the research related to the development of a unified purpose and the significance of coherence in school district leadership. The literature reviewed for this study contains both scholarly and empirical works. A full listing of the empirical research can be found in Appendix A.

Uncertainty Reduction when Onboarding Newcomers

Failing to properly prepare new members of a team can squander not only time and financial investments but, just as importantly, talent and potential (Bauer, 2010; Cable et al., 2013; Caldwell & Peters, 2018). Interchangeable with workplace concepts of induction and orientation, the relatively recent term of onboarding refers to the activities used to bring new employees into an organization or company. As defined by Jeske and Olson (2022), onboarding “sets the stage for new hires’ expectations about how to behave, connect to other staff members and succeed in the new role” (p. 64). For any industry, the use of a comprehensive onboarding program for new employees can be instrumental in the success of the organization (Ellis et al., 2017).

While once thought of as a meeting for new employees to sign-up for benefits and provide them with directions to the coffee machine, mailroom, and lavatories, onboarding has developed into a major human resources operation that draws heavily from the science of socialization (Bauer, 2010; Becker & Bish, 2021; Bengtson et al., 2013; Klein et al., 2015). Many companies see onboarding as an opportunity to go further. They seek to instill corporate values in, establish expectations for, and increase the potential for success with their newest employees. Public school education is not immune to the challenges posed when hiring new leaders and has the same need for comprehensive onboarding approaches as all other industries (Bengtson et al., 2013, Zepeda et al., 2012).

The literature surrounding the concept of onboarding will be reviewed in greater depth. What should not be overlooked, however, are the intentions of an organization *before* bringing a newcomer into the fold. Determining the reasons why a new member of the team has been hired must be done before the onboarding process can be designed and implemented.

Prior to Onboarding

A significant step in the effective onboarding of a new employee—or more accurately, prior to it—is the actual selection of the candidate. Certainly, a knowledge of the work, a solid resume, and commitment to the success of the organization are vital considerations during the vetting and interviewing processes, but other factors regarding the candidate’s selection also come into play—factors that may very well affect the organization’s onboarding efforts (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013; Klein et al., 2015).

Is the newcomer an existing member of the organization transitioning into a new role? An example of this in an educational setting would be a principal who has been elevated to an assistant superintendent position within the same school system. Is the newcomer already

experienced in that role, but coming in from another organization? An education-based example of this would be a principal who was hired away from one school system to be a principal in a different system. Is the role an entry level position in which the newcomer has no experience in the field, such as a recent college graduate who was hired to teach first grade?

Another important consideration must also be contemplated by the organization's decision-makers: Are the employers searching for a complementary or supplementary fit (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987; Van Vianen, 2018)? As defined by Muchinsky and Monahan's (1987) seminal work, a supplementary hire would be a candidate who is perceived to have characteristics like those already in the organization, thus making them a natural fit. Van Vianen (2018) suggested that a supplementary hire would be a person whose focus would be on fitting in with the organization, team, or supervisor and who would strive to continue the current approach to the work of the organization.

A complementary hire, as labeled by Muchinsky and Monahan (1987), would be one who fills a hole in the organization, bringing strengths to areas of perceived weaknesses on the team. This newly hired person is someone whose primary focus is on the job responsibilities and is more likely to alter approaches to the work regardless of how it may be currently conducted (Van Vianen, 2018).

While fit theories are still being debated and tested for predicting job satisfaction and productivity (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013; Van Vianen, 2018), they certainly raise questions that must be considered prior to onboarding. Chief among them: for what reason is the new person being hired? Once answered, comprehensive onboarding processes can be designed that bring out the best in the new employee and, thus, lead to the success for which the organization is aiming (Cable et al., 2013).

In the realm of public schools, decision-makers must determine if they are hiring a principal, for example, to alter the direction of a school, or one who will work to continue the path that it is on (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987; Van Vianen, 2018). Another example of this would be the thought process used to determine why a new member of the Teaching and Learning Department of a school district is being added. Is it because of a specific skill set the candidate brings to the team that fills a missing element needed for success (complementary fit)? Or are they hired because the newcomer is already seen as a natural fit with that group (supplementary fit), making for a more efficient transition and the continuation of the work as it has been done in the past (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987; Van Vianen, 2018)? Regardless, clarity in purpose must be developed prior to the onboarding experience. Once that purpose has been determined and the right candidate has been selected, it is incumbent on the organization to socialize the newcomer in a very intentional manner.

Organizational Socialization to Reduce Uncertainty

The theory of organizational socialization, as first developed by Van Maanen and Schein (1977), provided the foundational research for onboarding new employees. As described in their seminal work, Van Maanen and Schein (1977) stated that the process of organizational socialization “may appear in many forms ranging from a relatively quick, self-guided, trial-and-error process to a far more elaborate one requiring a lengthy preparation period of education and training followed by an equally drawn out period of official apprenticeship” (p. 3). Further clarifying, Van Maanen and Schein (1977) wrote:

At any rate, given a particular role, organizational socialization refers minimally, though, as we shall see, not maximally, to the fashion in which an individual is taught and learns

what behaviors and perspectives are customary and desirable within the work setting as well as what ones are not. (p. 3)

In short, socialization into a new workplace serves as an employees' guide for how to gather information, as well as how to operate, interact, and survive on the job. The more that the new employee can predict expectations and reactions of those around them, the less anxiety they will experience in the early stages on the job (Cable et al., 2013; Klein et al., 2015; Saks & Gruman, 2018; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

Van Maanen and Schein (1977) proposed that, through a combination of socialization tactics employed either by design or by default, new employees would transition into their new role with one of three predictable outcomes as a

1. *custodial* member of the team who will seek no changes in the job role, the way the work is handled, nor in the mission of the organization;
2. *content innovator* who will aim to alter the way the work will be handled, while still honoring the organizational mission; or,
3. *role innovator*, who will aim to redefine the mission of the organization, the way that work is handled, and the job role, itself (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977, emphasis in the original).

Ultimately, newcomers will want to gather information about their new environment to deal with the uncertainty associated with starting a new job. Therefore, it is imperative that the organization intentionally plans this socialization process. Failure to do so will lead to the newcomers developing into their roles in ways that run counter to the organization's goals and practices.

To produce either the custodial outcome or one of the innovator outcomes, Van Maanen and Schein (1977) shared that an organization chooses between (or defaults to) six primary sets of socialization tactics. Jones' (1986) empirical study tested and further clarified the organizational socialization theory by grouping the six sets of tactics into two categories: institutional versus individual. Jones (1986) found that those companies who used institutional tactics to socializing new employees were more likely to produce custodial responses, to reduce the newcomers' anxieties, and to retain their services. Those companies choosing individualized tactics saw higher levels of role conflict and ambiguity, greater newcomer anxiety, higher intention of employees to quit, and less job satisfaction (Jones, 1986).

The first choice that a company must make in the socialization of new employees is between a collective approach (institutional socialization tactic) and an individual approach (individualized socialization tactic). In the collective approach, newcomers learn together, whereas in the individual approach, the newcomers are left to learn on their own (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). In the context of a school district, a collective approach would be the onboarding of new leaders as a cohort. According to Greenlee and Karanxha (2010), learning as a group fosters trust, cohesiveness, and satisfaction over an individualized approach. Bialek and Hagan (2021) suggested that using "a cohort-based format provides a means by which to develop leader cohesion and support network development. Networks contribute to interpersonal skill and competency development and support building social capital" (p. 18).

Often coupled with the first choice of tactics, an organization next must choose between a formal approach (institutional tactic) to socialization and an informal one (individual tactic). The formal approach involves new learning via a structured process, while the informal approach is an on-the-job experience and where the employee's previous perceptions are not intentionally

addressed at the onset of the work (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). School systems who choose to orient newcomers through a cohort model tend to use an institution-driven formal approach, ensuring that the new employees learn the values, mission, and vision of their new organization together (Bengtson et al., 2013). Bauer et al. (2007) shared that when using more formal structures, training can be done in a safe setting, away from the job, “where performance consequences are minimized” and “newcomers can practice their roles without fear of failure;” thus, improving the self-efficacy of the new employees (p. 709).

The third choice in socializing newcomers comes between a sequential socialization (institutional tactic), which requires a series of steps or phases to the process of starting the job, and a random approach (individual tactic), where no clear progression is established by the organization (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Tied closely to that is the fourth choice. This choice is made regarding a timetable for completion of the process, which is done either on a fixed basis (institutional tactic) or with a varied (individual tactic) approach, which has no set timeline (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). In the realm of school district leadership, sequential and fixed timeline socialization tactics are often equated to the structured training and college preparation programs that are requisite to a candidate even applying for the position (Bengtson et al., 2013).

The final sets of choices to be made in an organization’s socialization practices are what Jones (1986) characterized as the social aspects of the six tactics. The fifth choice positions the use of a serial approach (institutional tactic) against a disjunctive (individual tactic) one. The serial experience uses veterans inside of the organization to mentor or coach the newcomer, while the disjunctive approach provides no formal support from an experienced member of the team (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). The serial approach is one often used by school systems

who aim to support new teachers and administrators (Swaminathan & Reed, 2020). The use of experienced mentors and coaches within the field of education is considered vital for developing and retaining new educators, as the personal connection leads to a quicker understanding of the unknown, as well as a deeper trust with the school or organization (Bengtson et al., 2013; Swaminathan & Reed, 2020; Zepeda et al., 2021).

The sixth and final choice in organizational socialization involves the use of investiture (institutional tactic) versus divestiture (individual tactic). While investiture experiences aim to reinforce the newcomer's personal traits with positive affirmation from those within the organization, divestiture aims at stripping away a newcomer's personal traits (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). This choice of tactics has yielded much debate among scholars. While Van Maanen and Schein (1977) declared divestiture practices to be integral to obtaining a custodial response, the research of both Jones (1986) and Bauer et al. (2007) suggested the opposite, claiming that the internal support garnered from positively reinforcing a newcomer's traits helped strengthen the social acceptance of that newcomer and, thus, led to a greater commitment to the organization.

A similar debate plays out in the socialization of school leaders, as well. At its core, education is a "people business" that focuses on bringing out the best in students, teachers, and administrators (Bengtson et al, 2013). Unlike the training of military personnel, divesting one of their personal traits in education runs counter to the reasons many leaders are elevated in a school system setting. However, as leaders in education face unparalleled challenges, content innovation may be preferred over custodial responses to socialization. To meet new challenges in the field, Bengtson et al. (2013) suggested that individuals "must 'divest' from their old professional identity and embrace a new way of behaving, interacting, and knowing" while

maintaining the relationship-building skills and “good character” that led them to their leadership roles in the first place (pp. 157-158).

While much of the foundational research related to organizational socialization focuses on the activities of the organization, Bauer et al. (2007) claimed that the onboarding process of newcomers is more interactionist than simply the design of those activities initiated by the company. Bauer et al. (2007) stressed that both the organization *and* the newcomer play roles in the reduction of anxiety, “Simultaneously (and perhaps in reaction to tactics), newcomers proactively seek information to help them adjust. A theoretical basis for both newcomer information seeking and organizational socialization tactics is the reduction of uncertainty newcomers experience on organizational entry” (p. 709). In later studies, Cable et al. (2013) and Becker and Bish (2021) pointed to the need for greater attention to be placed on the needs and experiences of the newcomer, further making the case that socialization should be a two-way street of responsibility when it comes to reduction of uncertainty.

Bauer et al. (2007) demonstrated that the combination of information seeking along *with* collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture socialization tactics—what Jones (1986) collectively called individualized socialization—led to three newcomer adjustments: role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance. From there, Bauer et al. (2007) demonstrated a correlation between the newcomer adjustment and uncertainty reduction with positive socialized outcomes of better performance, improved job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, greater intention to remain, and lower turnover rates, illustrating empirical evidence about the significance of Van Maanen and Schein’s (1977) work. Studies focused on the reduction of uncertainty have led to the use of multiple onboarding frameworks, including the *Inform-*

Welcome-Guide (IWG) that was developed by Klein and Heuser (2008) and Bauer's *Four Cs Framework* (2010).

Applying the Research to Onboarding Practices

Rooted heavily in the sciences of socialization, human resources departments across industries have adapted research-based frameworks to build their onboarding programs. Klein and Heuser (2008) placed greater focus on measurable, ongoing practices than on broad use of socialization processes at the initial stage of onboarding. Their *Inform-Welcome-Guide (IWG)* model demonstrated this focus (Klein & Heuser, 2008). In this onboarding framework, the “inform” category focused on providing the newcomer with essential information through formalized communications, document resources, and training sessions. The “welcome” category celebrated the arrival of the new employee with a focus on meeting their emotional needs. The “guide” category provided them with fellow, veteran employees as a resource to help “navigate the transition from naïve outsider to effective insider” (Klein et al., 2015, p. 265).

Based on studies of the implementation of the *IWG* model, new considerations were raised to guide future onboarding model designs. These considerations included the potential for an unintentional disconnect between what a company was hoping to teach and what the new employees were learning during the process, concerns about the effectiveness of practices being used, questions on whether those activities should be voluntary or mandated, and the numbers and types of activities that should be used (Klein et al., 2015). Jeske and Olson (2022) suggested that the designing of onboarding programs required deeper examination of those concerns so that employees were provided with both the readiness for their new role, as well as the ability to adjust when new challenges were presented.

Another model for intentional onboarding is known as the *Four Cs Framework* (Bauer, 2010). This is a four-level model that begins with the “compliance level” where rules, regulations, and policies are learned by the newcomer. The second is the “clarification level” where roles are to be clearly defined for new employees and expectations are laid out. The third level, “culture,” is where organizational norms are to be learned. The fourth level, considered the highest and most transformative one, is the “connection” level. It is at this level where social relationships are developed and internal networks are, hopefully, cemented (Bauer, 2010). In its building block approach, the *Four Cs Framework* aims to provide onboarding activities that lead to four levels of success, as elaborated in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

The Four Cs Framework for Onboarding

Onboarding Levels	Focus of Onboarding Activities	Indicators of Success
I. Compliance	Building confidence early in the newcomer’s tenure	Self-efficacy
II. Clarification	Clear understanding of the new role and performance expectations	Role Clarity
III. Culture	Finding comfort in working with peers and superiors; Relationship-building with department colleagues and team leaders	Social Integration
IV. Connection	Gaining command of organizational vocabulary, core values, and internal politics	Organizational Fit

Note. Adapted from Bauer (2010).

While not the employee-centered focus that Cable et al. (2013) and Becker and Bish (2021) called for, the *Four Cs* does incorporate both the organization’s long-term goals of higher productivity and low turnover, along with newcomer-centered goals of job satisfaction and commitment from the organization (Bauer, 2010; Maier & Brunstien, 2001). Although both the

Four Cs and *IWG* frameworks are particularly helpful in reducing uncertainty, onboarding activities can be designed with even greater goals in mind to support role clarification for new school district leaders (Becker & Bish, 2021; Saks & Gruman, 2018).

Leadership Clarity for New School District Leaders

Although the *IWG* and *Four Cs Framework* serve as basic socialization models for reducing the anxiety associated with the uncertainty new employees experience, these models do not address the challenges of adjusting to a new role for someone already working within an organization. Similarly, these frameworks do not address the difficulties of experienced newcomers who arrive from outside of the organization. Given the nature of leadership promotion in public school systems, it is vital to consider the background experiences of district-level newcomers before onboarding commences (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013). Becker and Bish (2021) shared that the employer should not only provide the new leader with the organization's expectations, but also to consider the employee's "previous experiences and tailor onboarding experiences accordingly" so that their needs are met as they transition into the new role (p. 5). The onboarding of new school district leaders, therefore, requires an understanding of their backgrounds and experiences in previous educational roles and settings.

In the realm of public-school systems, the performance of leaders has measurable impact on student success and nearly every new leader comes to the job with myriad experiences from within the field (Leithwood et al., 2019; Zepeda et al., 2012). Most school system leaders, both at the building and district levels, come to their roles after demonstrating success as educators within the field. Moving from one role to another, such as a teacher moving into an administrative role or a principal shifting to a central office position, requires an adjustment in thinking that should be addressed as part of the onboarding process (Bengtson et al., 2013;

Zepeda et al., 2012; Zepeda et al., 2021). When done correctly, new leaders can better adjust to their new roles by learning how to apply leadership skills from one setting to another.

The *IWG* and *Four C's Framework* provide well-researched outlines to develop onboarding activities that reduce uncertainty and new job anxiety. Adding to those models is imperative given the significance that previous experience has on a newcomer's development (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013; Daskalaki, 2012). To acquire the additional learning needed to succeed in new roles, the onboarding of new leaders necessitates the unlearning of previous assumptions and thinking (Becker & Bish, 2021; Bengtson et al., 2013, Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2014; Park & Kim, 2020). The concept of unlearning is a vital part of the process in helping school leaders adjust their leadership lens to find clarity in their new district leadership roles.

Unlearning as Part of the Onboarding Process

When designing onboarding experiences that clarify a newcomer's role and provide opportunities for adjustment, the process must include more than simply handing out a list of organizational expectations. Organizations will find improvement in the quality of work and retention by shifting from the traditional, organization-focused theories of socialization to theories of learning that have the *newcomer* as the primary focus (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013; Klein et al., 2015). Cable et al. (2013) urged a personalized approach to the onboarding process aimed at helping the new employee “recognize and apply their authentic best selves” (p. 6). Going further, Becker and Bish (2021) suggested that effective onboarding incorporated both learning and unlearning processes that focus on the new employees' prior experiences, knowledge, and previous socialization. In the words of Park and Kim (2020), “Unlearning is a significant issue for organizations struggling to adapt to a changing world and to survive in the

competitive business market” (p. 6). That changing, challenging world includes the business of education (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021).

While one of the major goals of onboarding is for the newcomer to obtain new knowledge necessary to be successful, it is just as vital to help them disconnect with old knowledge that may inhibit effectiveness (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2014; Park & Kim, 2020). Rushmer and Davies (2004) suggested the existence of three levels of unlearning: routine unlearning, wiping, and deep unlearning. The natural, more gradual letting go of old practices is what defines routine unlearning (Rushmer & Davies, 2004). The more intentional level of wiping of old practices involves the organization using direct approaches to changing a newcomer’s methods to solving problems from their old practice to what is expected by their new employer (Becker & Bish, 2021; Rushmer & Davies, 2004). Deep unlearning often comes in the form of a shocking situation or incident that results in a challenge and loss of the newcomer’s deeply held beliefs about their work and their world (Rushmer & Davies, 2004).

More simply, Cegarra-Navarro et al. (2014) shared that the process of unlearning comes through three stages: awareness of obsolete thinking and previous assumptions; relinquishing of those assumptions, attitudes, and habits; and relearning of the new skills, behaviors, and the types of thinking and perspectives needed to succeed in the new role. For those teaching and leading at a school building level, the day-to-day operations and the work being done at the district level are often a mystery. Assumptions made and attitudes developed are carried with an educator as they are promoted to a district office post. Unlearning those preconceived beliefs and learning about the culture, interactions, and politics of the district office are just as important as acquiring policy expectations as the educational leader enters the world of the central office (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021).

Klein and Heuser (2008) suggested that a newcomer's previous knowledge of procedures, policies, and structures are much less challenging to unlearn than behavior-related, experienced-based knowledge such as organizational relationships, politics, values, and attitudes. Utilization of various onboarding methods over a period of time will be necessary and should include challenging newcomers to question their prior knowledge through experiential activities, providing human support such as formalized coaches or mentors, and helping them acquire new understandings of the processes and knowledge of their work through professional development efforts (Becker & Bish, 2021; Fiol & O'Connor, 2017). In designing personalized onboarding activities, considering the newcomer's past experiences and what will be needed for them to obtain necessary new knowledge are vital elements to a successful socialization process (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013).

These ideas are particularly insightful when onboarding new leaders in a public-school system, where very few newcomers would be considered a blank slate when appointed to their new role (Daskalaki, 2012). Building level leaders moving into district leadership positions will bring with them their formally obtained knowledge from capacity-building and certification programs, as well as their innate understanding and perceptions formed from their own experiences of interacting with district leaders (Daskalaki, 2012). This would similarly hold true for education leaders moving from one school district to another.

Becker and Bish (2021) suggested that the question of what newcomers need to learn and what they need to unlearn should be considered immediately when designing onboarding experiences. A major factor to be considered are the reasons for their selection—whether they were hired for supplementary or complementary purposes—so that an effective onboarding experience can be designed (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987;

Van Vianen, 2018). Prior knowledge can become an obstacle to new learning if not factored into the onboarding design. According to Beck and Bish (2021), “Previous socialization in significantly different organizational environments will require more unlearning and therefore more comprehensive onboarding” (p. 10). As illustrated in Table 2.2, levels of unlearning to be used in the onboarding of new school district leaders will vary based on both the newcomer’s past experiences and the purposes for which they were hired.

Table 2.2

Levels of Unlearning Needed for Newly-Hired School District Leaders

Previous Employment Reason Hired	Similar Role	Different Role
Same School System		
Supplementary Fit	Low	Moderate
Complementary Fit	Moderate	High
Different School System		
Supplementary Fit	Moderate	Moderate
Complementary Fit	High	High

Note. Adapted from Becker and Bish (2021).

Van Vianen (2018) shared that it is imperative to examine the culture from which the new leaders came and the role that they played in that organization. It is just as important to clearly determine the purpose they are expected to fill in their new roles as district-level leaders, as well (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987; Van Vianen, 2018).

An example of “low” levels of unlearning in a public-school setting would be true for a department director who is appointed to a lateral position in another department within the same school system, as they would be viewed as a natural, supplementary fit (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). A public-school example of “moderate” unlearning would exist when a principal of one successful school is asked to rebuild an underperforming school within the same system. Another “moderate” school-based example is when an assistant principal, known to be particularly

effective in special education issues, is asked to assume an assistant director position at the district level in the Student Services Department (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987).

The “highest” unlearning levels in public educational settings are needed when leaders are hired from outside of a particular system, regardless of the role, and are asked to fill an unmet need or to provide a different approach to the work than what has been the norm (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). A similar situation would be the promotion of a successful principal to an associate superintendent role with the goal of instituting changes in the district’s direction.

In short, significant attention to unlearning during the onboarding process must be paid to meet the purpose of the new leader’s selection (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2014; Park & Kim, 2020). Clarifying that purpose and taking previous experiences into account set the table for any shifts in thinking that the newcomer will have to make during the onboarding process. A shift in thinking is particularly true in the world of public-schooling, where many district level leaders arrive at their jobs after having served as building level leaders at local schools—roles that operate in two very, distinct contexts.

Shifting to a New Leadership Lens

Principals and assistant principals perform as the instructional leaders of their schools, with an impact on student achievement that seconds only to that of classroom teachers (Leithwood et al., 2019; Zepeda et al., 2015). In many systems, principals have the responsibility for hiring, firing, assigning, and professionally developing the faculty and staff at their schools (Rogers & Van Gronigen, 2021; Zepeda et al., 2015). In leading instruction, managing local school budgets, raising funds, and interacting with families and businesses, the principal is the public face and voice for their school (Moore Johnson et al., 2015). When it comes to hiring new principals, opportunities for preparation, onboarding, and ongoing support continue to develop

leaders (Steinberg & Yang, 2022; Tingle et al., 2019). With the growing impact that school leadership has on student achievement, the importance placed on principal development and support will only continue to grow (Goldring et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2019; Rogers & Van Gronigen, 2021; Zepeda et al., 2012).

While Bengtson et al. (2013) shared that principal socialization was mostly directed by school district leaders, the question of how the district leaders, themselves, have been transitioned into their roles is something Goldring et al. (2020) suggested has been left largely unanswered. School systems throughout the nation have developed multi-year or multi-phased approaches to teacher and principal induction (Bengtson et al., 2013; Kang & Berliner, 2012; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Steinberg & Yang, 2022; Tingle et al., 2019), but very little research exists in the realm of the preparation and onboarding of district office leaders (Goldring et al., 2020). When principals do their job well, the next step is often a move into district office leadership. When the shift in position from the building to the central office level happens, clarity in leadership purposes and approaches must be learned, as leaders will be asked to operate in a new and very different context. As Goldring et al. (2020) shared, this transition likely will require the unlearning of old assumptions and behaviors and the acquisition of a new leadership lens.

Harden (2009) identified the need for addressing the challenges school leaders face when transitioning to a district office role. It was determined that a gap existed between the knowledge and skills that principals had acquired while successfully leading school buildings and the knowledge and skills they needed to successfully lead at the district level (D. Harden, personal communication, March 6, 2023).

Harden (2009) posited that school level leaders operate with a focus on advocating for the success of their own school. On their elevation to the district office, Harden (2009) suggested that school leaders needed to adjust their leadership lens to understand the change in context of leadership, as well as to clarify the purpose of their new role. Table 2.3 articulates the shifts that Harden (2009) shared were necessary for new school district leaders to make sense of their new roles.

Table 2.3

District Office Leadership Lens Shifts

School Level Leadership		District Office Level Leadership
Vertical Focus		Horizontal Focus
School leaders take a vertical approach to managing system functions within their school, receiving district resources in a top-down orientation.		District leaders must work across system departments on a horizontal plane, providing needed resources to schools.
Micro (System) Focus		Macro (Systemic) Focus
School leaders operate within a setting that is a microcosm of the district, focusing on activities that advance the interest of that school specific in alignment with district goals.		District leaders operate in the macro system that includes all schools and departments that comprise the district.
Affiliation		Separation
School leaders develop a close, deep connection and identify with their school through daily interactions with stakeholders and ongoing curricular and extracurricular activities.		District leaders rarely interact with any one group of students or families and are more frequently involved with community leaders on system-wide issues and initiatives.
“For” the Superintendent		“With” the Superintendent
School leaders build a relationship with the superintendent that is part of the hierarchical orientation.		District leaders, while still serving as subordinates, develop a more collaborative relationship with the superintendent, often providing counsel and analysis

School Level Leadership		District Office Level Leadership
“Receiving” Services		“Providing” Services
School leaders, in pursuit of serving their students, staff, and families, receive requisite support, resources, and service from the district office.		District leaders must be aware of the needs of all of the schools and school leaders in the system, providing for their sometimes-competing needs.
Implementation Focus		Design Focus
School leaders adjust district initiatives and programs to fit the needs of their school, often in collaboration with district personnel.		District leaders designs initiatives and programs that accommodate the needs of all schools, as well as providing oversight and monitoring school implementation to ensure alignment to district goals.
Product Focus		Process Focus
School leaders are responsible for overseeing programs and activities that lead to student achievement—work for which they are held accountable.		District leaders are responsible for the processes and resources that support school programs and maintain alignment to district goals.
Facilitating		Networking
School leaders must facilitate the work and interactions of students, staff, families, and the community in order to achieve school goals.		District leaders must network with fellow system and school leaders, the community at large, and local, state, and federal agencies to develop allowances for conducting the work of the district
Center Stage		Back Stage
School leaders play a very public role and are often identified with their schools, its activities, and standing in the community.		District leaders often provide behind-the-scenes support to school leaders with little recognition or fanfare.

Note. Copyright 2009 by the Georgia School Superintendents Association, D. Harden. Adapted with permission.

Leaders transitioning into district roles are asked to analyze and reflect on nine shifts in their leadership lens to serve effectively into their new positions (Harden, 2009). Doing so helps to

clarify what leadership looks like from their new perspectives and, ultimately to adjust to their new roles more quickly (D. Harden, personal communication, March 6, 2023).

The first shift suggested by Harden (2009) is for newly appointed leaders to move from a vertical to a horizontal perspective of educational work. Building administrators look at district offices from a vertical perspective, as they seek the resources to accomplish school goals from those at the central office (Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021). Those needs can range from maintenance equipment to human resource allotments to curriculum materials (Zepeda et al., 2021). A building leader connects with the individual department that can best meet the requests being made.

From the district lens, a horizontal view must be adopted, as district departments and leaders operate across the system with overlapping resources and responsibilities, often guided by board of education policies, state statutes, and federal requirements (Zepeda et al., 2021). As described by Anderson and Young (2018), the purpose of the district leader is to strive “to maximize alignment of organizational structures, financial allocations, and personnel policies and procedures” (p. 4). As a result, the leader in the district office must proceed more cautiously when making decisions, as more people must be brought into the conversation. This inclusion means that decisions take longer than had been the practice when operating with a vertical perspective—a sometimes frustrating adjustment for the new district leader endure (D. Harden, personal communication, March 6, 2023).

The second shift Harden (2009) proposed requires the move from a micro, or system, lens to a macro, or systemic, lens. At the micro level, the leader focuses on school/system goals and initiatives that will impact the students and staff directly. At the district level, the implementation of central office initiatives lies at a less tactical and more strategic level, making the impact less

direct. As Marzano and Waters (2009) shared, the principal is often the author of a one-year school improvement plan, whereas the district leader is involved in executing a specific element of a five-year strategic plan that was put together by a much larger group of stakeholders. Anderson and Young (2018) contended that the purpose of the effective district leader is to “establish an instructional and curricular focus and develop a widely shared set of beliefs and vision about student achievement” (p. 4). Put simply, the new central office leader will need to exchange a zoom lens for a wide-angle lens when approaching their work for the district.

To make the transition from a micro to a macro perspective, Harden’s (2009) third shift requires that a school leader break away from affiliation with their individual school and community, which had developed from their day-to-day interaction with students, staff, and parents. In turn, as the leader begins to operate from a district context, they will have to accept a separation from the daily work of schools. New district leaders must focus on what is best for all schools in the system—no longer just one. Sharing leadership with and providing autonomy to one’s former peers at the school level, the purpose of the district leader is to help foster a sense of efficacy across the district (Anderson & Young, 2018; Zepeda et al., 2021).

The fourth shift occurs in the nature of the relationship with the superintendent of the school system. When operating as a building leader, Harden (2009) describes the relationship as being hierarchical, with the principal working for the superintendent. Zepeda et al. (2021) made the point that the purpose of leaders at the district level is to serve on the superintendent’s team. While still technically in a role that “reports” to the superintendent, the district leader will often be a collaborator working with the superintendent (Zepeda et al., 2021). Guiding that collaboration are collective commitments to the strategic plan and governance team goals (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021).

The shift in the superintendent relationship is closely aligned with Harden's (2009) fifth one, which requires the new district leaders to recognize that they are no longer in a position to receive services. Rather, their primary purpose is now to provide services. Once the primary instructional leader at their school, the new district leader now serves as a filter to keep things off the principals' plates in the hopes of freeing them up to lead instruction (Honig, 2012).

Allocating time and money to the job-embedded professional development of others—namely, teachers and school building leaders—becomes the focus of the district leader (Anderson & Young, 2018; Goldring et al., 2020). Aligning those efforts with the strategic plan provides the opportunity to enhance district coherence and greater collective efficacy, both indicators of effective district leadership (Anderson & Young, 2018; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Zepeda et al., 2021). Much like the vertical to horizontal shift, this requires the relinquishing of a single-school lens in exchange for a view that leads to understanding the needs of all the system's schools.

As the boots on the ground, it is up to school leaders to implement district initiatives, albeit in a manner tailored for the specific needs of their students and community. At the district level, the responsibility shifts from being one that implements to one who designs initiatives and monitors progress throughout the system (Harden, 2009). Anderson and Young (2018) shared that this included the development of district wide curriculum, systems to monitor student achievement and gaps across the district and aligning and coordinating professional learning to meet instructional needs.

In Zepeda et al.'s (2021) words, "District leadership positions their time and effort focusing on the work needed to support the transformation of practices at the building level while attending to external accountability and reform" (p. 95). Additionally, Moore Johnson et al. (2015) pointed out that it is critical for district leaders to work closely with principals when

developing or implementing initiatives, as “they are vital agents in the district’s efforts to implement strategy for instructional improvement” (p. 89). As state and federal accountability intensifies, the need to design systemwide initiatives and monitor their progress will continue to be a major purpose for district leaders.

The seventh of Harden’s (2009) shifts comes in the fact that district leaders must become much more process oriented, while those at the school level remain product oriented—a shift not unlike the move from implementing to designing. The initiatives developed at the district level are rooted in a systems orientation, whereas those at the building level are developed to meet the specific needs of the students at that particular school. With evidence drawn from student data, an important purpose for district leaders is to establish programs systems that help deliver and translate such data to school building leaders (Anderson & Young, 2018). To provide a sense of district coherence, it is imperative that systems and programs are aligned to a common, systemwide purpose with the use of common vocabulary and processes (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021).

At the building level, a leader spends time facilitating relationships with parents, staff, and business partners to meet the needs and goals of their school (Moore Johnson et al., 2015). At the district level, much wider networking is needed—an approach that includes associations with board of education members, political leaders, state and federal agencies, university partners, and leaders from other systems, as well as the influential players in the local community (Leithwood, 2010; Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021). This network can be instrumental in forecasting future threats and opportunities facing the system, as well as the partnerships needed to meet those challenges. According to Leithwood (2010), it is critical to develop district priorities with an understanding of governmental and political agendas. The

effective district leader develops the ability to “analyze government change agendas to leverage them in the interest of district policies” (Anderson & Young, 2018, p. 4). Developing a vast network has, therefore, become a significant purpose for central office leaders.

The final shift proposed by Harden (2009) provides overarching clarity in one’s transition from school level to district office roles: the shift from center stage leadership to backstage leadership. Once the chief advocate for their own school, the new principal-turn-district leader must now focus on improving district coherence (Anderson & Young, 2018; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Zepeda et al., 2021). The focus on building self-efficacy in individual teachers and employees at the school is replaced by the focus on building collective efficacy among groups throughout the district (Anderson & Young, 2018; Zepeda et al., 2021).

With control of the morning school news broadcasts, local budgets, and a presence in their communities, school principals are the face of their schools (Moore Johnson et al., 2015). As new district leaders, they will now find that their purpose is, as Zepeda et al. (2021) put it, to serve as the unseen “connector for the superintendent leading their division in ways that link the system office to schools” (p. 94). For those who thrive living in the spotlight of school level leadership, the challenge of moving into a role with little to no fanfare may be a challenging transition to make.

As these new leaders are promoted to district level leadership from school buildings—or from other districts—the importance of designing an onboarding process that takes their previous socialization and experiences into account is imperative, particularly as none among them will arrive at their new desk as a truly blank slate (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013; Daskalaki, 2012). While uncertainty reduction is always a must when socializing newcomers, providing clarity of purpose in their new leadership role is also vital.

As presented in Harden's (2009) work, the need for unlearning processes is necessary when shifting from school level to district level leadership roles. Previously held assumptions, attitudes, and approaches to the work will need to be relinquished and new understandings and applications learned for a different leadership context (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2014; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Park & Kim, 2020; Zepeda et al., 2021).

In addition to the reduction of uncertainty and clarification of purpose in district leadership roles, a third area of focus for the successful onboarding of new school district leaders was explored: learning agility. Learning agility and its application to onboarding and leadership development is a relatively new concept that has led to a robust and growing body of literature.

Developing Learning Agility in New School District Leaders

Ideally, successful principals and assistant principals promoted to school district office positions will find immediate success in their new roles. Success in one area, though, is not only *not* a guarantee of success in another, but it can hinder future effectiveness (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). According to Castiglione et al. (2022), "No longer can individuals and organizations base success on the replication of past experiences; emerging situations are often significantly different than the past" (p. 312). As building administrators become new district leaders, this most certainly holds true.

Identifying the candidate who is the right fit and has the right characteristics needed for the new job, as well as establishing a clear purpose for hiring that particular candidate, are considerations that should be made prior to the hiring process (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987; Van Vianen, 2018). However, that is not always the case. Succession planning is not always a standard operating procedure—in school systems or elsewhere. Regardless of the selection

process, the work of those hired to fill district office positions is simply too important not to provide a comprehensive onboarding experience (Leithwood et al., 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021).

While Harden (2009) described the shifts needed to transition from one leadership context to another, it is important to point out the seismic shifts currently occurring under the feet of veteran and new district leaders, alike. Several challenges emerged between 2020 and 2022 that disrupted the nature of school system work (Grace et al., 2022; White et al., 2023). School board meetings that were once quiet and rarely attended became the center of political angst and controversy, reflecting the polarization of their respective communities (Ferrare & Phillipppo, 2023; Sutherland, 2023).

The stakeholders involved in the shaping of local board of education policies once consisted of educators, parents, and board members now include elected officials and national advocacy groups, each with an agenda far more expansive than determining local millage rates or which aging school to fix up (Ferrare & Phillipppo, 2023). In many cases, attendees at monthly meetings have been encouraged to use intertextual co-optation tactics (using their own words against them) to publicly challenge and discredit school officials (Bertrand & Sampson, 2022). Things became so heated at meetings that the numerous threats of violence against local board members prompted the National School Board Association (NSBA) to formally ask the federal government to provide protection (Sutherland, 2023; White et al., 2023).

What began as battling over mask and vaccine mandates rolled into racial and gender controversies. The social justice movements that began with the death of George Floyd in 2020 led to debates over school curriculum, particularly over the impact of critical race theory (CRT) and the development of culturally responsive classrooms (Grace et al., 2022; Hines et al., 2023). The treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and gender expansive (LGBTQ+)

students became another focus of examination (Farley & Leonardi, 2021; McQuillan, 2023). A backlash resulted in debates over any school district programs designed to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as well as social and emotional learning (SEL). Glenn Youngkin's successful campaign to become the governor of Virginia in 2022 was partially, and significantly, built on post-pandemic outrage over instructional practices and materials used by teachers during distance learning activities. His victory spawned a new strategy for politicians at national, state, and local levels: move education policy and practices to the front of the political stage (White et al., 2023).

In the wake of these debates, a wave of new legislation in a variety of states was passed—legislation that took dead aim at curriculum, instruction, and library books as evidenced by Georgia's *Divisive Concepts (20-1-11)*, *Parents Bill of Rights (20-2-786)*, and *Materials Harmful to Minors (20-2-324.6)*. In many cases, federal laws and guidelines have been contradicted by new state legislation, leaving board members, superintendents, and district leaders in an exceedingly vulnerable, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) position (Cohen & Mehta, 2017).

The result for school officials was that every decision made would now be viewed through a magnified, partisan, political lens. For the newly appointed district office leader, the onboarding process must include more than just the socialization aimed at reducing uncertainty and shifting into a new leadership context. As seen with the implications of a pandemic, and now with heightened political debate around curriculum and instruction, the role of a district leader also requires the ability to quickly anticipate the impact of decisions from multiple perspectives. In short, leaders must be able to provide stability in an “age of agility” (De Meuse & Harvey, 2021, p. 6).

Developing the skills and abilities needed to become nimbler and more flexible are what Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) first referred to as learning agility. While debates continue over the practicality of using learning agility as a means for identifying potential (Silzer & Church, 2009), the research is clear that those leaders who possess learning agility are most likely to be successful in their positions (Church & Seaton, 2022; De Meuse, 2022).

The Foundations of Learning Agility

Since the 1980s, the economy of the United States has shifted from industrial production to one based on knowledge (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). With information technology as the primary driver, many successful organizations in the twentieth century have failed to stay relevant, as evidenced by that fact that only 52 companies who appeared on the Fortune 500 list in 1955 remained there in 2020 (De Meuse & Harvey, 2021). Nearly 90% of the companies fell off the list during that period, meaning only 10% of America's top businesses made the necessary adjustments to remain relevant. The shift in businesses' focus can also be seen in the expectations of workers. Employees once focused on receiving a "fair day's work" for a "fair day's pay" as well as pledging organizational loyalty (De Meuse & Harvey, 2021, p. 11). Today, the employee focus can be characterized as more self-oriented, with work-life balance as a major objective along with personal fit (De Meuse & Harvey, 2021).

Keeping employees engaged has led to challenges for recruitment and retention among organizations (Milani et al., 2021). This new reality has altered the relationship between leaders and employees, as De Meuse and Harvey (2021) explained:

Employees are expected to show initiative, accept responsibility, be flexible, communicate solutions as well as problems, and demonstrate an ability and willingness to change. The archaic militaristic paradigm fostered docile, compliant,

and complacent employees. Leadership today must engage, empower, facilitate teamwork, and foster an environment of inclusion and diversity. Successful leaders have learned how to listen (as well as direct) and share decision-making. Most importantly, they must understand the appropriate skills to deploy in an ever-changing context. (p. 11)

As the economic climate changes ever-so-quickly and the demands of employees have dramatically shifted, leaders who are stuck in a mindset of the past quickly find themselves derailed (De Meuse, 2022). Worse, organizations that have not developed adaptability as a core mode of operation have also lost their places in their respective industries and markets (De Meuse & Harvey, 2021; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

One important result of what Harvey and Valerio (2022) call a “volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA)” world has been the need to reassess and redefine effective leadership (p. 269). Groves and Feyerherm (2022) urged leaders to understand the multitude of changes facing the organizations and the necessity to be flexible. Going further, Groves and Feyerherm (2022) stated, “Unprecedented transformations to the nature of work and organizations are forcing leadership and organization development scholars to redefine leadership models and how organizations must respond to these dramatic changes” (p. 978). In short, organizations must become adaptable to changing climates, both internally and externally, if they wish to survive and thrive (De Meuse, 2017; Groves & Feyerherm, 2022; Nicolaides & McCallum, 2013).

According to Pulakos et al. (2019), organizations who devise successful strategies in highly competitive business environments, who are willing to discard ineffective strategies, and who can quickly recover from disruptions are the agile companies. Through the use of right-

sized teamwork, a drive for stability, and making necessary course-corrections, these agile corporations are able to reduce complexity, clarify rules for work, and remove distractions for their employees, with the end result of higher profitability (Pulakos et al., 2019).

The need for adaptability means that organizations need forward-thinking, nimble leaders who can prepare for the unknown, who can demonstrate resiliency in the face of critical challenges and setbacks, and who can create conditions to bring out the best in their employees in the challenging context of a VUCA world (Cable et al., 2013; De Meuse, 2017; De Meuse & Harvey, 2021; Groves & Feyerherm, 2022; Nicolaides & McCallum, 2013; Pulakos et al., 2019). Identifying and developing the characteristics needed in leaders who can meet modern challenges has become a major focus for researchers in organizational, industrial, and leadership psychologies (Groves & Feyerherm, 2022). By discounting age or current levels of leadership within an organization as definitive predictors of future success, the biases, inaccuracies, and lack of diagnostic data often associated with intuition-based promotions can be limited (De Meuse, 2022; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Groves & Feyerherm, 2022; Rothwell, 2010).

Situated at the core of adaptability is the construct of experiential learning, as developed by Kolb (2015). According to Kolb's (2015) seminal work, knowledge results from grasping experiences and transforming them into lessons that can be acted on in the future. Kolb's (2015) process for learning requires one to take (grasp) a concrete experience, reflect on it, conceptualize it in thought (transform it), then act on it through experimentation. In their study on identifying high potential in men and women based on their ability to learn from experiences, Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) coined the phrase *learning agility*, defining it as "the willingness and ability to learn new competencies in order to perform under first-time, tough, or

different conditions” (p. 323). Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) posited that experience, alone, is no predictor of future successes, but that the willingness to apply those lessons may be.

While Kolb (2015) described the process of experiential learning, Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) focused on the skills and abilities needed as prerequisites to be successful at transforming experiences into knowledge for future application. De Meuse (2022), in describing learning agility as a meta competency, pointed out that not all components of it are necessary or relevant to all jobs within an organization, but are vital to those aspiring to leadership positions. Defining learning agility through a leadership context was the path followed for this action research study.

Defining Learning Agility

Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) found that successful leaders possessed four types of abilities which they positioned were essential to the experiential learning process. The abilities originally articulated by Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) included: people agility, results agility, mental agility, and change agility. Once embedded in people agility, self-awareness was later added as its own category, along with the additions of environmental mindfulness and feedback responsiveness (De Meuse, 2017). Each category of learning agility as defined by Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) and refined by De Meuse (2017) is described in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4

Categories of Learning Agility

Agility	Description
People Agility	The ability of a person to treat others well, to operate calmly under difficult circumstances, and to learn from experiences.
Results Agility	The ability of a person to get positive results in challenging circumstances by emanating a confident presence and inspiring others to achieve.

Agility	Description
Mental Agility	The ability of a person to find comfort in ambiguity, to use unique or alternative perspectives to solve complex problems, and to clearly articulate their thinking to others.
Change Agility	The ability of a person to passionately embrace new ideas, to be curious, to engage in new learning, and to experiment with new approaches.
Self-Awareness	The ability of a person to internalize lessons learned from experiences, to reflect on lessons learned for future application, and to understand one's own strengths and limitations.
Feedback Responsiveness	The ability of a person to seek and accept constructive feedback, to consider the merits of that feedback, and to adjust future actions accordingly.
Environmental Mindfulness	The ability of a person to be fully present and observant of their surroundings, to be attuned to changes in duties and responsibilities, and to remove judgment when facing environmental changes.

Note. Adapted from De Meuse (2017); De Meuse and Harvey (2021); Lombardo and Eichinger (2000).

Since Lombardo and Eichinger's (2000) original article, a variety of definitions have been constructed that incorporate various elements of the agility categories. The definition most directly tied to leadership has been De Meuse's (2017) version, which stated that "learning agility is the ability to learn from experiences, and then the willingness to apply those lessons to perform successfully in new and challenging leadership roles" (pp. 286-287).

The concept of learning agility, as originally proposed by Lombardo and Eichinger (2000), did not emerge without debate and constructive criticism. DeRue et al. (2012) raised multiple concerns ranging from its definition to methods of measuring learning agility. Questioning its validity as a meta competency, DeRue et al. (2012) pointed to a lack of empirical evidence that learning agility was a valid predictor of future performance and that it simply was not empirically distinguishable from other elements of experiential learning. DeRue et al. (2012) stated that learning agility should not be seen as its own construct, but rather an element of

learning situated within a “broader framework of constructs related to learning from experience, with a particular emphasis on the cognitive and behavioral processes through which learning agility is manifested and enhanced” (p. 265).

DeRue et al. (2012) believed that Lombardo and Eichinger’s (2000) definition of learning agility took on a much too broad construct, suggesting that it was simply a repackaging of learning ability and just another way of describing learning through experience. In narrowing the definition, DuRue et al. (2012) stated, “We posit that the concept of learning agility will be most applicable and have the most theoretical value when thinking specifically about issues related to speed and flexibility in the experiential learning process” (p. 262). Hence, DeRue et al. (2012) defined learning agility as the ability to pick up on new ideas quickly and across various situations.

Mitchinson et al. (2012) supported the need for a narrower definition, as they believed that doing so would allow for better empirical study. Mitchinson et al.’s (2012) concern over how to separate individuals from their internal thinking to focus on more specific elements of learning agility, as proposed by DeRue et al. (2012), led them to question the ability to apply such a model to the original intent of identifying high potential. DeRue et al.’s (2012) definition gives a clear picture of “agility,” with the emphasis on speed and application of new learning, but basically ignores the “learning” aspect of learning agility (Mitchinson et al., 2012).

In his meta-analysis of 19 field studies, De Meuse (2017) pushed back on the criticisms, demonstrating a significant empirical relationship between learning agility, as originally proposed by Lombardo and Eichinger (2000), and leadership success. While sharing that learning agility had been used for practical purposes in a variety of ways and measured differently through the use of commercially developed assessments, De Meuse (2017)

recognized the need for more scholarly research to clarify its definition, for common tools to measure those factors, and, ultimately, more empirical studies to determine the overall effectiveness of the construct.

Because of the debate, we are left with two schools of thought on learning agility. One school is that learning agility should be narrowly defined with a focus on the ability to learn things quickly and cognitively to apply them across various situations (DeRue et al., 2012). In this school of thought, natural intelligence is key to success. The other school calls for learning agility to be understood as a leadership metacompetency that is more broadly defined and includes a combination of skills related to “dealing with ambiguity, problem-solving, conflict management, critical-thinking skills, and open-mindedness” (De Meuse, 2017, p. 286). This school of thought contends that learning based on experiences and the application of that learning to new situations requires the leader to possess four main elements: abilities, willingness, cognitive flexibility, and behavior flexibility (De Meuse, 2017; De Meuse et al., 2010; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000).

Simply put, intelligence is the key driver in the first school; the willingness to learn is the major point of emphasis in the second school of thought. While the unsettled debate leaves the question of identifying potential up in the air, the broader definition proposed does open the door for developing learning agility in those being prepared for or already chosen for leadership positions.

Developing Learning Agility

Bray et al.’s (1974) study on management at AT&T determined that managers once thought to have low potential actually succeeded beyond expectations when provided leadership development opportunities. Kolb’s (2015) work on experiential learning demonstrated that the

development of new skills came from experiences. The combination of these two theories in terms of leadership development underscore the belief that learning agility can be developed in employees who are willing to learn (Church & Seaton, 2022; De Meuse, 2017; Harvey & Prager, 2021; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Milani et al., 2021).

Dries et al. (2012) declared that learning agility provided a better predictor than job performance for future success and that both on-the-job learning and a variety of career experiences were found to have higher levels of learning agility. Castiglione et al. (2022) stated the obvious when they concluded that a thorough understanding of the various aspects of learning agility by leaders and potential coaches was key to aligning targeted interventions and enhancing the learning of future leaders.

In their effort to promote learning agility as a something that could be developed, Harvey and Prager (2021) implored leaders to keep focused on those aspects of behavior that can be learned and the organizational practices that can enhance learning,

Just as a race car may have maximum horsepower and the best aerodynamics, the conditions of the track and the strategies deployed by the driver to adjust to them are also necessary for achieving maximum velocity. While identification and selection are certainly critical, it is equally important to consider processes that develop learning agility both for those who are and are not naturally predisposed to be agile learners. (p. 146)

Harvey and Prager (2021) shared that applying lessons learned from experience more quickly and learning to forecast future scenarios were key to leadership effectiveness.

Harvey and Prager (2021) provided five main categories of behaviors to be learned for leaders to become learning agile. Table 2.5 provides an overview of the five main categories of behaviors associated with learning agility.

Table 2.5

Learnable Behaviors Needed for the Development of Learning Agility

Behavior Category	Category Description	Learnable Behaviors
Observing	Behaviors that allow the leader to assess situations, both internally and externally, to be prepared for new challenges	Mindfulness Scanning Forecasting
Doing	Behaviors that allow the leader to find paths to organizational and personal improvement through new experiences, new information, and new constructs.	Stretching Experimenting Courageous Risk-Taking
Connecting	Behaviors that allow the leader to draw on the experiences of others to improve themselves by learning different approaches to new challenges.	Assistance Seeking Feedback Seeking Learning Vicariously Coachability
Thinking	Behaviors that allow the leader to process and frame the nature of challenges through the formulation of questions and letting go of obsolete practices.	Reflecting Metacognition Inquiring Unlearning
Mobilizing	Behaviors that allow the leader to become disciplined, process-grounded, and action-oriented when facing challenges.	Goal Setting Planning and Monitoring Demonstrating Resilience Self-regulating

Note. Adapted from Harvey and Prager (2021).

These categories each consist of multiple, learnable behaviors that will allow leaders to identify the need for adjustments and interventions, to make plans that address those needs, to develop the skills needed to execute adjustments, and to reflect on the effectiveness of the planning and execution (Harvey & Prager, 2021).

Having what Dweck (2006) called a growth mindset is woven into each of the behavior categories provided by Harvey and Prager (2022). Not listed among those learnable behaviors is the one that serves as the lynchpin to the development of learning agility: willingness. The unwillingness to learn and practice these agile behaviors—the lack of a growth mindset—is the surest ways for leaders to experience serious derailment in an increasingly VUCA world (Church & Seaton, 2022; De Meuse, 2022; De Meuse & Harvey, 2021; Yost et al., 2021).

The intentional selection of organizational socialization tactics is vital to designing onboarding experience that reduces the anxiety of new district leaders (Bauer, 2010; Becker & Bish, 2021; Bengtson et al., 2013; Jones, 1986; Klein et al., 2015; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977; Zepeda et al., 2012). Within the framework of those tactics, activities designed to help newcomers refocus their leadership lens through the unlearning of old assumptions and shifting into a new leadership context will increase the speed of their effectiveness and clarity of their purpose at the district office (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2014; Goldring et al., 2020; Harden, 2009; Park & Kim, 2020). To prepare new central office administrators for the unknown challenges that they will inevitably face as system leaders will require exercises that develop learning agility (Church & Seaton, 2022; De Meuse, 2022; De Meuse & Harvey, 2021; Harvey & Prager, 2021).

The design of onboarding activities that encompass socialization tactics, along with interventions aimed at clarifying leadership roles and developing learning agility, provides an additional opportunity for school system decision makers: increased district coherence. The literature surrounding school district coherence was reviewed in the next section.

School District Coherence

Along with the teachers and principals working in local schools, the leaders guiding operations from the school district level can have significant impact on the success and achievement of its students (Leithwood et al., 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021). The role of the central office in public school systems has been to provide the resources and support needed to ensure that conditions for success are established—a role that has dramatically changed as greater focus on instructional leadership and supervision has grown over the past two decades (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Thessin, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021).

One of the fastest ways to derail attempts to establish positive conditions, however, is for district leaders to operate in a fragmented, dysfunctional manner (Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021). Successful school districts are those in which a common purpose has been established throughout the system (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021). When that common purpose permeates the work of educators and support staff at all levels of a school district, that system has the opportunity to “make a major difference for humanity in a troubled world” (Campbell & Fullan, 2019, p. 3).

School districts have always had to wrestle with the internal debates and challenges associated with determining “what is best” for its students and teachers, ranging from decisions about curriculum materials, resource allocation, school attendance zones, textbook adoptions, and behavior management philosophies, to name a few. As pointed out by Zepeda et al. (2021), those predictable factors, along with the crisis-level challenges that often come as a surprise, all require thorough analysis and clear responses. The best protection against those challenges leading to complete disaster is to have developed a level of school district coherence that “serves to stabilize the system” (Zepeda et al., 2021, p. 34).

Defining District Coherence

The idea of coherence is one that most educators recognize when they experience it, but find difficult to define consistently (Moore Johnson et al., 2015). Zepeda et al. (2021) forwarded that coherence is critical to success in the business of public-school education, stating, “Without coherence, district actions and decisions can become unpredictable, initiatives unsustainable, leadership focus fragmented—all leading to system overload and inefficiency” (p. 24). While coherence involves aligning resources between schools and the central office, as well as between external demands and school system goals, it requires more than just alignment (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Going further with what coherence is not, Fullan and Quinn (2016) shared that it is neither a structure, a strategy, nor a reform. When done effectively, coherence serves as the cement that binds decisions to actions throughout the district, acting as “the stabilizing connection and not a practice implemented today and gone tomorrow” (Zepeda et al., 2021, p. 26).

Like school improvement itself, the concept of coherence is an ongoing process that leads to a common purpose, collective ownership of successes and failures, and an understanding of how the various roles and departments across a school system all work together (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Zepeda et al., 2021). Coherence embodies a systematic approach to school district leadership that includes the use of common vocabulary, clear protocols to identify and develop potential leaders, collaboration between district departments and schools, and an emphasis on creating conditions for success through a collective focus on strategic goals (Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021).

Fullan and Quinn (2016) suggested that the focus of school leaders on system structures and improvement strategies are important, but that “consistency of purpose, policy, and practice”

are a must for the development of coherence (p. 1). Fullan and Quinn’s (2016) framework outlined what they believed were the important drivers for developing and maintaining of school district coherence. Along with those important “right” drivers that lead to greater coherence, Fullan and Quinn (2016) also explained how the “wrong” drivers to school improvement can lead to dysfunction and fragmentation. These two sets of drivers are described in Table 2.6.

Table 2.6

Right Drivers vs. Wrong Drivers in Developing District Coherence

The Right Drivers	The Wrong Drivers
Focusing Direction A purpose is developed collectively and drives the goal-setting, strategy selection, and leadership functions.	Punitive Accountability A purpose is developed individually from within or mandated from external sources (like politicians) and is tied to directly to results rather than processes.
Cultivating Collaborative Cultures The approach to improvement comes through the building of both individual and group capacity comes through continuous learning and disciplined approaches to research-based strategies and reflective practices.	Focus on Individuals The approach to improvement comes from the use of rewards and punishments handed out to those meeting externally set goals. This is often linked to the “punitive accountability” driver previously described.
Deepening Learning The use of technology is limited to how it enhances pedagogy and increases student engagement in communication, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, character, and citizenship.	Technology The acquisition of technology for the sake of having the newest, most up-to-date devices and software, often leading teachers to find ways of using it as a means for justifying its purchase.

The Right Drivers	The Wrong Drivers
Securing Accountability The development of internal capacity will lead to a greater sense of responsibility within the organization, as well as to improved responses to and engagement with external measures of accountability.	Ad Hoc Policies The development of policies that aim at individual elements of school improvement, often resulting in a plethora of initiatives that schools and teachers are expected to implement to meet accountability measures.

Note. Adapted from Fullan and Quinn (2016).

Perhaps the simplest way to summarize the right versus wrong drivers, as posited by Fullan and Quinn (2016), is that a system striving for effective coherence will rely on collaborative approaches, where silos are replaced by pipelines and processes are valued as much as final products. As Zepeda et al. (2021) suggested, important organizational factors must be established as the foundation on which Fullan and Quinn’s (2016) coherence framework can be constructed.

The Organizational Foundations Needed for District Coherence

School districts are complex organizations and can become increasingly so with size (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). Guided by elected school board members, led by superintendents and district staff, and operated by principals and teachers, individual agendas can quickly emerge and derail school districts from having systemwide success (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021). While the concept of district coherence is the safeguard against this fragmentation, a culture of trust must first be established between the governance team and the district staff, between and among district leaders and their departments, and between those who make up the school staffs and those operating out of the central office (Adams & Miskell, 2016; Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021).

The development of a school district strategic plan is a foundational element of organizational structuring necessary for coherence to emerge (Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021). The vision, mission, and belief statements, along with strategic goal areas and performance objectives, should capture the collective will of the community for the direction of its school district (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021). A robust cross-section of stakeholders provides feedback and input from multiple perspectives, increasing the collective ownership of the plan once finalized (Marzano & Waters, 2009). A commitment to the fulfillment of the final plan by the governance team, along with action and accountability measures developed collaboratively between district and school leaders, provides the foundation for a focused purpose (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018).

The strategic planning process allows the superintendent and board members to establish and model the collaborative culture that is so important to developing coherence, with accountability situated as part of that process rather than driving it (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). The strategic plan born from that process provides the common focus needed to deter individual agendas that might otherwise arise at the governance team level. School board members increasingly face severe external political pressures, sometimes struggle with finding appropriate levels of engagement (that can lead to micromanagement), question themselves on how far to compromise before being considered a sellout by constituents, and occasionally get caught up on single issue promises (Campbell & Fullan, 2019).

A strategic plan developed with their community, however, can provide the basis for unity that leads to governing coherence, as Campbell and Fullan (2019) explained, “A unified board is made up of individuals, complete with different beliefs, styles, and personalities working together with a shared moral imperative in a collaborative, cooperative fashion toward a

common goal” (p. 88). The strategic plan, complete with vision, mission, beliefs, and objectives, can serve as that common, unifying goal (Leithwood et al., 2019). With governing coherence structures in place, district coherence can follow (Campbell & Fullan, 2019).

While the strategic plan provides the blueprint for achieving the district’s purpose with non-negotiable beliefs and objectives, the follow through on those plans requires what Zepeda et al. (2021) called “parallel systems for parallel purposes” (p. 32). At the core of these parallel systems is the need for capacity building among district staff to fulfill strategic purposes, as suggested by both Fullan and Quinn (2016) and Zepeda et al. (2021). Adams and Miskell (2016) described capacity as neither an instrument nor a resource that can be purchased, but rather a “relational context that synchronizes district, school, and teacher actions” (p. 676). An example of this comes through teacher and leader evaluation processes.

Zepeda et al. (2021) contended that teacher evaluation systems should be used for growth, informing professional learning opportunities that build teacher and leader capacity and, ultimately, improved student achievement. When those systems are used for compliance rather than growth, they can reduce teacher effectiveness and erode trust between them and their administrators; whereas, when they are used in tandem, new instructional strategies can be implemented with much greater success (Zepeda et al., 2021). The ability of leaders to facilitate this balance of parallel systems is key, according to Adams and Miskell (2016) to establishing and maintaining trust.

As Fullan and Quinn (2016) described school district coherence as “the shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work” (p. 1), Zepeda et al.’s (2021) call for the district to develop a common instructional vocabulary takes on even greater significance. A common framework for developing district coherence simply cannot be achieved when

stakeholders do not have a common understanding of the lexicon used to describe the work (Zepeda et al., 2021).

Going further than simply asking system leaders to develop a vocabulary list with definitions, Zepeda et al. (2021) suggested that school districts enhance coherence and avoid confusion, dysfunction, and fragmentation by:

- creating a common nomenclature to increase clarity;
- agreeing about key instructional practices;
- identifying “non-negotiables” about teaching, learning, and the learner;
- providing opportunities to enlarge conversation across the system;
- focusing professional learning opportunities across the system; and,
- crafting knowledge based on data from monitoring systems that track progress. (p. 33)

The use of a common lexicon when facilitating professional learning, presenting to the community, providing feedback, and discussing learning are all ways in which coherence can begin to permeate the work being done at all levels of a school district (Zepeda et al., 2021). As the common language and an understanding of the strategic mission are more fully comprehended, the relationship forged between the district office, school leaders, and the community can also be strengthened (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Moore Johnson et al, 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021).

Developing Coherence Through Strong District Office-School Relationships

In the effort to become a strong school system, as opposed to being a system of schools, leaders at the district level must be continuously cognizant of the relationship that exists between

the central office and the principals in the school buildings—those who are most directly involved with students and their families (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Moore Johnson et al., 2015). Zepeda et al. (2021) gave the reminder that “coherence is built when systems support and focus efforts on teaching and learning, the core mission of every school district” (p. 33). Honig and Rainey (2019) encouraged greater effort on the part of districts to develop principal support roles with principal supervisors modeling continuous learning while they support the instructional growth of sitting principals. In short, the relationship between the school building and the district office is dynamic, requires constant attention, and should always be focused on the core mission of student achievement (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021). That, however, is sometimes easier explained than adhered.

Regardless of a school system’s size, a natural tension exists between centralized district authority and levels of autonomy desired by school principals. Navigating that tension requires that district leaders gain the trust of school leaders (Adams & Miskell, 2016; Zepeda et al., 2021). Should district leaders conduct themselves in ways that project top-down, hierarchal authority, compliance will, at best, be the level of engagement that the district leaders can expect to receive from principals and school leaders (Adams & Miskell, 2016; Moore Johnson et al., 2015). Should district leaders engage principals as partners in school improvement—recognizing the fact that principals are the key leaders in enacting district strategies at the school level—then the trust necessary for change can develop (Adams & Miskell, 2016; Moore Johnson et al., 2015).

Moore Johnson et al. (2015) issued a warning that radical decentralization is the fast track to a fragmented system, where inequities across the district are sure to follow. Just as dangerous is the misperception that coherence equals centralization, as over-standardization stifles

innovation, creativity, and trust while increasing “disappointment, cynicism, and disengagement among those who work most closely with students” (Moore Johnson et al., 2015, p. 157). The challenge facing the superintendent and district leaders is what Adams and Miskell (2016) call the “tricky dance” of “the tight—loose balance” that must be mastered (p. 676).

Given their critical positioning as the leaders closest to the action, Moore Johnson et al. (2015) suggested that principals should be viewed by district leaders as *stakeholders*. Principals should be consulted with, listened to, and collaborated with in much the same manner that effective principals engage their students, staffs, and families (Moore Johnson et al., 2015). As Harden (2009) demonstrated, the leadership context for the two school district environments—the school building and the central office—require very different lenses. District leaders with recent experience at the school level who can adjust their lenses quickly are well-situated to translate system needs and objectives to principals and school leaders (D. Harden, personal communication, March 6, 2023).

In terms of developing a principal’s capacity to lead instruction, it is vital that a joint work approach is taken by principal supervisors, establishing supportive conditions as opposed to relationships built on compliance (Honig & Rainey, 2019). When the relationships between district leaders and principals are strong, the right drivers for developing coherence, as described by Fullan and Quinn (2016), can become much more prevalent across the district. As principals are empowered to have a voice, they will impact the development of system goals, thus taking on more ownership and expanding district coherence (Moore Johnson et al., 2015).

One major landmine that has the potential to derail coherence efforts is the overuse or heavy reliance on outside consultants to lead school district work (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021). Honig and Rainey’s (2019) analysis suggested that districts lose the

opportunity to develop capacity within their system when they rely on outside organizations to coach and support principals. Zepeda et al. (2021) concurred, suggesting that turning over the core work of the district to outside organizations is commensurate to malpractice. The development of leaders, from teachers to school administrators to central office personnel, all provide avenues to build system capacity (Zepeda et al., 2021). As opposed to relying on outside consultants, taking on this challenge of building leaders as a district-owned endeavor can greatly enhance a culture of coherence (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021). This capacity building can come in the form of leadership development programming, succession planning, and the onboarding of new district leaders.

Chapter Summary

District leaders can have an immense impact on student achievement based on the environmental conditions they establish for their school systems (Leithwood et al., 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021). As teacher shortages loom, the domino effect will inevitably lead to a shortage of school district leaders, as well (Schmitt & de Courcy, 2022; Owens, 2015). As a result, the importance of developing, training, and supporting new leaders is of paramount concern, as districts can ill-afford a lack of quality when pipelines begin to shrink (Bengtson et al., 2013; Goldring et al., 2020; Zepeda et al., 2021).

While succession planning and capacity building programs are both avenues for building up a school system's leadership pipeline, a critical area given much less attention has been the onboarding of new district leaders (Goldring et al., 2020). At a critical time in public education's history, school systems simply cannot afford to lose their leaders to dissatisfaction, high turnover rates, lack of preparation, or low productivity (Kang & Berliner, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2019; Rogers & Van Gronigen, 2021; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Organizational socialization,

conducted through intentional onboarding programs, is imperative to transitioning new leaders to school district central office positions (Bengtson et al., 2013; Jeske & Olson, 2022; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

Using appropriate socialization tactics, Van Maanen and Schein (1977) proposed that newcomer anxiety could be reduced while increasing the custodial responses that lead to greater satisfaction and commitment to the system. Building on Van Maanen and Schein's (1977) seminal work, Bauer (2010) insisted that greater levels of self-efficacy, role clarity, social integration, and organizational fit could also be obtained during the onboarding process.

Given that most school district leadership positions are filled by those with experience leading local schools, Harden (2009) identified the need for role adjustment shifts to be considered when onboarding activities, as newcomers will be asked to lead from within a new context. While new leaders are certainly expected to acquire new knowledge, significant unlearning will be needed to disconnect with previous practices and assumptions (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2014; Park & Kim, 2020). As the shifts suggested by Harden (2009) are coupled with unlearning activities, new leaders will be able to adjust to their roles more quickly and with greater clarity of leadership purpose (Anderson & Young, 2018; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021).

School district leaders must juggle existing challenges while simultaneously preparing for new, unpredictable ones, and they must do so in a highly politically polarized environment (Ferrare & Phillippo, 2023; Grace et al., 2022; Sutherland, 2023; White et al., 2023). Such is life in a VUCA world. As part of this new reality, school districts must be equipped with organizational agility (Nicolaidis & McCallum, 2013; Pulakos et al., 2019; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). The idea of district-level adaptability requires that new leaders not only adjust more

quickly to their roles, (Bauer, 2010; Bengtson et al., 2013; Harden, 2009; Jeske & Olson, 2022), but that they develop the capacity to be learning agile (De Meuse, 2022; De Meuse & Harvey, 2021). Infusing activities that enhance learning agile behaviors into the onboarding process will enhance the new leaders' abilities to apply previous leadership experiences to new, unknown challenges, as well as increase levels of engagement to the organization (Church & Seaton, 2022; De Meuse, 2017; Harvey & Prager, 2021; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Milani et al., 2021).

Socializing new district leaders, helping them adjust to their new roles, and developing in them the behaviors needed to be learning agile are all extremely important elements in the onboarding process. For those situated in the district leadership positions who will be tasked with facilitating onboarding activities, there exists an additional consideration. To avoid fragmentation and dysfunction, these leaders would be wise to develop the onboarding practices in a collaborative, purpose-driven approach that envisions onboarding as an opportunity for modeling and enhancing school district coherence (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021).

Chapter 3 describes the methodology involved, as well as the interventions and qualitative methods employed in this action research study. A detailed context in which the study was conducted is provided. Chapter 3 also discusses the limitations that arose from the nature and context of this qualitative action research study.

CHAPTER 3

ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Intentionally transitioning new employees into their positions provides benefits to both the organization and the new hire (Bauer, 2010; Bengtson et al., 2013; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Failing to do so can have disastrous effects that cost time, money, and talent (Bauer, 2010; Cable et al., 2013; Caldwell & Peters, 2018). At a time in which school systems are facing labor shortages and potential attrition in their leadership pools, talent recruitment and retention are at the forefront of public-school leaders' thinking, thrusting the notion of formal onboarding of new employees into the spotlight (Owens, 2015; Schmitt & DeCourcy, 2022).

The practice of formalized onboarding and induction of teachers, assistant principals, and principals new to their roles is widespread, supported by an abundance of research. When it comes to transitioning school building leaders into district office roles, there is much less from which to draw (Goldring et al., 2020; Zepeda et al., 2021). Focusing efforts on the precarious transition period in which school leaders assume district office responsibilities provides opportunities to reduce anxiety that comes natural with job change (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977), clarify leadership expectations in a new and different context (Harden, 2009), and develop the learning agility necessary to lead effectively in an ever-challenging environment (Church & Seaton, 2022; De Meuse, 2022; De Meuse & Harvey, 2021; Harvey & Prager, 2021). Designing and facilitating onboarding practices in a collaborative effort among sitting district office leaders has the added benefit of enhancing school system coherence (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021).

The purpose of this action research study was to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). This study looked specifically at identifying the challenges and needs faced by those moving from leadership positions at the school building into roles at the district office. The following questions were used to guide the action research conducted in this study:

1. How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variation of leading at the district office with leading at the school level?
2. How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding model on their transition from school level to district office leadership?
3. How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding model on their own professional practice?

This chapter provided the rationale for using a qualitative research approach, along with a description of the action research design and the context of the study. The methods employed to collect data, along with descriptions of the data sources, the interventions, and data analyses techniques were discussed as well as the efforts to ensure validity and trustworthiness.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

The central office of an American public-school system is a social setting unto itself. The operations emanating from a central office impact the safety and academic achievement of the students and staff throughout the school system (Leithwood et al., 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021).

Given the importance of school district responsibilities, it is vital for researchers to gain a deep understanding of the culture, environment, and interactions that make up the social setting of a school district's central office. In seeking to better understand the experiences of those school leaders who transitioned into leadership roles in the East Smithfield School District's (ESSD) central office, a qualitative research approach was employed for this study.

Creswell (2013) described research using a qualitative approach as one that “begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 44). In this study, qualitative research allowed for the deep exploration of ESSD's transition processes—or more accurately, the lack of transition processes.

While multiple frameworks exist to shape qualitative studies, it was deemed that a social constructivist paradigm was most appropriate for this study. Sometimes described as interpretivism, social constructivism is the search for understanding within one's experiences in a real-world setting against the backdrop of not only that individual's interactions with others, but also through the established norms and daily activities associated in a given environment—in this case, a work environment (Creswell, 2013).

Giving voice to the research participants who were involved in the daily work of ESSD's central office leadership allowed the challenges, complexities, and opportunities they faced in this real-world context to be most clearly articulated (Bloomberg, 2023). This constructivist paradigm allowed for research participants to construct meaning from their experiences and to articulate their personal journeys through a variety of open-ended inquiries facilitated by the researcher (Bloomberg, 2023; Creswell, 2013).

A qualitative, constructivist approach in this study provided the researcher with a framework in which to examine the individual challenges faced by new ESSD leaders. According to Glanz (2014), “Action research is utilized primarily by practitioners to solve specific problems” (p. 17). As the challenges associated with moving from school level to central office leadership positions presented a phenomenon specific to those working in ESSD, an action research study within that qualitative, constructivist framework was designed. The specific action research methods used in this study are described in the next section.

Overview of Action Research Methods

An action research study design is used when a specific problem needs to be addressed in a manner that solutions can be applied and examined with a sense of immediacy (Coughlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014; Karagiorgi et al., 2018). An action research approach is often used in public school educational settings, like that of ESSD, where leaders must focus on innovative practices and programs that instill continuous improvement while simultaneously empowering practitioners to be partners in the process (Glanz, 2014).

Lewin (1946) and Corey (1954) pioneered the notion that those working within a school system—guided by the applied science known as action research—could solve the day-to-day problems facing educators. Consistent with these definitions of action research, the practitioner-researcher also serves as a participant immersed in the study. This methodology requires the researcher to acknowledge personal views and experiences, to reflect on those perspectives, and to join participants in interpreting themes and constructing greater meaning over the course of the action research cycles (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014).

The dual purposes for an action research approach are to apply existing and emerging research toward solving a specific problem and to return to the greater body of academia the

findings drawn from the application of that research in practice (Coughlan & Brannick, 2014). In the case of ESSD, the objective was not only to capture the voices of those central office leaders participating in the study as a means for improving leadership role transitions, but also to construct greater meaning from those experiences that could be drawn on by researchers, as well as those in other school systems facing similar challenges.

Coughlan and Brannick (2014) claimed that action research was “research *in* action, rather than research *about* action,” and that it employs a collaborative approach between the researcher and participants following a “sequence of events” or cycles of study to find solutions (p. 6, emphasis in the original). Those cycles of learning for the researchers and participants in an action research study follow an established schedule of activities, as depicted in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1

The Action Research Process



Note. Adapted from Coughlan and Brannick (2014).

While a cycle of action research follows a prescribed set of activities, the interventions designed from one cycle to the next are impacted by the outcomes they produce; thus, leading to an iterative process for the researcher and participants who are continuously reflecting throughout the study. As the collaboration among researchers and participants leads to the construction of meaning and solutions together, it makes for a more “democratic partnership” to working together toward deeper understanding (Coughlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 6).

Taking an action research approach to the East Smithfield School District’s (ESSD) challenge required a partnership between the lead researcher, the Action Research Design Team

(ARDT), and the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). Through three action research cycles, organizational socialization theory was used as the foundation to guide the delivery and timing of the interventions. The design of interventions within each cycle was informed by extant research related to uncertainty reduction, leadership role clarity, and learning agility, along with the individual experiences of the ARDT and the ARIT members.

The interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaire results, as well as observations of interactions in district office meetings, were all documented and used to inform the development and refinements of the interventions throughout the action research cycles. Participants gave voice to this study through their reflections, feedback, and articulation about their experiences. The specific design elements for this action research study conducted in the ESSD are explored in the next section.

Action Research Design

For an action research study to be effective, a prescribed framework must guide the activities of the Action Research Design Team (ARDT). Much like the *Plan-Do-Study-Act* framework developed by Deming (Bryk et al., 2015; Moen, 2009), this action research study adapted a design that ensured a reflective, evolving, collaborative process. Together, the ARDT embarked on three action research cycles that each followed a logic model with the following steps: Determine, Select, Implement, Assess, and Adjust (DSIAA).

Upon reviewing all aspects of transitioning new leaders into the ESSD central office, as well as the literature related to that challenge, the ARDT members determined the outcome they wished to see achieved with the new district leaders on the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). From there, the ARDT selected the interventions that they collectively believed would achieve a positive outcome. Next, the ARDT oversaw the implementation of those

interventions with ARIT members. Finally, in a reflective manner, the ARDT members addressed the outcomes resulting from those interventions and made necessary adjustments before moving into the next cycle of action.

The Spiraling and Iterative Nature of Action Research

One of the unique aspects of action research as a qualitative method is the fact that more than one cycle of action can be conducted over the course of a study. As Mertler (2021) explained,

Most action researchers tend to believe that once cycle of action research is simply not enough. Rigor can be enhanced by engaging in a number of cycles of action research into the same problem or question, where the earlier cycles help to inform how to conduct later cycles, as well specific sources of data that should be considered. In theory, with each cycle of action research, more is learned, and greater credibility is added to the findings. (p. 7)

This spiraling approach, where each cycle of action research built on the previous cycle, characterized this study. As one Determine, Select, Implement, Assess, and Adjust (DSIAA) cycle came to an end, the results were reflected on and a new DSIAA cycle commenced. These spiraling cycles of research are exhibited in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2

The Spiraling Cycles of Action Research



Note. Adapted from Bryk et al. (2015); Coghlan and Brannick (2014); Jones (1986); Moen (2009).

Each cycle undertaken by the ARDT allowed for increased collaboration among team members and the researcher in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD) study. The DSIAA framework employed gave the structure necessary for deep reflection, conversation, and action planning thus allowing for increased rigor as the study matriculated from one cycle to the next.

The Logic Model

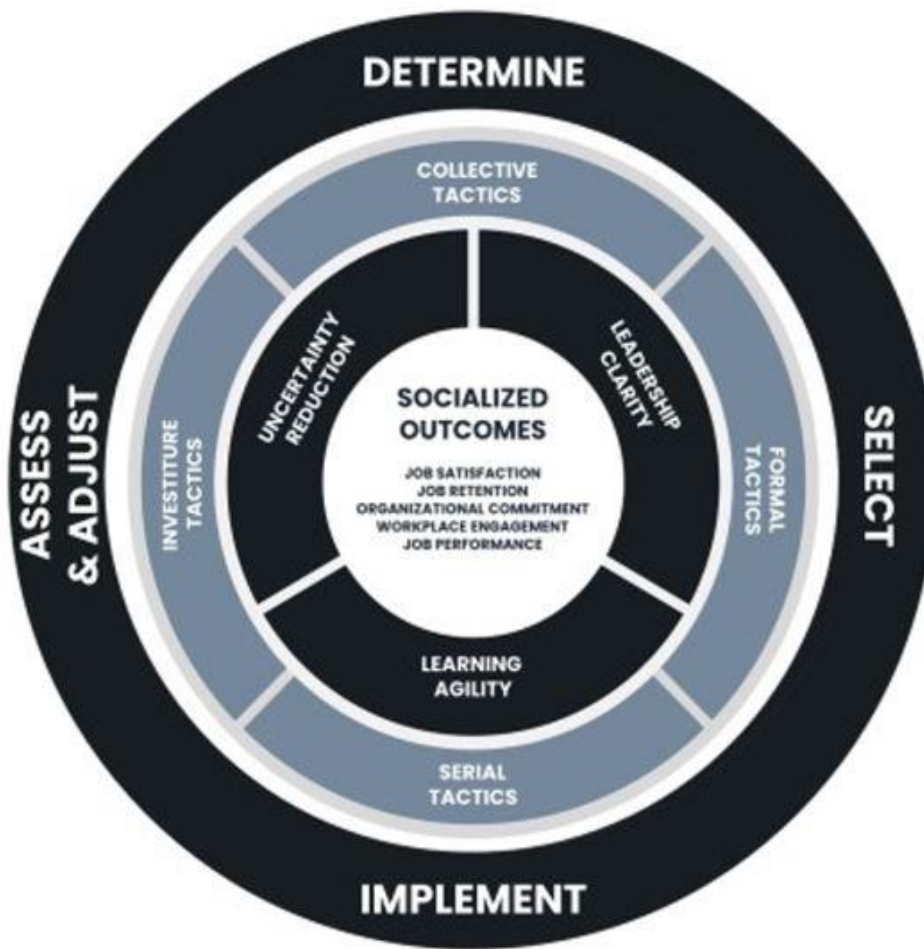
Researchers hoping to solve problems must first grasp a complete understanding of the problem. Understanding the problem from the vantage point of those experiencing issues requires the researcher to authentically engage people in the process of improvement (Bryk et al., 2015). Failing to do so ultimately leads to the “solutionitis” that so often plagues education (Bryk

et al., 2015). Developing a logic model that placed a premium on the collaborative elements, therefore, was paramount to the development of this study. The *Plan-Do-Study-Act* approach developed by Deming in the 1950s, and later refined by him in the 1990s, has come to define the scientific inquiry used for action research (Moen, 2009). Heavily influenced by that approach, the study conducted in ESSD relied on a Determine-Select-Implement-Assess-Adjust (DSIAA) method for addressing the challenges associated with leadership transitions from local school to the central office level.

This DSIAA process gave a necessary series of steps for clearly defining the challenges facing new leaders in the ESSD central office and determining a desired outcome, for selecting and implementing interventions to reach those outcomes, and for addressing the results and adjusting future intervention plans. As depicted in Figure 3.3, the DSIAA logic model gave an overall direction to the framework that housed the theoretical focus of the study.

Figure 3.3

The Determine, Select, Implement, Assess, and Adjust Logic Model



Note. Adapted from Bryk et al. (2015); Coghlan and Brannick (2014); Jones (1986); Moen (2009); Van Maanen and Schein (1977).

Theory of Change

The concept of organizational socialization, rooted in the research conducted by Van Maanen and Schein (1977) and later validated through the empirical works of Jones (1986), served as the theoretical framework for the ESSD study. Organizational socialization theory posits that efforts made by an organization to onboard newcomers can have benefits to both the

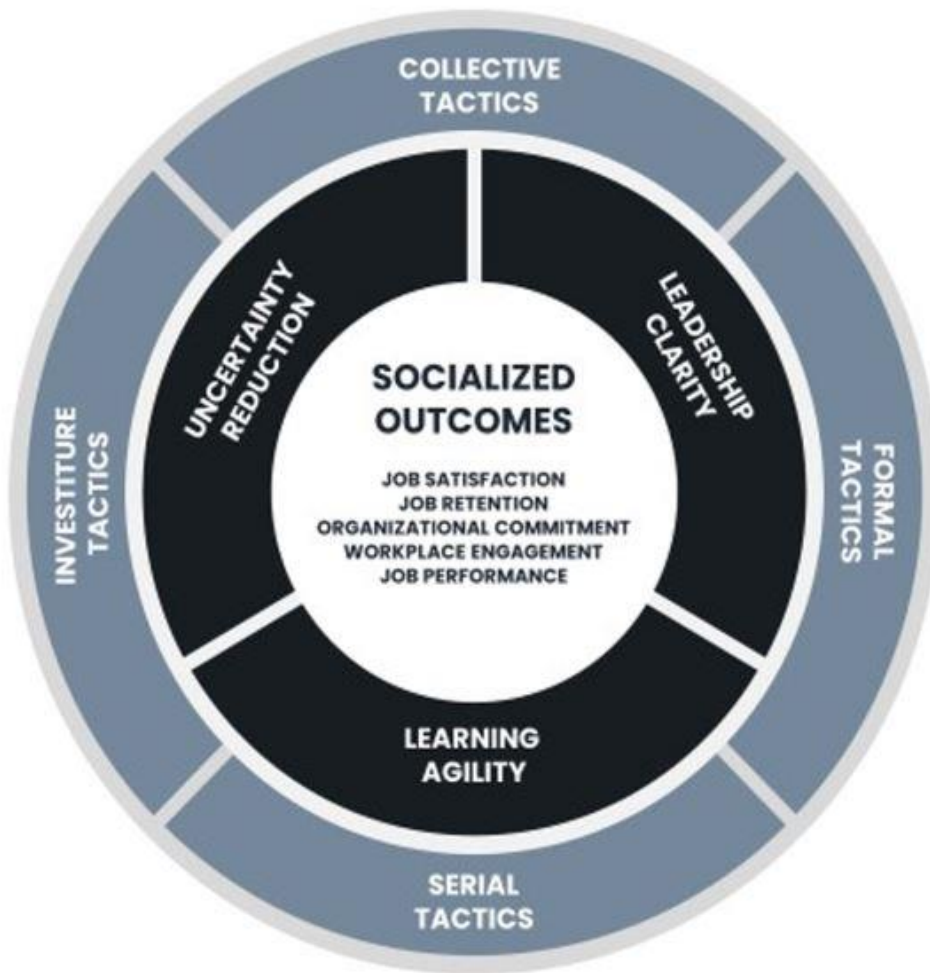
employee and the organization, when done intentionally. As shared by Van Maanen and Schein (1977), intentional efforts that include the use of socialization tactics, ranging from the collective (group), formal (outside of the normal setting of the job), serial (involving guidance from veterans in the field), and investiture (building upon the strengths of the newcomer) can lead to greater job satisfaction, retention, and commitment. Failing to intentionally onboard newcomers can increase the anxiety associated with uncertainty and, ultimately, the loss of productivity, if not the employees, themselves (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

The ARDT reviewed the literature surrounding organizational socialization, as well as opportunities to enhance leadership clarity and learning agility during the onboarding process (De Meuse & Harvey, 2021; Harden, 2009). Additionally, they analyzed the challenges faced by school level leaders moving into district level leadership roles. Based on that research, along with their own observations and personal experiences, the ARDT designed interventions aimed at helping new leaders to the central office in ESSD successfully adjust to their new roles.

The ARDT designed interventions. The interventions focused on the reduction of newcomer uncertainty, leadership clarity, and the development of learning agility, and the interventions were adapted through the organizational socialization tactics advocated by Van Maanen and Schein (1977). The theoretical framework used in ESSD is depicted in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4

Theoretical Framework for Socializing New District Leaders



Note. Adapted from Jones (1986); Moen (2009); Van Maanen and Schein (1977).

The interventions, which aligned to research questions and overall purpose of the study, were facilitated through four socialization tactics: collective, formal, serial, and investiture. The theory of change predicted that the combination of these tactics and interventions would lead to newcomers feeling a greater sense of job satisfaction, commitment to ESSD, and workplace engagement, as well as higher levels of job performance and, as aspiration, retention (De Meuse & Harvey, 2021; Harden, 2009; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

The Case

Unlike other forms of scientific inquiry that require the separation of a phenomenon from the context in which it occurs, the case study method recognizes that in real-life, contemporary social settings, like that of the East Smithfield School District (ESSD), the two are not necessarily distinguishable (Bloomberg, 2023; Yin, 2009). The use of multiple data collection methods allowed the researcher to triangulate as the means for constructing deeper meaning in a more reliable manner.

In the case of ESSD, each of the research questions asked *how* participants “articulate and describe” phenomenon related to the transitioning of school leaders to central office positions. The search for greater meaning based on the experiences of participants operating within the context and culture of ESSD required a qualitative approach. As Yin (2009) explained, qualitative cases studies have four major applications, which include:

1. providing explanations for interventions that are too complicated for simple survey or traditional experimentation;
2. describing both the interventions employed and the contemporary context in which the phenomena exist;
3. clearly articulating the topics that exist or emerge within an evaluation of interventions used; and,
4. highlighting the situations identified within the study that produce a multitude of outcomes.

These four applications served as guardrails for the study conducted in the ESSD.

The thematic analysis conducted in the case study of the ESSD attempted to paint a picture of the complexity of transitioning from one leadership context to another, along with descriptions of

how interventions impacted participants in the study. The thematic analysis used in this action research was not designed to be generalizable beyond the ESSD, but a foundation was laid for the case to have “relevance and potential application with regard to a broader context” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 85).

The Action Research Design Team

Two of the many benefits of engaging in an action research study are the opportunity to develop a systemwide approach to solving problems and empowering those closest to the problems to participate in finding solutions (Glanz, 2014). To focus on the challenges of school-to-central office leadership transitions in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD), six leaders from that district formed an Action Research Design Team (ARDT). The members of the ARDT (pseudonyms used for their names), their positions in ESSD, their years of experience in public education, and their roles on the ARDT are described in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Action Research Design Team Members’ Experience and Action Research Roles

Team Member	Central Office Position in ESSD and Education Experience	Action Research Role
Lead Researcher	Deputy Superintendent 4 years of central office service 24 years in public education	Conducted all aspects of research Facilitated ARDT design activities Collected data for ARDT analysis Authored all reporting for the study
Heather Cassidy	Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning 6 years of central office service 33 years in public education	Reviewed related research findings Analyzed data from ARIT activities Designed interventions for ARIT Provided feedback to lead researcher
Erin Emerson	Associate Superintendent of Student Support and Services 21 years of central office service 27 years in public education	Reviewed related research findings Analyzed data from ARIT activities Designed interventions for ARIT Provided feedback to lead researcher

Central Office Position in ESSD		
Team Member	and Education Experience	Action Research Role
Bernie George	Chief of Operations 17 years of central office service 32 years in public education	Reviewed related research findings Analyzed data from ARIT activities Designed interventions for ARIT Provided feedback to lead researcher
Linda Mitchell	Director of Student Support 6 months of central office service 22 years in public education	Reviewed related research findings Analyzed data from ARIT activities Designed interventions for ARIT Provided feedback to lead researcher
Wallace Wilson	Associate Superintendent of Human Resources 2 years of central office service 22 years in public education	Reviewed related research findings Analyzed data from ARIT activities Designed interventions for ARIT Provided feedback to lead researcher

Consistent with the nature of action research, the ARDT worked collaboratively to analyze the challenge of school-to-central office transitions of school leaders (Bryk et al., 2015; Glanz, 2014). Each member of the ARDT was selected for their long service and varied experiences in public education. Additionally, each served in an elevated leadership position in ESSD's central office structure. At various points in their careers, each member of the ARDT had made the transition that this study focused on, as every one of them went from leading within a local school to leading at the district level in the ESSD. Therefore, each member brought forth their own experiences with the challenges associated with leadership transitions—both from personally living through it and by witnessing colleagues make the move.

Reflection on their own experiences, review of related literature, and ongoing reflection and analysis of study participants' responses to onboarding activities provided the foundations for the interventions that the ARDT designed for this study. Additionally, their articulation of the impact that participating as an ARDT member had on their own professional practice provided important data related to the third research question posed by this study.

The Action Research Implementation Team

As the focus of this study was on the onboarding of new leaders to ESSD's central office, six leaders were approached to participate as members of the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). Each of these leaders were veteran educators recently appointed to the central office in the ESSD. Before their appointment, each was serving as a principal or assistant principal in an ESSD school building. One member—Linda Mitchell—served on both the ARDT and ARIT. The members of the ARIT (pseudonyms used for their names), their new leadership positions in the ESSD central office, their years of experience in public education, and their previous roles are described in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

Action Research Implementation Team Members' Experience and Roles

Team Member	Central Office Position in ESSD and Education Experience	Previous Role in ESSD (Level)
Bob Tocheny	Classified Recruiting Coordinator Pre-service in central office role 30 years in public education	Principal (Middle School) 7 years as principal
Shannon Fields	Director of Human Resources Pre-service in central office role 24 years in public education	Principal (Elementary School) 8 years as principal
Marni Lynn	Family Engagement Coordinator 6 months of central office service 15 years in public education	Assistant Principal (Elementary School) 2 years as assistant principal
Linda Mitchell	Director of Student Support 6 months at central office 22 years in public education	Principal (Elementary School) 7 years as principal
Brittini Morgan	Assistant Director of Student Support 1.3 years of central office service 20 years in public education	Assistant Principal (Middle School) 2 years as assistant principal

Team Member	Central Office Position in ESSD and Education Experience	Previous Role in ESSD (Level)
Kimberly Kasson	Assessment Coordinator 6 months of central office service 13 years in public education	Assistant Principal (Middle School) 5 years as assistant principal
Jim Young	Director of Food and Nutrition 6 months at central office 26 years in public education	Principal (Middle School) 7 years as principal

Research Plan and Timeline

As suggested by Bloomberg (2023), participatory action research studies “emphasize that multiple parties or stakeholders with an interest in the research topic and project must work together as a research team in framing and conducting the study, thereby collaboratively producing knowledge about a shared problem” (p. 102). The Determine-Select-Implement-Assess-Adjust (DSIAA) logic model used for this action research study required that a timeline was established for the collaborative planning and reflection that Bloomberg (2023) suggested. Involving those closest to the problem to better understand the issues to be addressed was an underlying key to this action research study (Bryk et al., 2015). This study followed the suggestions of both Bryk et al. (2015) and Bloomberg (2023) through the facilitation of three action research cycles conducted over the course of eight months. Table 3.3 provides an overview of the action research timeline that was used.

Table 3.3

Action Research Timeline Activities

Cycle and Timing	Action Research Design Team	Action Research Implementation Team
<u>Pre-Study</u>		
February 2024	Secure participation consent Orientation meeting	Secure participation consent Orientation meeting

Cycle and Timing	Action Research Design Team	Action Research Implementation Team
<u>Cycle #1</u>		
March—April 2024	ARDT individual interviews ARDT design meeting #1 Observations data reviewed ARIT questionnaire data reviewed	ARIT questionnaire #1 Interventions implemented Observations conducted ARIT individual interviews
<u>Cycle #2</u>		
May—June 2024	ARDT design meetings #2 and #3 Observations data reviewed ARIT interview data reviewed ARIT focus group data reviewed	Interventions implemented Observations conducted ARIT focus group #1 ARIT questionnaire #2
<u>Cycle #3</u>		
July—September 2024	ARDT design meeting #4 and #5 Observations data reviewed ARIT questionnaire data reviewed ARIT interview data reviewed ARDT focus group #1	Interventions implemented Observations conducted ARIT individual interviews #2 ARIT questionnaire #3
	Follow-up activities	Follow-up activities

Context of the Study

ESSD is a suburban school district located approximately 30 miles outside of a major southern city. The county in which it is located has a total area of 247 square miles with a population of just over 250,000 residents. Between the census years of 2010 and 2020, ESSD was ranked as the 6th fastest growing county in the nation, with residents representing 129 countries and speaking 69 languages. Mirroring the growth of the county, the school system grew by 44% between 2012 and 2022. In 2023, ESSD had a student population of over 54,000, making it the fifth largest system in the state. With over 8,000 full and part-time employees, it is the largest employer in its county. In 2023, ESSD housed 42 schools—23 elementary, 11 middle, 7 high, and 1 college and career preparation schools.

ESSD has seen its student population grow from 28,500 to over 54,000 between 2006 and 2023. Along with that growth, the system has also changed dramatically in terms of its cultural

makeup. The demographic shifts displayed in Table 3.4 posed a major challenge to leaders as they sought to respond effectively to cultural changes across every level of ESSD.

Table 3.4

East Smithfield School District Demographic Growth and Change Overview

Student Enrollment Group	2006-2007 School Year	2021-2022 School Year
Asian	4%	27%
Black (non-Hispanic)	2%	5%
Hispanic	9%	14%
Amerindian/Native Alaskan	2%	4%
White (non-Hispanic)	84%	50%
ESOL	4.5%	6%
Free/Reduced Lunch	17%	15% (figure based on 2019)
Gifted	6%	15%
Special Education	15.5 %	13%

Like the labor shortages faced by all industries in the post-pandemic world, ESSD has been tested in the recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers, administrators, and support staff. The median home cost in ESSD, reaching over \$500,000 in 2023, stood as another challenge for school leaders, as educators and support staff found it increasingly difficult to find affordable housing. These critical needs all emerged while public education took center stage in the politics-driven culture wars. With the 2022 passage of state legislation such as *Divisive Concepts (20-1-11)*, *Parents Bill of Rights (20-2-786)*, and *Materials Harmful to Minors (20-2-324.6)*, leading in ESSD became even more complex.

Providing support for building leaders is an absolute necessity to meet the growing demands they face (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021). To do so effectively, district leaders need to understand the complexities faced by building administrators. To be an effectively led school system, this support requires what Moore Johnson et al. (2015) and Zepeda et al. (2021) call *coherence*—a systematic approach to school district leadership that includes the use of common vocabulary, clear protocols to identify potential leaders, collaboration between district departments and schools, and an emphasis placed on creating conditions for success through a collective focus on strategic goals. Developing coherence is key toward building trust and a unified system as district leaders strive to provide support to principals and school level leaders (Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021).

Since 2014, the tenets and attributes of the ESSD *Learner Profile*, presented in Table 3.5, have served as the big picture goal for graduates of the school system. As the “true north” guiding the work of teachers, paraprofessionals, school administrators, and system leaders, ESSD stakeholders have been provided a common vision to aim their efforts when it comes to student success. This profile has provided a coherent focus, particularly for students and teachers.

Table 3.5*The East Smithfield School District Learner Profile*

Learner Profile Tenets	Learner Profile Attributes
Exhibit Strong Personal Qualities	- Displays integrity, perseverance, and drive to achieve personal goals - Accepts responsibility for personal actions - Advocates for self, others, and the community - Maintains wellness and balance in life
Interact Effectively	- Communicates responsibility in reading, writing, listening, and speaking - Works collaboratively with others - Cultivates and maintains positive relationships
Pursue Continuous Learning	- Masters and applies academics for college and career success - Makes connections to discover new knowledge and ideas - Develops talents, interests, and passions - Uses technology effectively to access information and display learning
Utilize Creative and Critical Thinking	- Defines problems and create solutions - Applies knowledge and skills to real-world situations - Embraces innovation to adapt to an ever-changing world
Engage and Contribute	- Connects to be a world-wise person - Develops relationships across boundaries and cultures - Interacts in a multilingual community - Demonstrates civility and respect differences in others

Similarly, as a framework for outlining the characteristics of effective leadership in ESSD, the system developed a *Leader Profile* in 2021. The tenets and attributes of this profile, shown in Table 3.6, were developed through the collaborative efforts of principals and district leaders in ESSD. The purposes for the development of the *Leader Profile* framework were three-fold:

1. it was developed as a means for identifying leaders;
2. it was to be used as a guide to coach leaders; and,

3. it was to be used as an evaluation document to make expectations clear and to hold accountable the leaders in ESSD.

The *Leader Profile* has been incorporated into the capacity-building and induction programs for principals and building leaders, as well as the selection process for leadership vacancies at the school level. As of 2023, however, the *Leader Profile* had yet to be used in any intentional way to guide the work of district leaders. The *Leader Profile* has the potential for establishing a unified purpose in ESSD's leadership and, thus, enhancing district coherence. The *Leader Profile* is illustrated in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6

The East Smithfield School District Leader Profile

Leader Profile Tenets	Leader Profile Attributes
Builds Relationships	- Evokes trust through honesty, empathy, humor, and respect for others - Advocates for equal opportunity and inclusion - Strives for self-awareness - Takes responsibility for decisions - Motivates and inspires
Communicates Effectively	- Listens actively, seeking to understand multiple perspectives - Articulates a clear picture of purpose and long-term objectives - Builds consensus for a shared vision - Establishes clear expectations
Leads with Intentionality	- Follows communications with appropriate action steps - Aligns work to the <i>ESSD Learner Profile</i> - Utilizes data-driven processes for making improvements - Connects short-term goals with global objectives - Reflectively analyzes results and adjusts appropriately - Anticipates the impact of decisions from multiple perspectives
Embraces Innovation	- Applies current research to daily practice - Utilizes human and financial resources in creative ways - Models a collaborative approach to creative problem-solving - Takes calculated, appropriate risks - Seeks feedback and accepts coaching for continuous improvement

Leader Profile Tenets	Leader Profile Attributes
Develops Leaders	- Empowers others to share in the decision-making - Provides authentic leadership opportunities and experiences - Encourages risks while providing support and coaching - Demonstrates vulnerability through open self-reflection - Models the importance of a balanced life

In the three-year period between 2020 and 2023, ESSD appointed 26 new principals in its 42 schools. During that same time, 61 new assistant principals were appointed. To prepare for this eventuality, district leaders in ESSD developed and implemented an Aspiring Leaders Program, as well as an Aspiring Principals Program. Both programs were designed to build leadership capacity. Of the 26 new principals, all but 1 came from within the system’s pipeline of leaders.

In addition to these capacity-building programs, a robust onboarding package provided induction activities for the new building leaders. The New Administrator Orientation was facilitated, as were district coaching and 1-on-1 mentoring opportunities, all designed to provide transitional guidance and ongoing support to the ESSD’s new building level leaders. To increase district coherence and to provide a common set of expectations, the *Leader Profile* became the foundational document to guide the development of those trained in ESSD’s leadership programs.

The central office in the ESSD is led by a superintendent and his administrative staff. In the ESSD central office organization, each of its nine departments are headed by leaders who comprise the superintendent’s cabinet and who report directly to the superintendent. Reporting to these cabinet leaders are directors, assistant directors, coordinators, managers, specialists, technicians, and support staff. An overview of the primary leaders in the ESSD central office is presented in Table 3.7.

Table 3.7*The East Smithfield School District Central Office Administrative Organization*

ESSD Department	Cabinet Leader	Subordinate Leaders
Leadership	Chief of Staff	1 Director 2 Coordinators 1 Legal Consultant
Communications and Community Engagement	Chief of Communications	1 Director 1 Coordinator
Facilities and Maintenance	Chief of Facilities	2 Directors 5 Coordinators 2 Managers
Finance and Business	Chief Financial Officer	3 Directors 5 Coordinators
Human Resources	Associate Superintendent	2 Directors 5 Coordinators
Operations	Chief Operations Officer	3 Directors 2 Coordinators
Student Support and Services	Associate Superintendent	2 Directors 4 Assistant Directors 6 Coordinators
Teaching and Learning	Associate Superintendent	4 Directors 4 Coordinators
Technology	Chief Technology Officer	3 Directors 3 Coordinators

During the time between 2020 and 2023, the leadership of ESSD’s central office began a significant transition, as a new deputy superintendent, 2 associate superintendents, and 12 directors and assistant directors were tapped to lead at the district level. Unlike the systematic approach to developing, onboarding, and coaching building level administrators, these 15 newly

appointed central office leaders received none of the capacity building and induction practices for formalized professional support from which building level benefited.

ESSD has provided clear expectations, ongoing systems of professional development, and multiple supports for its new building level leaders—investments that have proven vital during these perilous times in education. Although they are not immune to the challenges of retention, job satisfaction, and productivity that building leaders face, new central office leaders have not received similar preparation or supports.

This action research study was designed to address the challenge of onboarding new leaders in the East Smithfield School District central office. Made up of current central office leaders in the ESSD, the Action Research Design Team reviewed the research surrounding leadership role socialization and developed interventions to support members of the Action Research Implementation Team who were transitioning to the central office.

The next section of this chapter describes the sources of data collected during this study.

Data Sources

This action research study focused on the experiences and perceptions of newly appointed school district leaders who transitioned from roles at the school level to central office positions. Data were collected from primary sources—specifically those who participated in the study—as well as secondary sources, which included school district documents.

Participants

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) consisted of six members, including the lead researcher. The role of the ARDT was to review the literature surrounding effective onboarding practices and to design interventions for the newest leaders appointed to the East Smithfield School District (ESSD) central office. Three of these ARDT members served in ESSD as

Associate Superintendents, one as the Chief of Operations, one as Deputy Superintendent (the lead researcher), and one in the role of Director of Student Support. Five out of six ARDT members had served as school level administrators prior to arriving at the central office in ESSD (the lone exception being the Associate Superintendent of Student Support and Services). The Director of Student Support also served on the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), thus providing the unique perspective of both designing and experiencing interventions developed for this study.

The Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) was comprised of six members, all of whom were in their first two years of service as central office leaders in the ESSD. Included among the six were a newly appointed Director of Food and Nutrition, the Director of Human Resources, the Coordinator for Classified Recruiting, the Assessment Coordinator, and both the Director and Assistant Director of Student Support. The Director of Student Support also served on the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) for this study. Each of these leaders had served as a principal or assistant principal in an ESSD school immediately prior to entering central office service.

As members of the ARIT, these new leaders participated in a variety of organizational socialization activities designed to improve their transition to new roles as part of the onboarding process. They articulated challenges faced during the transition and identified the activities they found most beneficial toward supporting them during the onboarding process. The data collected through each of the three action research cycles were collected, analyzed, and used to inform the efforts of the ARDT as they designed interventions for each subsequent cycle.

Selection Criteria

Unlike quantitative studies, which aim to provide broad generalizations from the research conducted, qualitative action research is used when seeking solutions to specific problems (Glanz, 2014; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The objective of qualitative research is to provide rich, in-depth meaning to challenges faced by practitioners in the context of their social environment (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Working together, the lead researcher and study participants constructed meaning from the experience, proposed solutions, and developed a deeper understanding for themselves, as well as for others researching similar topics (Bloomberg, 2023; Coughlan & Brannick, 2014). Therefore, it was imperative for the lead researcher to identify the target audience for this research study and to assemble the appropriate participants who could provide a typical sample for the challenges of transitioning from school level to central office leadership (Bloomberg, 2023).

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) members who agreed to participate in this study represented the East Smithfield School District's (ESSD) central office leaders who recruit, develop, and hope to retain staff for the school system in their respective departments. Each one of these leaders make recommendations to the ESSD Superintendent who, ultimately, submits the names to the board of education. Once approved, the onboarding of new district leaders is left to each of the central office leaders doing the original recommending. Therefore, it became vital that these decision-makers be offered the opportunity to participate, where their insights and ideas were integral in the design of onboarding and socialization interventions for newly appointed members of their teams.

The Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) members who agreed to participate in this study all arrived at their roles in the central offices of ESSD from principal and assistant

principal positions at schools within the district. While numerous individuals were elevated to various central office positions, the six identified and asked to participate in this study were those appointed to coordinator, assistant director, or director positions in ESSD. The six participants were leaders given responsibilities for developing and serving on district improvement teams, of managing resources—both human and financial—for their respective departments and interacting with local school leaders most frequently. Each member of the ARIT was directly supervised by a member of the ARDT in the ESSD central office. As the ARIT members selected were all in their first two years of service at the time of the study, they were able to provide detailed descriptions of their transition experiences, thus providing deep insights that guided the work of the ARDT.

The next section of this chapter provides descriptions of the methods used to collect data during this action research study.

Data Collection Methods

A qualitative action research approach was used in this study to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by newly appointed central office leaders when transitioning into new leadership roles. Interventions within an organizational socialization theoretical framework focused on reducing anxiety, enhancing role clarity, and developing learning agility. These interventions were designed by the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and implemented with the members of the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT).

Case study methodology was used to provide rich descriptions of the impact that interventions had on participants in the study. Consistent with an action study approach, the lead researcher worked closely with participants throughout the study to collaboratively construct

deeper meaning from the experiences of the participants and to explore how future leaders new to the East Smithfield School District's (ESSD) central office might be positively affected by onboarding processes.

Multiple qualitative methods were used to collect data for this action research study, as follows:

1. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual members of the ARIT in each of the three cycles of the study. Members of the ARDT were also interviewed individually near the beginning of the study.
2. Questionnaires were used with members of the ARIT both in the beginning stages and near the conclusion of the study. One was also used at the mid-point of the study with ARDT members.
3. Focus group discussions were facilitated with members of the ARIT mid-way through the study, as well as near the end of the study. One was also facilitated with members of the ARDT near the conclusion of the study.
4. Observations were conducted during individual interviews, welcome receptions, monthly ARDT, department, and directors' meetings, as well as during District Leader Onboarding (DLO) workshops.
5. Artifacts were collected that included meeting agendas, district reports, and school system materials that the researcher used to provide clarity of context throughout the study.
6. A journal was kept by the researcher to record observation notes made during interactions ARIT and ARDT members. It also provided a tool for ongoing reflections made by the researcher.

This combination of data collection methods allowed the lead researcher to compare, contrast, and ultimately, triangulate the results. In doing so, the lead researcher was able to add credibility and dependability to the findings.

Interviews

Interviewing participants in action research studies is among the most common methods of collecting qualitative data (Bloomberg, 2023). The intentional design of interview questions can bring forth rich descriptions that give deeper meaning to the experiences of those participating in a study. According to Tavory (2020), “narrative and symbolic representations matter as a way for humans to construct their world together. Eliciting such a cultural landscape, interviews tell us something about how people make sense of their world well beyond the interview situation” (p. 458). In this study, the use of semi-structured interview protocols provided a balance of both pre-set questions and the spontaneous probing and prompting of follow-up questions that allowed for a natural exchange of thoughts and ideas (Bloomberg, 2023).

In the search for understanding the experiences of newly appointed district office leaders in the ESSD, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant in the study. Each member of the ARDT was interviewed at the start of the study, providing the researcher an opportunity to better understand their experiences when they transitioned into district leadership roles, as well as to describe the activities they had initiated when bringing newcomers that they hired into their respective departments.

Each member of the ARIT was interviewed three times. The first interview was to provide each participant the opportunity to fully describe the fears, challenges, and interpretations of their experiences related to moving from school leadership positions to roles at

the district level. The second interview was conducted to ascertain the effectiveness and impact of interventions employed during their transition into new leadership roles. The final interview was to gain a greater understanding from the perspective of ARIT participants about the differences of leading in two different contexts: the school level and the district level.

The questions designed for members of the ARDT and the ARIT were aligned to the research questions that framed this study. Each question provided the interviewee the opportunity to provide personal descriptions of their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of moving from one leadership context into another. While the full sets of interview protocols for both the ARIT and ARDT can be found in Appendices B and C, respectively, Table 3.8 provides a sampling of ARIT interview questions asked, along with their corresponding research question.

Table 3.8

Sampling of Interview Questions

Research Question (RQ)	Interview Questions
RQ #1 How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level?	Prior to starting in your new role, what did you anticipate would be the biggest challenge(s) in your transition? What has been the biggest challenge to this point?
RQ #2 How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership?	What knowledge do you wish you possessed early on about your new role that simply was not provided or that you feel you did not learn quickly enough?
RQ #3 How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?	What has been the most impactful source of support to you during your transition? Provide suggestions for improving the transition process for future district office leaders arriving from the school level.

Questionnaires

Although they are not the most effective means as a stand-alone method for collecting qualitative data, the use of questionnaires does provide value in the triangulation process when gathering and analyzing the perceptions of those participating in action research studies (Bloomberg, 2023). Questionnaires also provide an efficient way of capturing a respondent's feelings toward a particular practice, environment, or culture (Glanz, 2014). For the purposes of this study, two questionnaires were provided to the members of the ARIT—the first at the onset of the study, the second one near the conclusion of the study.

The first set of questions were structured and close-ended, providing the respondent the opportunity to rate their emotions prior to the implementation of interventions. The numeric data collected were not, in and of themselves, the true focus of the data collection. The numeric data provided the ARDT with a baseline of attitudes, perceptions, and feelings prior to the implementation of interventions, as well as an added element of focus to aid in the design of the interventions. The second set of questions corresponded with the first set, thus providing an additional layer of evidence regarding the effectiveness of the interventions that the ARIT experienced.

As with the interview protocols, the questionnaire items were intentionally aligned to the research questions that guided the study. To avoid what Glanz (2014) called “response sets,” where participants can simply run down a column and mark every question with the same answer, the questions asked were worded with a mixture of positive and negative statements (p. 121). Both ARIT questionnaires can be found in Appendix D. A sampling of the questions posed in the questionnaires are displayed in Table 3.9.

Table 3.9*Sampling of Questionnaire Items*

Research Question (RQ)	Pre-Intervention Questions	Post-Intervention Questions
	For each of the following, provide a rating between 1 and 5, with 1 being the lowest level and 5 the highest level.	For each of the following, provide a rating between 1 and 5, with 1 being the lowest level and 5 the highest level.
RQ #1 How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the school level?	Rate your level of clarity related to the performance expectations placed on you in your new role (at the time of	Rate your current level of clarity related to the performance expectations placed on you in your new
	For each of the following, provide a rating between 1 and 5, with 1 being the lowest level and 5 the highest level.	For each of the following, provide a rating between 1 and 5, with 1 being the lowest level and 5 the highest level.
RQ #2 How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership?	Rate the level of discomfort you feel (or felt at the onset of your transition) in knowing who to contact when questions arose.	Rate your current level of discomfort in knowing who to contact when questions arise.

Focus Groups

As part of their participation in this study, members of both the ARDT and ARIT agreed to engage in focus group discussions. Sometimes referred to as group interviews, focus groups allow for a give-and-take discussion on topics provided by the facilitator (Glanz, 2014; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Set in a more socially natural environment than a one-on-one interview setting, participant interaction can provide the researcher unpredicted responses that lead to greater insights into their experiences (Bloomberg, 2023; Krueger & Casey, 2015). While the

synergy created in a group setting led to fruitful discussions, there were two challenges that the lead researcher/focus group facilitator had to be on guard against.

One challenge was the issue of “power dynamics” in which minority opinions could get drowned out. The other challenge was a “group think” dynamic in which participants tended to agree with one another in a collective manner, rather than providing their own, individual, reflections rooted in their own experiences (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 286).

The questions designed for the two ARIT focus groups aimed specifically at gathering data related to the effectiveness of interventions, which were delivered in the form of onboarding activities. The first focus group meeting occurred during the second cycle of interventions, allowing them to reflect on past activities and well as ones in which they were currently engaged. The second focus group came near the end of the third cycle, allowing for a more comprehensive group reflection on their experiences. In the case of the ARDT, one focus group was held as the final meeting of the group. This meeting of the participants focused on gathering their impressions of the processes used in implementing onboarding activities, as well as the impact that the practices had on their own leadership effectiveness.

In all focus groups, the questions designed to facilitate the discussions were directly aligned to the research questions that guided this action research study. A sampling of the focus group protocol questions can be seen in Table 3.10. The entire set of Focus Group protocols for the ARIT can be found in Appendix E, while the protocols for the ARDT can be found in Appendix F.

Table 3.10*Sampling of Focus Group Questions*

Research Questions	Focus Group Questions (Participant Group)
RQ #1 How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at	Given that you are leading from a new context, describe the elements of the Leader Profile you find the most challenging to live up to, particularly as compared to leading in a school setting. (ARIT)
RQ #2 How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership?	Share with the group the “stretch” experiment that you are embarking on as we head into the summer and what your initial feelings are about it. (ARIT)
RQ #3 How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?	What, if any, benefit(s) did you gain from coaching leaders from other departments? What, if any, benefit(s) did you gain from your monthly Supervisor Expectation Checks of participants in your own department? (ARDT)

Observation Notes

A key element to a qualitative action research study is the participation of the lead researcher. Solutions are sought through the collaboration of the researcher and fellow members within the organization working together (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). The concept of the practitioner-researcher is most pronounced in the collection of notes through observations by the lead researcher when interacting with colleagues in the normal work setting (Bloomberg, 2023; Zieman, 2012).

In this study, given the positionality of the lead researcher, it was vital that the role played at the time of the observations be clarified. As Glanz (2014) pointed out, the lead researcher conducts observations through one of four roles:

- a *participant* who is embedded in the natural work setting
- an *observer-participant* who is known by all in attendance to be participating and collecting data simultaneously
- a *participant-observer* who is primarily focused on the job at hand, not on the research,
- an *observer* who is in no way participating but is there simply to record data.

In this study, the observer-participant was the role played most predominantly by the lead researcher. As suggested by Zieman (2012), observation provided the lead researcher a practical opportunity to “watch human behaviors and actions and derive meaning from these experiences” (p. 50).

Over the course of this study, the lead researcher collected data from observations of ARDT members as they participated in and interacted during cabinet and design team meetings, as well as in interviews and focus group discussions. The researcher diligently took notes as the ARDT developed interventions aimed at reducing uncertainty, while enhancing role clarity and job agility in ARIT members. In this setting, the lead researcher played the role of an observer-participant, with all members of the ARDT aware that they were being observed while engaging with one another, including the lead researcher. The only setting in which the lead researcher served as a participant-observer was during cabinet meetings, as participation in the normal work-based role of the lead researcher took precedent over the collection of notes.

In the ESSD director and department meetings, the lead researcher focused on collecting notes as members of the ARIT engaged in their normal work activities, with all participants fully aware that the observer-participant role was being employed. The same approach and collection of notes occurred in interviews and focus groups that included ARIT members. The only setting

in which the lead researcher served as a participant-observer was during the social gatherings held as welcome receptions by ESSD's superintendent. In these situations, participation in the normal work-based role of the lead researcher took precedent over the collection of notes. Some samples of the observation notes collected by the lead researcher are provided in Table 3.11.

Table 3.11

Sampling of Observation Notes

Date	Observation Setting	Observation Notes Recorded by the Lead Researcher
03-15-24	ARDT Interview #1	Bernie scowled, shifted, and was clearly uncomfortable with the question. He looked away a lot when answering, searching for answers almost like a job interview. He perked up with confidence when discussing PBIS.
03-24-24	District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshop #1	Discussion of those people who made a major impact on their (ARIT members') lives was a great kickoff - all participated. They were animated, shared, and wanted more time!
04-08-24	ARIT Interview #1	Marni smiles constantly. Smiles left her face. A sense of frustration and fear over isolation and a lack of clarity. She was very slow and careful choosing her words on this topic.
05-21-24	ARDT Meeting #3	I (the lead researcher) walked in and Bernie, Wallace, and Linda were discussing the lack of leadership displayed by so many folks at the district office. They discussed the need for formal training and onboarding. This made my heart fill. They were talking about the work and the need for onboarding prior to my presence! This could be the start to real coherence in building an onboarding program.

Artifacts

Throughout this study, a plethora of documents were gathered for analysis. According to Glanz (2014), the analysis of archival information and organizational records can be a "very rich" source for "portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting" (p. 290). In the iterative nature of an action research study such as this, many additional documents were developed as the study ensued. The ARDT spent time reviewing various ESSD documents,

ranging from strategic plans and departmental goals to school system profiles and meeting agendas. The ARDT used charts, figures, and graphs from non ESSD sources, while also developing their own materials, when designing interventions.

Placed together with interview, focus group, and questionnaire data, a more comprehensive picture of the culture and working environment in ESSD was constructed, providing necessary context in the search for meaning (Bloomberg, 2023; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). In addition to painting a contextual picture, the analysis of documents provided an additional means of triangulating the data gathered during the study, thus strengthening the reliability of the findings (Creswell, 2013).

Researcher's Journal

One of the challenges faced by the lead researcher when conducting a qualitative action research study can be the volume of narratives, observation notes, and data collected. An important tool for recording and filing this information is the researcher's journal (Annink, 2015; Bloomberg, 2023). Perhaps even more important than having a place to file information, the researcher's journal can also be the tool that helps facilitate deeper reflection. Bloomberg (2023) explained it this way:

It is important to keep a record of your changing thoughts about the literature and its relevance to your emerging research topic, as well as about the research process in general. One way to ensure that you preserve your reasoning and thinking and are able to spell out the development of your ideas is to keep a research journal. (p. 46)

The researcher's journal was used for both the recording of data related to observations, interviews, focus groups, and interactions with participants, as well as for the reflective process. Some samples of the notes taken from the researcher's journal are provided in Table 3.12.

Table 3.12

Sampling of Researcher's Journal

Date	Event	Thoughts and Notes Recorded by the Lead Researcher
03-15-24	ARDT Meeting #1 Defining leadership "clarity"	Hung up on leadership clarification and clear expectations. Wallace (Wilson) and Bernie (George) see them as same, despite being different categories of interventions. Post-meeting – Heather (Cassidy) suggested that what we might mean by leadership clarification is leader clarity. Discussion led to defining <u>clarification</u> as "providing clear expectations," whereas <u>clarity</u> refers to "newcomers better understanding their leadership role" – which is exactly what we were aiming for. I will need to make changes to my use of clarification and clarity throughout the dissertation.
04-09-24	Bob Tocheny ARIT Interview #1 Reflection	Upon rereading the notes and the transcript of Bob's first interview, it was clear that a major source of anxiety was his not knowing the calendar or daily timing of work like he did in a school building.
04-09-24	Bob Tocheny ARIT Interview #1 Reflection	We (ARDT) will need to discuss adding this as a topic to the supervisor expectations check-in meetings. I will need to add this as a new code – re-analyze transcripts.

Date	Event	Thoughts and Notes Recorded by the Lead Researcher
04-24-24	ARDT Meeting #2 DLO activity	Linda Mitchell shared in the first DLO Workshop “newcomers displayed vulnerability by sharing their personal stories and the people who impacted them. The ARDT members sat—like a jury—and listened, making them very uncomfortable.” Linda suggested that each of the ARDT members should Share about themselves and their journeys at future DLO Workshops and “let our guards down a little.” Based on my perception of the first meeting, I had left thinking that the ARIT members had enjoyed themselves. Apparently not! At least not Linda. We discussed and agreed that we would share our stories at future meetings, beginning with Erin and me.

The thoughts, perceptions, misperceptions, analysis, and adjustments in thinking were all recorded in the journal, demonstrating the evolving nature of the study simultaneously with the lead researcher’s evolution in thinking. Included among the everchanging elements in this study were interventions designed by the ARDT and implemented for use with the members of the ARIT. Those interventions are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Interventions

One key element of action research that distinguishes it from other forms of research is that it focuses on the identification of a specific problem within a specific context whereby the practitioners, themselves, are directly involved in finding solutions (Karagiorgi et al., 2018; Mertler, 2021). Going further, Mertler (2021) shared, “the research is being conducted by insiders, those who work directly with the problem being studied. It is based upon critical reflection and investigation into one’s own professional practice” (p. 1). Dating back to the seminal works of Lewin (1946) and Corey (1954), the idea persists that action research can be an appropriate approach to solving problems in the context of education.

As shared by Glanz (2014), a collaborative approach to action research can lead to the development of a “systemwide mind-set for school improvement—a professional problem-solving ethos” (p. 17). The challenge of onboarding new central office leaders in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD) came into focus as a systemwide issue—one in need of immediate attention—thus calling for an action research methodology (Mertler, 2021; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009).

The collaborative approach to problem-solving in education lends itself to another distinguishing feature of action research: its iterative, spiraling cycles of discovery (Bryk et al., 2015; Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014). Once a problem of practice has been clearly defined and the literature related to that problem thoroughly reviewed, a collaborative team of educators can commence an action research study (Bryk et al., 2015). As a team, they must design, implement, and review the results of research-based interventions as part of one research cycle (Bryk et al., 2015; Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014). Upon assessing the successes and failures of the first cycle, the collaborative design team commences a new cycle of interventions to be implemented, thus leading to the spiraling, cyclical research that Coghlan and Brannick (2014) described as research-in-motion.

For this study, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) conducted three action research cycles. Interventions within each research cycle were delivered through the framework of organizational socialization, which included formal, collective, serial, and investiture tactics (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). While organizational socialization tactics provided the delivery method, the interventions, themselves, were developed around three, primary foci: uncertainty reduction, leadership clarity, and learning agility.

Organizational Socialization Tactics Used to Deliver Interventions

Rooted in the research of Van Maanen and Schein (1977), the concept of organization socialization posits that any organization failing to intentionally onboard its newcomers is subject to predicted responses that can drastically and negatively affect both the employee and the organization. When newcomers are onboarded through a set of organizational socialization tactics, their reactions are more predictable, with an increased likelihood of experiencing less anxiety, more job satisfaction, and a custodial response that preserves the organization's approach to conducting business (Bengtson et al., 2013; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). These predicted responses are more clearly explained in Table 3.13.

Table 3.13

Organizational Socialization Response Definitions

Predicted Response	Response Definition
Custodianship	The newcomer accepts the organization's mission, the existing approach to the work, and their role in it.
Content Innovation	The newcomer accepts the overall mission, but wishes to make changes in the approach to the work and the strategies used.
Role Innovation	The newcomer wishes to change the overall mission, approach to the work, and redefine their role within the organization.

Note. Adapted from Bengtson et al. (2013); Van Maanen and Schein (1977).

In this study, the ESSD leaders elevated from school leadership roles to central office positions of leadership comprised the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). These new leaders participated in a series of onboarding activities designed as interventions by the ARDT. The interventions were delivered through a combination of organizational socialization tactics aimed at achieving a primarily custodial approach, with some level of content innovation that capitalized on the newcomers' strengths and abilities. The tactics used in this study included a

combination of collective, formal, serial, and investiture vehicles in which to provide the onboarding interventions. A full description of the organizational socialization tactics employed in this study is provided in Table 3.14.

Table 3.14

Four Organizational Socialization Tactics Used to Deliver Interventions

Tactics	Descriptions
Collective	Groups of newcomers go through socialization together rather than individually.
Formal	Very structured preparation as opposed to unstructured and organic; socialization occurs away from other organization members rather than being job-embedded; efforts made to disconnect from previous thinking and learn new protocols and values rather than allowing prior assumptions to prevail or go unchecked.
Serial	Experienced employees take a major role in preparing newcomers as opposed to leaving them to independent discovery and potential isolation.
Investiture	The newcomer's personal traits are valued and built upon as opposed to stripping away personal traits in favor of prioritizing the work.

Note. Adapted from Bengtson et al. (2013); Jones (1986); Van Maanen and Schein (1977).

The collective tactic used in this study came in the form of a newcomer cohort. The members of the ARIT were provided many onboarding interventions as a group, thus allowing them to develop a social network and a deeper sense of cohesion that fostered trust (Bialek & Hagan, 2021; Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010). Formal tactics for transitioning the new leaders were employed, as the onboarding interventions largely occurred away from fellow members of their department. Providing a setting where the new leaders could safely express themselves through structured activities allowed them to unlearn previously held assumptions about the central office in the ESSD and clear the way for learning their new mission and the values of their new departments (Bauer et al., 2007; Bengtson et al., 2013; Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2014; Zepeda et al., 2021).

To provide both insight and support to the newcomers in the ESSD central office, experienced leaders were used as coaches who met with members of the ARIT in one-on-one sessions. This approach, along with formalized one-on-one expectations meetings between newcomers and their supervisors, embodied the serial tactics that Jones (1986) referred to as a social aspect of organizational socialization. Leaning into veterans within the field who have greater knowledge of the innerworkings provided the newcomers a faster grasp of their new environment and greater trust in their organization (Swaminathan & Reed, 2020; Zepeda et al., 2021). In these sessions, as with the group meetings, the members of the ARIT were expected to demonstrate their strengths and use them to problem solve.

Unlike the divestiture tactics used in boot camps by the military, newcomers in the ESSD central office were not broken down and built back up by their supervisors and coaches (Bengtson et al., 2013). Rather, the personal traits and skills that led them to their promotion to the central office were built on, consistent with Van Maanen and Schein's (1977) definition of investiture as an organizational socialization tactic.

As the organizational socialization tactics provided the framework for delivering onboarding content, the ARDT developed specific interventions aimed at reducing uncertainty, enhancing leadership clarity, and building learning agility.

Interventions Aimed at Uncertainty Reduction

The successful transition of school leaders to positions at the district level began with the intentional reduction of uncertainty and the anxiety associated with starting a new role (Bengtson et al., 2013; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Getting newcomers to feel confident in their new surroundings required them to quickly gain an understanding of formal guidelines, responsibilities, and both intra- and inter-office politics (Klein et al., 2015; Jeske & Olson,

2022). According to Bauer et al. (2007), the acquisition of knowledge necessary to navigate the workplace is a two-way proposition, where the newcomer actively seeks information, and the organization provides activities to reduce uncertainty.

For this study, the ARDT leaned into two onboarding models when designing interventions that aimed at uncertainty reduction: The IWG Model developed by Klein and Heuser (2008) and the Four C's Framework developed by Bauer (2010). The major components of these two programs are illustrated in Table 3.15.

Table 3.15

The Inform-Welcome-Guide and the Four C's of Onboarding

IWG Components		Four C's Components	
	Descriptions		Descriptions
Inform	Provides the newcomer with essential information through formal communications, documents and training sessions.	Compliance	Provides newcomer with rules, regulations, and policies.
Welcome	Celebrates the arrival of the newcomer; focus on meeting emotional needs.	Clarification	Roles and responsibilities are defined; expectations are established.
Guide	Veteran employees are provided as a resource to help newcomers gain necessary knowledge to better understand the inner workings of the organization.	Culture	Organization norms are learned through relationships with superiors and peers.
		Connection	Social relationships and internal networks are formed that help the newcomer gain command of the organization's vocabulary, core values, and internal politics.

Note. Adapted from Bauer (2010); Klein and Heuser (2008).

Drawing from both the IWG and Four C's models, the ARDT designed interventions that provided newcomers (ARIT members) information needed to navigate their new surroundings. Beginning with a superintendent's welcome reception, newcomers were celebrated for their successful advancement in the ESSD. Supervisor expectation check-ins were held monthly in which the newcomer was provided details about rules, policies, performance expectations, success criteria, and feedback.

Monthly one-on-one sessions with district coaches were designed and held to provide perspectives to newcomers from veteran central office leaders. Each coaching session focused on an element of district leadership, as well as opportunities for newcomers to seek counsel and advice from a leader outside of their department. Finally, monthly district leadership onboarding workshops were held to explore various elements of district leadership, while also providing newcomers the opportunity to share experiences with each other, clarify information that they found confusing, and truly develop a network of colleagues in whom they could trust.

At each ARDT monthly meeting, the lead researcher would share questionnaire results, interview and focus group responses, and observational notes taken during district department and director meetings. Along with ARDT members' own experiences and interactions with ARIT members, these data were used to inform the development of interventions aimed at uncertainty reduction from one action research cycle to the next.

Interventions Aimed at Leadership Clarity

Saks and Gruman (2018) shared that organizational socialization efforts often stop short of their potential to establish deeper levels of workplace engagement in newcomers. Reduction of uncertainty and anxiety should not be the sole focus of onboarding efforts (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013; Ellis et al., 2015). For this study, the reduction of uncertainty was

foundational in setting the stage for a successful transition, but it was not the only objective. For workplace engagement and job satisfaction to be sustained beyond the initial transition period, the ARDT needed to develop interventions beyond those that focused on uncertainty reduction (Becker & Bish, 2021; Saks & Gruman, 2018).

Consideration of a district leader's previous experiences was imperative when designing onboarding activities, as ARIT member naturally came into their new central office positions with a school-centric view of educational leadership (Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013; Harden, 2009). To better understand the new context from which they would be leading, ARIT members had to be provided interventions that helped them to unlearn old assumptions and begin acquiring greater leadership clarity (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2014; Goldring et al., 2020; Harden, 2009; Park & Kim, 2020).

The interventions that focused on developing leadership clarity leaned heavily into the works of Harden (2009) and Zepeda et al. (2021). Zepeda et al. (2021) shared that the role of district leaders is less about daily action and more about establishing the conditions for success. Harden (2009) suggested that leaders moving from school level to district level roles struggle with a series of shifts needed in their leadership lens. Interventions were designed by the ARDT with Harden's (2009) and Zepeda et al.'s (2021) works serving as the foundation for exercises and conversations in district leader onboarding workshops, supervisor expectation check-ins, and one-on-one coaching sessions.

Interventions also included the comparisons of budgeting at a local school with that process at the district level, school improvement with strategic planning, and developing school partnering with district networking. Scenarios were designed and implemented to help ARIT members to experience—in the safe environments of onboarding workshops and coaching

sessions—the impact of decision-making at the district level, the nature of behind-the-scenes leadership, and the speed at which district work is completed. Appendix G provides two complete examples of these Leadership Situation Scenarios

The lead researcher shared questionnaire results, interview and focus group responses, and observational notes taken during district leader onboarding workshops, as well as during district department and director meetings. Along with ARDT members’ own experiences and interactions with ARIT members, these data were used to inform the development of interventions aimed at enhancing leadership clarity from one action research cycle to the next.

Interventions Aimed at Learning Agility

Two sets of interventions implemented in this study focused on the reduction of uncertainty and providing clarity in a new leadership context. A third set of interventions developed by the ARDT focused on the development of learning agility in newcomers to the ESSD central office. Whereas the first two areas aimed at helping the ARIT members adjust to their new roles, developing their learning agility was done to prepare them for a future of leading in an increasingly “volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA)” world (Harvey & Valerio, 2022, p. 269).

De Meuse (2017) defined learning agility as applying previous learning to leadership challenges *not* previously experienced. Although members of the ARIT were elevated to their new central office positions based largely on their effectiveness as school level leaders, it was not safe to assume that they would automatically find success in their new roles, given the everchanging VUCA environment in which they were promoted (Castiglione et al., 2022; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Armed with that understanding, the ARDT designed interventions that focused on developing five categories of learning agile behaviors in the

ESSD's newest central office leaders. These categories, developed by Harvey and Prager (2021), included:

- *Observing*—behaviors that allow the leader to assess situations to be prepared for new challenges;
- *Doing*—behaviors that allow the leader to find paths to organizational and personal improvement through new experiences, new information, and new constructs;
- *Connecting*—behaviors that allow the leader to draw on the experiences of others to improve themselves by learning different approaches to new challenges;
- *Thinking*—behaviors that allow the leader to process and frame the nature of challenges through the formulation of questions and letting go of obsolete practices; and
- *Mobilizing*—behaviors that allow the leader to become disciplined, process-grounded, and action-oriented when facing challenges.

When designing each intervention for the development of learning agility, the ARDT chose specific learning agile behaviors that could be embedded within each of the onboarding activities.

In the supervisor expectation check-in meetings, ARIT members were asked to set, plan, and monitor professional goals (Mobilizing) with their supervisor, as well as to seek feedback on those goals, as well as on performance expectations (Connecting). Supervisors also worked to challenge ARIT members with stretch assignments outside of their comfort zones (Doing).

While working through ARDT-designed scenarios, newcomers were challenged to not only solve problems, but be able to articulate to their district coaches in one-on-one sessions and their colleagues during onboarding workshops their rationale and mental processes for resolving those

issues (Thinking). Seeking feedback on those scenarios from their coaches and hearing how each other resolved dilemmas in the onboarding workshops allowed for vicarious learning (Connecting). Finally, the ARDT developed a workshop for ARIT members that centered on mindfulness (Observing).

Even with effective interventions aimed at helping newcomers adjust to their new roles, the onboarding interventions in this study provided an opportunity to go further in the newcomers' development, preparing them for unforeseen challenges that lay ahead (Groves & Feyerherm, 2022).

At the start and conclusion of each cycle of interventions, the lead researcher shared questionnaire results, interview and focus group responses, and observational notes taken during district leader onboarding workshops, as well as during district department and director meetings. This information, along with ARDT members' own experiences and interactions with ARIT members, was used to inform the design of interventions aimed at developing leadership agility from one action research cycle to the next.

The data generated by the three cycles of interventions throughout the study were systematically collected, coded, and analyzed. This qualitative process produced clear themes and patterns through a set of rich descriptions. The methods used to analyze the data are discussed in the next section.

Data Analysis Methods

Among the unique challenges facing a qualitative researcher is the ability to make sense of the volumes of data collected over the course of a study (Creswell, 2013; Glanz, 2014). Analyses of data gathered in quantitative research takes place at the conclusion of the study,

whereas analyses of qualitative data occur simultaneously with the collection of data (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014). During the iterative cycles of a qualitative action research study, the lead researcher must be at once both reflective and reflexive (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Warin et al., 2007).

Whereas reflective practices allow the researcher the time to look back on a completed study to draw meaning, reflexivity requires “an awareness of self-in-practice” as integral aspect of reflection (Warin et al., 2007, p. 234). In the case study of onboarding new leaders in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD) central office, the lead researcher had to be reflexive while conducting cycles of action research, making sense of the data while it was being collected.

Sense-making in this study required the lead researcher to collect data from interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires, as well as from observations during workshops and meetings. While collecting and storing data in the researcher’s journal, the lead researcher was continuously taking notes in real time about the data being gathered. This study adhered to the four forms of analyzing case study data suggested by Creswell (2013):

1. *Categorical aggregation*—finding issue-based meaning from a collection of common instances.
2. *Direct interpretation*—finding meaning from individual instances in isolation of other instances before categorizing and, potentially, recategorizing.
3. *Establishing patterns*—finding meaning by identifying correspondence between multiple categories of instances.
4. *Naturalistic generalizations*—finding meaning through the collection of lessons learned by those participating in the study and by those who wish to apply the lessons to their own, similar cases.

Recording each phase of the process, each conversation, each reflexive adjustment, and ongoing reflection resulted in a thick, rich description consistent with the expectations of a qualitative study (Bloomberg, 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Glanz, 2014; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). To produce a thick description, the lead researcher had to develop a coding process to establish categories and identify themes by which to analyze emergent patterns.

Coding

The process of coding is simply constructing small categories or groupings of data with corresponding symbols or words to identify any commonalities among the various pieces of the information gathered (Creswell, 2013). According to Williams and Moser (2019), “Coding in qualitative research is comprised of processes that enable collected data to be assembled, categorized, and thematically sorted, providing an organized platform for the construction of meaning” (p. 45). Given the volume of interview and questionnaire responses, discussions held, and observations conducted, it was imperative for the lead researcher to systematically organize the data so that meaning could be constructed.

Two forms of coding were employed in this study: deductive coding and inductive coding. Deductive coding refers to the use of codes that were prefigured or pre-determined (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell, 2013). In this study, deductive codes directly tied to both the research questions used to guide the study, as well as to the components of the study’s theoretical framework. Inductive coding refers to the emergence of categories that evolved organically over the course of the study—an evolution much like the iterative nature of action research, itself (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell, 2013).

For this study, the semi-structured nature of the interviews and focus groups, as well as the observations of new central office leaders participating in district meetings, led to a

continuous development of codes throughout the research cycles. In both coding processes, patterns emerged from the code-driven categories. These patterns were then analyzed to identify themes. Some samples of the coding used in this study are provided in Table 3.16.

Table 3.16

Coding Samples

Code	Meaning	Sample of Application
A	Anxiety	“I am fearful that others won’t see benefits of this position.”—Marni Lynn describing her feelings as she transitioned into her new role at the central office.
R/C	Role Clarity	“I would love to have more guidance on how my work was intended to align to the goals of the district.”—anonymous response to the first ARIT questionnaire.
P	Power	“Power up here is earning the respect of the people out there. We must teach them that.”—Bernie George, sharing with the ARDT his thoughts on helping new central office leaders to make the transition from school leadership. “Up here” is his reference to the central office, while “out there” was his reference to school building leaders.
F	Feedback	“So from my direct supervisor, I’m not receiving feedback unless I seek it. And the feedback is very general, like ‘oh, I think you’re doing a good job.’”—Linda Mitchell, during her first ARIT interview, reflecting on the nature of feedback at the district level.

Thematic Analysis

Simply put, thematic analysis is a qualitative function used to “organize and simplify the complexity of the data into meaningful and manageable codes, categories, and themes” (Peel, 2020, p. 7). Unlike studies that test theories through quantitative measures, qualitative action research such as this study relies on the lead researcher to serve as the primary instrument to analyze, interpret, and make sense of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Williams & Moser, 2019).

A thematic analysis approach allows for themes to be pulled from the data, followed by rich descriptions that construct deeper meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020;

Nowell et al., 2017). As with the iterative nature of action research, the themes constructed evolve throughout the course of a study, requiring reflexive analysis. Braun and Clarke (2022) described 10 basic assumptions that define the idea of reflexive thematic analysis:

1. Subjectivity is required, as the researcher is the primary instrument of analysis.
2. Effectiveness of thematic analysis is not measured on accuracy, but on how fully developed, thoughtful, and in-depth it is. It is either considered strong analysis or weak analysis.
3. Effective coding and development of themes rely on the researcher's ability to be both immersed in the data and distanced from the data. This allows the researcher to gain a depth of knowledge while, simultaneously, being able to step away and reflect on what was learned.
4. Quality coding does not require multiple coders—it requires *reflexive* coders who seek interpretation through greater levels of depth when analyzing the data.
5. Themes come as analytic outputs that emerge after, not before, coding.
6. Themes are not simply summaries of topics; they are “patterns of meaning anchored by a shared idea or concept (or central organizing concept)” (p. 9).
7. Themes are developed by the researcher through thorough engagement with the data and through the researcher's theoretical perspectives.
8. Researchers must acknowledge that their data analysis are girded by their theoretical assumptions.
9. The iterative, generative reflexivity of the researcher is key to quality analysis.
10. Within a framework of rigorous data analysis, creativity in conceptualizing their findings is paramount in the researcher's ability to provide meaning.

These 10 assumptions weighed heavily on this study, as the lead researcher sought to develop meaning from the abundance of data collected. As the lead researcher was responsible for developing the themes from that data and identifying patterns, subjectivity was unavoidable, as pointed out by Braun and Clarke (2022).

The very nature of thematic analysis in a qualitative study is subjective. The bias of the lead researcher is not only inescapable, it is *key* element to the process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The burden placed on the researcher is to follow a process that is rigorous enough to provide strength to the study that will enable it to stand up to scrutiny. Based on the works of Lincoln and Guba (1986), and later refined by Braun and Clarke (2006), a six-stage process was used to guide the thematic analysis used by the lead researcher in this study, as outlined in Table 3.17.

Table 3.17

The Six Stages of Thematic Analysis

Stage	Description
1. Familiarization	Throughout the course of the study, the lead researcher reads the data multiple times, making notes, and recording initial ideas.
2. Initial Coding	The lead researcher identifies interesting features captured in the data, generating codes for them, and systematically assigning those codes across the entire set of data.
3. Constructing Themes	The lead researcher groups codes into potential themes, then gathers all other data relating to those themes and groups <i>them</i> together.
4. Reviewing Themes	The lead researcher establishes how each theme connects with one another, as well as with the overall set of data.
5. Interpreting Themes	Through ongoing analysis, the lead researcher defines the themes, explaining with specific details the story of how they came to be themes.

Stage	Description
6. Finalizing the Report	The lead researcher produces a final report, in which theme analyses are highlighted with rich descriptions and connected to the research questions and related literature.

Note. Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006); Lincoln and Guba (1986).

Given the fact that subjectivity is at the heart of thematic analysis, a challenge that must be met is the establishment of trustworthiness in this study. Trustworthiness is the focus of the next section in this chapter.

Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability

The quality of an action research study is ultimately determined by the usefulness and confidence that researchers place in the processes used to conduct that study (Bloomberg, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Mertler, 2021). The levels of rigor applied to make certain that qualitative processes accurately represent the experiences of a study's participants are vital to the establishment of trustworthiness (Bloomberg, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Nowell et al., 2017). In short, the higher the trustworthiness evident in an action research study, the higher the quality.

In determining the rigor used in quantitative research, validity stems from internal evaluation and the generalizability of the findings, while reliability comes from the replicability of the research and the objectivity in which it is conducted (Bloomberg, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Mertler, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017). In their seminal work on qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1986) established the evaluation criteria for qualitative studies that parallel those of quantitative research. They asserted that trustworthiness in qualitative work corresponds to the concept of rigor in quantitative work (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Accordingly, Lincoln and Guba (1986) proposed that validity in qualitative work comes from credibility (the parallel counterpart to internal evaluation) and transferability (the counterpart to generalizability), while reliability in qualitative research comes from

dependability (the counterpart to replicability) and confirmability (the parallel to objectivity). These criteria, along with the qualitative strategies needed to achieve them, are more fully described in Table 3.18.

Table 3.18

Trustworthiness Criteria and Qualitative Processes

Criteria for Establishing Trustworthiness	Description of Trustworthiness Criteria	Qualitative Strategies for Meeting Criteria
Credibility	The accurate representation of the participants experiences is demonstrated by the researcher.	Reflexive journaling Prolonged engagement Thick descriptions Triangulation Seeking negative findings Member checks Peer reviews
Confirmability	The researcher establishes that the findings are data driven and not simply drawn from the researcher's subjectivity.	Reflexive journaling Triangulation Audit trail
Dependability	The researcher provides adequate, data-driven responses to each of the study's research questions.	Triangulation Audit trail Peer reviews
Transferability	The findings of the study can be applied to similar problems that occur in similar contexts.	Thick descriptions Purposeful sampling Depth of data

Note. Adapted from Bloomberg, 2023; Lincoln and Guba (1986).

In this study, multiple qualitative strategies were used to establish trustworthiness, validity, and reliability through the four criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1986). The following set of strategies were employed:

1. Reflexive journaling: The use of the lead researcher's journal was not only a source of data, but the notes also provided insights into the evolution of thinking that shaped the study (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017). By recording his thinking in a

living document, the lead researcher could more readily identify his bias over the course of the study. The journal provided an important audit trail for each aspect of the action research journey (Nowell et al., 2017).

2. Prolonged engagement: The lead researcher spent long periods of time collecting data with participants in the field of their work and the study through persistent observation. Copious notes were taken during observations in interviews, focus groups, meetings, receptions, and workshops. Those notes were reviewed, situations coded and grouped, and narratives provided to give voice to participants in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).
3. Thick descriptions: The lead researcher recorded detailed narratives about the research process, the context of activities, and responses of the participants throughout the study (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).
4. Seeking negative findings: The lead researcher presented situations that challenged or ran counter to his expectations, providing detailed explanations of instances that disconfirmed anticipated findings (Bloomberg, 2023; Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).
5. Member checks: The lead researcher continuously tested his analyses and assumptions of the data collected by sharing transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions, as well as questionnaire responses, to participants in the study. This allowed participants an opportunity to challenge the lead researcher's thinking, as well as to correct the record when necessary (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

6. Purposeful sampling: The lead researcher developed selection criteria that reflected the roles and challenges experienced in other settings similar to the ones found in the site that this study was situated (Bloomberg, 2023; Creswell, 2013).
7. Triangulation: The extensive variety of data sources and collection methods allowed the researcher to continuously cross-check the data to corroborate evidence of the findings (Glanz, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

In qualitative action research, it is imperative for the researcher to immerse himself into the work in which the problem of practice is situated (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Therefore, it is just as important for the lead researcher to provide a full accounting of his positionality within the organization in which the study is being conducted. That accounting is explored in the next section of this chapter.

Researcher's Perspective

At the time this study commenced, the lead researcher was serving in his third year as the deputy superintendent in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). Halfway into the study, the researcher was named Superintendent of ESSD. Prior to being promoted to district leadership, the lead researcher had served seven years as a high school principal in ESSD. Leading up to that, he had served in ESSD as an assistant principal (four years) and a history teacher (three years) at the high school level. Before moving to ESSD, the lead researcher had served as a high school social studies teacher and head basketball coach in a neighboring county for seven years. After coaching basketball at the collegiate level for three years, the lead researcher has served as a public-school teacher and leader for 24 consecutive years.

Raised by a public-school educator, the lead researcher had lifelong experiences that impacted his views on educational leadership. As his father served as a teacher, coach, and

district administrator over a 42-year career, the lead researcher was exposed to an insider's view at a very young age. This unique perspective gave him insights into the joys that educators feel when positively impacting young people, as well as the challenges facing teachers and school leaders that emanate from politics, economic pressures, and personal agendas. While it was the joy of impacting students that drew him into education, it was the preparation of teachers and leaders that became a passion of the lead researcher as his career progressed.

Preparing fellow educators for the rigors of the classroom to the external pressures that they would face became a passion of the lead researcher. He was often asked to coach and mentor new educators and to supervise student teachers. Preparing teachers to become leaders, and administrators to become principals, became a major source of fulfillment as the lead researcher's journey led to school administration and the principalship. As the lead researcher was identified and encouraged by others to take steps that led from the classroom to the main (school) office, he benefitted from the efforts of mentors, supervisors, and capacity-building programs that established clear expectations, provided constructive feedback, and prepared him for new challenges.

In his most recent move, however, the lead researcher was struck by the lack of intentionality given to the onboarding, preparation, and support he received when leaving the school building for the central office in ESSD. Aside from his participation in a statewide program for district leadership preparation, no efforts were made by central office leaders to help the lead researcher make the transition to leading in a new context. His move to the central office in 2021 coincided with external forces impacting public education that included the COVID-19 pandemic and the socio-political unrest that developed around social justice movements. Along with the need for helping leaders adjust to new roles within the school district, these events

pointed to the additional need for developing skills and abilities that help new leaders prepare for the unforeseen.

In the role of deputy superintendent, one of the most critical responsibilities that the lead researcher was tasked with was overseeing leadership development for the ESSD. While directing capacity-building programs for aspiring leaders and principals, as well as providing new administrator onboarding experiences, the lead researcher believed that an unmet need existed during the transitioning of school leaders to positions of leadership in the central office. His own transition experiences when moving into the ESSD central office impacted the lead researcher tremendously and, ultimately, led to the purpose of this study.

Great efforts were made by the lead researcher to mitigate subjectivity through qualitative methods such as member checking, providing thick descriptions, and triangulating the data collected (Bloomberg, 2023; Creswell, 2013; Glanz, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). At the same time, it was the bias and subjectivity of lived experiences that the lead research had to embrace to develop the focus of this action research study, itself (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Despite extensive efforts to provide transparency and trustworthiness, two sets of limitation emerged in this study. The first was a direct reflection of the nature of qualitative research. The second arose from the context in which the study was situated. These limitations are fully discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Limitations

The very nature of qualitative action research leads to limitations in a study. An expectation is that the lead researcher will be intimately involved in the design and implementation of activities that take place over the course of the study—that he will take on the

role of a participant-observer (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014; Zieman, 2012). This level of involvement makes bias and subjectivity inescapable (Braun & Clarke, 2022). While the lead researcher employs methods to mitigate bias, it simply cannot be eliminated.

A limitation linked to the nature of a qualitative case study is that the findings are simply not generalizable (Bloomberg, 2023; Merriam & Grenier, 2019), as one would expect to find in a quantitative study. Qualitative case study research is focused on a specific problem situated within a specific context and with a limited sample (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014). The purpose, therefore, is not for findings to be generalizable, rather they are to be transferable to those with similar phenomena in similar contexts and similar samples (Bloomberg, 2023; Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). For the challenges facing those leaders transitioning to central office jobs from school level roles in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD), this qualitative action research case study was the appropriate approach to be taken, despite the limitations inherent in that approach.

While the qualitative nature of the study in the ESSD led to limitations, additional factors may have limited the findings, as well. These were rooted in the contextual setting of the study, beginning with the fact that the lead researcher held a position of authority over those participating in the study. Just after the study commenced, the lead researcher was appointed to serve as the ESSD superintendent. As deputy superintendent, then superintendent in the ESSD, the lead researcher's position could have impacted the views shared by participants in interviews, focus groups, and on questionnaires. His presence during meetings could also have shaped participant behaviors.

Another limitation to this study came in the selection of participants. Only those holding coordinator level positions or higher in the ESSD central office were invited to participate.

Additionally, only those who had previously served as a school level principal or assistant principal were invited to participate on the Action Research Implementation Team. This could be deemed a limitation, as other levels of leadership existed in the ESSD central office outside of coordinators, while several central office leaders did not have experience as school building administrators.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in the ESSD. A qualitative action research approach was an appropriate methodology for this case study because the need for solutions was immediate, the importance of collaboration between the researcher and participants was necessary, and a desire to better understand a real-world situation would best be met through the voices of those immersed in the work (Bloomberg, 2023; Bryk et al., 2015; Coughlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014).

Multiple forms of data were collected through artifacts, interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, researcher journal entries, and observations. The data were coded and thematically analyzed to discover and establish patterns for deeper understanding. Strenuous efforts were made to develop a trustworthy, reliable, and valid study that gave authentic voice to the experiences of the participants. To that end, an audit trail for this study was developed that reflected prolonged engagement, reflexive journaling, member checking, thick descriptions, the search for negative findings, purposeful sampling, and triangulation of data.

In the next chapter, the findings of the quantitative action research case study in the East Smithfield School District are presented. The action research cycles that were framed by

organizational socialization theory, along with interventions that aimed at reducing uncertainty, clarifying leadership, and enhancing learning agility, are fully described.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

Transitioning from school building administration to central office leadership can be a challenging experience. School district leadership can have a significant impact on student achievement, as central office leaders are vital to creating conditions for success in schools (Leithwood et al., 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021). While great efforts have been made to prepare and to develop support systems for new principals as they transition into their roles, little research exists relating to the preparation and support provided to central office leaders (Goldring et al., 2020; Zepeda et al., 2019).

An intentional onboarding process provides the opportunity for organizations such as school districts to not only reduce the anxiety of newcomers, but also to equip them for success in their new leadership roles (Bauer, 2010; Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013; Jeske & Olson, 2022; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Giving new central office leaders opportunities to clarify their new leadership lens, as well as to develop the tools they need to face an increasingly vulnerable, complex, uncertain, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, should be vital elements considered in an onboarding process (Harden, 2009; Harvey & Prager, 2021).

The purpose of this action research study was to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). This study looked specifically at identifying the challenges and needs faced by those moving from leadership positions at the school building into roles at

the district office. The following questions were used to guide the action research conducted in this study:

1. How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variation of leading at the district office with leading at the school level?
2. How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding model on their transition from school level to district office leadership?
3. How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding model on their own professional practice?

Chapter 4 describes the context in which this action research case study was situated. This chapter also provides an overview of those leaders participating on the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). Finally, the findings of this case study are presented through full descriptions of the action research cycles and the experiences of those who participated in the study.

Context of the Study

The East Smithfield School District (ESSD) is the lone public-school system situated in a suburban county approximately 30 miles outside of a major southern city. The district has grown tremendously since the early 2000s. Academic achievement and home values have mirrored that growth. While the school system strives to remain among the highest-rated in its state, its continued growth has led to the need for greater intentionality and school system coherence.

Growth and Demographics

The county in which the ESSD is located has seen remarkable growth, ranking among the nation's 10 fastest growing communities since 2010. With over 250,000 residents, current trends project a population of nearly 460,000 by the year 2050. Since 2012, the school system has grown over 40%, with a student population surpassing 53,000 in 2022. The ESSD, at the time this study commenced, was the fifth largest public-school system in its state with 55,700 students.

A significant demographic group within that population explosion has been Asian families. The increased Asian population in the ESSD community has been identified as the fastest growing in the United States. These trends, naturally, have been reflected in ESSD's enrollment data. In the 2006-2007 school year, the ESSD's Asian student population made up 4% of the system's enrollment. In 2021-2022, Asian students made up 27% of the enrollment in ESSD. During that same stretch, the Hispanic population rose from 9% to 14%, while White students went from 84% down to 50%. Although other demographic groups saw minimal change, the growth in gifted numbers rose from 6% to 15%.

In 2023, the ESSD consisted of 23 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, 7 high schools, 1 specialized college and career preparation school, and an academy of creative learning that housed a virtual school, a hybrid academy, and a behavior-based alternative setting. The ESSD was the largest employer in the county as the time of this study, contracting with over 8,000 employees. The ongoing growth led to the seemingly continuous need for more school buildings, more teachers, more administrators, and more services. That growth also called for intentional and strategic planning.

Community Expectations of the School System

In developing its 2022-2027 Strategic Plan, the Deputy Superintendent of the ESSD led a community-wide effort to articulate expectations that would guide the work of the school system for five years. In this process, community members were invited to provide feedback in online surveys, as well as to share views with local school councils (LSC) members and at parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings. Cross-sections of parents, teachers, administrators, and students were invited to round-table discussions to develop Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analyses of the school system. Once all of these various forms of data were collected, the Deputy Superintendent and his staff coded the results and developed themes for further consideration by a 90-member strategic planning committee.

The strategic planning committee, also made up a cross-section of stakeholders, was tasked with reviewing longitudinal and year-by-year school system data that ranged from student achievement information to five-year facilities planning documents to system budgets to graduation rates. Armed with this data and the perception feedback gathered from public participation in the previous stage of the process, the strategic planning committee developed the ESSD Strategy Map for 2022-2027. In it, they articulated the mission, vision, and belief statements along with five areas of strategic focus for the school district. This map is displayed in Figure 4.1.

Table 4.1

The East Smithfield School District 2022-2027 Strategy Map

Strategic Element	Element Description
Vision Statement	A safe, connected, and thriving community for all
Mission Statement	To provide an unparalleled education for all to succeed
Belief Statements	Respect and empathy are vital to building trust

Strategic Element	Element Description
Belief Statements	All students and staff must be connected and supported.
	All students and staff must have a strong sense of purpose.
	All students and staff must be challenged to think critically and creatively.
	Family and community engagement are essential to continuous Improvement.
Strategic Goal Areas	Social and Emotional Health
	The Learner Experience
	Operational Excellence
	Staff Recruitment and Development
	Culture, Climate, and Community

Note. Adapted from the ESSD Strategic Plan, 2022-2027.

To further articulate their expectations, the community established performance objectives for each of the strategic goal areas. These expectations are displayed in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

The East Smithfield School District Strategic Performance Objectives

Strategic Goal Area	Performance Objective
Social and Emotional Health	A. Foster healthy digital interactions
	B. Expand access to mental health resources and strategies
	C. Promote respect, wellness, and balance for staff and students
The Learner Experience	A. Increase student achievement and growth
	B. Increase student engagement

Strategic Goal Area	Performance Objective
The Learner Experience	C. Develop and sustain consistent assessment and grading practices.
Operational Excellence	A. Plan and adapt for growth B. Manage financial resources C. Plan and allocate resources
Staff Recruitment and Development	A. Acquire and retain excellent staff B. Build individual staff capacity
Climate, Culture, and Community	A. Increase meaningful home, school, and community relationships B. Work collaboratively with all people to promote inclusivity, school pride, and belonging

Note. Adapted from the ESSD Strategic Plan, 2022-2027.

Guided by the strategy map and performance objectives passed by the ESSD Board of Education, the Superintendent and school system staff developed district action plans. These action plans were updated throughout the year, were monitored by department leaders and the Deputy Superintendent, and were reported on to the Superintendent each month. To ensure increased levels of school system coherence, the Deputy Superintendent and Associate Superintendent for Teaching and Learning worked side-by-side with principals and their administrative teams to develop annual school improvement plans that aligned to the ESSD Strategic Plan. At both district and school levels, goals, objectives, and results were provided to the public on the ESSD website. When school system and building leaders presented at Board of Education meetings, they were required to demonstrate the connection between their presentation content and the ESSD Strategic Plan.

Achieving the objectives laid out in its strategic plan required increased intentionality at all levels of leadership in the ESSD. The intentionality in developing system coherence became critical, given the growth and everchanging demographics that ESSD has experienced. At the center of those strategic efforts was the focus on increasing and maintaining academic achievement and growth.

Academic Achievement

In the ESSD Strategic Plan, the first four goals areas all laid the foundation for the system's core work. Those first four areas included social emotional health, operational excellence, staff recruitment and development, and culture, climate, and community. Those were all established in order that the fifth area of the ESSD Strategic Plan could be addressed: the learner experience. The learner experience captured the ESSD community's priorities of student achievement, growth, and engagement, as well as its desire for more coherent grading and reporting practices across the district. The academic areas of the ESSD Strategic Plan are summed up in the district's mission: "To provide an unparalleled education for all to succeed."

Academic success was something that the ESSD community had become accustomed to and wanted to place intentionally as a strategic priority. At the time that this study was conducted, the ESSD stood as the fifth largest school system in its state, with nearly 55,000 students. Situated in the suburbs of a major metropolitan city, the ESSD outperformed its neighboring districts, garnering the following honors among metro-area large school districts in 2022:

- Highest 4-year and 5-year graduation rates (96.4%)
- Highest College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) scores (CCRPI is the state's balanced report card rating system that measures state test scores, student

attendance, family, student, and community health surveys, student growth percentiles, and graduation rates among other factors)

- Highest SAT scores
- Highest ACT scores

The expectation that students in the ESSD be prepared to attend colleges and universities after graduation was evident in that over 70% of the district's graduates matriculated to institutions of higher education.

Financial Stewardship

The ESSD community's political makeup was dominated by conservative views and the Republican Party at the time that this study commenced. Each of the five board of education members in ESSD were elected as Republicans, as was each member of the community's state and federal legislative delegations. In line with conservative views, the ESSD Governance Team (comprised of the superintendent and members of the board of education) was expected to be conservative stewards of taxpayers' finances.

In comparison to the 12 largest school districts in the state, the ESSD spent less per pupil than all of them in 2022. The average spent per pupil in these 12 districts was \$11,707. The ESSD spent \$9,803 per pupil, while the 12th district in this comparison spent \$18, 449. Keeping that budget lower translated into the ESSD collecting property taxes at the lowest millage rate among the large metro systems. (One mill is equivalent to one dollar for every \$1000 of assessed property value.) The 17.3 mills that the ESSD collected in 2022 was actually lowered by two full mills for 2023, bringing the rate of 15.3 mills to the lowest level it had been since 2005. In short, the ESSD governance team was very conservative in its collection of property taxes.

The reason that the ESSD could provide the lower millage rates while still providing high quality education in a safe environment rested on the continued growth that the school district and surrounding county continued to experience. The academic success of the school system has been a major element driving the growth, as well as driving up home values as supply dwindles. As those home values rose, the value of the mills collected rose, as well.

The ESSD Leader Profile

Given the challenges of growth, the pressure to succeed academically, the increased passion and rhetoric permeating the political environment, and the growing complexity of school finance, it was imperative that the ESSD intentionally plan for the development of leaders. The ESSD established robust capacity-building and onboarding programs for school level leadership development. Aspiring Leaders, designed in partnership with an outside organization, helped the district to develop teachers who showed potential to lead.

The Class A Leadership Program provided professional development for classified employees serving in leadership roles, such as head custodians, cafeteria managers, and transportation supervisors. The Class A Program, too, was developed in partnership with an outside organization. Finally, an Aspiring Principals program was established as the required training for assistant principals to gain qualification to lead an ESSD school as a principal. Again, this program was designed and established in partnership with an outside organization.

In 2021, the ESSD named a new Deputy Superintendent who, among other duties, supervised all of the district's leadership development programs. An audit of these programs led to the discovery that they were effective, but that little coherence existed. An opportunity existed for the deputy superintendent to increase district coherence by connecting these programs with a common purpose. Beginning with the three associate superintendents, as well as the outgoing

deputy, the newly appointed deputy superintendent held focus group sessions to identify common elements to high quality leadership. Through a series of reflective exercises, the group determined six characteristics that they agreed upon. The deputy superintendent then held a series of 11 focus groups that each included a mixture of school level principals and district level leaders. The same reflective exercises were held.

Once the data were collected, they were coded and analyzed for common themes related to high quality leadership. The end result was the development of the ESSD Leader Profile, which contained not only five major tenets to what leadership looked like in ESSD, but with five additional indicators assigned to each tenet to ensure common understanding and the establishment of a common leadership vocabulary. Once embraced by the ESSD Governance Team, the Leader Profile was unpacked at summer leadership retreats, woven into interview protocols, used as a common identifier for potential leaders, and made a part of the evaluation process for principals. Most importantly, the Leader Profile gave common purpose to each of the leadership development programs used by the ESSD, thus providing coherence while negating the use of outside organizations.

While not intentionally factored in at the time of its development, many of the attributes and indicators of high-quality leadership spelled out in the ESSD Leader Profile overlapped with learnable behaviors identified as important elements of learning agility (Harvey & Prager, 2021), presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3*The ESSD Leader Profile and Learning Agile Behaviors*

Leader Profile Tenet	Leader Profile Attributes	Learning Agile Behaviors
Builds Relationships	Strives for self-awareness	Reflecting Self-regulating Feedback Seeking Assistance Seeking
Communicates Effectively	Seeks to understand multiple perspectives	Mindfulness Learning Vicariously Inquiring Feedback Seeking
Communicates Effectively	Establishes clear expectations	Goal Setting Planning and Monitoring
Leads with Intentionality	Connects short-term with global objectives	Scanning Metacognition Unlearning
	Analyzes results and adjusts	Reflecting Goal Setting Planning and Monitoring
	Anticipates the impact of decisions from multiple perspectives	Scanning Mindfulness Inquiring Feedback Seeking
Embraces Innovation	Takes calculated, appropriate risks	Courageous Risk-Taking Experimenting Stretching
	Seeks feedback and accepts coaching for continuous improvement	Coachability Feedback Seeking Learning Vicariously

Leader Profile Tenet	Leader Profile Attributes	Learning Agile Behaviors
Develops Leaders	Encourages risks while providing support and coaching	Metacognition Scanning Courageous Risk-Taking
	Models the importance of a balanced life	Mindfulness Stretching Assistance Seeking Demonstrating Resilience

Note. Adapted from Harvey and Prager (2021).

Given the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) nature of the world, it was imperative that the ESSD develop leaders with the learning agility to navigate unforeseen challenges (Harvey & Valerio, 2022). As those learning agile behaviors were embedded in the ESSD Leader Profile, the framework provided an effective tool for developing leaders, as well as one that led to increased system coherence. Many of these learning agile behaviors were a focus included in this study's interventions.

While the ESSD provided capacity-building and onboarding programs at the school level, no such programs existed for those leaders moving into the district office from the school level. This meant that the 13 district employees appointed to lead in the ESSD central office between 2021 and 2023 received no formal support. As this study was initiated to analyze the transition from leading in one context (school level) to another context (district level), the ESSD Leader Profile emerged as an important tool in the development of interventions.

Participants in the Study

Two groups of ESSD's central office leaders were recruited to participate in this study. The first group made up the Action Research Design Team (ARDT). The ARDT took on the responsibility of reviewing literature related to onboarding new employees, reflecting on their own transition experiences, and devising interventions to support those leaders who were new to

the ESSD central office. The second group of leaders recruited for this study consisted of central office leaders in the ESSD who had been recently appointed to their positions. Known as the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), members of this group voluntarily participated in the interventions designed to make their transition to the central office smooth. As part of their participation, members of both groups volunteered to be interviewed, questioned, observed, and to participate in focus group discussions.

Action Research Design Team (ARDT)

The ARDT consisted of six members, including the lead researcher. Together, they focused on the challenges associated with newcomer transitions into the ESSD central office. A full listing of the ARDT participants is provided in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

The Action Research Design Team

ARDT Member	Current Role in the ESSD
Dr. Heather Cassidy	Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning
Ms. Erin Emerson	Associate Superintendent of Student Support and Services
Mr. Bernie George	Chief of Operations
Ms. Linda Mitchell	Director of Student Support
Mr. Wallace Wilson	Associate Superintendent of Human Resources

Each member reviewed research related to onboarding, organizational socialization, role clarity, and learning agility. They actively designed interventions, while also serving as coaches for the ARIT participants. It is important to note that each member of the ARDT had supervisory roles that include the recruitment and retention of central office leaders, including the members of the ARIT. Information about the backgrounds and current job descriptions of ARDT members follow, with pseudonyms established to conceal their identities.

Dr. Heather Cassidy served as the ESSD Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning. A veteran public educator of 33 years, Dr. Cassidy served in the central office for 6 years—2 years as the system Assessment Coordinator and 4 as an Associate Superintendent. Prior to her central office work, Dr. Cassidy spent 27 years as a teacher, administrator, and principal in middle and elementary schools. As someone highly skilled at analyzing data, as well as a someone charged with hiring employees to the district office, Dr. Cassidy was recruited to be a member of the ARDT.

Ms. Erin Emerson served as the ESSD Associate Superintendent of Student Support and Services. Twenty-one of her 27 years in public education have come in the form of central office leadership. In 2021, the Superintendent of the ESSD combined two departments and created the role of Associate Superintendent of Student Support and Services. Ms. Emerson was elevated from Director of Special Education to the new role. Prior to district office service, she served as a special education teacher at the high school level. Her long history of supporting schools from the district level, along with her responsibilities for hiring employees for her department, led the lead researcher to recruit her for this study.

Mr. Bernie George served as the ESSD Chief of Operations, which included overseeing the safety and security, transportation, food and nutrition, and athletic departments. His 17 years of central office service followed 15 years of teaching, coaching, and serving as an administrator at the high school level. His unique operational view, which exposed him to all 43 schools and each district department in the ESSD, made Mr. George a target for recruitment by the lead researcher. Like the other members of the ARDT, he is responsible for hiring employees into the departments he supervises.

Ms. Linda Mitchell, who served as the Director of Student Support, was the only member of the study to participate on both the ARDT and ARIT. Ms. Mitchell is the only member of the ARDT not serving at the Associate or Chief levels in ESSD, but still has responsibility for hiring in her department. At the time the study commenced, she had just reached six months of district office service. Prior to the district position, Ms. Mitchell spent 22 years as a teacher, administrator, and principal in public elementary schools. Her relative newness to her role, along with her supervisory responsibilities, led to her recruitment as a member of both action research teams for this study.

Mr. Wallace Wilson served as the Associate Superintendent of Human Resources. A 22-year veteran public educator, Mr. Wilson is in his second year as at the district office. He spent one year as the Director of Human Resources before being appointed to Associate Superintendent in 2023. Prior to district leadership, he spent 20 years as a high school teacher and coach before serving as an elementary administrator and principal. A highly analytic leader who not only has responsibility for hiring but establishes the parameters and expectations for employment practices for the entire school district, Mr. Wilson was an important recruit for this study. As much of the research in this study connects with human resource (HR) literature, Mr. Wilson was able to provide an important HR lens and insight to the ARDT.

Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)

The ARIT consisted of eight members, including Ms. Linda Mitchell, who also participated as a member of the ARDT. As the study began, each member of the ARIT was in their first two years of district office service. Each had arrived at their post from positions of leadership at the school level in ESSD. A full listing of the ARIT participants is provided in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5*The Action Research Implementation Team*

ARDT Member Name	Current Role in the ESSD
Mr. Bob Tocheny	Classified Recruiting Coordinator
Ms. Shannon Fields	Director of Human Resources
Ms. Marni Lynn	Family and Engagement Coordinator
Ms. Linda Mitchell	Director of Student Support
Ms. Brittini Morgan	Assistant Director of Student Support
Dr. Kimberly Kasson	Assessment Coordinator
Mr. Jim Young	Director of Food and Nutrition

ARIT members voluntarily participated in three action research cycles, actively engaging in the interventions developed by the ARDT. Information about the backgrounds and current job descriptions of ARDT members follow, with pseudonyms established to conceal their identities

Mr. Bob Tocheny served as the Classified Employee Recruiting Coordinator. With 30 years under his belt as a public-school educator, Mr. Tocheny accepted an ESSD central office position in the Human Resources Department. Prior to his arrival, he served as a middle school principal in ESSD, with experiences as an administrator and teacher at elementary and middle schools. At the time the study began, Mr. Tocheny had not yet begun formal work in his new role, as his appointment was set to commence at the conclusion of the school year, allowing him to complete his duties as a middle school principal. In his new role, Mr. Tocheny's direct supervisor was Mr. Wallace Wilson, a member of the ARDT.

Ms. Shannon Fields served as the newly appointed Director of Human Resources. A 24-year public school educator, Ms. Fields had spent her career as an elementary teacher, administrator, and, prior to her central office appointment in ESSD, principal. Like Mr. Tocheny,

Ms. Fields had not yet started in her new role in the ESSD central office when the study began. Like Mr. Tocheny, she also was hired by and directly reported to ARDT member, Mr. Wilson.

Ms. Marni Lynn served as the Family Engagement Coordinator for the ESSD. Ms. Lynn was the first to fill this newly created role within the Teaching and Learning Department in the ESSD fifteen months prior to the start of this study. Prior to her central office service, Ms. Lynn served as an elementary school assistant principal in the ESSD, as well as a teacher at that level. She had completed 15 years of public-school service at the time that this study commenced. Dr. Heather Cassidy, the Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning and a member of the ARDT, hired and supervised Ms. Lynn.

Dr. Kimberly Kasson served as the Assessment Coordinator in the ESSD Teaching and Learning Department. At the time the study began, Dr. Kasson was in her sixth month at the ESSD central office. She arrived in her new role after serving in public education for 13 years as a high school teacher and administrator, and most recently as an assistant principal in an ESSD middle school. Like Ms. Lynn, she was hired by and supervised by ARDT member, Dr. Cassidy.

Ms. Brittini Morgan served as the Assistant Director of Student Support. At the time this study began, Ms. Morgan had completed just over one full year of central office service. Prior to that, she spent 20 years in public education as an administrator and teacher, serving as a middle school assistant principal in the ESSD at the time she was appointed to district leadership. Ms. Morgan was hired by ARDT member Ms. Erin Emerson, Associate Superintendent of Student Support and Services, but was supervised by Director of Student Support, Ms. Linda Mitchell. Ms. Mitchell served as a member of both the ARDT and ARIT.

Mr. Jim Young served as the Director of Food and Nutrition for the ESSD. In his sixth month on the job at the start of this study, Mr. Young arrived at the central office after 26 years

in public education as a teacher, coach, and administrator. Just prior to his new role, he served as a middle school principal in the ESSD. He was hired by and reported directly to Mr. Bernie George, Chief of Operations and ARDT member. Table 4.6 summarizes the relationships between all ARIT and ARDT members in the ESSD.

Table 4.6

ARIT and ARDT Relationships in the ESSD

ARIT Member	ESSD Role	Supervising ARDT Member	ESSD Role
Bob Tocheny	Classified Employee Recruiting Coordinator	Wallace Wilson	Associate Superintendent for Human Resources
Shannon Fields	Director of Human Resources	Wallace Wilson	Associate Superintendent of Human Resources
Marni Lynn	Family Engagement Coordinator	Heather Cassidy	Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning
Linda Mitchell	Director of Student Support	Erin Emerson	Associate Superintendent of Student Support and Services
Brittini Morgan	Assistant Director of Student Support	Linda Mitchell	Director of Student Support
Kimberly Kasson	Assessment Coordinator	Heather Cassidy	Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning
Jim Young	Director of Food and Nutrition	Bernie George	Chief of Operations

Findings

The purpose of this action research study was to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). This study looked specifically at identifying the challenges

and needs faced by those moving from leadership positions at the school building into roles at the district office.

An Action Research Design Team (ARDT), made up of leaders in the ESSD central office, was formed to develop and implement research-based interventions to help newly appointed central office leaders to make the transition from school leadership more effectively. Those new leaders to the ESSD central office participated on the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). These participants helped to identify which intervention activities most effectively assisted them with their transition. Both groups helped create a better understanding of what makes district leadership unique when compared to school leadership.

The participants' stories have been captured through the data collected over the course of three action research cycles. The overall findings from that data included:

1. Newcomers to the ESSD central office struggled with a lack of clear expectations provided to be successful in their new roles.
2. Newcomers to the ESSD central office struggled to find clarity in their new leadership roles.
3. District coaches and the use of Leadership Situation Scenarios were found to be effective sources of support when navigating the new challenges of transitioning from the school to district leadership in the ESSD.
4. The Superintendent's Welcome Reception was found to be an effective source of support to newcomers in the ESSD central office.
5. Newcomers to the ESSD central office experienced a sense of loss when leaving the school building for their new roles.

6. Adjusting to the horizontal orientation of district work provided a challenge for newcomers as they transitioned into their district roles in the ESSD central office.
7. Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings were integral in reducing newcomer uncertainty, while also helping to cement the relationship between the newcomers and their supervisors.
8. Using a cohort approach provided newcomers to the ESSD central office a network of support across district departments.
9. Use of the Harden Shifts chart served as an important tool for both newcomers and supervisors to make sense of the challenges leaders faced when transitioning from the school level to the district level in the ESSD.
10. The development of learning agility through activities aimed at reflection, unlearning, feedback seeking, and vicarious learning was deemed important to the successful onboarding of newcomers to the ESSD central office.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to describing the action research cycles that were facilitated over the course of eight months. Included are descriptions of participant recruitment and orientation, ARDT planning meetings, and the collection of data through interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and observations. Interwoven are descriptions of the analyses used that provided meaning to the data.

Participant Recruitment and Orientation

Each staff member serving in the ESSD central office who fit the qualifications to participate in this study was personally approached by the lead researcher to gauge their interest in being a participant in the study. These veteran educators had less than two full years of central office experience and, prior to their appointment, had served as a principal or assistant principal

in an ESSD school building. Each of the staff members approached showed a willingness to learn more and were provided an overview of the study that included a consent letter and form. Each of the seven who were approached, as well as an eighth staff member who was appointed midway through the first action research cycle, provided their informed consent, and committed to participate in the study. These eight novice district leaders comprised the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) for this study.

Each of the three ESSD associate superintendents, along with the Chief of Operations and the Director of Student Support (who also served on the ARIT), were approached to participate in the study, as well. The lead researcher believed it imperative to include each associate superintendent and operations chief in the study as the onboarding of newcomers to central office leadership was to be a school district approach to the transition process that had the potential to increase system coherence. Therefore, the voices and opinions of each major decision-maker in the academic areas of the ESSD would inform the development of an onboarding program that would potentially be implemented beyond this study. The five ESSD leaders were approached personally, and each provided consent to participate in the study. Along with the lead researcher, these five members comprised the Action Research Design Team (ARDT).

On February 26, 2024, two, overlapping orientation meetings were held, first with the ARDT and the second with the ARIT. In both meetings, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and an overview of the nature of qualitative action research were provided as presented in Appendix H. A brief discussion was held about the challenges all people face when transitioning from one job to another. The lead researcher explained the spiraling, iterative nature of action research and described how the two groups would engage in three cycles of collaboration, interventions, and reflection. The roles played by the two teams were laid out, as

was the unique position that the lead researcher would engage including collecting data and participating in the study, itself.

In the overlapping segment of the meetings, in which the ARDT and the ARIT attended together, members had the opportunity to introduce themselves, their roles, and what positions they had held prior to their central office appointment. The lead researcher explained to both groups that data would be collected from a variety of sources, including questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and observations during meetings and gatherings. Additionally, times were scheduled with each study participant to engage in a one-on-one interview with the lead researcher. All participants left their respective meetings committed to their participation in the study.

Action Research Cycle 1

The first action research cycle of this study began in early March and ran until the end of April 2024. To guide the development of a formal onboarding program for new central office leaders in the ESSD, interventions were designed by the members of the ARDT and implemented by the newcomers on the ARIT. These interventions were rooted in the research surrounding organizational socialization, role clarity, and learning agility. Throughout the process of designing and implementing interventions, the lead researcher collected data through observations, questionnaire responses, and interviews with ARDT and ARIT members. A timeline of activities for the first action research study cycle is displayed in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7*Action Research Cycle 1 Timeline of Activities*

Date(s)	Activities	Data Collection Method
3/6	ARIT Questionnaire distributed	Item responses
3/13–3/22	ARDT Individual Interviews 1	Item responses and observation
3/15	ARDT Design Meeting #1	Discussion responses and observation
3/16–4/1	Supervisor Expectations Check-in Meetings	Information shared by supervisors at ARDT meetings
3/20	Superintendent Welcome Reception	Observation
3/27	District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshop #1	Discussion responses and observation
3/28–5/1	One-on-One Coaching Sessions	Information shared by supervisors at at ARDT meetings
4/8—4/16	ARIT Individual Interviews 1	Item responses and observation

Commonalities across collection methods emerged from the data gathered during the first action research cycle. Transcripts of interviews, responses to questionnaire items, and observation notes collected in the researcher’s journal were reviewed multiple times, coded, and analyzed for common themes and patterns. While some codes were developed deductively, in connection with this study’s research questions, others were developed inductively, as commonalities naturally emerged from responses and observation notes. The triangulation of these data points enhanced the trustworthiness of the study’s findings. Two significant findings that emerged during the first action research cycle included the following:

1. Newcomers to the ESSD central office struggled with a lack of clear expectations provided to be successful in their new roles.

2. Newcomers to the ESSD central office struggled to find clarity about their new leadership roles.

The story of the interventions that were designed, the transition experiences of the participants that were shared or observed, and the findings that emerged during the first action research cycle are described in the following subsections of this chapter.

ARIT Questionnaire

Upon collection of informed consent and completion of the orientation sessions, the initial data collection for this study commenced with the first ARIT questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent to participants on March 6 and completed by March 18, 2024. The questionnaire was sent to ARIT members to be completed anonymously. In addition to collecting data linked to the study's research questions, this initial questionnaire was an important first step to gathering information that would help inform the ARDT in designing interventions that matched the perceived needs of the ARIT participants.

All seven questionnaires sent out were completed and returned. The questionnaire consisted of 14 Likert scale-based questions and 1 open-ended question that focused on ARIT members' perceptions, feelings, and attitudes at the onset of their transitions from school level leadership to the district office. While a full listing of questions on the ARIT questionnaire is provided in Appendix D, samples of this questionnaire, including its one, open-ended question, are provided in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8

Samples from ARIT Questionnaire 1

Scale Statements	Questionnaire Items
With "1" as the lowest level of clarity and "5" being the highest level of clarity:	At the time you accepted your new central office position, how clear were you regarding the nature of the work associated with your new role?

Scale Statements	Questionnaire Items
With “1” as the lowest score of effectiveness and “5” as the highest score of effectiveness:	How effective was the district training you were provided to prepare you for your new role prior to or in the early weeks of your new job?
With “1” as the lowest level of feeling welcome and accepted and “5” being the highest level of feeling welcome and accepted:	How welcome and accepted did you feel by your colleagues in your new department in the early weeks on the job?
The open-ended question:	In the space provided, please share any thoughts you have regarding the transition process that you underwent (or are currently experiencing), including how the process might be improved.

The first ARIT questionnaire informed the ARDT of areas to consider for interventions early in the study. An additional purpose that the questionnaire provided was the first part of a “before and after” measure of ARIT members’ perceptions at the start versus the conclusion of the study, linked directly to the study’s research questions. The concerns raised in this initial questionnaire were echoed, with expanded explanations, in the individual interviews that were conducted during the first action research cycle. The first ARIT questionnaire yielded three “red flags” in terms of the concerns articulated by the ARIT respondents. These responses impacted the development of interventions for the first action research cycle.

The first of the red flags in the newcomers’ perceptions was a lack of understanding regarding departmental politics that must be navigated in their new district leadership roles. An average score of 1.71 out of 5 on this topic demonstrated this concern. Based on this information, the ARDT determined that navigating inter-departmental, central office politics was a topic that would need to be directly addressed through interventions aimed at reducing uncertainty and providing role clarity. These concerns around role clarity were also raised throughout the

individual interviews. Specific descriptions of the interventions developed by the ARDT are provided in the next subsections of this chapter.

Another area that came across as a grave concern to the ARDT was the high level of discomfort that newcomers felt in asking their supervisors for detailed feedback as they began in their new roles. Worded so as to avoid a response set, this question was used to discern the levels of discomfort felt by newcomers to the central office. The average score of a 3.14 out of 5 indicated high levels of discomfort (interpreted conversely, an average score of only 1.86 out of 5 indicated comfort in getting feedback). The ARDT determined that this concern would need to be addressed through interventions aimed at both the reduction of uncertainty and the development of learning agility. Again, specific descriptions of these interventions are provided in the next subsections of this chapter.

A lack of training or formal preparation for ARIT participants' new roles also registered low on the questionnaire. Coming in at an average of 1.86 out of 5, the very premise for this study was reaffirmed. This provided data-driven proof to ARDT members that new central office leaders felt that little-to-no intentional programming to prepare them for their new roles existed in the ESSD's district office. This topic would also emerge very clearly throughout the interviews conducted with study participants.

In terms of the open-ended question included in the questionnaire, the need for role clarity was referenced 16 times over the 7 responses. Examples of responses that indicated the need for greater role clarity included, "While I had an opportunity to preview my job description prior to applying for the position, I felt unsure of what the overall vision was for my role." Another respondent shared, "I struggle to explain my role to others." Still another respondent

stated, “I would love to have more guidance on how my work was intended to align to the goals of the district.”

Closely related, the concept of expectations was mentioned 11 times, while support was referenced 10 times. One respondent stated, “The responsibility of transitioning fell solely onto my shoulders—attempted to follow district expectations for principals, but incredibly challenging without any guidance from my department leader.” Another shared, “I have clarity at the moment, but am less clear about long-term performance expectations and multi-year performance targets. Not knowing where you’re going (allowed to go) makes leading anything an impossible task.”

One shared that they felt lucky to have “colleagues who helped me understand who to contact with questions.” The pursuit of support led one respondent to share:

Everyone I work with is great to help when I asked questions, but I somewhat felt at times that by asking, it would seem to others that I was inadequate and not capable of doing the role, I was hired to do.

In each case, the lack of clear expectations and having to search for support indicated that newcomers struggled to find pathways for success in their new roles.

The indications that newcomers struggled with departmental politics and in obtaining feedback not only provided the ARDT with areas worthy of exploration, but also gave the lead researcher an early indication of what could possibly emerge from individual ARIT interviews. Likewise, the need for role clarity, clear expectations, and greater support came through the open-ended question and went on to influence the nature of the interventions, as well as analysis of findings emerging from the interviews and observations.

Design Team Meeting 1

The first ARDT meeting, held on March 15, 2024, focused on the research surrounding organizational socialization and how it formed the theoretical framework for the study.

Additionally, the major focus areas of the interventions, the research behind the categories of interventions, and how they fit into the socialization framework were explained and discussed.

Just prior to the first ARDT meeting, Associate Superintendent of Human Resources and ARDT participant, Mr. Wallace Wilson, met with the lead researcher to discuss some confusion he had with the theoretical framework. He suggested that we “re-frame the (theoretical) framework to be more user friendly” in a graphic organizer of ARDT interventions. This matrix helped ARDT members to transfer their understanding of the theoretical framework for the study into a practical application guide that assisted with discussions regarding the organization and delivery of intervention activities. The matrix developed for the ARDT, as depicted in Table 4.9, includes all elements of the theoretical framework used to guide this study.

Table 4.9

ESSD Leadership Onboarding Matrix of Interventions

Organizational Socialization Methods (Tactics)	Focus of Interventions		
	Uncertainty Reduction	Leadership Clarity	Learning Agility
One-on-One Coaching Session (Serial-Formal)			
District Leadership Onboarding Workshop (Collective-Formal)			
Supervisor Expectation Check-In Meetings (Serial-Investiture)			

Informed by personal experiences and the literature provided by the lead researcher and guided by the District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Matrix of Interventions, members of the ARDT freely brainstormed ideas for the interventions to be implemented in the first cycle of action research. Consistent with the study's theoretical framework and related research, the interventions developed were designed to be implemented through the following settings:

- One-on-one meetings with their supervisors
- District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshops in which ARIT members attended as a newcomer cohort
- One-on-One Coaching sessions with a veteran district leader serving in a different department than the participating ARIT member.

At the first ARDT meeting, it was decided that the serial tactic of supervisor expectation check-in meetings during the first cycle of action research would focus on the reduction of uncertainty for the newcomers (Bauer, 2010; Klein & Heuser, 2008; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

Supervisor expectation check-in meetings would allow the ARIT members to hear from their supervisors about what was expected of them in terms of success criteria for their performance on the job, as well as how the skills the newcomers brought with them would enhance their work. This approach was deemed consistent with both the serial and investiture tactics to socializing newcomers proposed by Van Maanen and Schein (1977) and Jones (1986).

A significant observation noted by the lead researcher at the first ARDT meeting was the enthusiasm expressed by ARDT members to address newcomer job expectations as a major priority, "Each member wanted to address expectations—all discussed its importance for newbies to know how to succeed." Mr. Wilson discussed the need for this when describing the appointment of a new member to his department,

The man is excited about the work he's going to do. We went out to eat and he's going off on a tangent about all of the things he wants to do. I had to just sit him down. 'No, no, no. You're down the wrong path. Stay right here. Stay in this lane.'

Further, Dr. Heather Cassidy showed concern about those ARIT members who had already been on the job for several months in her department, and she shared:

I was thinking that in my first meeting with them, I would just say, 'are my expectations clear?' just to clarify the expectations, then see where I didn't – maybe I wasn't clear initially. Now they're in the role they are like 'I still don't know' and just have that opportunity to do the 'if there's anything uncertain about that.' I can gauge that.

Finally, Ms. Erin Emerson shared an example of not providing basics to a new member of her team in Student Support Services, "I've never had the conversation about if you're doing mass copies, we use the print shop." From major expectations to the little, day-to-day knowledge needed to navigate the central office, the ARDT felt that these meetings should be intentional.

These comments were found to be significant by the lead researcher. The questionnaire results indicating that ARIT members were struggling with a lack of clear job expectations had not been analyzed in time for the first ARDT meeting, meaning that the importance ARDT members placed on clarifying expectations was drawn from their own, personal experiences and observations. Not surprisingly, the topic of expectations—or lack of expectations—was a reoccurring concept that emerged throughout individual interviews with ARIT and ARDT members.

Based on the ARDT's discussion around the need for increased clarification of expectations and general district office knowledge, members agreed that supervisor expectation check-in meetings would be conducted at least once per month. While encouraged to address all

specific needs that newcomers may have (such as break room locations and copy protocols), the ARDT members each incorporated the following interventions to ease the uncertainty of their newcomers, including those who had already served in their roles for an extended period of time. Using the following common approach to their newcomers also enhanced a sense of district coherence (Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021):

- Review the 240-day employee calendar with them, explaining how annual leave works compared with their traditional school calendar, as well as the best times of years to use annual days.
- Ask their subordinates to share what they believed to be the supervisor's success criteria, thus jumpstarting a conversation around clarifying those expectations.
- Establish short-term and long-term goals together, along with monitoring plans.
- Use the ESSD Leader Profile to guide overall expectations.

The District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshop developed during the first cycle provided collective, formal, cohort-based opportunities for networking across departments (Bauer, 2010; Bialek & Hagan, 2021; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). A cohort approach would in itself be an intervention in that it fostered a network of support for new members to the central office. It was determined that the first session would begin with small group discussions of ARIT members' personal journeys that led them to district leadership. This was seen as a means to both allow for a personal connection among members, while simultaneously embed the learning agile behavior of reflection.

In terms of the activities that served as the intervention content of the DLO session, it was decided by the ARDT that the DLO Workshops would introduce and explain the Harden Shifts guide for better understanding the nature of district office leadership. The shifts that

district leaders need to make when arriving from school settings would be brought to life for the new leaders through panel discussions of veteran leaders. Additionally, the use of leadership situation scenarios were designed by the ARDT participants to help ARIT members think critically about situations arising at the central office.

The ARDT determined that ARIT members would be challenged to work out these scenarios on their own, then share their approaches in the non-judgmental, safe space of One-on-One Coaching sessions, which would follow DLO Workshops. Both the Harden Shifts and the ESSD Leader Profile would serve as guides to support ARIT members' thinking.

The ARDT members also decided that the DLO Workshops would be the place to introduce the idea of learning agility as an intervention for newcomers to better navigate the unknown challenges that they may one day face (De Meuse, 2022; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). It was suggested that cross-examining the list of learning agile behaviors with the ESSD Leader Profile would be a way of further ingraining in ARIT members the importance of the district approach to leadership while simultaneously helping them to grasp the concept of learning agility. These behaviors would be enhanced through seeking feedback, planning and monitoring goals, and engaging in mindfulness training (Harvey & Prager, 2021).

Additionally, ARIT members would be asked to find and to attempt a "stretch activity" that would take them out of their comfort zones as a means for developing learning agility (McCauley & Yost, 2021). This stretch activity required them to learn a new skill, seemingly unrelated to their job (i.e., painting, learning an instrument, taking up a new sport, etc.) as a first, low-stakes approach to a stretch activity. While the idea of choosing a stretch activity would be introduced in the DLO Workshops, the concept would be reiterated in both later coaching and supervisor check-in meetings. For their part, members of the ARDT also committed to choosing

and attempting a stretch activity of their own, thus modeling the importance of the activity and their desire to build learning agility.

At the initial ARDT meeting, it was determined that One-on-One Coaching sessions would provide ARIT members the opportunity to meet with an experienced district leader in a safe, non-evaluative, non-judgmental environment. In this discussion, another significant topic emerged that would reoccur throughout individual interviews: a lack of role clarity around the context of leading from the district office. Mr. Bernie George, Chief of Operations for the ESSD, shared an example of explaining to a newcomer in his department how things worked at the central office level in a system that provides high levels of autonomy to schools. The newcomer struggled with the lack of implementation of Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems (PBIS) in schools. Mr. George shared,

We're running PBIS and Mary helped me with it. 'When we got started, we had so much support. Why is everybody not jumping on board with it? We're paying for everything. It's great.' And it just doesn't work that way. Now, I was smart enough to realize, don't toss the apple cart. And I've been a first-year person. I can tell we could have pushed and pushed, and it wouldn't have worked. Yeah, it took some time to figure that out.

Ms. Emerson provided another example from her experience that further demonstrated a struggle with role clarity that newcomers have when transitioning from a school setting to the central office,

I remember exactly who it was when we first had the issue of a facilitator coming on and she was a high school department chair who had a lot of power at her school. So, when she was assigned a school, she felt like she should tell them how to run the program. We

ended up having to move her out because that's not how we work. We are servant leaders. We're there to support whatever they need at each school. Each school had the autonomy to be how they want to be in their departments. We didn't tell them how to be. But, I did not tell her that when she onboarded.

The observations made and sentiments expressed regarding role clarity continued to emerge across individual ARIT and ARDT interviews, questionnaire responses, and in DLO Workshop discussions.

The ARDT determined that a shift in newcomers' leadership lenses should not only be addressed in DLO Workshops, but in One-on-One Coaching sessions, as well. Through this formal, serial socialization tactic of One-on-One Coaching sessions, ARIT members could share transition concerns, learn more about life in the central office, and begin gaining clarity around leading in a different context than their previous school building lens (Bauer, 2010; Klein & Heuser, 2008; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

Mr. Wilson suggested that the same scenarios used in conjunction with the Harden Shifts guide would be a great, common element for each coach to use. Based on that, ARDT members were very clear that they wanted coaching sessions to follow DLO Workshops, thus giving them time to work on the leadership scenarios themselves before coaching the ARIT members.

After the first ARDT meeting, the lead researcher provided the first draft of coaching assignments. All members agreed that the coaches had to work with ARIT members who were from departments outside of their own, so as to provide an environment safe and clear of any evaluative judgments made by the senior partner in the pairing. Table 4.10 displays the One-on-One Coaching matches for this study.

Table 4.10*The ESSD Newcomer Coaching Assignments*

ARIT Member	ESSD Role	ARDT Coach	ESSD Role
Bob Tocheny	Classified Employee Recruiting Coordinator	Heather Cassidy	Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning
Shannon Fields	Director of Human Resources	Linda Mitchell	Director of Student Support
Marni Lynn	Family Engagement Coordinator	Erin Emerson	Associate Superintendent Student Support and Services
Linda Mitchell	Director of Student Support	Bernie George	Chief of Operations
Brittini Morgan	Assistant Director of Student Support	Heather Cassidy	Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning
Kimberly Kasson	Assessment Coordinator	Wallace Wilson	Associate Superintendent of Human Resources
Jim Young	Director of Food and Nutrition	Wallace Wilson	Associate Superintendent of Human Resources

Lastly, the ARDT suggested that the members of the ARIT be formally welcomed at a reception held in their honor, much the way that the ESSD central office leaders welcomes its new principals. In a conversation after the ARDT meeting, Dr. Cassidy shared, “We do such a great job with welcoming new principals into the family when they are appointed.” Ms. Erin Emerson, Associate Superintendent of Student Support Services, agreed, “Giving them social time with the superintendent and the cabinet is such an empowering activity for them.”

The lead researcher reached out to the ESSD’s superintendent and planned a newcomer dinner. The Superintendent’s Welcome Reception was scheduled at a local restaurant, to be hosted by the superintendent and attended by all members of the study. The focus of the

reception was aimed at celebrating the arrival of the new district leaders, while strengthening their connection through social-professional networking (Bauer, 2010; Klein & Heuser, 2008).

Each of the interventions designed by the ARDT at that first meeting established the basic pattern that ensued over the course of the three action research cycles. While the specific content was adjusted as the cycles progressed and data was collected, the focus of interventions and their respective delivery methods aligned to the theoretical framework of the study. Table 4.11 provides an overview of the first round of interventions.

Table 4.11

Action Research Cycle 1: The First Round of Interventions

Onboarding Intervention (Socialization Tactics)	Focus of Interventions	Activities Facilitated
District Leadership Onboarding Workshop (Formal / Collective)	Uncertainty Reduction	Personal journeys – help make connections; cohort experience leading to a support network
	Leadership Clarity	Harden Shifts overview
		Leadership dilemma scenarios
	Learning Agility	Personal journeys – foster reflection
		Vicarious learning through panel discussion of veteran central office leaders
		Stretch Activity
		Overlap of Leader Profile and Agility

Onboarding Intervention (Socialization Tactics)	Focus of Interventions	Activities Facilitated
Supervisor Expectation Check-In (Investiture / Serial)	Uncertainty Reduction	240-day employee calendar / annual leave / appropriate vacation times Question for Newcomers: “what do you believe my success criteria is for you?” Review their strengths and clarify supervisor’s success criteria for newcomer ESSD Leader Profile as an evaluation guide
	Learning Agility	Development of short- and long-term goals, along with discussion of monitoring those goals
Coaching (Serial/Formal/Investiture)	Uncertainty Reduction	Provide warm welcome and encouragement Resolving leadership dilemma scenario together, using Harden Shifts as a guide for discussion Entertain questions regarding district office politics, providing examples of do’s and don’ts.
	Leadership Clarity	
	Learning Agility	Discussion of ESSD’s Leader Profile, with particular attention on seeking feedback, anticipating impact of decisions from multiple perspectives, self-awareness and reflection, and being coachable
Welcome Reception (Collective/Formal)	Uncertainty Reduction	Celebration of arriving at the central office Meeting social and emotional needs and establishing a network of support
	Leadership Clarity	Awareness and development of the horizontal relationships needed in central office roles

ARDT and ARIT Individual Interviews 1

As the first round of interventions were designed and implemented throughout the months of March and April, the lead researcher simultaneously conducted individual interviews with each of the ARDT and ARIT members. Each interview included multiple, semi-structured questions, was recorded, transcribed using a cloud-based application tool, and analyzed for common themes and patterns of responses. The transcripts were re-read multiple times, with transcription errors corrected, and then coded. While full interview questions are provided for ARIT in Appendix B and ARDT in Appendix C, Table 4.12 provides a sampling of the questions posed in both sets of interviews.

Table 4.12

Sampling of ARIT and ARDT Individual Interview 1 Questions

Action Research Group	Interview Prompt
ARIT	Put into your words the feelings you experienced as you transitioned from your school into your new role at the central office.
ARIT	Prior to starting in your new role in the central office, what did you anticipate would be the biggest challenge(s) in your transition? What has actually been the biggest challenge, to this point?
ARIT	When you have questions regarding your new role and responsibilities, who do you seek out for advice, guidance, and answers? How does this compare to finding support when you first started as a school building leader?
ARDT	How would you compare the onboarding and systems of support provided for new teachers, assistant principals, and principals in our school district with that of newly named district leaders?
ARDT	What are the indicators for success that you have provided new leaders of your department? When and how are these articulated to the newcomer?

As each ARDT member had at previously served in leadership roles at the school level, as well as had hired people into their departments directly from the school level, the lead

researcher felt it was important to collect their thoughts on the topic of transitioning from one level of leadership to the other. The ARDT members had valuable personal experiences to share, as well as the perspective of having observed newcomers make the transition into their respective departments.

Each ARIT member had recently made (or was currently going through) the transition from school to district leadership. Their equally valuable perspectives were rawer and more in-the-moment than ARDT members. The combination of ARDT and ARIT member responses provided the lead researcher a treasure trove of data in which clear commonalities emerged between the two groups, as well as with questionnaire responses and observations made by the lead researcher in each of the meetings held during the first cycle of action research. These commonalities included struggles with the lack of clear job expectations and finding role clarity in leading from the district office. The interviews also raised the potential of additional findings around the newcomers' sense of loss when moving away from a school setting, as well as the lack of constructive feedback and a sense of isolation when moving into district leadership.

The first topic that the lead researcher uncovered through the individual interviews of ARDT and ARIT members centered around providing and receiving clear expectations as an integral element of the transition process. Both groups unanimously agreed through their interviews that clear expectations were vital to successful transitions. ARDT responses were mixed in terms of the effectiveness of the ESSD's district supervisors at providing those expectation, while every member of the ARIT shared concerns over the level of expectations that they had received from district leaders.

In ARDT member Wallace Wilson's words, "I think indicators of success to start with is to know and understand the work of the department." He went on, "understanding how our

department connects to the outer circle of the school system and the school leaders.” Mr. Wilson extolled the importance of establishing his non-negotiables with new members of his team, which included “we’re a servant-oriented department, so non-responsiveness to our school leaders would be a nonnegotiable and then making sure that their work aligns to the work of our department around the employee experience.”

While Mr. Wilson described his success criteria, ARDT member Heather Cassidy shared her experience of transitioning to the central office that included little, if any, discussion of expectations, “I don’t think I had any official onboarding.” She went on, “Most of what I needed to know, I would ask other directors.” Dr. Cassidy raised the concern not only about the lack of expectations, but also about the inconsistency of expectations at the ESSD’s central office when it came to onboarding newcomers. This was very different, she explained, than the “choreographed onboarding process through new educator orientation” that the ESSD’s schools used to bring new teachers into the system or when administrators are elevated to the principal role. Dr. Cassidy continued:

With our new principals, when they’re named, they have meetings. They meet our superintendent for expectations. They’re assigned a mentor. Then they have monthly meetings to support their growth and learning throughout the year. As far as the district, that’s very different and so those expectations have not been in place. And so, generally, I guess what I was saying is that the different departments, it’s really whatever the departments have set up. It usually is just going to involve the newcomer talking to a veteran person in the department about how things happen.

Simplifying Dr. Cassidy's thoughts on seeking expectations, ARIT and ARDT member Linda Mitchell shared, "what we're striving to do is find a strong-connection between what we do at the school level to replicate with purpose at the district level."

The comparison to school level experiences regarding expectations came up in ARIT interviews, as well, as the ESSD's newest members to the central office described their struggles with receiving unclear expectations. Marni Lynn was elevated to the newly created post of Family Engagement Coordinator for the ESSD. Ms. Lynn, when asked why having clear expectations was important to her, responded:

I'll be honest, this is where I struggle with this role because I feel like I really have a vision of where I want this to go. But I also know that this is slowly becoming a focus and it's like a new focus for the district. So, it was important for me to understand where the need for this job came from, how it was developed. I feel like I was more fearful in the sense that I'm just making sure I knew where we were headed. So that apprehension piece of not knowing. At the school level, as an AP, I worked very closely with the principal to make sure we were in alignment of school goals and student goals.

Not only was this a new role for Ms. Lynn after serving as an elementary assistant principal, but the role itself was also new, compounding her concerns during the early months on the job.

Dr. Kimberly Kasson, the ESSD's new Assessment Coordinator, shared that she had always understood her administrative roles at the school level as an assistant principal and in her new role at the district level was to serve her supervisor. At the school level, Dr. Kasson made certain that she "understood what my leaders wanted out of things. What they cared about most. How they spoke about things. And then aligning my work to that in order to get it done." In

coming to the central office, Dr. Kasson has had to work harder seeking out her supervisor to assure alignment, to determine “where the leader wants to go.”

Determining alignment and getting direction at the district was more challenging for Dr. Kasson than at the school level because in school leadership “you see your people every single day, your supervisor every day. So, to have that kind of interaction on a daily basis, then come up here, where you don’t really get face time with your supervisor...” can make both ascertaining and living up to expectations a very difficult prospect.

Ms. Mitchell shared that after several months, “I still don’t know what my responsibilities are and to whom. I went through a rapid cycle of being very competent to very not competent in the space of people calling me and I’m giving them an answer to people calling me and I should not give them an answer.” She explained that her sense of not feeling successful was due to her uncertainty over the criteria for success, “I asked about job expectations, and I didn’t receive a lot of feedback regarding that. I’m a pleaser. I want to make sure I’m hitting the mark. So, it’s challenging for me.”

Director of Food and Nutrition for the ESSD, Jim Young, shared that his supervisor was supportive but “hands off” during the transition. According to Mr. Young, “it was more of a sink or swim kind of thing, trying to ask as many questions as I could.” He went on to say, “I think one of the things that makes transition pretty rough is if there’s not somebody else who does some of that stuff, then there’s no one there to guide you. And even the big picture, there’s no one to guide you if you’re all siloed.”

The two ARIT members from the ESSD’s Human Resources (HR) Department provided interview responses far different than their ARIT colleagues. Bob Tocheny, the new Classified Recruiting Coordinator, and Shannon Fields, the new HR Director were both in their pre-service

status at the time of the interviews, finishing spring as principals in their respective schools. Both indicated concerns, but as neither were fully engrossed in their new roles, their concerns were more intellectual and logistic based than those shared by their ARIT colleagues.

Mr. Tocheny's biggest concern centered on the lack of clarity in when the busy seasons of the job would commence and where his office space would be set up. He stated:

While I might start my day in one spot, it may not be where I end. My day will be all over the place. And that's, well, that's exciting to me. That my days might not ever be the same and might not be as predictable, that does cause me a little bit of, well, that's the part I'm curious about.

Ms. Fields biggest concerns centered on not knowing all that she needs to know to be successful out of the gate. She shared that she understood, at an intellectual level, that she was not supposed to magically have that knowledge, "there is a little bit of struggle that I have to kind of work through" that reality, and that it is "okay that I don't know all the things right away."

As the first round of interviews with ARIT and ARDT members helped to establish the study's first finding—that newcomers to the ESSD central office struggled with a lack of clear expectations provided to be successful in their new roles—it also helped the lead researcher uncover a second finding that emerged during the first cycle of action research: Newcomers to the ESSD central office struggled to find clarity about their new leadership roles. The topic of role clarity came up both in the questionnaire responses, as well as in discussions among ARDT members.

While the idea of clear expectations encompassed ideas like providing success criteria for newcomers, as well as knowledge of policies, procedures, and individual responsibilities associated with one's specific role, the concept of leadership role clarity referred to the

adjustment in a newcomer's leadership lens as they leave the school building for the central office. Examples of leading in a different context included an understanding of the social environment of the central office, of interoffice politics, and the power and process of decision making.

All the study participants shared that no formal central office onboarding program existed in the ESSD prior to this study, sharing that no attempts at providing an explanation of the different context of leadership or role clarity they would experience in their new role were provided, at least in any formal manner. Only a few members of the ARIT and ARDT had even contemplated the idea of a lens adjustment prior to their district appointment. Yet, each interviewee described similar struggles that they had had with their understand and the changing nature of their roles.

Perhaps the most pronounced misjudgment leading to a lack of clarity made by those leaving the school building for the central office came in anticipating the complexity in decision making at the district level. ARIT member and Assistant Director of Student Support, Brittini Morgan, stated, "Up here, the decisions that I make are so wide reaching and I'm realizing that they have to take into account so many other departments." She went on, "As an AP, I knew who to call at the district level above me if I needed additional support or guidance. But when you're up here and there's more complex issues, there's a narrow pool above you" to help find the answers needed. The impact of decision-making in central office roles, as referenced by Ms. Morgan, emerged in multiple interviews. "The scope does get a little bigger," predicted ARIT member Ms. Fields. She went on,

Whereas if I'm making a decision at my school, we're going to be thinking about what's best for kids. Trying to see what our roadblocks are. How can we prevent those? That's

what drives our decision making? When faced with a decision that we have to make with a human resources situation, you're going to think about students, but you're also going to think about the outcomes of that decision at a bigger scale. Like, if I make this decision, am I setting a precedent and what's to follow from whatever that decision might be? Are we making a process?

Mr. Young expounded on that topic, describing his search for information about free and reduced lunch when he assumed his new role as Director of Food and Nutrition, "I reached out to our Title I coordinator and told her, 'You need to tell me all the things that free and reduced lunch reaches in the school system.' And it was kind of mind blowing. And that doesn't include feeding kids, right?"

Ms. Lynn shared her anxiety, "I think about this role and I get nervous, like wow, this is a really, really big role, touching so many schools." That large scope led to anxiety not just over the wide-ranging impact that district leadership can have, but over the weight that goes with making decisions that cannot be easily undone, as explained by Ms. Mitchell

The effects are far reaching. Much more so that at a school, where if you make a decision with a grade level in a building, and it's not necessarily the right one, you can change an pivot pretty quickly. If you make a decision at the district level, there is no changing quickly. There's no backtracking quickly. The decision that you make has far and wide reaching effects.

Unfortunately, Ms. Lynn does not believe that the ESSD has done enough to prepare newcomers for that weight and breadth, stating, "The majority of that clarity is coming through experience and conversations on the job."

Further exploring that need for clarity, ARDT member Erin Emerson described the recent struggle that a newcomer to the Student Support Department had upon her arrival from a school, “Our first lead counselor took the job. It was not communicated necessarily the difference in those roles from the school to the district. So, she really struggled with thinking it was her job to advocate for all of the counselors.” The new lead counselor believed that with her newfound title, she could end all counselors from having to do specials rotations at their respective schools. As Ms. Emerson explained, people come to the district office believing that “have a lot of power and that they’re going to be able to have more control over the bigger picture of how the school district is run.”

According to Mr. Wilson, the ability to actually make decisions at the district level differed a great deal from decisions that principals make at schools, where things can be made to happen very quickly:

I just thought it would be easier to make decisions and you could make things happen quickly. I have learned over time that it takes a long time to make change that effects all 43 schools versus when you’re serving in a principal role. The principal can make things happen pretty quickly, and they have the autonomy to make those decisions. That was a big shift for me.

ARDT member Heather Cassidy supported that sentiment during her interview, suggesting that principals who come to the central office have the toughest time adjusting—as she did—because they are used to being “in charge, used to making decisions.”

Both Mr. Young and Mr. Tocheny referenced the idea that moving from the school principalship to district leadership is like moving from being the king or queen to a “servant role.” Mr. Wilson explained it this way, “Moving from the principal position, where I was the

strategic thinker, into the role of director in which I essentially became what I would call an AP of the department.” Bernie George’s comments served to summarize the challenge that newcomers experience, “I do believe that when people come up here, they’re fighting so much to find themselves. And to establish themselves at the county level, and to build those relationships.”

Struggling with those misunderstandings about the nature of central office roles, as well as the shifts entailed with leadership differences between the school and district settings, came through each of the interviews, group discussions, and questionnaires during the first action research cycle. Along with newcomers’ struggles with receiving clear expectations and the ability to find role clarity, several other topics emerged during the first cycle that were re-analyzed during the second action research cycle. Additional data collection was conducted to provide triangulation points to added findings.

The emergent topics included a sense of loss that new leaders felt when leaving their school buildings for central office positions, the challenges of shifting to a horizontal leadership focus from the vertical orientation used at the school level, and the emergence of One-on-One Coaching as a means of meeting those challenges.

Action Research Cycle 2

The second action research cycle of this study began in late April and ran until the end of June 2024. The interventions designed and implemented in the first action cycle were reviewed by the ARDT. Observations made during supervisor expectations check-in meetings and One-on-One Coaching sessions by ARDT members were discussed, as well. The ARDT continued to guide the development of a formal onboarding program for new central office leaders in the ESSD, adjusting and adding to the interventions used during the first action research cycle.

Two sets of interventions—rooted in the research surrounding organizational socialization, role clarity, and learning agility—were designed and implemented during the second action research cycle. The lead researcher continually collected data through observations and discussions with ARDT and ARIT members. A timeline of activities for the second action research study cycle is displayed in Table 4.13

Table 4.13

Action Research Cycle 2 Timeline of Activities

Date(s)	Activities	Data Collection Method
4/24	ARDT Design Meeting #2	Discussion responses and observation
4/24–6/30	Supervisor Expectations Check-in Meetings (2)	Information shared by supervisors at ARDT meetings
5/13	DLO Workshop #2	Discussion responses and observation
5/14–6/30	One-on-One Coaching Sessions (2)	Information shared by supervisors at at ARDT meetings
5/21	ARDT Design Meeting #3	Discussion responses and observation
6/3	DLO Workshop #3	Discussion responses and observation
6/4	ARIT Focus Group #1	Item responses and observation
6/17	ARDT Questionnaire #1	Item responses

Commonalities across various collection methods continued to emerge from the data gathered during the second action research cycle. Again, transcripts of interviews, responses to questionnaire items, and observation notes collected in the researcher’s journal were reviewed multiple times, coded, and analyzed for common themes and patterns. The data collected were triangulated by the lead researcher in an effort to enhance the trustworthiness of the study’s findings. While the findings of the first action cycle continued to surface, three additional

findings emerged during the second action research cycle. As is the nature of qualitative action research, the iterative process that began with data collection during the first cycle of the study was built on during the second cycle, ultimately leading to four additional findings. These new findings included the following:

1. District coaches and the use of Leadership Situation Scenarios were found to be effective sources of support when navigating the new challenges of transitioning from the school to district leadership in the ESSD.
2. The Superintendent's Welcome Reception was found to be an effective source of support to newcomers in the ESSD central office.
3. Newcomers to the ESSD central office experienced a sense of loss when leaving the school building for their new roles.
4. Adjusting to the horizontal orientation of district work provided a challenge for newcomers as they transitioned into their district roles in the ESSD central office.

Findings from the first cycle of action research, including the lack of clear expectations provided to newcomers, as well as struggles with gaining clarity in their new roles, continued to surface in conversations held during the second cycle. The story of the ARDT's experiences in designing the interventions, along with the ARIT participants' journey through the second action research cycle, are described in the following subsections of this chapter.

ARDT Planning Meetings 2 and 3

At the second ARDT planning meeting on April 24, 2024, ARDT members were able to share thoughts from their first set of individualized coaching and supervisor sessions, as well as their observations from the first District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshop, which had been held on March 27, 2024. The ARDT determined that the three-pronged structure developed

at the first meeting—individual supervisor expectation check-in meetings, whole group workshops, and One-on-One Coaching sessions—was appropriate to deliver the interventions. These interventions continued to fit within the theoretical framework of the study. Unlike the first meeting, in which the discussion focused more on the organization of the study and the structure of interventions, the second meeting zeroed in on the content of the interventions, driven by the ARDT members’ recent experiences with the ARIT newcomers and the data collected by the lead researcher.

At this second ARDT meeting, the lead researcher reviewed ARIT questionnaire results. The lead researcher shared that the three areas of greatest concern coming from the initial questionnaire included the lack of an intentional preparation program, the nature of departmental politics, and discomfort that newcomers had with asking their supervisor for feedback. This gave the ARDT areas of concern to focus on, particularly that of addressing departmental politics and feedback.

Based on ARDT members’ interactions and experiences with ARIT newcomers during the first round of interventions, as well as the questionnaire data, the ARDT found that continued focus on leadership clarity was imperative to the transition of the newcomers on the ARIT. A topic discussed at length by the group was around teaching newcomers the idea that the power to accomplish their goals, from a central office perspective, required a different approach than at the school level—a different kind of politics than newcomers were used to. The ESSD Chief of Operations, Mr. Bernie George, shared, “Power up here is earning respect out there. Responsiveness and follow through. We must teach them that that is how you win influence.” Student Support Director Linda Mitchell, who serves as both an ARIT and ARDT member, suggested that:

The ESSD is so different than other systems. It is no wonder why outsiders struggle when they come here. The same is true for our insiders who come to the county office from schools. When we say that our job is to support and to advise principals, that is exactly what we mean.

Discussion of Ms. Mitchell's point led to the ARDT's emphasis on the importance of the ESSD Leader Profile, which had "Builds Relationships" as the first major tenet of effective leadership in the school district.

Navigating the transition in terms of helping newcomers adapt to their new leadership context and the nature of district politics went on to dominate the discussion. Associate Superintendent for Student Support Services, Erin Emerson, urged the group to consider the need for enhanced coaching during the transition period, stating "coaching provides an opportunity for new teammates to gain awareness and to learn how to manage mistakes." Ms. Emerson's instincts would be validated by the ARIT later in the second action research cycle when members provided feedback during their first focus group session.

Mr. Wilson, the ESSD Associate Superintendent for Human Resources, shared that the new lens that ARIT members were having to develop matched the challenge of moving from a vertical to a horizontal orientation of leadership highlighted on the Harden Shifts document (Harden, 2009). Through his relatively recent experience of moving from school level to district leadership, Mr. Wilson shared,

My perception was so misled to what the reality was. I thought I was serving principals and serving schools. That's what I thought I was supposed to do. Then I realized 'Oh, there's an HR team that needs to be led' and understanding the politics of that. And then, 'Oh, there's other departments that I need to work with, too.' So, I would almost say the

basic understanding that there are three groups of people that you're serving is the most important thing to learn, because I didn't have it.

Mr. Wilson went on to share that the time it would take to both build relationships both within his department, as well as across departments, was something he had not been prepared for. "It never occurred to me how much time would go into investing into the inner workings of HR and you've got to work and try to avoid missteps on the outside."

Ms. Mitchell took the ideas of horizontal thinking and district politics further, sharing "There's a lot of unspoken rules that I didn't know until I stepped in it." In her experience, navigating the communication from one department to the next is very different than how her communication with district leaders looked from her former principal seat, where a vertical relationship existed. She explained,

It's very different then as it is as the Director of Student Support when I am calling someone else in a different department and the way their leader may handle things. I had to adjust to this. Katie Carr is a perfect example. She would prefer that we go through her than to chat with any of her people. I didn't know that because, as a principal, I would just call them directly if I had a question about FTE. In this role, I learned really quickly that that's now how she would prefer that I do things. It was a big shock to me and I think

I inadvertently upset her. I was just doing what I had always done, but now I'm different. Again, the ARDT collectively pointed to the ESSD Leader Profile as a reminder of what the system claimed to be the keys to effective leadership. While relationship building was the first tenet spelled out, the document highlighted "Effective Communication" as the second tenet.

Ms. Mitchell shared that, she believed, the real issues centered on communication lines and leaders' individual preferences. She shared that a meeting of associate superintendents,

chiefs, and directors to determine who and how they would like communications to be lined up would be helpful to not only newcomers, but veterans of the district office, as well. Ms. Mitchell shared, “It would be nice to have that piece because then we’re not calling it politics. We’re just calling it relationships within those departments and how to best communicate on that level.”

Building on Ms. Mitchell’s sentiments, Mr. George pointed to the need for district leaders to better communicate to newcomers how district departments work as a whole, sharing, “I think it’s important for new people to see how much our departments are interconnected. A new person may not know that your department got with my department and developed a class on safety training.” Mr. George went on to say, “if they see how we work together, then maybe the word ‘politics’ will soften. Because it really does need to be solved.”

The result of this robust discussion ended with Mr. Wilson reiterating the point made earlier in the meeting by Ms. Emerson that coaching would be the key to helping newcomers navigate the challenges associated with developing a horizontal approach to their communications and interactions at the district level. He pointed out that no formula or code existed that could completely resolve the challenge, but that making newcomers aware of this shift was a vital element that should be included in their onboarding. He went on to explain how coaching newcomers would be the best intervention to assist them:

You have to be aware, and then you have to figure out how to manage that awareness. So to me, that’s where the coaching comes in, because every scenario will be different and the people who are leading are so different. So, I think that coaching supports the management of the missteps. I’ve made several missteps that I had to identify and correct. I really learned that through coaching.

As a result of these discussions, the ARDT felt that clarifying lines of communication and establishing a means of “who to go to with your questions” would be excellent topics to discuss in both coaching sessions and supervisor check-ins.

Based on discussions around power, awareness, managing mistakes, and communication, the ARDT adjusted the topics of discussion for the coaching and supervisor sessions for the second half of the first action cycle. The topics of the second DLO Workshop were to build on the ones previously implemented. Specifically, the ARDT determined that the Harden Shifts 1, 2, and 3 would be presented by Mr. Wilson and Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, Dr. Heather Cassidy, as both had previous experiences in using the document as a means for understanding the shifts in moving from schools to the central office.

Helping the ARIT members understand the concept of “unlearning” as they moved from one leadership context to another, was also determined to be a point of emphasis for the second DLO Workshop. This was deemed by the ARDT to be a complimentary approach to helping newcomers adapt to the shifts being discussed, as old assumptions needed to be released in order to make room for new learning. “Unlearning how decisions are made at the school compared to how they are made in the central office would be an important one to discuss,” stated Mr. Wilson, further emphasizing the use of situational leadership scenarios to both witness the current thinking of newcomers and guide the coaching conversations.

Finally, based on several concerns gathered during the first round of ARIT interviews and questionnaires, it was determined that supervisors would add a discussion of “busy seasons” related to job expectations during their next one-on-one sessions. As these seasons varied from department to department and even among divisions within district departments, it was

determined that conversations on this topic must be individualized and facilitated by supervisors during their expectations check-in meetings.

A third ARDT design meeting was held on May 21st, 2024. In one-on-one conversations held between the lead researcher and various members of the ARDT over the course of regular, work-related discourse, it was determined that a brief meeting should be scheduled. As late April and May had been such busy months for all participants of the study, several ARDT members wished to have an additional round of interventions to work through topics that simply were not given sufficient attention. The topics agreed on in coaching and supervisor expectation check-in meetings were deemed to be a too robust to cover in the time set aside for those meetings. Having an additional opportunity to meet would allow for those topics to be covered more thoroughly.

In the course of the discussion around ARDT observations during their one-on-one meetings, Mr. George shared his observation:

There seems to be a big difference between assistant principals who come to the district compared to those who come up here as principals. John, my previous Food Chief, was very hesitant to make decisions without checking in. Jim doesn't have a problem just running with things. Principals seem to have much more confidence than APs.

Mr. Wilson added to that a concern that the confidence of a principal "could be a detriment if the run ahead without asking or checking in. They may not understand the overall direction of the department." The lead researcher shared that the concern raised highlighted the organizational socialization theory developed by Van Maanen and Schein (1977), which suggested that organizations who do not plan and manage the transition of new employees run the risk of developing rogue actors.

Dr. Cassidy suggested that the issue did not lie with the confidence of former principals, but that their previous role required constant decision making. “That is not their role here” in most cases, Dr. Cassidy shared. Adjusting to a role in which their power to make decisions on a solo basis was severely diminished fed into the idea that role clarity was elusive to those rising to central office leadership. This new reality caused newcomers to recalibrate their views on leading.

Ms. Mitchell suggested that “titles are so much more important—at the cabinet level, especially. Much more weight is given to titles at the district office.” She went on, “Who I serve is such an important core value and more clarity is needed. Are we serving the superintendent, my associate, or the principals?” Mr. Wilson picked up on this struggle with role clarity, reiterating thoughts he shared at the second ARDT meeting about his transition experiences,

When I came up here, I thought it was to serve schools. Period. I learned this by accident, as I was always looking through my lens as a principal. Now, if I am not intentional, my department can’t serve schools effectively.

Regardless of previous roles at the school level, the ARDT members all agreed that a service focus was needed for newcomers to the district level to be successful and that leaning into the first two tenets of the ESSD Leader Profile were vital coaching points to be emphasized in future one-on-one sessions. (Those two tenets included relationship building and communicating effectively.)

Based on the decision to increase the use of the ESSD Leader Profile, the ARDT agreed that at the next DLO Workshop, the lead researcher should emphasize to ARIT members on how the ideas of learning agility overlapped with relationship building and communicating effectively, as articulated in the ESSD Leader Profile. Additionally, each ARDT member felt that

a successful activity of the first two DLO Workshops had been the group discussions around the Harden Shifts. Based on his journal observations, the lead researcher shared that the discussion of shifts was, indeed, a highpoint in previous workshops. It was agreed that time permitting, Harden's Shifts 4, 5, and 6 would be addressed and discussed at the third DLO Workshop. (Due to time constraints, these shifts were not addressed until the fourth DLO Workshop.)

While the result of the third design meeting was that our onboarding efforts should stay consistent with previous activities, the interaction among ARDT members provided the lead researcher with additional observational data. The meeting crossed over from simply focusing on the pre-planned agenda into a truly collaborative planning session that served almost as a focus group. Just as the researcher was approaching the room, he was able to hear Mr. Wilson, Ms. Mitchell, Ms. Emerson, and Mr. George talking about their experiences in their respective coaching sessions. Mr. Wilson suggested to the others, "We really need to consider building on this study with some monthly leadership labs."

Ms. Mitchell explained that her coaching session left her concerned that her person had "totally missed the real concern" of the leadership situational scenario they had discussed and that ongoing leadership training, with scenarios, Harden Shifts, and the Leader Profile should all be used to help district leaders. The lead researcher, after admitting that he had been listening right outside of the room, shared how thrilled he was at hearing them talk about the work that needed to be done in the future. In his journal, he wrote, "This made my heart fill. They were totally talking about the work and the need for onboarding prior to my presence!!! This is the start of a really coherent program to onboard newcomers in ESSD!"

The group wrapped up the third ARDT design meeting by discussing the need to keep the third DLO workshop short, as it was to be facilitated at the same time as the ESSD's annual

Leadership Retreat. All ARDT and ARIT members were scheduled to participate in the retreat.

Table 4.14 provides the complete overview of the second and third round of interventions that occurred during the second action research cycle.

Table 4.14

Action Research Cycle 2: The Second and Third Round of Interventions

Onboarding Intervention (Socialization Tactics)	Focus of Interventions	Activities Facilitated
District Leadership Onboarding Workshop (Formal / Collective)	Uncertainty Reduction	Personal journeys – connection with others, including both ARIT and ARDT members.
		Continued development of a support network through cohort experiences.
	Leadership Clarity	Harden Shifts 1 – 6 via Panel Discussion. Leadership dilemma scenarios.
	Learning Agility	Personal journeys – foster reflection Vicarious learning through panel discussion of veteran central office leaders. Understanding “unlearning” as a means to new learning. Stretch Activity re-emphasized
Supervisor Expectation Check-In (Investiture / Serial)	Uncertainty Reduction	“Busy seasons” discussion. Expectations of intra- and inter-office lines of communication and why important. Feedback on job performance (or re-assurance for those in pre-service).
	Leadership Agility	Continued discussion of long- and short-term goals and how to monitor progress.
Coaching (Serial/Formal)	Leadership Clarity	Resolving leadership dilemma scenario together, using Harden Shifts as a guide for discussion.

Onboarding Intervention (Socialization Tactics)	Focus of Interventions	Activities Facilitated
Coaching (Serial/Formal)	Leadership Clarity	Awareness of the complexity of communication at the district level – “Why is it so important to have clarity around lines of communication <i>within</i> and <i>across</i> departments?”
		Working through mistakes (aka Happy Accidents).
	Learning Agility	Discussion of ESSD’s Leader Profile’s Communication and Intentionality tenets, with particular attention paid to anticipating impact of decisions from multiple perspectives.

At the end of the third meeting, the lead researcher shared with the group that either an additional meeting or an ARDT Questionnaire would be headed their way to ascertain their beliefs about the effectiveness of each intervention designed to that point in the study. Ultimately, due to the challenge of bringing each ARDT member together in the month of June, the lead researcher opted to send a brief questionnaire to the group. Just prior to that, however, the first ARIT Focus Group was conducted. During that discussion, participant responses gave voice to the experiences of central office newcomers in the ESSD.

ARIT Focus Group 1

The first ARIT Focus Group was facilitated on June 4, 2024. All seven members of the ARIT were present, and a robust discussion ensued. The use of a focus group as a data collection method in this study was two-folded. The first purpose aimed at capturing newcomer perspectives as they transitioned to the central office from local schools in the ESSD. The second purpose was to determine the effectiveness of the interventions designed by the ARDT to make the newcomers’ transitions smoother. Four semi-structured questions were developed and used by the lead researcher to guide the conversations. The entire discussion was recorded, transcribed

using a cloud-based application tool, and analyzed for commonalities and patterns of responses. The transcripts were re-read multiple times, with transcription errors corrected, and then coded.

Many of the findings and potential findings related to the transition experiences of the ARIT newcomers that emerged during previous data collections were bolstered by the responses given during focus group conversations. As a result, findings from both the first and second action research cycle were solidified through the descriptive story telling of ARIT members. The questions used to during the first focus group each connected with this study's research questions. While the full ARIT Focus Group protocol is provided in Appendix E, a sampling of the questions used to guide the discussion is displayed in Table 4.15.

Table 4.15

Sample Discussion Questions from ARIT Focus Group 1

Research Focus	Focus Group Prompt
Research Questions #1 and #2	What leadership shifts do you anticipate – or have you found – to be the most challenging in your new role? What has most helped you make the transition to leading in a new context?
Research Questions #2 and #3	Share the onboarding activities you have participated in at this point in your transition that you would like to see continued in the future. Give a brief explanation on how they have impacted your personal and professional confidence, productivity, and overall job satisfaction.

The first topic addressed focused on the ARDT designed interventions or onboarding activities in which ARIT members participated. Consistent with the observations made by the lead researcher via ARDT discussions, the use of veteran leaders in the ESSD as newcomer coaches had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the transition experience. Based on the focus group discussion, the learning agile behavior of vicarious learning was at the root of the coaching model's success. In the words of the ESSD Food Service Director, Jim Young, "One-on-One Coaching was most effective for me." He went on to equate the experience to good parenting,

where “pre-teaching things like ‘what are you going to do when this happens?’ I feel like I am able to come up with some good ideas, but there’s always some angle that people have been able to add” during coaching sessions.

The ESSD Family Engagement Coordinator, Ms. Marni Lynn, agreed with the effectiveness of coaching. The safety of meeting with a veteran leader outside of her own department allowed her to “walk through the kind of steps I might not be thinking of before bringing it to a supervisor.” She described the idea that she could work out “some glitches. Just having that new perspective has been really helpful for me to figure out the work.” She shared that “just hearing their experiences and lessons learned” provided her with much-needed support. She was encouraged by her coach that she could be successful by making more informed decisions through learning from others. Mr. Young put it more bluntly, “I really like to think that at this point in my life, I want to learn from the mistakes of others!”

Ms. Mitchell expounded on the activity, sharing with the focus group that coaching had had a significant impact on her thinking. Ms. Mitchell suggested that the vicarious learning from the coaching sessions was very much intertwined and strengthened by another intervention activity that ARDT members chose to use in conjunction with coaching: Leadership Situation Scenarios. According to Ms. Mitchell, “The coaching sessions have given me an opportunity to see different leadership styles play out, as well.” As she and her coach worked through Leadership Situation Scenarios together, she learned that:

my coach approaches problems in a different way than I do. So, it’s nice to have a different perspective. I may choose to or I may choose not to, dependent on what’s happening in my world, but having a scenario that’s kind of neutral is nice because I’m not bringing my current problems. With the scenario, we have a common

problem to think through.

Mr. Young added to Ms. Mitchell's response, "I've always enjoyed the scenarios and picking the brains of my colleagues. It's so important to have someone who's been in the central office longer than I have to help because the landmines are so different" than what he had been used to at the school level.

Dr. Kimberly Kasson, the ESSD Assessment Coordinator, saw that working through scenarios with her coach was a way to help her navigate the challenge of making meaningful connections in the central office,

We're talking through things that are relational, talking through strategy of how do you do the work up here which crosses multiple departments, when you don't even know who it is you need to reach out to? How to make those connections and develop those relationships so that you can have a more cohesive, strategic approach to the work that we're all doing. So, I have found the coaching sessions have been instrumental. I always leave my coaching session with an action step.

Ms. Shannon Fields, the Director of Human Resources who was in a pre-service status when this study commenced, viewed the coaching sessions through much the same lens as Dr. Kasson. As Ms. Fields explained, "I haven't experienced a lot at the central office yet. So, having a coach to be able to just ask questions has been super helpful." She went on to say that "just having that person and really thinking through those scenarios have been extremely beneficial and helpful."

While the initial conversations centered on coaching, the lead researcher wanted to find out more about ARIT members' affinity for the scenarios themselves. To Mr. Young, the benefit of the scenarios was tied to district office problem solving. He shared that the scenarios helped the newcomer begin to peel the layers back so that they could get practice with on how to

“identify the problem. What’s the real thing we are trying to get at here?” Ms. Mitchell shared that they were so helpful for newcomers to make the shift from seeing things from a micro to a macro level as they moved from the school to the district.

In the cases of Ms. Lynn and Dr. Kasson, the scenarios provided an understanding that there is no one, correct way to solve the problems that reach district leaders. As Ms. Lynn shared:

This work can be challenging, and we don’t always know the right answer. The problem solving piece looks different for each role. I think that’s been helpful for me to know that there is going to be grace and to keep moving, as long as we know the end goal. That’s been a huge lift, like a release.

Dr. Kasson agreed, stating that the scenario work-throughs have set “the foundation that the goal isn’t perfection. The goal is persistence in the role and it’s a long game that we’re playing.” She then captured the sentiment of many regarding the scenarios, saying, “It’s how you get better and develop your skills at the problem solving and seeing the bigger picture.”

The effectiveness of coaching sessions combined with Leadership Situation Scenarios was highlighted throughout discussions among ARDT members, as well as on the ARDT questionnaire. It should be noted that for two members of the ARIT, the coaching sessions were seen as a potential for helping in the transition process, but that more was needed to meet that potential.

In the case of Assistant Director of Student Support, Ms. Brittini Morgan, the one-on-one sessions felt rushed and not quite lined up to her needs. She suggested that greater intentionality in the matching of coaches and newcomers would aid in the transition, as would a differentiated approach to the coaching intervention. Ms. Morgan believed that, at the start, personalization

could be developed by asking newcomers, “What are your trepidations? I think that would help the coach with creating guiding questions that were appropriate for the person and get to know them a little bit.”

Similarly, new Classified Recruiting Coordinator, Bob Tocheny, felt like the coaching sessions could be improved. Like Ms. Fields, Mr. Tocheny began participation in this study while straddling his previous role as principal and his new role in the ESSD central office. Mr. Tocheny suggested that he desired coaching talks and scenarios that were more related to his work. He agreed with Ms. Morgan that added intentionality for coaching sessions would be useful, “I felt like maybe if there was some more structure to it, whether its scenarios or structure to the conversation, that would be more helpful to me as someone who is pre-service.”

For Mr. Tocheny, the most valuable onboarding activity that helped to reduce his anxiety and increase his role clarity had been the supervisor expectation check-in meetings. “Having a little bit more information about the department itself gives me peace of mind, as we go into preparation mode for moving into a new position.” To Mr. Tocheny, scenarios tied more directly to the work of his department and specific to his role would have been more useful.

While the constructive feedback from Mr. Tocheny and Ms. Morgan were important considerations for differentiating the coaching experience and scenario use, neither indicated that they were detrimental to their transitions. As a result, based on ARDT and ARIT interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and observation notes, it was safe for the lead researcher to conclude that One-on-One Coaching by veteran leaders, particularly when coupled with Leadership Situation Scenarios, was an effective source of support for newcomers transitioning to central office roles.

Perhaps the biggest surprise to the lead researcher that emerged from the first ARIT Focus Group was the positive impact of the Superintendent's Welcome Reception. When discussing the effectiveness of onboarding activities, Ms. Lynn shared that a major event for her was "when we had the welcome reception with you all. That just really helped build a bridge for me that these are people, too" referring to the superintendent and district leaders. She went on:

They are about me and not just the work that I've been assigned to do, but that I'm a person. I think once that was established, I was able to relax a little bit and feel like I could reach out to certain people and be like, "hey, I really want to talk about an idea" or kind of build that bridge for me to have more support. That was huge.

Ms. Morgan concurred, sharing that the dinner allowed everyone to "share our why and a little bit of history. Like, that was so impactful." The focus of that event to simply begin relationships was, to Ms. Morgan, the beginning of "feeling like a team."

For Mr. Tocheny, the Superintendent's Welcome Reception was not only personally beneficial, as it gave him the "opportunity to get to know people a little better," but that it benefited the ESSD as an organization "because I do think that that's going to help as we think about those cross-departmental conversations and relationships that need to be built." Dr. Kasson agreed, stating that the reception was "a moment where we could be informal and break down some of the barriers and just establish those relationships."

The positive sentiments shared by ARIT members during the first Focus Group validated suggestions by Dr. Heather Cassidy, Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, and Ms. Emerson. Both had shared with the lead researcher during informal discussions that they believed holding such a reception would be very beneficial to the newcomers, helping them to

feel welcomed, to begin building a social network, and to feel empowered. The responses from ARIT members clearly backed those claims.

As the lead researcher discovered, the root causes for the success of the reception were not as surprising to him as the overwhelmingly positive sentiment was for the event. Throughout the first round of interviews with ARIT and ARDT members, newcomers shared that they experienced a sense of grief when leaving the school building. Although the focus group question aimed at learning about effective interventions – of which the Superintendent’s Welcome Reception was clearly one – the responses as to *why* it was effective solidified two additional findings: that a sense of loss was a common element of newcomer transition experiences and that newcomers struggled with the horizontal orientation of district work.

The sense of loss experienced by newcomers to the district office began to emerge prior to the first ARIT focus group. During the first set of ARDT interviews and in discussions during design meetings, it became clear to the lead researcher that several district office leaders had undergone many of the emotions expressed by ARIT members in their interviews and during focus group conversations.

In her initial ARDT interview, Dr. Heather Cassidy, Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning in the ESSD, raised the issue of lost relationships when starting out at the central office. She shared:

I cried. It was the first time in 29 years that I wasn’t in a school building, and I didn’t see the children. I left our (first) staff meeting and I went into the bathroom and locked the stall. And I cried. I thought, “What the hell have I done? This is not what I got into education for.”

Dr. Cassidy realized that she simply had not been “prepared for the emotional transition,” nor the feeling that she “would miss the students and teachers as much as I did.”

Part of that loss, as Ms. Mitchell explained in her first ARDT interview, stemmed from the changing nature in her relationships with former, school-based colleagues:

When you are a central office person, a call with a former colleague becomes evaluative and that can break or hinder a relationship. When you think you’re just being the same person you were two months ago, other people don’t see you that way immediately. The people who were your colleagues are calling you. Sometimes they want you to fix something that you don’t have the power to fix.

Mr. Wilson, the ESSD Associate Superintendent for Human Resources, also hit on his early frustrations he felt with the loss of previous relationships due to his new role. He stated, “When you move to the county office, the relationships in some ways become more artificial and that people are looking to get things.” Being seen by former colleagues as the person with great power led him to be very cautious when interacting with people, as “people are looking to get things from you.” It should be noted that Mr. Wilson, Ms. Mitchell, and Dr. Cassidy had all been building principals prior to arriving at the ESSD central office. Their feelings of loss were echoed in conversations with ARIT members throughout the first and second action research cycle.

At the time of the first ARIT Focus Group, the ESSD held its annual leadership retreat, which included district office leaders and the administrative teams from all 43 of its schools. For two members of the ARIT, this issue of lost affiliation was raw, as they attended the retreat for the first time in a non-school leadership role. According to Mr. Tocheny, despite sitting with his new teammates in human resources, he felt “a little alone.” Just pulling out his badge, which still

had the name of his previous school and title (principal) on it, Mr. Tocheny was left feeling a mixture of emotions, including:

a little nostalgic, because I've been an assistant principal or principal for 22 years. So I've been going to these leadership retreats for a long damn time. And that shift from being with your people and planning and knowing what you're wanting to do for the next year. So, intentionally, I didn't go up to the group. I didn't go to my old people and didn't interact with them a lot because I wanted to give (the new principal) the space to create his own bonding moments.

In a similar vein, Ms. Fields described the feeling of seeing her former school administrative team operating without her as their principal for the first time. "It's just an emotional roller coaster of excitement and loneliness," she shared. As Ms. Fields described it:

To some extent, it's feeling like you lost a friend. There's just a weird dynamic. It's almost like a parent and you're sending your kids off to school where you're excited for them, but also your heart breaks to leave them. I don't know. It's up and down emotions, excitement, all at the same time.

Interestingly, in their initial ARIT interviews, both Mr. Tocheny and Ms. Fields predicted that they would be feel a sense of loss. It appeared, however, to hit them harder than they had anticipated, much like the lack of emotional preparation discussed by Dr. Cassidy.

During the first ARIT Focus Group, another factor in the sense of loss felt by new leaders in the ESSD central office was the lack of informal interaction that school building employees enjoyed on a regular basis. As Mr. Young shared, there were no opportunities in his new role to meet with people without it being scheduled. "It's so hard to get everybody in the same room to even have a conversation." At the school level, where he was a principal, Mr. Young shared that

“everyone is under one roof, so you have those little hallway conversations that you have to have with people.” Ms. Mitchell added, “To meet with people, I have to schedule a meeting. There is no hallway conversation with the majority of my staff because they are just not in the office.”

That lack of informal, daily check-ins not only with staff, but with one’s supervisor, was a loss that Dr. Kasson said blocked gaining role clarity in her new job. “If you think back to the (school) building, you’re getting clarity in the work constantly through conversations.” This echoed concerns raised in multiple ARIT and ARDT interviews, where Dr. Kasson, herself, shared:

I miss the meetings that were frequent in a school building. You got clarity so often just from working with your teammates. In the school building, you see your people every single day, your supervisor every day. I am a person who is proactive and going to my boss to say, “here’s the situation, here’s what I want to do, what are your thoughts?” So, to have that kind of interaction on a daily basis, then come up here, where you don’t really get face time with your supervisor?

It was clear, the loss of interaction and the loss of feedback to know that she was doing her job well was a shift that Dr. Kasson, like other ARIT members, struggled with.

The lack of informal conversations, direction, and guidance that newcomers experienced in the ESSD central office translated into a loss of the kind of support they had experienced at the school level. Dr. Kasson described finding a silo-based environment when she arrived at the ESSD central office, which was very different from the school setting that she had left behind:

One of the surprising things in my move up here was how the departments can sometimes feel really separate. And it’s not clear who, if you want to collaborate, to go to. It’s not that people don’t want to collaborate, but I think because of the hierarchical structure

that's here. You don't want to step on toes. You don't want to come across as being pushy or having an agenda that doesn't align with the work that was already done before you.

Dr. Kasson's need to collaborate, as she did when she was an assistant principal, has led her on a search for "my team."

Ms. Morgan underscored Dr. Kasson's struggle in finding a team, a concept that was so natural at the school level. Like Ms. Morgan, Mr. Young lamented the challenges of having no colleagues to whom he could turn when he first arrived at his new post, "It was a sink or swim kind of a thing." There were simply no other directors within the ESSD who had any idea of his job needs or requirements, thus leaving him to seek help from outside the district.

As both the ARDT and ARIT members described the sense of loss felt during the transition, their descriptions also gave evidence of the struggle newcomers to the ESSD central office felt as they shifted from the vertical focus associated with school leadership to a horizontal orientation needed as district leaders. Whereas school leaders often receive mandates and support from the central office in a vertical, top-down manner, operating at the central office level required a horizontal, cross-departmental focus (Harden, 2009).

This new reality served as a source of frustration to newcomers. At the school, where administrators had job-alike colleagues, continuous interaction, and common work, leaders had a natural network of support and decisions could be made quickly. As the school leaders transitioned to the central office, their loss of that support network was compounded by their uncertainty about with whom to connect to get their work accomplished. The search for the appropriate partners and the time that it took to do so emerged as a major roadblock to newcomers. As Dr. Kasson shared, "I don't know who the players are in other departments. So, I

might be reaching out to people, which I am, and sometimes I get ‘ghosted’ because it’s not the right person. So that’s been a challenge.”

Ms. Lynn picked up on that struggle, “there’s more players” to contend with at the district than the school. Dr. Kasson added, “You don’t always know who you should be at the table with you.” A seemingly exasperated Ms. Morgan shared her frustration with the time element, stating, “When you do find the right person in another department, you often have to wait as that one has to go to their player to figure out if it’s okay. The chain of command and the time it takes to go through it” was a source of struggle.

The sentiments shared by these ARIT members underscored those shared by ARDT members during their initial individual interviews where they recounted their frustrations when first arriving to their central office positions. When Mr. Wilson first arrived in the Human Resources Department, he was taken aback at how difficult it was to make a decision. He shared his own awakening on the impact that a horizontal orientation has on decision-making when he first arrived in the Human Resources Department,

The assumption that I had (of the Associate Superintendent of HR) about her is that she had the power to make things happen pretty quickly, and that she was able to make decisions really based on what she felt or wanted. I didn’t quite understand there was a chain of command and procedures that she would go through to make those decisions and the impact that her decisions would have on the other departments, and specifically the Leadership Department and Finance Department. So, I think I took for granted how many decisions she made impacted horizontally out to the other departments. The other thing was the speed. I just thought it would be easier to make decisions and you could make things happen more quickly.

In the words of Dr. Cassidy, “The district office works very, very differently. Things move a lot slower. Rarely does anyone have the power or authority to make an instantaneous decision, and we need to check with other departments.” Dr. Cassidy suggested that this seemingly slower speed can be very frustrating to new leaders in the district.

In her observation of newcomers through the years, Ms. Emerson, the longest serving ESSD central office leader participating in the study, remarked that newcomers “just struggle with not knowing people from other departments. People like Linda (Mitchell) will ask, ‘Who do I call? Where do I go with this?’ I just think it’s difficult for them.”

Perhaps the best case made for the importance of helping newcomers find the support network needed to navigate the challenges of horizontal leadership was the experience of ARIT member and new Director of Human Resources, Shannon Fields. Unlike her fellow participants, Ms. Fields assumed a role in which a job-alike colleague existed in her department, as well as a supervisor who had recently held her role. Like the other newcomers, she did experience a sense of loss when leaving her school and, like them, worried about “stepping on people’s toes” on her arrival. However, sharing an office with a fellow Human Resources Director, right next door to her Associate Superintendent and direct supervisor (Mr. Wilson), allowed Ms. Fields to experience the daily, informal hallway conversations so prevalent in a school building and so important to shifting into a new leadership context.

As Ms. Fields explained, “We sit and we meet, we brainstorm, and we review tasks and processes. So, every day has been like a professional learning opportunity. It’s not formal, but I definitely think it’s crucial.” Ms. Fields’ relatively positive experiences during the transition from the school building to the central office was as informative as were those struggling with the move.

Given the loss that so many newcomers to the ESSD central office felt as they transitioned from their school building administrative roles, it should not have been a surprise that so many found the Superintendent's Welcome Reception to be such an uplifting activity. For the very same reasons, the effectiveness of the One-on-One Coaching sessions proved to be a much-needed structure of support for nearly all of the ARIT members. These formalized support interventions proved to be effective in the onboarding process. The descriptions provided by both ARDT and ARIT members not only gave insights to their effectiveness, but also helped the lead researcher better understand the reasons that they were so necessary. The sense of loss was real for newcomers, as was the struggle to shift into a horizontal context of leadership.

To gather additional data to support the insights shared during the focus groups, interviews, and meeting conversations, as well as to gain the perceptions of design team members regarding the effectiveness of interventions, the lead researcher designed a feedback survey for ARDT members to complete as the final activity of the second action research cycle.

ARDT Questionnaire

On June 17, 2024, ARDT members were provided a questionnaire that focused on the interventions that they had designed to that point in the study. The purpose was to obtain a basic pulse check on what they felt were the most effective and least effective interventions used to that point. Survey responses also served as additional data to be analyzed as part of the triangulation process for this action research study. The questionnaire consisted of three sections that correlated to the three intervention focus areas embedded in the study's theoretical framework: the reduction of uncertainty, leadership role clarity, and learning agility. Each section included between six and eight questions that asked the respondent to rate each of the specific onboarding activities implemented over the course of the study. The ratings for each

question included a 3-point scale in which a “1” equated to no impact on the focus area and a “3” equated to significant impact.

The results of this questionnaire both informed the design of future interventions and gave insights into the study’s second major research question, which focused on the impact that formalized onboarding had on newcomers moving from school to district leadership in the ESSD. One open-ended question was also provided to ARDT members that gave respondents the chance to explain which interventions had an impact on their own work. This, too, had the dual purpose of helping with the design of future interventions, as well as providing insights into how their own work was impacted by participating in the design and implementation of an onboarding program—a direct connection to the study’s third main research question on that topic. It is important to note that the data collected from questionnaire items were used to corroborate larger themes discovered throughout the study. As this study was an action research case, findings should not be generalized outside of the context of the ESSD. While a full listing of questions is provided in Appendix I, Table 4.16 displays a sampling of items from that questionnaire.

Table 4.16

Samples from ARDT Questionnaire 1

Scale Statement	Corresponding Questionnaire Items
With “1” being no impact and “3” being significant impact, rate each of the following activities designed by the ARDT to help newcomers overcome uncertainty in their district Office roles:	The discussion/establishment of short-term and long-term goals that you developed with your newcomer.
	The cohort-based experience of participation in DLO Workshops as a means for newcomers to begin developing a cross-departmental network of support.
	Your discussion with your newcomer on the importance of inter- and intra- office lines of communication in the district office setting.

Scale Statement	Corresponding Questionnaire Items
With “1” being no impact and “3” being significant impact, rate each of the following activities designed by the ARDT to help newcomers develop greater clarity about their district office roles:	The use of the Harden Shifts document as a means for understanding the different context of school level versus district level leadership in 1-on-1 coaching sessions. The use of Leadership Situation Scenarios for newcomers to think critically about the decisions made and courses of action followed by leaders in the district office.
With “1” being no impact and “3” being significant impact, rate each of the following activities designed by the ARDT to help newcomers develop greater learning agility .	The use of Leadership Situation Scenarios for newcomers, individually, to develop the learning agile behavior of <i>scanning</i> along with ESSD Leader Profile tenet of <i>leading with intentionality</i>. The use of goal setting and progress monitoring during Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings to develop the learning agile behaviors of <i>goal setting</i> and <i>planning & monitoring</i>, along with the ESSD Leader Profile tenet of <i>leading with intentionality</i>.
With “1” being no impact and “3” being significant impact, rate each of the following activities designed by the ARDT to help newcomers develop greater learning agility .	The use of Leadership Situation Scenarios for newcomers, individually, to develop the learning agile behavior of <i>scanning</i> along with ESSD Leader Profile tenet of <i>leading with intentionality</i>. The use of goal setting and progress monitoring during Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings to develop the learning agile behaviors of <i>goal setting</i> and <i>planning & monitoring</i>, along with the ESSD Leader Profile tenet of <i>leading with intentionality</i>.
The open-ended question:	In reflecting on all of the interventions mentioned above, please share your thoughts on any of those activities that you might use—or have already incorporated—into your own work in helping employees adjust to life in the district office. This could include, but is not limited to, those employees who are participating in this study.

Four of the five participating members of the ARDT (excluding the lead researcher) were able to complete the questionnaire. The perspective of those respondents was vital, as each had fully participated in the design of the interventions, engaged in their implementation, and supervised at least one of the ARIT in their respective departments in the ESSD central office.

Three interventions emerged with a perfect 3 out of 3 average scores, indicating that those activities had significant impact on newcomers participating as ARIT members. These included the use of the District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshop as a means for helping newcomers to build a cross-departmental network of support. The second intervention deemed to be of significant impact was the use of the Harden Shifts guide as a means for understanding the different context of school level versus district level leadership in 1-on-1 coaching discussions. The third intervention to garner a perfect score was the coaching discussions with newcomers about how best to navigate the political environment that exists in the district office, including the “do’s” and “don’ts” from the coaches’ perspectives.

Six interventions rated on the ARDT questionnaire received an average score of 2.75 out of 3, suggesting that 3 out of 4 respondents found them to have a significant impact. These interventions included the following:

- The Superintendent’s Welcome Reception for newcomers to begin a developing cross-departmental network of support.
- The Supervisor Expectations Check-In meeting discussions with newcomers about the importance of inter- and intra-office lines of communication in the district office setting.
- The individual use of Leadership Situation Scenarios by newcomers to think critically about the decisions made and courses of action followed by leaders in the district office.
- The use of 1-on-1 Coaching session to review and compare coaches’ and newcomers’ responses to Leadership Situation Scenarios as a means for vicarious learning opportunities.

- The panel discussions in the DLO Workshops designed to unpack the Harden Shifts.
- The use of 1-on-1 Coaching sessions to discuss Leadership Situation Scenarios as a means to develop the learning agile behaviors of scanning, unlearning, and learning vicariously, while also developing the ESSD Leader profile tenets of leading with intentionality, communicating effectively, and embracing innovation.

Each of the four respondents to the open-ended question shared that their work and planning for improving their leadership had been impacted by the interventions that they designed. As Ms. Mitchell shared,

Designating a specific project with clear objectives and set check-ins will support our work moving forward at an accelerated pace next year. I will also use these “check-ins” with our new staff to support alignment with expectations and reduce uncertainty about their roles.

Mr. George echoed that in his response to the open-ended question: “I had a great goal setting opportunity with one of my staff not participating in the study.” He went on to write, “We established SMART goals for his continued improvement. It was a positive experience for both of us.” Given the concerns raised by the ARIT members’ responses to their first questionnaire and interview, where a lack of expectations was cited as a major struggle, the lead researcher found these responses to be a sign of awareness and growth on the part of the ARDT.

Those interventions that rated to as the least impactful according to ARDT questionnaire responses included the use of stretch activities as a means for developing learning agility, as well as the discussion of the 240-day calendar during Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings. Each of these interventions rated a 1.75 out of 3 as an average score. The results of the ARDT questionnaire were used to deepen the conversations about the design of interventions.

As the study shifted into the third and final action research cycle, many of the findings that emerged during the first two cycles surfaced again during final interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and observations. Topics that arose earlier in the study would be confirmed as findings during the final rounds of data collection. These topics included the impact of supervisor expectation check-in meetings in providing newcomers a better understanding of how to succeed in their new roles, the importance of the Harden Shifts chart for improving leadership clarity, the importance of learning agility when transitioning to the central office, and the significance of the DLO cohort experience in establishing a support network for newcomers.

Action Research Cycle 3

The third and final action research cycle of this study began in late July and ran until early September 2024. All of the interventions and study activities previously designed by the ARDT were reviewed and adjusted. Observations made over the course of the first two action cycles were also discussed, highlighting the benefits of One-on-One Coaching sessions and supervisor expectations check-in meetings. A timeline for the activities carried out in the third action research cycle is displayed in Table 4.17.

Table 4.17

Action Research Cycle 3 Timeline of Activities

Date(s)	Activities	Data Collection Method
7/25	ARDT Design Meeting #4	Discussion responses and observation
7/25–8/31	Supervisor Expectations Check-in Meetings (1 or more as needed)	Information shared by supervisors at ARDT meetings
7/31	DLO Workshop #4	Discussion responses and observation
8/1–9/3	One-on-One Coaching Sessions (1)	Information shared by supervisors at at ARDT meetings
8/6–8/13	ARIT Individual Interviews #2	Item responses and observation

Date(s)	Activities	Data Collection Method
8/16	ARDT Design Meeting #5	Discussion responses and observation
8/28	DLO Workshop #5	Discussion responses and observation
9/3	ARDT Focus Group #1	Item response and observation
9/4	ARIT Focus Group #2	Item responses and observation
9/6	ARIT Questionnaire #2	Item responses

As with the first two action research cycles, the lead researcher continually collected and triangulated data to increase the trustworthiness of the study's findings. Transcripts of interviews, responses to questionnaire items, and observation notes collected in the researcher's journal were reviewed multiple times, coded, and analyzed for common themes and patterns. The data collected during the third cycle of action research not only confirmed earlier findings, but also solidified four additional findings that included the following:

1. Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings were integral in reducing newcomer uncertainty, while also helping to cement the relationship between the newcomers and their supervisors.
2. Using a cohort approach provided newcomers to the ESSD central office a network of support across district departments.
3. Use of the Harden Shifts chart served as an important tool for both newcomers and supervisors to make sense of the challenges leaders faced when transitioning from the school level to the district level in the ESSD.
4. The development of learning agility through activities aimed at reflection, unlearning, feedback seeking, and vicarious learning was deemed important to the successful onboarding of newcomers to the ESSD central office.

The experiences of ARDT members who reviewed, designed, and facilitated this study's interventions are shared in the remaining pages of this chapter. The journey of ARIT members transitioning into their new central office roles in the ESSD is also documented throughout the remainder of this chapter, as well.

ARDT Planning Meetings 4 and 5

At the fourth ARDT planning meeting on July 25, 2024, the lead researcher shared initial findings from the previous action research cycles with ARDT members. Additionally, the lead researcher conducted his first round of member checking, as ARDT members read through quotes written up during previous cycles as a means of assessing accuracy and appropriate context. ARDT members also provided their observations from supervisor expectation check-in meetings, One-on-One Coaching sessions, and the third District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshop.

In planning for their final action research cycle, the ARDT committed to addressing the fourth through sixth of the Harden Shifts in the fourth DLO Workshop, as these were not addressed as planned at the previous workshop. The topics of conversation for the next One-on-One Coaching session were to center on applying the Harden Shifts to Leadership Situation Scenarios. However, during this session, members of the ARIT would be asked to *create* a scenario based on their own experiences, as opposed to working through a pre-made scenario. The ARDT determined that this would allow ARIT members to reflect on their own experiences and apply their new learning, particularly around making necessary shifts in their own leadership lenses. As in previous action research cycles, the ARDT did not want coaching sessions to commence until after the DLO session was held so that all parties would be on the same page. The ARDT also agreed that the Supervisor Expectation Check-in meetings would continue with

a focus on providing newcomers a better understanding of what their job success criteria would be, along with feedback on their job performance and goal progress.

Based on the feedback provided by ARIT members, the one intervention that was dropped was the “stretch” challenge. The attempt at learning something new outside of newcomers’ work responsibilities, which had been implemented as a stretch activity designed to replicate learning new skills on the job, had clearly missed the mark. As shared one-on-one in most coaching sessions, as well as in ARIT Focus Group discussion, the stretch activity was seen as something that might have merit for veterans, but not for newcomers who were trying to develop clarity around their new roles. This was best articulated by Ms. Shannon Fields, the new Director of Human Resources when she shared:

I loved the idea of the stretch goal. That would be a good activity for year two or maybe three. I think the stretch is actually learning the new job. I think, “Wouldn’t it be great to do something for myself?” Everybody would love to do that. But just learning a new job and life in general. We’re just so busy. I do want to spend time doing that stretch goal, eventually, but not right now.

Ms. Fields sentiment was shared by 100% of ARIT members, and all members of the ARDT, except for one—the lead researcher. As a result, the activity was discontinued.

Much like the previous ARDT design team meetings, members deviated from the agenda. In discussing how they were using Supervisor Expectation Check-in meetings with all of their employees, the lead researcher was provided useful data building on earlier indicators that these check-in meetings were having an impact on both ARIT and ARDT members, alike. This finding also supported the ARDT questionnaire results that showed a rating of 2.75 out of a possible 3.0,

indicating that the Supervisor Expectation Check-in meetings were having a significant impact as an intervention.

As the lead researcher shared that not all ARIT members agreed with the positive impact of that intervention, all did view it as a potentially powerful activity in the future. This comment by the lead researcher led to a deeper discussion of ARDT members striving to articulate why providing expectations was not always an easy thing to accomplish. Dr. Heather Cassidy, Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, raised the challenge she faced providing feedback to someone trying “to navigate a job that didn’t exist before.” In the absence of previous rules or expectations governing the new role, Dr. Cassidy shared that both “the supervisor and the new employee are learning it at the same time.”

Mr. Bernie George, Chief of Operations, shared that he felt more confidence in leading some parts of his department than others. While steeped in knowledge of safety and security, he was not as comfortable with establishing clear expectations for his transportation and food service leaders:

I was immersed more in safety and then I was given operations. I did not even know how to drive a bus and had never been in food service. For me, it was more important to support them (Transportation and Food Service Directors). I listen to them more than they listen to me. It ended up working out because they’re two really good leaders. Had those two not been great leaders, it probably wouldn’t have worked out as well. I spent more time listening, and then asking, “What can I do to help you? What do you need from me?” than providing them with expectations.

Ms. Linda Mitchell, Director of Student Support, echoed Mr. George, saying that it was difficult as a new director to set “expectations for an assistant director who knows far more than I do

about what’s happening in our department.” To that end, she shared that she had to treat the situation like a principal who was newly named to lead a school building. Despite the challenges, all members of the ARDT shared the importance of holding the Supervisor Expectation Check-in meetings and stated that it should be continued in this study. In fact, the significance that those meetings had on reducing uncertainty would be confirmed as a finding of this study during the final action research cycle.

The last decision made by the group heading into the fourth DLO Workshop was the evidence of learning activity that members of the ARIT would be expected to present. To foster cross-departmental connection, the ARDT decided that the project would be done in teams (or partnerships) among ARIT members from different district departments. Each team would be asked to present an overview of what they believed would be an effective onboarding program for newcomers to the ESSD central office.

ARIT members would be instructed to tap into their own transition experiences, drawing from the most effective activities in which they had participated during this study, as well as any ideas that they had outside of those facilitated in the study. ARIT members would also be allowed to include and exclude any additional onboarding activities they thought would aid future newcomers to the ESSD central office. Each team would present their onboarding program to the entire group of ARDT and ARIT members, using a single handout, providing explanations for their choice of activities, and answering audience questions. An example of a proposed onboarding program designed by a team of participants is provided in Appendix J.

The last ARDT design meeting held on August 16, 2024, was conducted to tie up any loose ends prior to the final DLO session. Members agreed that the fifth and final DLO Workshop would include a discussion of Harden Shifts chart topics seven through nine, thus

completing an overview and exploration of the entire document. Additionally, each member of the ARIT would have the opportunity to share the individual Leadership Situation Scenarios that they had created after their previous DLO Workshop. ARIT and ARDT members would be partnered up and work out the scenarios together, followed by an explanation from the creator.

Finally, each team of ARIT members would present their proposal for the future ESSD onboarding program as their major evidence of learning activity. Table 4.18 provides an overview of interventions implemented during the third and final action research cycle for this study.

Table 4.18

Action Research Cycle 3: The Final Round of Interventions

Onboarding Intervention (Socialization Tactics)	Focus of Interventions	Activities Facilitated
District Leadership Onboarding Workshop (Formal / Collective)	Uncertainty Reduction	Personal journeys – connection with others, including both ARIT and ARDT members. Creation of leadership onboarding program proposal to foster cross-departmental network
	Leadership Clarity	Harden Shifts 4 – 9 via Panel Discussion. Creation of Leadership Situation Scenarios and onboarding program proposal to demonstrate leadership clarity
	Learning Agility	Personal journeys – foster reflection Vicarious learning through panel discussion of veteran central office leaders. Creation of Leadership Situation Scenarios and onboarding program proposal to foster reflection and metacognition

Onboarding Intervention (Socialization Tactics)	Focus of Interventions	Activities Facilitated
Supervisor Expectation Check-In (Investiture / Serial)	Uncertainty Reduction	Time-of-year task discussion. Feedback on job performance (or re- assurance for those in pre-service).
	Learning Agility	Continued discussion of long- and short- term goals and monitoring progress.
Coaching (Serial/Formal)	Leadership Clarity	Creating leadership dilemma scenario using Harden Shifts as a guide for discussion. Continued awareness of the complexity of communication at the district level.
	Learning Agility	Continued discussion of ESSD's Leader Profile with particular attention paid to anticipating impact of decisions from multiple perspectives.

At the final ARDT design meeting, the concept of learning agility was raised by the lead researcher, as the topic had been discussed during the final ARIT individual interviews. ARDT members debated the importance of the learning agility behaviors and which of them were most needed for district leadership effectiveness. The lead researcher used this opportunity to collect data on ARDT perceptions regarding the significance of learning agility during the transition process. The learning agile behaviors found by ARDT members to be integral for newcomers making the shift into district leadership included: self-reflection, feedback seeking, learning vicariously, and unlearning. These same areas of learning agility were recognized by ARIT members in their final round of individual interviews, as discussed more fully in the next subsection of this chapter.

ARIT Individual Interviews 2

Between August 6 and August 13, 2024, the lead researcher conducted a second (and final) round of individual interviews with each member of the ARIT. Each interview included nine, semi-structured questions, was recorded, transcribed using a cloud-based application tool, and analyzed for common responses. The transcripts were re-read multiple times, with transcription errors corrected, and then coded. While the full interview protocol is provided in Appendix B, Table 4.19 provides a sample of the interview questions posed to ARIT members.

Table 4.19

Sampling of ARIT Individual Interview 2

Research Question(s)	Interview Prompt
RQ #2 & #3	Put yourself in the role of Chief or Associate Superintendent for a minute. Based on your transition experiences and activities conducted during this study, what would be the primary tools and activities you would use to help the people you promoted from the school building into your central office department.
RQ #2 & #3	What would be your advice to newcomers coming to the central office from the school setting about how to adjust to their new leadership context?
RQ2 & #3	Take a look at the Learning Agility behaviors chart. Take me through the ones that you feel are most vital to central office success – or leadership, in general – based on your experiences over the past few months.

Over the course of the second ARIT Individual Interviews, earlier findings from this study gained additional evidence. The importance of working one-on-one with district coaches, along with the use of Leadership Situation Scenarios, and the significance of the Superintendent’s Welcome Reception continued to be raised as valuable transition interventions. The challenges associated with making the shift from the vertical focus of their work when serving at the school level to the horizontal focus needed at the central office level continued to

be made, as well. The search for leadership role clarity, along with the importance of establishing clear expectations, also continued to receive mention from ARIT members as they were interviewed.

The first area that the interviews confirmed as a new or additional finding was the significance of the Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings. These meetings were deemed to be integral in reducing newcomer uncertainty, while also helping in the relational development between the newcomers and their supervisors. The importance of the Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings had come up several times in the ARDT Questionnaire 1 results, as well as in the first ARIT Focus Group. From the onset of this study, the lack of clear expectations provided by supervisors in the ESSD had been the source of newcomer struggle. The Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings were implemented to deal with that struggle.

According to the ESSD's new Human Resources Director, Shannon Fields, the Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings have been a welcome improvement as she moved into the job, with her supervisor, ARDT member Mr. Wilson, "making sure that I understand the processes, procedures." The relationship has grown into one where Mr. Wilson now seems more to her as a coach:

He'll say, "I have a challenge for you. I want you to go try to find this" as he's taught me how to do it. So now he's letting me spread my wings to see if I can figure it out on my own. Even though he's my supervisor, he's using a coaching strategy.

That empowerment has fed her confidence, helping her to make the transition into her new role a smooth one, and one in which the expectations on her were clearer.

For Family Engagement Coordinator Marni Lynn, the Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings were a significantly positive activity. Meeting on a regular basis gave her the space to

“go over the things currently happening in the family engagement world,” and to gain directional confirmation that she previously lacked from her supervisor. “I think both my supervisor and I saw the value in doing that,” as the role, itself, was new. Moving forward, Ms. Lynn felt that future monthly check-ins would be an essential element of onboarding new members to the team, helping them to see how their work connects to district objectives, like “bringing the strategic plan to life.” As with Ms. Fields and other ARIT members, Ms. Lynn saw the Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings as a means for solidifying the relationship between the newcomers and their supervisors. “Having continuous check-ins just ensures that new people are comfortable. Building that relationship so they are comfortable enough to say, ‘I don’t get that,’ or ‘I don’t know that.’ That’s how I would lead in the future, myself.” For Ms. Lynn, like many of the others, the relationship built with her supervisor resulted in receiving a clearer picture of what was expected from her.

Assistant Director of Student Support, Brittini Morgan, added to the sentiment that the Supervisor Check-In meetings provided a pathway for gaining comfort and strengthening relationships. She shared that the meetings were something she planned to do, herself, when supervising members of the department in the future:

During our check-ins, my supervisor would ask questions about how I was feeling as the study went on. That got us to start talking about some nuances of working in our department. I think anytime you have a positive experience from something your supervisor is doing with you, you naturally take that in as something you want to do with others because you’ve had success with it. It has helped me with some other people in our department to have that same kind of interaction.

Ms. Morgan went on to share that the Supervisor Check-In experiences were a positive for both her and her supervisor, Ms. Linda Mitchell. She stated that Ms. Mitchell “wants to make sure that our relationship keeps getting stronger. I think she see those check-ins as mutually beneficial.”

For Ms. Mitchell, the Supervisor Check-In meetings were not a means of micro-managing, but a chance to make certain that everyone in her sphere of influence were on the same page. She shared:

I need for them (subordinates) to keep me informed of how things are progressing. It goes back to check-ins. I need to check in with my people and know what the big things are on their plate to support them.

As Ms. Mitchell was a member of both the ARIT and ARDT, she also shared how vital it was to get that check-in time with her supervisor. She pointed out how difficult it was to get clear expectations at the district level, where success criteria were not as obvious. She stated, “In my role, I support a multitude of different programs. There’s no one particular thing that I’m working on.” Ms. Mitchell shared that there were no goals already in place for the programs she became responsible for, making it difficult to receive the clear expectations she had been accustomed to at the school level. “I like to know I’m hitting the mark, so I like to know what the mark is. I came to realize that I needed to set that mark for myself.” That realization helped her to understand that working in a leadership role at the district office level would mean that she would have to make several shifts in her approach to leadership.

That idea of having to make a shift in leadership thinking was consistent with another finding confirmed during the third action research cycle and magnified during the ARIT interviews: The use of the Harden Shifts chart served as an important tool for both newcomers

and supervisors to make sense of the challenges they faced when transitioning to the ESSD central office from a school building. Several members of the ARIT lent their voices to the importance of the Harden Shifts chart during their second interviews.

According to the ESSD's Director of Food and Nutrition, Jim Young, the Harden Shifts chart provided newcomers in ESSD a preview of how their new role would differ from leading as at a school. Mr. Young stated:

It's a good cheat sheet of where you're going, how you can be effective in your new role, and how it's different from your previous role. It's kind of a big thing, because it is very different. My job is different. I was an educator before, a principal. Now, I'm feeding kids in a federal program.

According to Mr. Young, the discussions around the Harden Shifts provided preparation that may have helped him to avoid making missteps, "I am confident I would have stumbled upon it, but I'm all for pre-teaching—for accelerating the process."

For Ms. Fields, knowing that she would need to make shifts in her thinking was easier than actually doing it. To Ms. Fields, the transition from the school to the central office was more emotional than expected, but the Harden Shifts chart and ensuing discussions about it with her colleagues in this study helped:

I knew things were going to be different. But seeing it on paper, I'm like, "Oh, that's the shift I'm experiencing." It just makes you feel less isolated, honestly, like I'm not alone. The shift is a real thing that a lot of people experience, and I think knowing ahead of time helps with that process. Going from a school in the community to here is an emotional shift. If you're not ready for that, it's hard.

Through the use of the Harden Shifts chart, Ms. Fields realized that her struggles were not uncommon, “Knowing that this was going to happen, then it happens, you’re like ‘Okay, this is normal.’ I just think it helps with all the challenges that come with a transition.”

For Ms. Lynn, the use of the Harden Shifts chart in group and individual settings helped her understand that she needed to change her perspective on the role of district leadership:

Once we started really talking about the shifts, it almost gave me a kind of confidence in the work. For example, working horizontally across the system and the expectation that we be collaborative. So that was helpful because in the role of Family Engagement Coordinator, it truly can be part of every department. I realized I had to work different angles with different departments. Then making that shift from working at a school where I was receiving services to providing services was a big shift. As an administrator, I was waiting for things to come. Now I have to support the schools and make their work a little bit easier.

Like Ms. Fields, the more Ms. Lynn discussed the Harden Shifts with others, the more she realized that she was not alone. Bob Tocheny, the ESSD Classified Recruiting Coordinator added to that sentiment, “The wording gives you something you can grasp ahold of and say, ‘Oh, good. I’m not the only one going through this.’ You can attach a connection to those who are in a similar situation as yourself.”

The importance of the Supervisor Check-In meetings and the use of the Harden Shifts chart as tools for helping newcomers emerged repeatedly throughout the study. Those findings would be confirmed in both the ARDT and ARIT Focus Groups, as well as in the ARIT members’ proposals for a future onboarding program during the final District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshop.

District Leadership Onboarding Workshop 5

Over the course of the study, five DLO Workshops were held. In each, all members of the ARIT were gathered together for 90-minute to 2-hour sessions in which transition activities were facilitated and discussions held. In each session, the lead researcher and veteran ESSD leaders from the ARDT would present elements of the Harden Shifts chart, provide professional journey reflection activities, preview the Leadership Situation Scenarios that would be discussed in One-on-One Coaching sessions, and introduce participants to the concept of learning agility. To be clear, the organizational socialization tactic used as an intervention was the DLO session, itself. It was considered a collective, formal tactic (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). The ARIT participants formed a cohort of newcomers who were provided common, collective socialization.

In addition to being the vehicle for delivering various onboarding activities, however, the DLO Workshop also provided the lead researcher a venue in which to gather data. Perhaps most useful of all workshops was the fifth and final gathering. In groups of two to three ARIT members, plans for a future onboarding program were presented to the ARDT members and their fellow cohort participants. While it provided the ARDT a way to see evidence of ARIT members' learning, ARIT members were instructed to brainstorm ideas that they would like to see, as well as pick and choose activities from the study, that they felt would be most useful in onboarding future newcomers into the ESSD central office. They were not restricted from using activities outside of the study and were told that they could drop any and all elements of their experiences that they wished.

In their presentations, seven approaches/activities used during the course of this study were referenced by all three groups as being important for a future, formalized onboarding program in the ESSD. These included the following:

- One-on-One Coaching sessions with veteran district office leaders. This supported findings previously discussed.
- One-on-one expectation meetings with district supervisors. This supported findings previously discussed.
- Leadership Situation Scenarios. These were presented as a useful tool for self-reflection, as well as vicarious learning through conversations with veteran leaders. While the DLO presentations supported previous findings about the usefulness of scenarios when coupled with coaching, they also presented data about the concept of learning agility. Learning agility is further explored in Focus Groups in subsequent sections of this chapter.
- The Harden Shifts chart. This added to the finding that the Harden document was critical in helping newcomers make sense of challenges they faced when transitioning to the central office from a school building. As discussed in the overview of the second set of ARIT Individual Interviews, and as explored in the Focus Groups data in subsequent sections of this chapter, the Harden Shifts chart helped newcomers find common meaning in their transition experiences.
- The ESSD's Strategic Plan and Leader Profile. While the use of these documents has been prevalent in onboarding activities, there were no data-based findings that emerged specific to their use in this study.
- Superintendent's Welcome Reception. This supported findings previously discussed.

- The cohort experience. The DLO presentations emphasized the importance of establishing a network of support across district departments. While discussed in previous action research cycles, the need for the cohort approach to onboarding became a finding in the third cycle and is discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Each of these onboarding program elements were found in all three onboarding proposal presentations. Several elements had been explored in previous sections of this chapter. However, two areas that needed further explanation are the emergence of the cohort experience and the recognition of learning agility behaviors as significant factors in the transition process.

For Ms. Mitchell and her partner, Mr. Tocheny, the cohort approach was invaluable. According to Ms. Mitchell's presentation:

Having time to work together has been so beneficial. To build relationships across the departments and with various leaders has really been something that we feel strongly needs to be replicated. The cohort model was something that was very important and intentional for us in building our relationships interdepartmentally, as a group who has similar experiences in shifting as we go.

To be clear, she and her partner felt that the cohort model, alone, was not enough. Ms. Mitchell stated, "The combination of cohort work, individual coaching, supervisor check-ins, and some pre-work would be beneficial to anyone making the shift from your building to the district."

Mr. Young and his partner, Ms. Fields, reiterated the importance of the cohort approach in their presentation. As shared by Mr. Young:

The power of that cohort model is you get to interact with people you don't normally

interact with. That's the relationship line of thought. Also, I think it's important that you get to learn more about what other people do.

Like the first group of presenters, Mr. Young and Ms. Fields shared that cohort work should be only one aspect of a robust onboarding program, as they highlighted the importance of structured expectations meetings with supervisors and the need for mentors and coaches.

For Dr. Kasson, Ms. Morgan, and Ms. Lynn, the cohort was a key factor in battling the sense of loss that so many newcomers experienced when they arrived at the central office. In the words of Dr. Kasson, "I remember a conversation we had about being at the leadership retreat and you're missing having your people. So, this becomes your people. Your cohort is your people." In a previous individual interview, Ms. Morgan had shared similar sentiments, stating that "listening to other people in the group has been so affirming. I'm not alone, regardless of my focus area in the district." Like the other ARIT members, Dr. Kasson, Ms. Morgan, and Ms. Lynn presented the need for a combination of onboarding tactics.

Along with their common thinking about the benefits of a cohort approach when onboarding, all three groups of presenters made references to learning agility behaviors. Interestingly, they did not make these references overtly, but rather in the context of other onboarding activities. In describing the need for coaching sessions, the ability to learn from the experiences of veteran district leaders fits the description of vicarious learning. As stated by Ms. Fields, newcomers need to learn "by watching how other people respond." This echoed statements she made her second interview when she said, "You need to be an observer. Observe how things operate. I am observing in all situations. I think watching how Wallace (Wilson) handles situations, as well as my job-alike" is so important to learning the new role.

During her group's presentation, Ms. Mitchell stated that newcomers "really need to focus on their 'why' and be able to explain 'who they are' as they establish relationships with their supervisors and others at the district." As Mr. Young shared in his group's presentation, leaders must develop a reflective process that includes questions, such as "What are we working towards? What are we trying to accomplish? What are our success criteria? What are the things along the way? How can this process get better?" This thinking, along with the other groups' inclusion of a personal journey activity in their plans, placed emphasis on the learning agility behavior of self-reflection.

Finally, all three groups pointed to the importance of the Leadership Situation Scenarios and the Harden Shifts chart in helping them to make the transition to the ESSD central office. As these activities/tools were used to help them drop old assumptions and make space for new realities, the participants were describing the learning agility behavior of unlearning. The inclusion of vicarious learning, self-reflection, and unlearning led the lead researcher to reexamine individual interview responses regarding learning agility. This also helped the lead researcher to shape the questions that were posed to participants in the Focus Groups held after the final DLO Workshop.

ARDT Focus Group 1 and ARIT Focus Group 2

Two major data collections of this study were facilitated in early September. The ARDT came together on September 3, 2024, not as a planning team, but as participants in a focus group. Members of the ARIT team participated for a second time in a focus group setting the following day, September 4, 2024. The purpose of meeting with both groups was to better understand the impact that planning and participating in the various elements of this study had had on them as leaders in the ESSD central office. Eight semi-structured questions were posed to the ARDT

members, while six were used to guide the ARIT discussions. As the full ARIT Focus Group 2 Protocol can be found in Appendix E and the ARDT Focus Group Protocol in Appendix F, a sampling of the questions is displayed in Table 4.20.

Table 4.20

Sample Questions from ARDT Focus Group 1 and ARIT Focus Group 2

Research Focus	Focus Group Prompt
Research Question #3	ARDT: Describe any benefits you gained from coaching leaders from other departments, as well as from meeting monthly with your subordinates in monthly Supervisor Expectations Check-in meetings.
Research Questions #2 and #3	ARDT: Which onboarding activities would you like to see expanded upon for future appointees to the central office? Which would you adjust? Which would you eliminate?
Research Questions #2 and #3	ARIT: Share the onboarding activities you have participated in during your transition that you would like to see continued in the future. Give a brief explanation on how they have impacted your confidence, productivity, and overall job satisfaction.
Research Questions #2 and #3	ARIT: How would you describe the effectiveness of the activities you participated in to help you develop the following learning agility behaviors and skills: • Self-reflection • Seeking feedback • Self-awareness • Learning Vicariously • Unlearning • Metacognition

Potential findings that emerged during earlier stages of this study were confirmed during the final ARDT and ARIT focus groups facilitated at the end of the study. These findings included the significance of using a cohort approach to onboarding, the effectiveness of the Harden Shifts chart as a tool for newcomers and supervisors to navigate the onboarding process, and the importance placed on the development of learning agility behaviors. Additionally, each

of the focus group discussions provided even more evidence to the findings that were established during the first two action research cycles.

In the realm of the cohort experience, members of the ARDT were clear on why they felt the District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshops were so effective. The importance of helping newcomers to develop a cross-departmental network of support spoke to the needs that ARIT members indicated in their first round of interviews and questionnaires. As Ms. Mitchell, who served as both an ARDT and ARIT member reflected, “Being in a cohort is pretty powerful. Just because they know, ‘I’m not the only new one to the county office. There’s a bunch of us and we’re all learning together.’”

To Mr. Wilson, the comfort level brought on by the cohort approach was something to be leveraged into improving newcomers’ work. In his example, he shared the potential gains for two new leaders who work in different departments:

Let’s say you have Kim Kasson and Shannon Fields that are in a cohort, meeting together and talking about something. The next thing you know, they’re connecting on the same issue, they’re developing strategies to work on with each other. Who knows, maybe they called each other off to the side. I’m sure that that certainly has helped the comfort level of what to do during different situations they will face.

Bernie George added to the importance of cross-departmental relationships:

There are times that in the department-to-department area, tensions can ramp up when you are dealing with something. You might get one answer from school safety. You’re getting another answer from special education. That can create tension for a new person. I’ve learned that once you have relationships across the system, you can pick up the phone, call each other, and try to figure out what we’re going to do together.

Mr. George summarized it by saying, “I do think that the more you know other people, the more grace you’re going to show them.”

In the words of ARIT participant Bob Tocheny, success in the ESSD rests heavily on “the relationships. It’s the comfort and the knowledge of knowing that you could go to anybody.” According to Mr. Tocheny, the cohort approach helped those who, unlike him, “did not have 20 years of experience in this school system to build those relationships.” He went on, “Just hearing that other people were in the same position as me, that there’s a shared experience there. I think that gave me the comfort to be able to work through the ups and downs of the transition.”

During the ARIT Focus Group, Ms. Lynn agreed, saying that the time spent with all of her fellow newcomers allowed her “to build up that networking and know that people are going through the same things that you are, and you now have that connection with them.” The interactions with the newcomer group gave Ms. Mitchell’s feelings validation, as well, by “hearing from someone else and the time we would spend together saying, ‘Oh yeah, I’m really feeling that, too.’”

The cross-departmental connections made through the cohort work was a topic that had been raised by Dr. Kimberly Kasson in her second ARIT interview. To her, the interactions with members of other departments were an invaluable part of the onboarding experience. She explained:

That networking piece and interaction with people that I wouldn’t have, under any other circumstances, been able to interact with. Just the conversations that come out of that alone are helpful because we were sitting in one meeting and I was able to tell someone in another department, “I’ve been trying to find somebody within your department to talk about this.” And they said, “This is who you need to contact.” That saved me from

searching or emailing random people to try to figure out who it is that I need to talk to. So that's been helpful.

During the ARIT Focus Group 2, Dr. Kasson re-visited the cohort topic, sharing that it not only benefited her from the networking standpoint, but that the learning taking place during the group meetings was just as important. She shared, "The concept of unlearning that we addressed was really big for me. 'What do I need to unlearn and learn in its place?' The shifts we discussed were big, too. The cohort meetings were impactful for all of that."

The discussions surrounding the effectiveness of the cohort experience fed into the other socialization tactics and intervention activities that were implemented over the course of the study. One of the intervention activities that re-emerged was the Harden Shifts chart and the positive impact it had on the newcomers' transition. The Harden Shifts chart, which articulated nine changes in one's leadership lens needed to be considered when leaving the school building for district office roles (Harden, 2009). In each cycle, three shifts were explained during the DLO Workshops through the experiences of veteran ARDT members. The chart was then used in the One-on-One Coaching sessions, often in tandem with the Leadership Situation Scenarios.

During the ARDT Focus Group, Ms. Mitchell found use of the Harden Shifts as a way to provide a warning to newcomers about how they will need to change their thinking about leadership as they enter the context of the central office. As she explained, "Sometimes a shift is something you are going to experience internally, or you have a situation arise that causes you to shift. When that happens, you go 'Oh gosh, I didn't consider this department or this thing.'" To Ms. Mitchell, the use of the Harden Shifts chart comes down to helping newcomers become "aware that you need to consider many things" that they may never have considered at the school level.

ESSD's Associate Superintendent for Student Support and Services, Erin Emerson, shared that the use of the Harden Shifts chart had already permeated into her work with newcomers outside of the study:

When I met with new staff last Friday, I shared the shifts and talked about them. You could see their eyes as we talked about their role now focusing on support, that you're not in charge anymore, kind of thinking. You could see in their faces, "Oh, I don't need to go in and tell the teacher what to do?" I'm sure it's hard for some of them to walk in and not be in charge.

Ms. Emerson went through it with her two directors, as well. She shared, "It's definitely a tool I've already put to use." Both Mr. George and Mr. Wilson agreed that using the Harden Shifts chart was beneficial to them when met with their coaching assignments, as well as with the people they supervised. For Mr. George, the chart was especially helpful when used to go through the Leadership Situation Scenarios—a sentiment shared by members of the ARIT.

As the ARIT members were living in the school-to-central office transition in real time during this study, they were able to articulate the raw emotions of making the move. As shared by Mr. Tocheny, "You're going from the building level and come to the county. You think you're ready for it and you learn it's a totally different shift." For each ARIT member, the Harden Shifts chart provided a sense of affirmation that what they were feeling was normal, and that they were not alone. For new Assistant Director of Student Support, Brittini Morgan, the Harden Shifts chart put "words to emotions that you're having. It provides a little bit more clarity and you can dig into exactly why the emotion is the way it is." She went on to explain that discussion of the chart also helps provide some predictability for the transition, stating, "I think if

you weren't experiencing a shift to its fullest, there were little hints at shifts to come. It allows you to prepare yourself a little bit better" for the looming changes.

Ms. Fields echoed much of what Ms. Morgan shared, explaining that newcomers expect to go through a transition, but have a hard time when they are actually in it. The Harden Shifts "gives you that sense that this is a normal process to go through. It also gives you a heads up, as you read through them, that you may not have experienced all of them, yet." Ms. Fields, shared that the shifts discussions, "coupled with the scenarios, arm you with what you need when those shifts do come into play."

Going through the Harden Shifts in tandem with the Leadership Situation Scenarios during his coaching sessions was of significant value, according to the ESSD's new Director of Food and Nutrition, Jim Young. He shared:

We interacted with them (the Harden Shifts) and then engaged with them with our coach.

My coach engaged me in those shifts as we talked about how they were related to the scenarios. It was kind of like the shifts were theoretical, but they were put into action in the scenarios. There was this process that blended the two, so it became real.

Like the others, Mr. Young shared that it helped him make sense of his transition experience, while serving as a predictor. He explained that the Harden Shifts chart discussions "gave you something to see over the horizon, but also a framework to work with and problem solve."

Discussion of the shifts during the second ARIT Focus Group highlighted an earlier finding in the study. The idea that newcomers to the district office must shift their understanding of their work from a vertical orientation at the school level to a horizontal viewpoint at the central office. The frustration of that shift came through as Dr. Kasson shared,

When you're in the building, and you're making decisions, you have that deeper context and knowledge of where everybody is. You're closer to the people that you're dealing with. When you come up here, the distance alone skews that whole decision-making process. So, it's difficult to pull the trigger when you're trying to figure out what all the ripples are that are going to come from this.

Ms. Fields agreed with those frustrations, sharing that she has “had to unlearn and think about it in a different perspective. It's not just me making the decision. I have to think of all the different shifts and how other departments are involved.” For Dr. Kasson, “That's why I like it when we combined scenarios with the discussion of the shifts. I thought that that was impactful.”

The concept of unlearning, as raised by Ms. Fields in the second ARIT Focus Group, was a part of an additional finding confirmed by the focus group discussions. The final finding of the study centered on the importance of developing learning agility behaviors in newcomers to help them make successful transitions from the school building to the central office in the ESSD. In the final ARDT planning meeting, as well as during the second round of ARIT Individual Interviews, the lead researcher had raised the topic of learning agility with the study participants. Excluding the lead researcher, as well as Dr. Cassidy (who was unable to attend the final ARDT planning meeting), 10 study participants weighed in. Seven of the 10 pointed to the learning agile behavior of self-reflection as being integral to making a successful transition. Six of the 10 pointed to the concepts of unlearning and feedback seeking as being vital. Five of the 10 referenced the importance of vicarious learning.

During the second ARIT Focus Group, Ms. Fields discussed the clarity she was able to gain by going through scenarios with her coach and supervisor. She stated, “One of the things that I appreciate is in regards to the shifts was that I liked hearing from the design team during

our DLO Workshops. Having just another lens of how they experienced the shift” was very helpful to her. Working through scenarios in her One-on-One Coaching sessions helped Ms. Lynn, as well, to learn by “hearing about others’ experiences and talking through different situations from a different perspective.”

Mr. Young discussed the importance of interacting with veteran district leaders through One-on-One Coaching and Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings. He likened the experiences to studying leadership, asking “How do different people problem solve a scenario or situation?” To Mr. Young, the opportunity to learn vicariously allowed him to “learn from the mistakes of others rather than from making my own mistakes.” Mr. Tocheny agreed, adding “I liked hearing what other people’s responses were. I was able to connect with others that a similar mindset,” during cohort sessions.

For Ms. Morgan, “listening to people talk through each shift was helpful.” She went on: Just hearing from veteran leaders, just hearing a broader perspective, and seeing things through a different lens was super helpful in my leadership journey. There were times when I read a scenario and I’d talk with Erin and I’d ask, “So what do you think of that?” And she’d say things that I had never even considered. I think that hearing some of those other pieces, again, builds your wider lens and to understand the power of the pause when you’re looking at certain situations.

Regardless of the onboarding settings—collective cohorts and individualized sessions with coaches or supervisors—newcomers valued the vicarious learning experiences of listening and observing veterans of the ESSD central office.

Discussion about learning vicariously from others’ experiences fed into the need for unlearning when transitioning into the central office. For Ms. Fields, the Leadership Scenario

Situations helped her to readjust her leadership lens by unlearning her former way of approaching challenging situations. She explained, “When reading through them, I’m so used to thinking like a principal. I had to kind of unlearn and think about it from a different perspective.” In the case of Dr. Kasson, unlearning caused her to slow down in her thinking “instead of assuming that all experiences are going to transfer” from her days as an assistant principal. She went on, “It’s really examining those experiences and saying, which do and which do not. Thinking through the shifts and leaving behind past assumptions was an important part of transitioning for her.

According to Mr. Young, “that unlearning concept is something I’ve actually shared with some of the people I recently hired.” As his new employees were from a different school system, he applied that idea to “get them to unlearn their old culture and learn that this is the culture of the ESSD.” Ms. Mitchell shared that unlearning is an idea she’s already put into place, as well, with newcomers to her office. For her, it was important to understand where each new employee was coming from to better personalize the unlearning experience. She explained, “All three of them are brand new to social work in a school system. So, their unlearning may look very different. Their challenges versus someone coming from a school site to the district might look a little different.”

A third area of learning agility that continued to emerge throughout the study centered on the idea of seeking feedback. As participants in the study sought clearer expectations to be successful at their jobs, as well as greater clarity about leading in a new environment, the idea that feedback came very differently than it had at the school level was very evident. The result was a need for newcomers to find both clarification and role clarity by seeking feedback from others.

For Mr. Tocheny, the need to seek feedback began at the onset of his transition when he realized that he was not being provided with clear marching orders. During his second interview, he shared his journey:

Feedback seeking is where I've been growing the most because, as a principal, you're not seeking it. You get feedback, but it's different. The feedback that I'm now seeking is personal feedback about my work performance. Whereas the feedback I would be getting as a principal was more about the team effort, about the school's success. You naturally try to compare experiences and make sense out of things. I'm having to unlearn some of that school level leadership and realize that I'm not making decisions but am supporting others.

During the second ARIT Focus Group, he shared, "You don't know what you don't know. You seek feedback because, I think the reality is, you are trying to gain clarity about what the role will be."

The area of seeking feedback was one in which Ms. Lynn also indicated growth, as she stated, "I have grown from not being afraid to ask questions." She went on, "This wasn't comfortable. I feel like I've always been good to accept feedback but seeking that out was new. In this role, I did have to seek it out." In Dr. Kasson's experience, the meetings with her supervisor were where she could find out if she was "hitting the mark." Like the others, though, she had to take the lead in getting the feedback by asking her supervisor, "Have you thought about this? Is this something we want to go into?" Those meetings, along with her time spent with her coach, were "great at giving me clarity in the work, of how to approach the work up here."

In Ms. Mitchell's situation, the Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings became the place that she learned how to seek feedback:

I had to shift my thinking to truly seek feedback, to ask, "Is this in alignment with what you expect?" versus top-down and meeting those expectations. I had to flip my thinking on that.

Ms. Mitchell, who served on both the ARDT and ARIT, found confidence while meeting with her supervisor, as well as those she was responsible for supervising, realizing that "I had learned more than I thought I had learned."

For Ms. Mitchell, the seeking of feedback went hand-in-hand with the learning agility behavior of self-reflection. In an earlier interview, she had remarked,

The reflecting and feedback seeking put the onus on me. That is tied up in the reflection space of asking people, "Dis this meet your needs?" and "Is there something else I can do differently?" I'd ask, "Are we working well together on all those pieces that's tied to you?"

As evidenced by Ms. Mitchell's experience, the need to understand the learning agility behaviors was not something just to be valued by the newcomers.

During the ARDT focus group, Associate Superintendent Wallace Wilson shared that having newcomers work the Harden Shifts through Leadership Situation Scenarios during his coaching sessions made him self-reflect on his own practices as a supervisor. "It honestly made me a better supervisor." He went on

As I was listening, I would think, "Oh my, I haven't done that as a supervisor. I'm

missing the mark here.” So, I felt like there was coaching almost in reverse that gave me reminders on things that I could do better, to make sure I’m supporting the person in my department better.

Mr. George shared those sentiments, stating that working with the newcomers had made him more reflective, “Without a doubt, I think I will be more aware of my own weaknesses and will try to turn them into strengths.” In Ms. Emerson’s experiences during the study, she found herself “thinking back and questioning, ‘How did I handle that?’ You’re constantly in a state of reflecting on your own leadership.”

Mr. Wilson likened the experience of supervising and coaching newcomers to the central office. He explained:

It’s like when you have a student teacher, where you are so much more intentional about why you do things, and you really think through every angle of what they’re trying to do and how to support them because you don’t want to have to do it all over again.

For each of the ARDT members, the learning agility behavior of self-reflection was one not only infused into the intervention activities for the ARIT members, but one that they felt improved their own leadership, as well.

ARIT Questionnaire 2

The final data collection for this study was facilitated through the second ARIT Questionnaire, distributed to members following their final Focus Group on September 4, 2024. In addition to collecting data linked to the study’s research questions, the final ARIT Questionnaire was an additional step in gathering information about the overall effectiveness of the onboarding interventions implemented during this study. It served as a bookend that matched up with the ARIT Questionnaire used at the beginning of this study.

Six out of the seven ARIT members completed their questionnaires. The questionnaire consisted of 14 Likert scale-based questions and 1 open-ended question that focused on ARIT members' perceptions, feelings, and attitudes at the conclusion of participating in this action research study. While a full listing of questions on the ARIT questionnaire is provided in Appendix D, samples of this questionnaire, including its one, open-ended question, are provided in Table 4.21.

Table 4.21

Samples from ARIT Questionnaire 2

Scale Statements	Questionnaire Items
With "1" as the lowest level of clarity and "5" being the highest level of clarity:	At the time you accepted your new central office position, how clear were you regarding the nature of the work associated with your new role?
With "1" as the lowest score of effectiveness and "5" as the highest score of effectiveness:	How effective was the district training you were provided to prepare you for your new role prior to or in the early weeks of your new job?
The open-ended question:	In the space provided, share any thoughts you have on how your experiences in this study will impact your professional practices in helping future newcomers make successful transitions from the school level to the district office.

In 13 of the 14 questions asked, respondents indicated improvement in their transition experiences. As a result of the first ARIT Questionnaire, three areas of significant concern were raised that ARDT members felt needed to be addressed by the interventions implemented during the study. These concerns included:

- a lack of understanding regarding departmental politics,
- the high level of discomfort that newcomers felt in asking their supervisors for detailed feedback as they began in their new roles, and

- a lack of district-level training or formal preparation for ARIT participants' new roles.

The ARDT tailored both the cohort DLO Workshop experiences, as well as the One-on-One Coaching Sessions and Supervisor Expectation Check-in Meetings, to meet the concerns illuminated by the survey.

In the case of addressing the lack of understanding related to departmental politics, the ARDT implemented the use of the Harden Shifts chart, Leadership Situation Scenarios, and the ESSD Learner Profile, to guide conversations on relationship building, effective communication, and intentionality. The discussions held in the group setting of the DLO Workshops, as well as in the more intimate setting of the coaching sessions, allowed newcomers to share their initial perceptions, develop strategies to navigate office politics, and to approach their supervisor with greater clarity of purpose when asking questions and seeking feedback.

The results of the survey indicated that the work done over the course of the study were effective. The average rating on this survey item leaped from a 1.71 on the first questionnaire to a 4.0 on the second. Related to question and worth noting, the average rating on questionnaire that asked about the ARIT members' levels of understanding around interdepartmental politics in the ESSD central office increased from a 2.0 to a 3.83.

To address the concerns of ARIT members about approaching their supervisors for more detailed feedback, the ARDT provided common topics to be discussed in Supervisor Expectation Check-in Meetings. The purpose of these topics was to lower the anxiety felt by newcomers by establishing clear expectations, setting performance goals, and discussing communication protocols and preferences that the supervisor wished them to follow. As newcomers gained confidence through greater role clarity about leading in the context of district level leadership,

the ARDT surmised that ARIT members would gain more comfort in seeking feedback. The results of the survey indicated success.

On the first questionnaire, ARIT members indicated high levels of “discomfort” in their responses, with an average rating of 3.14 out of 5.0 on the negatively worded question. On the second questionnaire, ARIT respondents indicated that their levels of discomfort turned into high levels of comfort in approaching their supervisors for feedback, recording an average rating of 4.5 out of 5.0. Related to these results, ARIT members also indicated a significant increase in their comfort in explaining to others what their job entails, recording a jump in average ratings from a 2.57 to a 4.33. That same numeric increase was also recorded in the newcomers’ level of clarity in understanding the core values established in their department.

The final red flag addressed was the lack of formalized preparation provided for newcomers in the ESSD central office. As expected by the ARDT, the combination of all interventions implemented in this study were the first, district-developed attempt at providing a coherent, department-wide approach to onboarding newcomers. It came as no surprise, therefore, that a significant jump in ratings on the topic of district training rose from the initial questionnaire to the final one. The 1.86 average rating on this topic increased to a 4.16.

The single question in which no improvement was indicated related to ARIT members’ sense of feeling welcome by their colleagues. An error on the part of the lead researcher resulted in a lost opportunity for comparison in asking about newcomers’ perceptions of feeling welcomed by those in their central office department. On the second questionnaire, the lead researcher mistakenly asked a question about feeling welcomed by those “outside” of their department, rather than “inside,” as had been the case on the first questionnaire. That error made comparing perceptions of feeling welcome on a before and after basis impossible. Aside of the

comparison, however, it is worth noting that the average rating for this question was a 4.0 out of 5.0, indicating ARIT members felt a high level of feeling welcomed and accepted by their new colleagues across the central office.

Unlike the 14 Likert-scaled questionnaire items, the open-ended question on the second ARIT Questionnaire was not designed as a bookend to first questionnaire. Instead, it offered respondents the chance to share additional thoughts on impactful experiences that they wanted to see used moving forward. Not surprisingly, the Supervisor Expectation Check-In Meetings and One-on-One Coaching sessions were referenced, further supporting findings made throughout the three cycles of this study.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this action research study was to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). This study looked specifically at identifying the challenges and needs faced by those moving from leadership positions at the school building into leadership roles at the district office.

Two groups of central office leaders in the ESSD volunteered to participate in this study. The first group was comprised of veteran central office leaders who formed the study's Action Research Design Team (ARDT). Members of the ARDT had previously experienced the transition of leaving school level leadership for district office roles. Each had completed their transitions during a time when the ESSD offered no formalized, coherent onboarding program for newcomers to the central office. Their tasks included reviewing research relevant to organizational socialization, role clarity, and learning agility; the development of interventions

designed to aid and support the onboarding of newcomers entering service at the ESSD central office; and the systematic review of those interventions, making adjustments, additions, and deletions as the study progressed to meet the needs of the both the newcomers and the district office. The second group was comprised of school level leaders who had recently been appointed to central office roles. This group formed the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). These newcomers willingly participated in the interventions designed and implemented by the ARDT.

Over the course of three Action Research cycles that began in February of 2024 and concluded in September of 2024, data were collected to make sense of the challenges faced by newcomers when transitioning from leading in one context to that of a new context – in this case, from school level to district level leadership. Data were also collected to determine the impact that the design of the interventions had on the experience of the veterans, as well as the effectiveness of those interventions based on the experiences of the newcomers. The collection of that data came through a variety of methods, which included observations, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, artifact analysis, and reflexive journaling.

As the lead researcher read and re-read transcripts and notes, coding was used as a means for categorizing commonalities that emerged. Analysis of those codes led to the emergence of patterns and natural groups which ultimately led to clear findings. To ensure that these findings were trustworthy, the data used to establish them were triangulated, as exhibited in Table 4.22.

Table 4.22*Findings and Sources of Triangulation*

Finding	Data Sources
Newcomers to the ESSD central office struggled with a lack of clear expectations provided to be successful in their new roles.	ARIT Questionnaire #1 ARIT Individual Interviews #1 ARDT Individual Interviews #1 ARDT Questionnaire #1
Newcomers to the ESSD central office struggled to find clarity in their new leadership roles.	ARIT Questionnaire #1 ARIT Individual Interviews #1 ARDT Individual Interviews #1 ARDT Questionnaire #1
District coaches and the use of leadership situation scenarios were found to be effective sources of support when navigating the new challenges of transitioning from the school to district leadership in the ESSD.	ARDT Questionnaire #1 ARIT Focus Group #1 ARDT Planning Meeting Discussion ARIT Individual Interviews #2 ARDT Individual Interviews #2 ARIT Artifact Analysis ARIT Questionnaire #2
The Superintendent's Welcome Reception was found to be an effective source of support to newcomers in the ESSD central office.	ARIT Focus Group #1 ARDT Planning Meetings ARDT Questionnaire #1 ARIT Individual Interviews #2 ARIT Artifact Analysis
Newcomers to the ESSD central office experienced a sense of loss when leaving the school building for their new roles.	ARDT Individual Interviews #1 ARIT Individual Interviews #1 ARIT Focus Group #1 ARIT Individual Interviews #2
Adjusting to the horizontal orientation of district work provided a challenge for newcomers as they transitioned into their district roles in the ESSD central office.	ARDT Planning Meeting Discussion ARDT Individual Interviews #1 ARIT Individual Interviews #1 ARIT Focus Group #1 ARIT Individual Interviews #2 ARDT Focus Group #1 ARIT Focus Group #2

Finding	Data Sources
Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings provided newcomers in the ESSD central office much needed clarification for how to be successful in their new department.	ARDT Questionnaire #1 ARDT Planning Meeting Discussion ARIT Individual Interviews #2 ARDT Focus Group #1 ARIT Focus Group #2 ARIT Artifact Analysis ARIT Questionnaire #2
Using a cohort approach such as the District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshops provided newcomers to the ESSD central office a network of support across district departments.	ARDT Planning Meeting Discussion ARIT Individual Interviews #2 ARDT Focus Group #1 ARIT Focus Group #2 ARIT Artifact Analysis
Use of the Harden Shifts chart served as an important tool for both newcomers and supervisors to make sense of the challenges leaders face when transitioning from the school level to the district level in the ESSD.	ARDT Questionnaire #1 ARIT Focus Group #1 ARIT Individual Interviews #2 ARIT Focus Group #2 ARDT Focus Group #1 ARIT Artifact Analysis
The development of learning agility through activities aimed at reflection, unlearning, feedback seeking, and vicarious learning was deemed important to the successful onboarding of newcomers to the ESSD central office.	ARIT Individual Interviews #2 ARDT Planning Meeting Discussion ARDT Focus Group #1 ARIT Focus Group #2 ARIT Artifact Analysis

These findings were brought to life through the words and descriptions of the ARIT and ARDT members throughout this chapter.

The findings that were discovered over the course of the three Action Research cycles were analyzed and re-examined by the lead researcher. Multiple themes emerged that connected those findings and provided even greater clarity to the experiences associated with the transition of educational leaders from school building to central office leadership positions. Those thematic findings, and how they connect to the research questions that guided this study, are addressed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

Over the course of three action research cycles conducted during the spring and summer of 2024, leaders in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD) provided a rich description of their experiences as new central office newcomers. Participants in this study shared the challenges they faced when transitioning from school to central office level leadership, their perceptions of how effective onboarding activities impacted their transition, and the overall impact of participating in this study had on their work. Consistent with qualitative analysis methods, the lead researcher in this action research case study was able to identify common experiences among the study's participants. These findings were then analyzed for the existence of themes—themes which were reviewed multiple times and, ultimately, defined within the context of this study's research questions.

The purpose of this action research study was to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). This study looked specifically at identifying the challenges and needs faced by those moving from leadership positions at the school building into roles at the district office. The following questions were used to guide the action research conducted in this study:

1. How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variation of leading at the district office with leading at the school level?

2. How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding model on their transition from school level to district office leadership?
3. How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding model on their own professional practice?

This chapter describes the thematic analysis of the findings that emerged from the three cycles of action research that were conducted between February and September of 2024 in the ESSD. Those findings were the result of data collected throughout the research cycles, as described in Chapter 4.

As the data were collected, analysis was conducted through both an inductive and deductive coding process that allowed the researcher to find meaning in the common experiences of the study's participants. In this chapter, those findings were analyzed through the lens of the study's research questions, thus providing larger, more comprehensive themes that gave clarity to the experiences of newcomers transitioning from school building to district level leadership roles.

Experiences of School Leaders Transitioning to the Central Office

The first research question posed in this study sought to capture the experiences of school leaders transitioning to district office leadership. "How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variation of leading at the district office with leading at the school level?" Four findings directly related to this research question emerged over the course of the three action research cycles:

1. Newcomers to the ESSD central office struggled with a lack of clear expectations provided to be successful in their new roles.
2. Newcomers to the ESSD central office struggled to find clarity in their new leadership roles.
3. Newcomers to the ESSD central office experienced a sense of loss when leaving the school building for their new roles.
4. Adjusting to the horizontal orientation of district work provided a challenge for newcomers as they transitioned into their district roles in the ESSD central office.

From these findings, two clear themes evolved that captured the experiences of newcomers to the ESSD central office.

Theme One: Newcomers Grappled with the Weight and Breadth of District Leadership

In an ever-challenging VUCA (vulnerable, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world, there was a level of comfort that building level leaders could find in the school environment. Prior to leading, most educators logged years as teachers or counselors before moving into administrative roles. For those leaders, additional comfort came with the familiarity that extended back to having spent 13 years as students in school buildings, themselves. That comfort allowed them to lead with confidence.

As these school leaders left the familiar confines of the local school for positions in the more corporate-like district office, they found themselves in a very different setting than that which they had become so accustomed. In short, they had left the school business for the business of schooling. As shared by the ESSD's new Director of Food and Nutrition, Jim Young, "My job is different. I was an educator before, a principal. Now, I'm feeding kids in a federal program."

A lack of clarity about how to lead in their new environment led to a range of emotions that included frustration, anxiety, and a lack of confidence in making decisions. From the perspective of the participants in this study, the first major theme that captured their transition experiences was grappling with the utter weight and breadth that their decisions now had on school district business.

The average sized elementary school in the ESSD was approximately 1,100 students, while the largest high school was just over 3,000. Decisions made at the school level focused on the specific needs of a smaller community of students and families. Conversely, for those with a district leadership role, the impact of decisions could affect up to 55,000 students attending 43 unique school communities within the ESSD. As Brittini Morgan, Assistant Director for Student Support, summarized the enormity of their new roles, “Now the decisions I make are so wide reaching.”

Making decisions about what was best for kids at the school was a daily occurrence for most participants in this study. New Human Resources Director, Shannon Fields, worried about the broader implications of making decisions, “You’re going to think about students, but you’re also going to think about the outcomes from that decision at a bigger scale. Like, ‘Am I setting a precedent or creating a process?’”

Participants in the study expanded on Ms. Fields apprehensions for decision making in the central office compared to that of school levels, pointing to the ripple effects that come from the breadth of the central office context. For Associate Superintendent of Human Resources, Wallace Wilson, embracing innovation at the district level was a scary prospect when he first arrived. He shared, “When you throw a stone at the school level, you’re looking out at maybe

one or two ripples. Here, you have to anticipate 15-20 ripples. Taking even calculated risks scared me.”

For Director of Student Support, Linda Mitchell, that fear came from the inability to backtrack on decisions the way she was able to as principal when something went wrong. According to Ms. Mitchell, “If you make a decision at the district level, there is no changing it quickly. There is no pivoting quickly. And those decisions you make are just so far and wide reaching.” In Ms. Morgan’s words, “If something that you started at the school level went a little awry, you could veer back in really quick. Not so at the district. The intentionality and time to design something here was a huge shift.”

The shift that Ms. Morgan referenced was a common theme. The weight and breadth of district leadership required newcomers to shift their views from the vertical relationship they practiced as school level leaders, in which they reached “up” to the central office for resources. While at the district level, they found that a horizontal orientation was needed to navigate their new lives as central office leaders, requiring them to reach “out” among colleagues in other departments when developing supports, resources, or solutions. While solving problems with individual teachers, students, or families was a daily norm at the school level for these leaders, the challenges they now faced could not be resolved in isolation, as the impact was too great.

For new Family Engagement Coordinator Marni Lynn, learning to think horizontally was a learning curve that she was not prepared for:

At school, I was really working with my principal to lead everyone else. Here, though, there is so much networking. My role may intertwine with student support, communications, or teaching and learning. There are different players with different perspectives of what the work should be. It takes so much more time to get that clarity to

figure out what direction we're all headed.

That sentiment was repeated throughout the study, as working across departments was not something that came natural to newcomers to central office leadership, as the school-to-district relationship from the school leader perspective was rooted in a vertical orientation. Finding clarity in that new view of leading caused, for many, a lack of confidence and anxiety in the early stages of their appointments.

The weight and breadth of district office work produced one final area of clarity that newcomers struggled to gain early on in their transition experiences: the slow speed of district operations. In the words of Mr. Mitchell, "The pace is so different. If there is a change that needs to be made, it's much, much slower. It just takes a long time to get stuff done."

Dr. Heather Cassidy, Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning in the ESSD, captured that frustrating reality:

When you are a principal, you are used to making decisions. You are used to being able to get information quickly from the people that you work with. I think the people that have been very strong principals or leaders tend to have difficulty because the way the district office works is very different.

Due to the weight and breadth that district decisions carry with them, Dr. Cassidy suggested that the speed of change is often at the core of their frustration. Dr. Cassidy explained:

Things move slower. Rarely does anyone have the power to make an instantaneous decision. We need to check with other departments. We need to make sure our decisions are in line with the superintendent's vision. We need to make sure that the decisions we make don't go against what other people's vision are. Sometimes that is frustrating, when

you are used to snapping your fingers and having things happen. It might take weeks or even months to make things happen.

Along with Dr. Cassidy, Mr. Wallace was unaware about how the scope of district leadership would impact his decision making when he first arrived, stating, “I just thought it would be easier to make decisions and you could make things happen quickly.”

In summary, the slow speed of decision-making came from the reality that every decision made by the central office had an impact on far more stakeholders than did a decision made at the school level. That larger ripple effect, therefore, required input from the various leaders of the various departments that comprised the central office in order to ensure that a cohesive message emanated from the district level. As shared by the participants in this study, those decisions were not easily retracted once in motion.

For newcomers, shifting to a more horizontal lens was key to their gaining clarity about their new leadership context. While recognition of the weight and breadth of district leadership provided one challenge, a second theme also emerged from the findings. This one also related to the first research question.

Theme Two: New District Leaders Felt Isolated

Though it was not easy for them to fully absorb, the weight and breadth of taking on a district leadership position was one that most newcomers were able to predict—at least at an intellectual level. Gaining clarity about how to lead from a new context of leadership required adjusting their perspectives to adopt a horizontal orientation of working across district departments. What the newcomers to the ESSD central office were not prepared for, intellectually nor emotionally, was the feeling of isolation that they experienced as new district

leaders. That isolation emerged from the lack of clear expectations received by their supervisors, as well as from a sense of loss that they experienced during the transition.

At the outset of the study, it became clear through the initial surveys and interviews that many participants in the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)—the newcomers—were frustrated by a lack of clear expectations provided by their supervisors. The following sampling of quotes gathered early in the study captured that frustration:

- I still don't know what my responsibilities are.
- I struggle to explain my role to others.
- I was literally thrown into the fire.
- I worry about if I am headed in the right direction.
- I haven't gotten any critical feedback.
- I don't know if I'm close to hitting the mark.

Working at the school level in the ESSD, school administrators gave and received continuous feedback based on clear expectations. The sources of feedback included teachers, students, parents, and colleagues. Guided by this feedback, the leaders knew if they were headed in the right direction on an almost daily basis. Receiving clear expectations and regular feedback was not their experience as they transitioned to the central office.

Feedback to central office leaders was simply not something teachers, students, or parents provided, and most of what was received from supervisors was delivered in generalities. An example was shared by new ESSD Assessment Coordinator, Dr. Kimberly Kasson, who was told, "You're doing a good job." Dr. Kasson went on to share, "I'm sure not every decision I have made has been good. It seems the higher up you go, the less critical feedback you get, until it comes to the superintendent from the community."

For Dr. Kasson, the lack of critical feedback made it difficult to know if she was headed in the right direction, which was very different than her life as an assistant principal. Other participants shared similar feelings, such as Ms. Morgan, who lamented, “I crave feedback on how I can improve. I get a lot of praise for doing a decent job, but in terms of growth feedback, not a whole lot.” In a system that thrived at the school level on establishing clear expectations and using feedback as an ongoing guide, newcomers to the central office felt lost without those practices being employed to support meeting expectations of their new supervisors.

The newcomers’ supervisors, who comprised the Action Research Design Team (ARDT), admitted that in many cases they had not effectively laid out expectations for their newcomers. Not establishing clear success criteria for their newcomers made it more difficult for supervisors to provide useful feedback. Chief of Operations, Bernie George, shared the perils of not providing better expectations to newcomers, when he stated, “If you’re spending all your time trying to figure out what you’re supposed to be doing, it makes it difficult to motivate and lead others.”

Ms. Mitchell, who participated in the study both as an ARIT member new to the central office, as well as an ARDT member who supervised newcomers in her department, demonstrated Mr. George’s point when she admitted, “I did not do a great job of setting them (her new employees) up to be successful.” Ms. Mitchell explained that not fully grasping the expectations of her own role made it challenging to know how to provide expectations to her new hires.

Struggling to understand how to measure success as a district leader was just one element of the isolation that newcomers to the ESSD central office articulated. The other factor was a sense of loss that the newcomers experienced during the transition. That loss came in different

forms for the study's participants. Regardless of the form, it proved to be an emotional reality for most of those participating in the study.

One prominent form of loss that was described came from the disappearance of the collaborative partnerships that were prevalent at the school level. By way of example, principals and assistant principals from one school collaborating with principals and assistant principals from another school was a natural phenomenon in the ESSD. Collaboration among teachers and administrators was a daily expectation within the schools in ESSD, as well. Upon their ascension to the central office in ESSD, however, newcomers found it very difficult to adjust to the lack of colleagues with similar roles.

That lack of "job-alike" relationships was one factor that led to a sense of loss experienced by newcomers. For example, there was only one Family Engagement Coordinator in the ESSD, meaning in Ms. Morgan's case, she had no professional peers with whom she could collaborate. The same was true for nearly every newcomer that participated in this study (the lone exception being the new Director of Human Resources, Shannon Fields). As shared by Dr. Kasson, "The most surprising thing moving up here was that it wasn't clear who to collaborate with. You're trying to find your team."

Ms. Lynn described the difference between start out as a new assistant principal versus a new central office leader, "When you are a new AP, you have an immediate core team that's in it with you. You have your other APs right next to you and everybody is easily accessible. You just feel so supported." At the district level, in Ms. Lynn's words, "You don't have a large amount of people that are at the same level in your department that can walk with you through some of those unknowns."

While most of the participants agreed with the sentiment shared in Ms. Lynn's and Dr. Kasson's comments, one participant did not have that experience. As the newest director in the Human Resources (HR) Department, Shannon Fields had the benefit of a fellow HR director with whom she shared an office. She explained, "we meet, we brainstorm, and we review tasks and processes. It's not formal, but it is really professional learning. I think it is crucial." As a result, the lack of collaborative opportunities did not affect Ms. Fields like the others. However, that did not mean that her transition was devoid of a sense of loss.

The change in relationships with former colleagues and the distance from stakeholders was another form of the loss felt by newcomers. For Ms. Fields, the daily interaction with students, parents, and teachers was the toughest part of the move. "I'm sad that I don't see my people anymore. I don't get the little hugs from kindergartners." In Dr. Cassidy's case, it led her to question her move to the central office. After 29 years of reporting to a school for work, she was now driving to a more corporate office environment where she would no longer interact with students and teachers each day.

For new Classified Recruiting Coordinator, Bob Tocheny, that loss hit home when he attended his first leadership retreat in June of 2024 without his team of administrators. He no longer had "his people" with whom to share a table and lead talks during the retreat. He was no longer the "king" of his own domain who could get things done quickly and efficiently.

In the experience of Mr. Wilson, a self-described "relational leader," it was challenging to adjust to the change in the way people viewed him compared to his days as school administrator. Mr. Wilson exemplified this loss as he described his new relationship with principals, "It seems that when you move to the county office, the relationships in some ways become artificial and that people are looking to get things from you. I'm now the 'allotment

guy”” to his former principal colleagues. In Ms. Mitchell’s experience, she said she wanted to yell to her former colleagues, “I’m still me. I’m still the Linda that sat at the principal’s meetings with you” just a few months prior.

The absence of a network of collaboration, the distance from the students and teachers, the lack of a team to share experiences with daily, and the changing nature of longtime relationships with former peers all added up to a sense of loss. That loss, combined with not knowing what was truly expected of them, left newcomers in the ESSD central office feeling isolated. In that isolation, they searched for support, for “their people,” and for purpose.

The weight and breadth of district leadership was challenging, but not surprising to the ESSD central office newcomers. The feeling of isolation, however, was both shocking and discouraging. Failing to assist them through that transition could have led to further, devastating anxiety and frustration. Regardless of their previous roles and years of experience, as described fully in Chapter 3, participants in this study all felt the impacts of the weight and breadth of district decision making and the isolation of working in the central office. Fortunately, several of the interventions implemented as part of this study proved to be effective in helping them to find necessary supports, as described in the following subsection.

Improving the Experiences of School Leaders Transitioning into the Central Office

The second research question addressed by this study focused on how to improve the experiences of school leaders transitioning into central office leadership roles. “How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding model on their transition from school level to district office leadership?”

The interventions developed and the tactics by which they were delivered were rooted in organizational socialization theory. Research indicated that failing to provide intentional

onboarding experiences could increase anxiety, uncertainty, and frustration among new employees (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Such was the case the of the veteran district leaders in the ESSD who served on this study's ARDT, as well as the newcomers who participated in this study as members of the ARIT. They shared that the lack of formalized onboarding had those very effects upon them: anxiety, uncertainty, and frustration. Further, participants described a feeling of isolation that was compounded by the reality that their roles carried greater weight than their previous positions at the school level.

Over the course of three action research cycles, six findings emerged that related directly to this research question. The following list of those findings describe the interventions and delivery tactics that proved most effective over the course of this study's action research cycles:

1. District coaches and the use of Leadership Situation Scenarios were found to be effective sources of support when navigating the new challenges of transitioning from the school to district leadership in the ESSD
2. The Superintendent's Welcome Reception was found to be an effective source of support to newcomers in the ESSD central office.
3. Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings were integral in reducing newcomer uncertainty, while also helping to cement the relationship between the newcomers and their supervisors.
4. Using a cohort approach provided newcomers to the ESSD central office a network of support across district departments.
5. Use of the Harden Shifts chart served as an important tool for both newcomers and supervisors to make sense of the challenges leaders faced when transitioning from the school level to the district level in the ESSD.

6. The development of learning agility through activities aimed at reflection, unlearning, feedback seeking, and vicarious learning was deemed important to the successful onboarding of newcomers to the ESSD central office.

From these findings, a third theme was developed. That theme is explored in the next subsection of this chapter.

Theme Three: Establishment of Support Networks Was Vital to Onboarding Experiences

The central office leaders who were elevated directly from the school level in the ESSD could all be described as relational leaders. In the ESSD Leader Profile, which defined the effective leadership characteristics for the school system, “Builds Relationships” was the first tenet listed. To be considered a successful leader in the ESSD, you had to be people-oriented, collaborative, and reflective. Upon their arrival at the central office, these “people” people were left to their own devices to make sense of their new roles.

The mission embarked on by this study’s ARDT was to develop a program that would assist the newest members of the ESSD central office by providing a variety of interventions to help them make the transition. Tools were adapted, meeting agendas established, and activities were facilitated. Through all of the interventions that were deemed effective by participants, the common theme that developed was that the establishment of support networks was vital to successful onboarding experiences.

There were three support networks that resulted from the study that participants found effective in helping them make the transition from their respective schools. The first network came in the form of the supervisor-newcomer relationship. The second came as the district coach-newcomer partnership formed. The third network came through the development of the newcomer cohort. While the participants could not agree on any one of the three being more

important than another, there was unanimity in that the combination of all three was vital in their successful transition.

The supervisor-newcomer relationship was one that needed immediate attention by the ARDT in the early stages of the study. ARIT survey and interview commentary indicated uncertainty anxiety that arose from not having clear expectations from their direct supervisors. The ARDT developed monthly Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings to provide success criteria. For Ms. Fields in Human Resources, the Supervisor Expectation Check-Ins were imperative for her peace of mind. She shared, “those were so powerful to have the space to talk about what I needed to be doing, what I needed to do in order to be prepared.” From those meetings, she felt that her relationship with her supervisor emerged into a coaching relationship as both parties gained more confidence and trust in one another.

Mr. Tocheny further expanded on the feelings shared by Ms. Fields, stating, “The Supervisor Check-ins were incredibly important for me coming into a new role and understanding the department.” The perception he had once had, during his time as a principal, was drastically changed once he started meeting with his supervisor. “You hear that the department is there to support principals, but when you’re here, you see it in action.”

The Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings proved to be a kick-start to the supervisor-newcomer relationship for many of the participants. It gave newcomers a monthly opportunity to gain the feedback that they were missing from their time in school buildings. The meetings aided in reducing the uncertainty associated with the supervisor’s expectations, as well as helping them to learn the nature of central office politics. As Mr. Tocheny articulated, “I have really enjoyed the supervisor conversations and learning more about the top of the department and how to traverse over to the other departments.”

The Supervisor Expectation Check-Ins were the place Dr. Kasson found as the “perfect opportunity to go through some unlearning” as she sought to gain clarity in her new role, while dropping her preconceived notions of central office work. The opportunity to learn vicariously from their supervisors, to seek and receive feedback, and, as Dr. Kasson shared, to unlearn previous held perceptions, were all elements of learning agility gained over the course of several meetings. These learning agile behaviors would be reinforced when participants engaged in coaching sessions, as well.

Along with the individualized nature of the Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings, the One-on-One Coaching sessions provided a second network for newcomers to find support. As the ARDT developed the common topics for the Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings that the ARDT developed, the One-on-One Coaching sessions were designed with common experiences in mind. The ARDT predicted that the One-on-One Coaching sessions would serve as the relationship that would best help newcomers adapt to leading in a different environment. At the heart of their thinking was the idea that newcomers might be more willing to share their fears and vulnerabilities with a coach from another department as opposed to their direct supervisor. The use of the Leadership Situation Scenarios and the Harden’s Shifts document would be tools that helped facilitate these discussions.

The One-on-One Coaching sessions that were held met with success. For Mr. Young, the one-on-one time with a veteran leader provided him with a “thought partner to bounce ideas off of.” While going through Leadership Situation Scenarios helped him to vicariously learn from his coach’s experiences, “some of the coaching sessions became brainstorming time, as there were some real issues I needed to work through. A lot of that had to do with interdepartmental things” that he was simply unsure of how to navigate. One-on-One Coaching sessions allowed

the newcomers to start building a network of relationships outside of their new departments, thus helping them to more quickly make the Vertical to Horizontal shift articulated on the Harden Shifts document.

Ms. Lynn found value in spending time with a leader outside of her department. Having a session with a veteran who has “been through things, to talk through different situations, was very helpful.” For both, vicarious learning through a veteran leader was a means for grasping the shifts in thinking required when transitioning to district level leadership. As shared by Ms. Lynn, her coach helped her to start “working across the system, with a horizontal focus.”

In Dr. Kasson’s case, the coaching stretched her as she came into the new role. She shared, “The coaching that I experienced was more strategy focused and kept me constantly reflecting.” Dr. Kasson found that it helped her to make connections between departments, guiding her through the sometimes-perilous waters of office politics. In the coaching setting, Dr. Kasson found a way to talk through the shifts necessary to be successful in the central office. After each session, when she found herself facing a challenge, Dr. Kasson was “able to go back” to discussions with her coach and “use the Shifts to kind of think about the challenge in more strategic terms.” As with the Supervisor Check-In meetings, the One-on-One Coaching sessions fostered the learning agility needed to get acclimated to leading from a new context.

The third network of support that the ARDT developed for ARIT members came in the form of a newcomer cohort. Beginning with the Superintendent’s Welcome Reception and through multiple District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshops, members of the ARIT were brought together as a group. At each workshop, ARIT members were introduced to new elements of the Harden Shift’s Chart, unpacked the ESSD Learner Profile through the lens learning agility, and were provided with a Leadership Situation Scenario to work through. At each subsequent

DLO Workshop, they would share their resolutions with the group, incorporating what Harden Shifts were at play. While these activities promoted vicarious learning and self-reflection, they also facilitated the unlearning necessary in making the transition.

In this group setting, the ARIT members recognized that their transition were not unique. Ms. Lynn shared that the DLO Workshops allowed, “the camaraderie of building that community” of support she was missing, comforting to know “that you’re not alone in the struggle.” For Mr. Tocheny, the DLO Workshops allowed him to start getting familiar with others from across the district office. “Hearing other people’s responses, I was able to connect with others in the room. That shared experience gave me comfort to work through the ups and downs of the transition.”

For Ms. Mitchell, the cohort “allowed us to not only build those relationships across departments but validated how we were feeling in this transition. It allowed us to talk about the journey we’ve been through,” thus allowing relationships to be built that she may not have taken the time to do otherwise. In Dr. Kasson’s experience, learning new ideas in the cohort setting forged a network, as newcomers worked through scenarios together, learned about concepts like unlearning together, and built a plan for future onboarding programs together. She shared, “that networking piece and interaction with other people I wouldn’t, under any other circumstances, have been able to interact with” was key for her, as it was for Ms. Mitchell and the others.

The Impact of Developing, Facilitating, and Participating in an Onboarding Program

How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding model on their own professional practice? Over the course of this study’s three cycles of action research, four findings emerged directly related to this research question:

1. District coaches and the use of Leadership Situation Scenarios were found to be effective sources of support when navigating the new challenges of transitioning from the school to district leadership in the ESSD
2. Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings were integral in reducing newcomer uncertainty, while also helping to cement the relationship between the newcomers and their supervisors.
3. Use of the Harden Shifts Chart served as an important tool for both newcomers and supervisors to make sense of the challenges leaders faced when transitioning from the school level to the district level in the ESSD
4. The development of learning agility through activities aimed at reflection, unlearning, feedback seeking, and vicarious learning was deemed important to the successful onboarding of newcomers to the ESSD central office.

These four findings led to the final theme that emerged from the analysis of the data.

Theme Four: Common Onboarding Practices Enhanced School District Coherence

The ARDT assembled for this study brought together six key decisions makers and members of the ESSD Superintendent's Cabinet with the aim of designing a central office onboarding program. The ARDT designed common onboarding activities that used common vocabulary and common leadership transition tools. In those efforts to provide a common onboarding experience for the ARIT members, school district coherence was enhanced for participants on both teams in this study, igniting a spirit of intentionality and self-reflection.

As ARDT members first focused on decreasing newcomer uncertainty through their Supervisor Check-In Meetings, many viewed it as a growth opportunity for themselves, as well. As Associate Superintendent for Human Resources, Wallace Wilson, shared:

The supervisor is an important role because it provides clarity for expectations. Without that one-on-one time, you (newcomers) are left just kind of guessing. I was reminded that, while we might not think it's very important time to spend, they do. A big takeaway was how much face time they really wanted with their supervisors and how much they needed that.

For Mr. Wilson, that reminder was coupled with the need for intentionality to maximize use of the time together, as he insisted in ARDT meetings that common themes be discussed across all of the Supervisor Check-In Meetings. Members of the ARDT agreed and common topics were established for each Supervisor Check-In Meeting throughout the study.

Director of Student Support, Linda. Mitchell, who served as both an ARDT and ARIT member, built on Mr. Wilson's sentiments, sharing "We want to please our bosses. We want to know what their expectations are so that we can meet them." She felt that the common ARDT topic of goal setting and progress monitoring, in particular, was a key element in the Supervisor Check-In Meetings. Ms. Mitchell explained that having those goals as a focus kept the meetings on track and will "help move our department forward, whereas without that formalized time it may not happen at the same rate." Having that supervisory experience, in Ms. Mitchell's mind, would also help when collaborating with other supervisors from different departments to "share ideas for overcoming common challenges within our departments."

As Associate Superintendent for Student Services and Support Erin Emerson shared, the expectation of meeting regularly with newcomers made her very self-reflective on her practices with other members of her staff, leading to greater self-awareness of her own leadership. This sentiment was shared by every member of the ARDT. She also believed that developing the

onboarding program together with her colleagues “built up our relationships with each other,” making future collaboration on district work more likely.

Chief of Operations, Bernie George, agreed with the growth in the authentic collaboration among the district leaders because of the ARDT’s work. “I have not been able to have these kinds of conversations in the past with all of you” he shared, contending that it would make him a better leader over his department. Mr. Wilson took the topic a step further, stating “I think this brought us together. We could say we are responsible for developing a team that supported new folks into their leadership journey at the district level. We are building our bench for the future.”

Designing all of the study’s interventions helped to bring the ARDT members together. The use of Leadership Situation Scenarios and the Harden Shifts Chart in both the One-on-One Coaching Sessions and District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshops assisted in bringing ARDT and ARIT members closer to each other, as well. For new Human Resources Director Shannon Fields, going through the scenarios and the shifts with her coach strengthened her ability to “work with departments, new people, relationships.”

For new Food and Nutrition Director Jim Young, establishing those relationships with veteran leaders was key to improving his transition experience. “As we strive to keep this large system feeling small, it was important to grow those relationships and learn from the veteran leaders. There is a reason that relationship building is at the top of our leader profile.” The DLO Workshops facilitated that relationship building by learning new concepts and sharing Leadership Situation Scenario resolutions together, as explained by new Family Engagement Coordinator Marni Lynn, “Building up that network and knowing that people are going through the same things as you are” gave her that connection with the others.

For Ms. Mitchell, the conversations around the scenarios were helpful to “see how people problem solve, what they’re thinking about, what holes they have right now as well as what differences we have in our problem-solving styles.” New Classified Recruiting Coordinator, Robert Tocheny, found the scenarios to be so useful that he suggested, “having a library of scenarios, a bank of them” for future use. Mr. Tocheny also believed that job specific scenarios should be created that “align a little bit more to a person’s experiences” that are bound to come their way. These scenarios would be used, according to Mr. Tocheny, for supervisors and newcomers to enhance their understanding of each other’s problem-solving approaches, as Ms. had Mitchell pointed out.

The most referenced tool in the study was the Harden Shifts Chart. Coaches, supervisors, and newcomers used this document to better articulate the changes needed in one’s leadership lens as they moved into central office leadership roles. The document gave voice to the emotions newcomers were feeling and words to describe the reasons behind the emotion. Four of the seven ARIT members had been principals at the school level, while the remaining three had been assistant principals. For the former principals, moving from center stage to backstage, as described on the Harden Shifts Chart, was akin to what Mr. Tocheny described as being “the king of your domain to, now, basically stepping back and being in more of a supportive role.”

At the school level, assistant principals are often the taskmasters who implement programs handed down from the central office. In the experience of ARIT members who had been assistant principals, a major struggle came from this shift between implementation of programs at the school level to designing programs at the district level. As described by new Student Support Assistant Director, Brittini Morgan, “at the school level, you’re making decisions for people you know deeply. You know their readiness. At the district level, you can’t

possibly understand the readiness level at every school or how people are going to receive things.” That shift manifested itself as a sense of lost confidence for participants.

In the experiences of both former principals and assistant principals participating on the ARIT, the chance to hear from each other and from veteran district leaders serving on the ARDT proved comforting. Seeing their experiences on paper in the Harden Shifts Chart descriptions helped them know that their challenges were universal. Working through those shifts with their coaches and supervisors via the safety of scenarios gave them the confidence to move forward.

Finally, the concept of learning agility was a common strategy of the ARDT to develop newcomers. Using the well-established ESSD Leader Profile as their guide, the ARDT emphasized learning agile behaviors that would help newcomers meet the expectations of the district profile while also making the leadership shifts more effectively. Over the course of the study, both ARIT and ARDT participants pointed to four learning agile behaviors that they found most important to making a successful transition into central office leadership:

- Reflection
- Unlearning
- Feedback Seeking
- Vicarious Learning

The significance of identifying these four behaviors was that it provided target areas for strengthening the characteristics that the ESSD had identified in its Leader Profile.

Prior to this study, the ESSD Leader Profile served as a document that presented a unifying, common purpose for all levels of leadership in the ESSD. Along with the Harden Shifts, common meeting expectations, and the use of Leadership Situation Scenarios, the learning agile behaviors explored in this study provided the ESSD with a toolkit and vocabulary

with which to enhance its ability to establish greater school system coherence through intentional onboarding practices.

Chapter Summary

Four major themes emerged directly related to the research questions that guided this study. The first research question sought to capture how district level leaders in the ESSD articulate the differences in leading at the district level with leading at the school level. The first of the themes that emerged from this investigation revealed that newcomers grappled with the weight and breadth of district leadership. Leaving the familiarity of the school building environment, making decisions on a much larger scale than they were accustomed to, adjusting their leadership lens from a vertical relationship with the district office to a horizontal orientation, and accepting the slower speed of accomplishing their work all contributed to their struggles.

A second theme also emerged that related to the first research question. As newcomers to the central office articulated the differences between the school and district levels of leadership, they shared a sense of isolation in their new environment. One contributing factor to that isolation was the lack of clear expectations provided them by their supervisors. Connected to that concern was the relative lack of critical feedback that they received. Another factor in the isolation was the feelings of loss that newcomers felt when leaving their school level colleagues, parents, students, and staff. The changing nature of their previous relationships with the lack of built-in support networks and job-alike peers contributed to the loss of connection and collaboration.

The second research question centered on how to improve the transition experiences of those leaving the school building for central office leadership roles. A third theme from the

collection of study participant perceptions revealed that the establishment of support networks was vital to positive onboarding experiences. These networks were developed as interventions were implemented in both individual and group settings.

Three networks of support emerged from the interventions designed over the course of this study. The first resulted from intentional efforts to cement the supervisor-newcomer relationship through regularly scheduled meetings with specific purposes to each. The second network of support developed between the newcomer and their district coach. In this setting, veteran coach and new staff member went through potential leadership situations, allowing the newcomer to explore their problem-solving skills with and to learn vicariously from a seasoned leader from a different department. The third network of support came as the cohort of newcomers spent time together in both learning workshops and social settings, helping to jumpstart cross-departmental relationships.

The third research question that guided this study sought to capture the impact that developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding model had on the participants' own professional practices. The fourth and final theme that emerged from this study was that common onboarding practices enhanced school district coherence. The use of common approaches to laying out expectations for newcomers reduced uncertainty while promoting self-reflection and collaboration. The use of common leadership scenarios and vocabulary across district departments also enhanced coherence. The development of learning agility behaviors to help newcomers make the transition proved to aid both them and those supervising and coaching them, thus adding an additional shared strategy to enhance district coherence.

Leading at the district office proved to be very different than leading at the school level. The use of intentional onboarding strategies, however, demonstrated that the transition

experiences from one level to the next could be improved, as could the overall level of coherence of a rapidly changing ESSD central office. Chapter 6 provides conclusions and the implications of this action research.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

The purpose of this action research study was to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). This study looked specifically at identifying the challenges and needs faced by those moving from leadership positions at the school building into roles at the district office. The following questions were used to guide the action research conducted in this study:

1. How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variation of leading at the district office with leading at the school level?
2. How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding model on their transition from school level to district office leadership?
3. How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding model on their own professional practice?

This final chapter provides a summary of the study, including an overview of its research design. The major findings and themes that were directly connected to the research questions and related literature are also presented in this chapter. Additionally, limitations of this study are

presented, as is an exploration of potential implications for educational practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. The lead researcher closes out this chapter with his concluding thoughts.

Summary of the Study

One of the realities of the East Smithfield School District (ESSD) at the time this study was conducted was that the school system experienced rapid growth in student enrollment. Another reality associated with the ESSD at the time of the study was increased turnover due to retirements in central office leadership. (Both of these contextual components of the ESSD are fully explored in Chapters 1, 3, and 4 of this study.) With both exponential growth and leadership turnover significant factors in play, it was vital for decision-makers in the ESSD to confront the potential of the school system to become fragmented and disjointed in both purpose and practice.

Prior to this study, the ESSD's efforts to implement a coherent approach to its school-based leadership development and support programs had demonstrated significant effectiveness, as the success of the system's principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders had proven. However, no programs to develop or formally support central office leaders had been initiated prior to this study. Leaders from school buildings in the ESSD were elevated to the central office based on their successes at that level. As described by both veteran district leaders and newcomers throughout this study, confidence and success at the school level did not automatically translate into confidence and success at the central office level.

To combat the weight and breadth that newcomers found challenging on their arrival to their new, central office roles, as well as to mitigate the isolation many experienced, this study aimed to develop the foundations of a formal onboarding program that was guided by an organizational socialization theoretical framework. Over the course of the study, the intentional

establishment of support networks for newcomers was found to be vital to positive onboarding experiences. As the study was conducted at a time of significant growth and change in the ESSD, the study revealed onboarding practices that enhanced school district coherence at a potentially perilous point in the system's history.

The qualitative action research study conducted in the ESSD was designed to explore the transition experiences of central office newcomers. Those experiences were captured and underwent a rigorous research process that began in February of 2024 and ended in September of that year. The action research process that guided this study is described in the next subsection of this chapter.

Action Research

The lead researcher for this study identified a specific problem confronting newly appointed leaders at a suburban school system in a major southern metropolitan area known as the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). That problem centered on the challenges that newcomers to the ESSD's central office faced as they transitioned from school level to district level leadership roles. As the problem being addressed was specific and in need of immediate solutions, an action research study design was deemed the appropriate method to undertake (Coughlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014; Karagiorgi et al., 2018).

Failing to engage people in a process designed to make their situation better was what Bryk et al. (2015) called solutionitis. Hoping to avoid that mistake, the lead researcher assembled an Action Research Design Team (ARDT) comprised of six ESSD leaders to analyze research and to design and to develop interventions that addressed the core issues facing newcomers to the ESSD's central office. To further guard against solutionitis, the select newcomers were asked to participate as members of the study's Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). Those

who accepted included seven former school level leaders who had recently been appointed to roles in the ESSD central office at a coordinator or higher level.

All members of the ARDT, including the lead researcher, were embedded in the daily work of their newest colleagues, serving as supervisors and coaches to ARIT members. As part of the study, ARDT members designed and implemented the interventions that were conducted over the course of three action research cycles. The idea of being immersed in the study as a practitioner-researchers—a concept pioneered by Lewin (1946) and Corey (1954)—was found to be an appropriate method for solving problems faced by educators. Qualitative analysis was used by the lead researcher to recognize and mitigate biases while accurately and fully capturing the voices of the study’s participants (Bloomberg, 2023; Creswell, 2013).

Efforts were made by the lead researcher and the study’s participants to better understand the challenges newcomers to the ESSD central office faced when transitioning into district leadership roles. Interventions were implemented during the study to deal with those challenges. In identifying and attempting to resolve the problem specifically addressed in the ESSD, this study contributed to the larger bodies of research related to central office onboarding, organizational socialization, and learning agility. Those findings, along with the theoretical framework and logic model used to guide this study, are articulated in the next subsections of this chapter.

Theoretical Framework and Logic Model

The problem addressed in this study was rooted in the process by which newly appointed central office leaders in the ESSD were socialized into their new roles. The question of socialization in the ESSD focused on how these newcomers learned the knowledge, skills, and values needed to be successful in their new roles (Bengtson et al., 2013; Jeske & Olson, 2022;

Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). In their research on organizational socialization, Van Maanen and Schein (1977) posited that the prospect of starting a new job led to anxiety. That anxiety came from the uncertainty about expectations, the nature of workplace relationships, and role clarity (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

The emotional responses exhibited and described by the participants in this study bore out Van Maanen and Schein's (1977) predictions. Participant frustrations and fear over unclear success criteria, the loss of a support system, the lack of critical feedback, and the absence of role clarity were found to be common emotional responses to the ESSD's newest central office leaders who had been elevated from the district's school buildings. The theoretical framework used for this study was built around the organizational socialization concept that an institutional approach to onboarding the ESSD's new leaders was the appropriate path to follow to improve the transition experience (Jones, 1986). This meant that specific, intentional tactics were used by district leaders to socialize the ESSD's newcomers rather than allowing them to individually find their own path of success in their new central office roles (Ellis et al., 2015; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

Four of the six tactics developed by Van Maanen and Schein's (1977) seminal work on organizational socialization were used in this study to deliver interventions. These tactics included formal, serial, investiture, and collective approaches to socializing the newcomers to decrease their levels of anxiety, help them to find clarity in their new leadership roles, and to increase their leadership agility (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

In this study, the formal tactics came from the ARDT's structured design of activities aimed at helping newcomers in the ESSD central office to disconnect from school level thinking and to learn new, district level perspectives (Bengtson et al., 2013; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen &

Schein, 1977). The serial tactics delivered interventions to ARIT members through veteran employees serving as supervisors and coaches to newcomers (Bengtson et al., 2013; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). In those individual sessions with veteran leaders, the personal leadership traits of the newcomers were encouraged and built on as a tactic of investiture (Bengtson et al., 2013; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Finally, the members of the ARIT went through their onboarding as a cohort of newcomers—a collective socialization tactic (Bengtson et al., 2013; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

As those tactics provided the socialization delivery vehicles, the interventions implemented centered on uncertainty reduction (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977), leadership role clarity (Harden, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021), and learning agility (De Meuse & Harvey, 2021; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). Ultimately, the aim of this study's onboarding model was to improve the transition experiences of newcomers to the ESSD central office and, over time, increase their levels of job satisfaction, retention, and performance, as well as organizational commitment and workplace engagement (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). The implementation activities and their respective delivery tactics came from the work of this study's ARDT, which followed a Determine, Select, Implement, Assess, and Adjust (DSIAA) logic model (Bryk et al., 2015; Moen, 2009).

Whereas organizational socialization provided this study with a theoretical framework, the action research conducted was guided by a repeatable, reflective structure that allowed for an iterative process of ongoing improvement (Mertler, 2021). Like Deming's *Plan-Do-Study-Act* model (Bryk et al., 2015; Moen, 2009), this study's DSIAA logic model provided the ARDT with prescribed steps for mapping out interventions. Over the course of three action research cycles, the ARDT would meet monthly as a group to review related literature and any data

specific to the ARIT members to *determine* desired outcomes for future interventions. From there, the ARDT would *select* research-based interventions and design activities.

The next step would be to *implement* those interventions in either the cohort (District Leadership Onboarding Workshops) or individualized settings (Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings or One-on-One Coaching sessions). Following implementation, the ARDT would regroup to discuss observations, feedback, and other data to *assess* the effectiveness of the interventions and make necessary *adjustments* before starting another round of interventions (Bryk et al., 2015; Moen, 2009).

The conversations held at these ARDT meetings to plan out interventions proved, in and of themselves, to be an effective means for school district improvement. As the ARDT members assessed the effectiveness of the interventions they implemented, they became more reflective about their own work in leading their respective departments. As the leading decision makers for the ESSD, the collaborative discussions and structured process for planning activities led to a more cohesive leadership team. The finding regarding coherence, along with other themes that arose from data analysis, are explored in the next section of this chapter.

Findings and Themes

This study sought to better understand the challenges faced by newcomers transitioning from leadership roles in a school setting to positions in a central office environment. Three research questions guided the study. The questions sought to articulate the differences in leading in the two educational environments, to describe the impact that onboarding practices had on those experiencing the transition, and to determine what, if any, impact that designing and implementing an onboarding program had on participants in the study. The answers to those research questions and their connection to the literature reviewed for this study emerged from a

rigorous thematic analysis of the study's findings. That analysis led to four themes that helped to address the research questions. Those themes are presented in the following subsections of this chapter.

Themes Related to Research Question One

The first research question posed in this study asked, “How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variation of leading at the district office with leading at the school level?” Two themes emerged in seeking to address this question.

Theme One: Newcomers Grappled with the Weight and Breadth of District Leadership.

School building principals and assistant principals are no strangers to the pressures that come with leadership. Along with classroom teachers, building level leaders continue to have the most significant, direct impact on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2019). The conditions needed for those school administrators and teachers to be successful, however, falls to district leaders of a school system (Leithwood et al., 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021).

For veteran school building leaders, their leadership role is quite clear: they are responsible for the safety of their students, as well as for their academic growth and achievement. School level leaders are able to operate with the closeup focus of a zoom lens. When moving to the district office, however, that leadership lens must be adjusted for clarity of purpose (Harden, personal communication, March 6, 2023; Zepeda et al., 2021). While the responsibility of district leadership is indirect, the importance of providing school leaders with necessary resources and supports has shown to be a different kind of pressure—one that newcomers in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD) found more challenging than anticipated (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021).

Among the seven participants on this study's Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), four had served as principals and three as assistant principals prior to their central office appointment. Jim Young, the newly named Director of Food and Nutrition, had led the largest school among the newcomers on the ARIT. His former middle school had an enrollment of just under 1,500 students. The enrollment numbers were smaller for each of the others on the ARIT, three of whom did not have the lead role at their previous school. Ascending to their new roles in the district office, the members of the ARIT faced the new reality that their decisions could impact all 54,000 plus students enrolled in the ESSD's 42 schools.

As former principals and assistant principals at the school level, participants in this study had been accustomed to make daily decisions that affected the teachers and students in their respective schools. They operated in close proximity with their stakeholders, helping them to gauge readiness when changes were to be made or new programs were to be implemented. As newcomers to the district office, the distance from stakeholders made readiness a challenge, as did the ripple effects that came from decision-making. These factors made leading in the central office very different from school-level leadership.

Harden's (2009) research proposed the leadership lens adjustments needed to find clarity in their new roles as they made the school-to-district leadership transition. At the school level, leaders who frequently "received" services from the central office were now expected to "provide" services (Anderson & Young, 2018; Goldring et al., 2020; Harden, 2009). School leaders had "implemented" district initiatives by tailoring them to fit their school's needs while now, as central office leaders, they were expected to "design" programs that align to the district's strategic objectives and meet the needs of all the system's schools (Anderson & Young, 2018; Harden, 2009).

Participants in this study shared that these shifts were not totally unexpected. Each participant met those shifts with varying degrees of apprehension or struggle. However, one shift that nearly every participant in the study agreed posed the most difficult to make was the move from a “vertical” relationship with the central office to the “horizontal” perspective of district work that was needed to be successful (Harden, 2009).

At the building level, where the needs of a single school community were the focus of the administrators, the central office was viewed as the storehouse for resources that they could access to meet their school’s needs (Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021). As predicted by Harden (2009), new leaders who moved into the ESSD’s central office roles found they could no longer operate in the relative isolation of a single school building. As study participants found out, the central office reflected a corporate structure more than that of a “single” school building.

Due to overlapping district office department goals, newcomers often found themselves in need of cooperation with peers from other departments, while occasionally competing with them for resources. According to Linda Mitchell, the ESSD’s new Student Support Director, the fear of “stepping on the toes of leaders in other departments” or not “including other departments in the decision-making process” required a very different level of intentionality than she was used to at the school level. As a school administrator, Ms. Mitchell shared, “you are used to making decisions on your own.”

The scope of decision-making at the district level required a new, horizontal thinking for the ESSD’s new leaders that reflected Harden’s (2009) research. As voiced by the ESSD’s new Assistant Director for Student Support, Brittini Morgan, the decisions made for 54,000 students

and 42 schools were “much harder to reel in after a mistake” than at a single school with only 1,500 students. This fact forced the idea of the horizontal lens adjustment for newcomers.

The intentionality required for horizontal thinking also meant that central office work moved at a pace much more slowly and methodically than at the school level—a reality that most newcomers found understandable, but nonetheless, frustrating. As lamented by Associate Superintendent for Human Resources, Wallace Wilson, “I learned that it takes a long time to make changes to all 42 schools versus when you’re serving as in a principal role. That was a big shift for me.” While the weight and breadth of district leadership, along with the time it took to work across departments in a horizontal manner, were challenges for newcomers, a more emotional side effect to their transition to central office leadership emerged as the second theme of the study.

Theme Two: New District Leaders Felt Isolated

The second theme that emerged connected directly to the organizational socialization research that served as this study’s theoretical framework. Van Maanen and Schein (1977) theorized that new employees in an organization would search for certainty in their new surroundings. Failing to provide this would lead to an anxiety, frustration, and a loss of productivity of the new employees (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

Prior to this action research, no intentional efforts had been conducted on the part of the ESSD’s district leaders to onboard newcomers to the central office. At the onset of this study, the ESSD’s newest central office leaders reflected Van Maanen and Schein’s (1977) assertion that a lack of intentional socialization would lead to problems for the organization. This study’s participants shared that their initial experiences in the ESSD’s central office had led to a variety of negative emotions that left them feeling a strong sense of isolation.

The first set of findings that led to newcomer isolation in the ESSD central office came from supervisors' failure to provide their newest employees with clear expectations. Each of the newcomers on this study's ARIT had previously served as school building leaders. At the school level, they were provided with success criteria and ongoing feedback about their job performance. As they entered central office leadership, six out of seven newcomers found that they were singletons, meaning that they were the only ones in the school system to hold their positions.

New Director of Human Resources, Shannon Fields, was the only ARIT member to have a job-alike peer in the ESSD. She was also the only one who was guided by a supervisor who had once held her position. For the other six newcomers, none received a clear set of expectations, as their supervisors admittedly struggled with exactly how to define success in roles they had never held. Not surprisingly, all but Ms. Fields shared high levels of frustration due to the lack of certainty on what was expected of them.

As posited by Van Maanen and Schein (1977), that uncertainty led newcomers in this study to try to make sense of their new role. As articulated by new Classified Recruiting Coordinator, Bob Tocheny, "I have had to be a self-starter. I have a vision for where I want things to go. I work hard at what I'm doing, and I think it's showing some fruits of my labor, but it's very isolating."

New Assessment Coordinator, Kimberly Kasson, also felt the burden for defining her new role. While she knew the broader purpose of her position, she did not possess "detailed information about where I was supposed to go. So, I had to put that together and I proposed three different ideas to (supervisor) Heather to say, 'Does this fall within what you're thinking?'"

about her role. Although they came to some agreement about her expectations, additional frustration came in the lack of feedback, much as it did with others on the ARIT.

The lack of constructive feedback that the newcomers received went hand-in-hand with the lack of clear expectations. Mr. Tocheny summarized the thinking of his ARIT colleagues when he shared:

I'm seeking feedback about the work I'm doing. 'Am I on the right track?' I think that's the part that anybody coming into a role is feeling isolated about. "Yes, you are on the right track; you are doing the right thing." That is the part I think we're all seeking.

Mr. Tocheny went on, "We're all wanting to do the work and we want to make an impact. But we need to make sure that our impact is hitting the mark." The uncertainty surrounding their supervisor's expectations were part of the findings that led to a sense of isolation for newcomers. The other part came from a feeling of loss that each member of the ARIT described when discussing their transition.

As newcomers to the ESSD's central office explained it, each experienced a feeling of loss as they began their new roles. The corporate structure of the central office and the fact that most positions are singleton roles make district leadership very different than school-based leadership. As described by Harden (2009), this change in educational setting requires additional shifts in the newcomer's leadership lens. At the school level, leaders continually interact with colleagues, staff, students, and parents to "facilitate" the work of education. At the district level, leaders must "network" with fellow school systems, the community at large, and government agencies, most of whom operate outside of one's own system.

As described by Mr. Young, ARIT members missed the daily "hallway conversations that you have to have with people." Those day-to-day, unplanned meetings were chances to build

relationships within a school building. They were seen by ARIT members as being vital sources of support to success in their previous roles. The loss of those informal opportunities was a tough adjustment for newcomers. “To meet with people, even in my office, I have to schedule a meeting. There are no ‘hallway’ conversations” in the ESSD central office, according to Ms. Mitchell. In short, the loss of the informal, collaborative environment translated into a loss of a support system for the newcomers.

A similarly difficult challenge for the ARIT members in this study was what Harden (2009) described as the shift from “affiliation” with to a “separation” from their individual school. Making this shift further drove feelings of isolation among newcomers, as they could no longer make decisions that were best for “their” school, but rather had to focus on doing what was best across the district (Anderson & Young, 2018; Zepeda et al., 2021).

The separation reality hit quickly for many as they literally felt divided off from their former schools when they attended their first system leadership retreat. My team was no longer my team,” was the sentiment shared by Ms. Fields. In accepting their new roles, ARIT members were no longer affiliated with the school with which they had once so closely identified. Compounding that loss for new Family Engagement Coordinator, Marni Lynn, was that she went from being on a team “with other APs right next to you” to being a member of a department with whom she had no one to experience daily challenges.

Being in a central office role forced the separation for many participants in the study, not by their choice, but by how their title changed the nature of their relationships with their former colleagues. For Ms. Morgan and Ms. Lynn, it was the fact that school leaders expected them to have ready-made solutions to their problems. For Mr. Wilson, it was how his former fellow principals now seemed only reach out when asking for more personnel. In the case of Ms. Fields,

it was “the dread that overcomes them when they see my number pop up on their phone. ‘What did I do wrong?’ is what they always seem to ask when they answer my calls.”

The feelings of uncertainty, loss, and disconnection combined with the size and scope of their new central office positions all added up to the newcomer anxiety that Van Maanen and Schein (1977) warned against. To avoid a continuation of those feelings, this study’s ARDT developed a variety of interventions and onboarding activities to combat the weight and breadth carried by and sense of isolation felt by the ARIT members as they entered the ESSD’s central office. The implementation of these interventions assisted with addressing this study’s second research question.

A Theme Related to Research Question Two

The second research question posed in this study asked, “How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding model on their transition from school level to district office leadership?” This study’s third theme emerged during the journey to address this question.

Theme Three: Establishment of Support Networks Was Vital to Onboarding Experiences.

Van Maanen and Schein’s (1977) proposals and Jones’ (1986) empirical verification suggested that socialization tactics could be used to reduce newcomer uncertainty and increase satisfaction while improving their organizational commitment and job productivity. The lead researcher ultimately chose four organizational socialization tactics to both frame this study and to deliver onboarding interventions. As participants were observed, surveyed, and interviewed, it became clear that the key to onboarding successes in this study were those activities and interactions that helped the ESSD’s ARIT members to develop networks of support.

For this study, formal socialization tactics were chosen for the onboarding of new members of the ESSD central office. This approach required a structured process that involved the unlearning of previous assumptions that newcomers had regarding the district office, thus making the way for new learning about the central office environment (Becker & Bish, 2021; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Prior to this study, the ESSD had not taken a formal approach, instead allowing newcomers to learn their surroundings through their own on-the-job experiences acquired at their own pace (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Not surprisingly, the lack of formal onboarding tactics employed in the ESSD led to much of the frustration aired by ARIT members at the onset of the study.

Guided by the research in organizational socialization theory, this study's ARDT opted to use formal structures, with pre-planned trainings that took place outside of newcomers' daily jobs and in spaces where they were safe to learn without the fear of failure (Bauer et al., 2007). The ARDT met monthly to review literature, analyze the data collected in the ESSD, and plan structured activities for ARIT members (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). In addition to using a formal approach to onboarding, the ARDT also committed to the organizational socialization tactic of investiture (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

In the context of the ESSD central office, leaders that were elevated from the school level were those considered to be successful in their previous roles. It was deemed important by ARDT members to help newcomers unlearn previous perceptions of central office work. However, unlearning did not include the idea of stripping newcomers of the personal characteristics nor the leadership skills that had helped them find success in an ESSD school (Bengston et al., 2013). Therefore, the concept of investiture was adapted, with onboarding activities intended to build on the newcomers' skills and abilities rather than divesting them

(Bengston et al., 2013; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). With formal and investiture tactics serving as the common thread throughout the onboarding experiences, this study's ARDT developed interventions to be delivered through collective and serial means of organizational socialization theory.

The collective tactic used in this study provided newcomers in the ESSD central office the opportunity to learn together (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). This cohort approach was facilitated, as posited by Bialek and Hagen (2021), to promote the development of a support network that fostered deep, leader cohesion among the newcomers. This tactic was first implemented via the Superintendent's Welcome Reception, which the ARDT designed to bring the newcomers together, to connect them with each other in a social environment, and to begin meeting their emotional needs, as proposed by both Bauer (2010) and Klein et al. (2015). That reception was overwhelmingly lauded by ARIT members who shared that it helped them to begin "feeling like a team," allowed them to "build bridges" across departments and helped them to "break down some of the barriers and just establish relationships."

While the Superintendent's Welcome Reception kicked off the collective, cohort approach, the ARDT designed District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshops to bring ARIT members together on a monthly basis over the course of the study. In each of these large group meetings, interventions were implemented that aimed to reduce uncertainty, to provide leadership clarity, and to develop learning agility. In each session, members of the ARIT shared their personal leadership journeys, allowing connections to be made through the awareness of shared experiences. Elements of the Harden's Shifts Chart (Harden, 2009) were unpacked at each DLO Workshop, with veteran district leaders providing examples of the shifts that they had experienced during their own transitions to the central office.

Finally, Leadership Situation Scenarios were provided to newcomers at each workshop. These allowed newcomers to apply learning agile behaviors to problem-solving real-world situations while also contemplating the shifts that they would need to make in their thinking. ARIT members were challenged to work on these situations individually, as well as with their assigned coaches, before returning to the next DLO Workshop.

The collective, cohort approach served to combat the isolation that so many ARIT members felt when transitioning to district level leadership in the ESSD. As ARIT member Brittini Morgan explained, “listening to other people in that group has been affirming. I’m not alone, regardless of my focus area in the district. There were definitely common themes.” For newcomer Bob Tocheny, it was reassuring to have found out during those DLO Workshops that “I’m not the only one feeling this way.”

These common feelings led to closer interaction across departments among the ARIT members, thus fostering those deeper connections that Bialek and Hagen (2021) discussed. In the words of ARIT member, Kimberly Kasson, “I felt lucky to be part of this because it gave me access to people and other departments. That, alone, was tremendously helpful.” As the DLO Workshops provided the collective tactic for socializing the ESSD’s newcomers, two more networks of support were developed by the ARDT through serial socialization tactics.

According to Van Maanen and Schein (1977), the serial experience in socialization uses veterans within an organization to provide guidance to newcomers. In this study, the ARDT designed interventions to be delivered through two serial approaches. The first set of these interventions were aimed at reducing uncertainty. These were to be addressed in a series of Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings between ARIT members and their department supervisors, who also served on the ARDT. The second set of interventions were aimed at

providing ARIT members clarity about leading from a district perspective and help in the development of the newcomers' learning agility. These interventions were delivered during monthly One-on-One Coaching sessions held between the newcomers and their district coach.

At the onset of this study, a major source of frustration for newcomers in the ESSD came from a lack of clear expectations. In the absence of success criteria, uncertainty grew among the ARIT members. As predicted by Cable et al. (2013), Klein et al. (2015), and Van Maanen and Schein (1977), that type of uncertainty manifested itself as frustration, fear, anxiety, and anger—none of which bode well for future productivity or organizational commitment if left unaddressed. However, once the ARDT prescribed common topics for discussion, which all centered on clarifying expectations for the newcomers, relationships began to strengthen between them and their supervisors.

For ARIT members, the Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings grew from understanding what was expected of them into opportunities to know more about their new world. Linda Mitchell, who served as both an ARDT and ARIT member, shared that the meetings helped both the newcomer and the supervisor. As a supervisor, “those check-ins helped me to know what big things were on their plates so that I could better support them.” In her role as a newcomer, the meetings “allowed me to know if I was hitting the mark” for my supervisor. In both, she shared that the key element was the sentiment of support that the supervisor conveyed.

As Mr. Tocheny explained, the Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings helped him to “understand more about the behind-the scenes work within the department that I never knew,” thus helping him to more quickly adjust to his new environment. Shannon Fields best summarized the success of this serial tactic, describing how her Supervisor Expectation Check-In

meetings evolved into coaching sessions. At the start, the focus was on “making sure I understood processes, procedures.” Over time, Ms. Fields saw her supervisor shift to challenging her. “He’ll say, ‘I want you to go and try to find this.’ He’s letting me spread my wings to see if I can figure it out on my own.”

As the anxiety over the unknown began to subside and expectations for newcomer success became clearer and relationships with their supervisors grew stronger, the ARDT committed to following the research that suggested onboarding should be about more than just uncertainty reduction (Bauer et al., 2007; Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013). While uncertainty reduction helps to establish the institution’s values and meet *its* needs, Becker and Bish (2021) suggested that the needs of the newcomer should also be taken into account. The research claimed that when onboarding becomes a two-way street of understanding both individual and institutional needs, both groups can be better served and greater growth can ensue (Bauer et al., 2007; Becker & Bish, 2021; Cable et al., 2013).

The ARDT endeavored to individualize the onboarding experience through the use of veteran district coaches. This second serial tactic was facilitated through One-on-One Coaching sessions between an ARIT member and a veteran district coach from the ARDT. By design, the coaches were all from different departments than the newcomers assigned to them. While common tools were used by each of the coaches, with common goals established, the One-on-One Coaching environment allowed for newcomers to explore ideas in a judgement-free setting outside of their district department. In this environment, ARIT members were free to think out loud, learn vicariously from their veteran coach, and begin to make sense of leading from a district, rather than a school level, perspective.

New Food and Nutrition Director, Jim Young, spoke for most in the group, as he described finding the coaching opportunities as vital for making sense of working in the ESSD central office:

The coaching sessions became a brainstorming time, as there were some real issues I was actually working through. A lot of that had to do with interdepartmental things. Our department needs things from other departments, and it helped, working with a coach, to work through all of that. He asked a lot of questions and forced me to just think about some things.

Dr. Kasson added to that sentiment, sharing that having a coach from another department, “gave me an outside lens of someone who could speak to leadership strategies” as opposed to the specific, work-related nature of the supervisor relationship. Dr. Kasson went on, “The coaching perspective kept me constantly reflecting and trying to figure out, ‘How do I make connections that I need to make in my work? What is the political sphere that I’m in and how do I maneuver?’”

During the final DLO Workshop, ARIT participants were teamed to provide an evidence of learning presentation. The assignment designed by the ARDT was for each team to present an overview of a future onboarding program for the ESSD central office. ARIT members were told to use anything from their personal experiences, from their own, independent research, to ideas gained during participation in this study’s activities. Each of the groups stated the need for a combination of tactics that included regular supervisor meetings, opportunities for coaching from non-department veterans, and for group learning activities that created conditions for support networking.

In the spirit of investiture that was reinforced during this study, the groups also suggested changes to future onboarding programs. These included improved processes for assigning coaches, the need for department-based leadership scenarios specific to their individual roles, and a collection of documents, such as the district’s strategic plan, to be part of the onboarding process. The fruitful discussions held over their presentations—during and since the final DLO session—led to the final theme in this study that addressed the third research question.

A Theme Related to Research Question Three

The third research question posed in this study asked, “How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding model on their own professional practice?” This study’s fourth and final theme emerged to address the third research question.

Theme Four: Common Onboarding Practices Enhanced School District Coherence

The ESSD has long enjoyed success in academic achievement and growth built upon a foundation of high community expectations. The fastest way to derail positive conditions is for a seemingly successful system to operate in a fragmented manner devoid of common purpose (Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021). In the years leading up to and during this study, the ESSD’s size and enrollment grew at record levels. At the same time, leader turnover at school and district levels also increased significantly. As a result, district coherence was at risk for derailment (Campbell & Fullan, 2019).

While several common processes for developing and supporting leaders were in place at the school level, the same could not be said for district leadership. The silo-based structure of the ESSD’s central office increased as departments grew larger. This action research study sought to improve the transition experiences of those leaders moving from school to district level roles. As

the study was carried out, a fourth theme emerged from its findings that addressed coherence and directly connected with this study's third research question: The development of common onboarding practices through the ESSD's central office leaders' collaborative efforts led to the enhancement of district coherence.

Coherence is defined as a systematic approach to school district leadership that includes the use of common vocabulary, clear protocols to identify and develop potential leaders, collaboration between district departments and schools, and an emphasis on creating conditions for success through a collective focus on strategic goals (Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021). The members of this study's ARDT included the leaders of five of the ESSD's central office departments: Human Resources, Student Support Services, Teaching and Learning, Operations, and Leadership. The mere fact that these leaders were regularly coming together to develop an onboarding program was a significant step in cross-departmental collaboration—a key element in building district coherence (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Zepeda et al., 2021).

From the first meeting, each member of the ARDT committed to using the same vocabulary, protocols, and documents when engaging in the study's interventions. Chief among the guiding documents was the use of the ESSD Leader Profile. In previous years, each member of the ARDT had participated in focus groups that developed the profile. However, no expectation had been laid out for its use in district-level leadership until this study. As shared by ARDT member, Wallace Wilson, "When you are intentional about the tenets of the Leader Profile, it brings consistency in terms of the skill sets our leaders have or need." As put by ARDT member Erin Emerson, the Leader Profile was a vital guide to "build those leaders" needed in the ESSD.

While the ESSD Leader Profile provided a common vocabulary for the ESSD's leaders, no district-level work had been done to plan activities aimed at developing leaders based on each tenet of the document. As ARDT members reviewed the research on learning agility, a close connection was identified between the profile and learning agile behaviors (see Table 4.3 in Chapter 4). ARDT members determined to embed learning agility into the interventions as a means for building skill in the newcomers that aligned to the district's Leader Profile. According to this study's findings, four learning agile behaviors emerged as being key to central office success: feedback seeking, vicarious learning, self-reflection, and unlearning,

The first two tenets of the ESSD Leader Profile focused on relationship building and communicating effectively. Key attributes under those tenets were the need for leaders to strive for self-awareness, while seeking to understand multiple perspectives. The ARDT reviewed the research on learning agility, learning that Harvey and Prager (2021) proposed that learnable behaviors could be developed and would lead to a newcomer's ability to connect with others in the central office. Connecting with others was determined by the ARDT to be a significant skill required in fulfilling the relationship and communication elements of the ESSD Leader Profile.

As newcomers to the ESSD central office found, seeking feedback would be instrumental in learning what their supervisors expected from them. Learning how to seek that feedback became part of the discussion that ARIT members had with their supervisors, as well as with their district coaches. In striving to be coachable, the newcomers were also opened to the importance of vicarious learning from veteran leaders in the ESSD. As ARIT member Jim Young stated, "I would rather learn from the mistakes of others than make them myself."

To facilitate this new learning, the ARDT developed a set of Leadership Situation Scenarios that all members would use in their coaching sessions (see Appendix G for examples).

In problem solving these hypothetical situations, ARIT members were asked to seek input from their coaches and colleagues. Resolutions were then shared with the whole cohort during DLO Workshops. These intervention activities served not only to develop newcomers' skills, but also provided common vocabulary, protocols, and activities practiced across district departments, all important to the development of district coherence (Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021). As the study progressed, it was observed that ARIT members became more comfortable reaching across district departments.

Ultimately, the feedback seeking and vicarious learning helped the ARIT and ARDT members, alike, to improve relationship-building and communicating, as described by the ESSD Leader Profile. In Harvey and Prager's (2021) work on the development of learning agility, they shared that activities aimed reflecting and unlearning led leaders to process and frame the nature of challenges. According to Harvey and Prager (2021), the formulation of questions and the letting go of obsolete practices or perceptions were key to developing new thinking.

As found in this study, new thinking was required for school leaders transitioning to the central office in the ESSD. As described in the ESSD Leader Profile, intentionality and innovation were two tenets imperative to effective leadership, both of which required self-reflection and unlearning. Again, committed to using common instruments to facilitate the interventions, the ARDT opted to use the Harden Shifts Chart (2009). At each DLO Workshop, the ARDT presented three of the nine shifts. ARDT members facilitated a discussion around each shift, providing personal examples and allowing for ARIT members to relay their experiences.

As ARIT members worked through real-world challenges of their own jobs, along with the Leadership Situation Scenarios, the Harden Shifts Chart (2009) provided them context to

make sense of their experiences. As ARIT member Shannon Fields proclaimed, “The shifts are a real thing that a lot of people experience.” She went on, “Seeing them on paper makes you feel less isolated, that this isn’t just me, that I’m not the only one struggling with this.”

Based on the findings of this study, the combination of shift thinking and situational scenarios aided in developing the ability to unlearn practices and perceptions built while at the school level. Developing the skill of unlearning was done in tandem with self-reflection, as ARIT member Brittini Morgan explained:

I had to unlearn the speed at which things happen. I have had to unlearn my thinking about trial and error, as you can’t do trial and error at the district level. You have to unlearn that decisions can be made cut and dry. It is very, very gray, here. You have to unlearn how to answer people at the schools who just want a black and white answer.

In short, Ms. Morgan summarized the value of the unlearning and self-reflecting when she stated that “the shifts and scenarios are anchor resources to help create common questions” that guided her and her fellow newcomers through the transition.

While interventions were designed to aid in newcomer transition in the ESSD central office, the ARDT found themselves being impacted during the implementation process. For Ms. Emerson, “The whole reflective piece to the self-awareness led me to think back and ask, ‘How did I handle that? How did I onboard my staff?’ So, you’re constantly in that state of reflecting on your own leadership.” Similarly, Mr. Wilson found that going through the shifts and scenarios has made him “more intentional about why you do things. You really think through every angle of what they’re trying to do and how to support them as they come on board.”

In an effort to provide a purposeful direction, cultivate collaboration, and deepen learning, the ARDT was motivated by what Fullan and Quinn (2016) called the “Right Drivers”

for developing district coherence. Using the ESSD Leader Profile was a key to establishing a common vocabulary for ARIT and ARDT participants, alike. The use of common activities to develop learning agility behaviors helped all participants improve as effective leaders. That focus on learning agility also aided in the participants' ability to understand the shifts needed to adjust their leadership lenses from a school to a district perspective. Implementing collaboratively-designed activities through organizational socialization tactics—Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings, One-on-One Coaching Sessions, and District Leadership Onboarding Workshops—meant that common protocols were used. The net effect of these efforts was that common onboarding practices were found to enhance school district coherence in the ESSD.

Limitations of the Current Study

The limitations of this study begin with the nature of qualitative research, itself. The lead researcher served as both an observer and a participant who was actively involved in the development, design, and implementation of interventions—a practice consistent with qualitative action research (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014). As a result of the deep involvement of the lead researcher, bias and subjectivity were inevitable (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Despite efforts to mitigate bias, it certainly existed and impacted the findings of the study. Additionally, it should be noted that those findings are not generalizable, rather they are specific to the case study conducted within the context of the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). Again, this is consistent with the nature of qualitative case study research, in which a limited sample within a very specific context is analyzed for a local purpose (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014).

Along with the challenges inherent in a qualitative action research case study, there were additional factors that must be considered limitations. Perhaps most significant was the fact that the lead researcher served in the ESSD as Deputy Superintendent when the study commenced.

Shortly thereafter, he was elevated to the role of Superintendent in the ESSD. This positioned the lead researcher at the top of the school district's administrative hierarchy, meaning that each of the participants was, in fact, under his authority. That reality may have impacted the views shared by participants during data collection and implementation activities. The lead researcher's position could possibly have impacted participant behaviors during the study.

As only those newly named leaders at the coordinator level or higher were asked to participate in this study, others in the ESSD central office who had originally worked in a school level setting were left out. Along with those district employees beneath the coordinator level who were left out of the study, the leaders working in the ESSD central office who had not served as either a principal or assistant principal were also eliminated from consideration when invitations to participate were made. These methods of selection could also be deemed as limitations to the study, as other newcomers in the ESSD central office might have benefited from the interventions while providing additional perspectives to the study's findings.

Finally, those potential limitations are part of the nature of action research. As the purpose of this study was to focus on the needs of those leaders being onboarded to the ESSD central office, the findings were representative of this system. The scope of this study was narrowly focused and situated in the context of the ESSD. While the data collected were specific to the participants and structures used in that school system, there were findings that provide a basis for further consideration in the realm of policymaking, academic research, and in the ESSD's future practices. Those implications are explored in the next sections of this chapter.

Implications of the Study for Policy Makers

The study conducted in the ESSD focused on improving the onboarding experience of school level leaders transitioning to central office leadership. A backdrop to public school

leadership at the time this study was conducted was the ongoing cultural divide that had become a part of school board politics. The ESSD was not immune to these socio-political forces. The VUCA world included the ESSD. From debates over the meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs to the appropriateness of school media center or library books, nearly every issue raised at ESSD's Board of Education meetings during this study had the potential for policy implications.

Three areas of state legislation that became law at the start of this study were the state's *Divisive Concepts (20-1-11)*, *Parents Bill of Rights (20-2-786)*, and *Materials Harmful to Minors (20-2-324.6)*. Perhaps the most significant federal legislation that was still being sorted out during this study was the reinterpretation of *Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*. While each of these areas of law play out in the public court of opinion, as well as in federal and state courtrooms, it will be incumbent upon local policy makers in the ESSD to provide the professional learning resources needed to guide their newest district leaders. Ensuring that newcomers to the central office are well-versed in these legalities will be vital to compliance at district and school levels of leadership. Compliance, however, is only part of the imperative.

These new cultural and legal realities only added to the weight and breadth described by the participants in this study as they transitioned to their new roles in the central office. Developing the learning agility to manage, adapt, and lead in a VUCA environment will be necessary for the future success of leaders in the ESSD. Providing equitable opportunities to all students, while adhering to state restrictions on classroom and library materials, could prove to be contradictory, thus requiring great levels of dexterity and agility among ESSD's leaders.

As policy makers in the ESSD look to expand leadership capacity, they should consider requiring professional learning to equip both new and existing system leaders for VUCA

challenges. In doing so, the ESSD's policy makers should seek research-proven strategies and methods for leadership development. As the findings of this study revealed, there are implications that apply to academic researchers, as well.

Implications of the Study for Researchers

The theoretical framework for this study was rooted in the organizational socialization theory proposed by Van Maanen and Schein (1977). Applying socialization tactics in an intentional way produced predictable outcomes that led to a strong, custodial response by participants in the study (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). For the participants in this study who failed to receive intentional socialization by their supervisors, a genuine struggle ensued as they sought to find clarity in their new role and purpose that aligned to the ESSD's strategic objectives. As supervisors facilitated activities that were intentionally designed in accordance with socialization theory, the newcomers' experiences improved as predicted (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

The socialization tactics used in this study included formal, serial, collective, and investiture tactics. In situations described by participants, the biggest struggles occurred when their supervisors failed to provide clear expectations and critical feedback. As predicted, these participants described feelings of frustration, lack of support, and overall low morale (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). For those who felt they understood their expectations and were provided ongoing feedback, a stronger sense of self-efficacy followed, along with increased empowerment. In all cases, the participants indicated the development of a social support network through the cohort model. Further research is encouraged to develop ways of measuring desired socialized outcomes such as organizational commitment and workplace engagement, as described by Van Maanen and Schein (1977). Given the scope of the action research process, it

was not possible to determine the long-term impact and whether the desired socialized outcomes were ultimately realized. To make those determinations, a longitudinal study is suggested.

The socialization tactics provided the delivery methods for this study's interventions. The interventions, themselves, focused on three main goals: to reduce newcomer uncertainty, to enhance leadership role clarity, and to develop learning agility in each participant. While these three areas of onboarding were included as part of the theoretical framework for this study, an additional area should also be considered for deeper investigation: isolation.

Emerging as a major theme in this study, the isolation that new leaders felt when leaving the school building for central office leadership roles was palpable. While the lack of clear expectations and role clarity contributed to this isolation, it was beyond the scope of this study to determine true causation. Bauer's (2010) Four C's of onboarding touch on the need for newcomer "connection." More research, however, should be considered to understand the cause of isolation and to provide specific remedies for combating it.

Harden's (2009) work on the shifts leaders need to make in their leadership lens when moving from school level to central office leadership proved to be an exceptionally accurate description for comparing the two work environments. As the findings of this study suggested, just being able to articulate the nature of their struggles was deemed helpful by participants. However, what was not clear and would require further academic investigation would be to go beyond the articulation of the shifts and into the development of activities that would help newcomers to adjust more quickly.

The findings of this study illustrate that there was a significant difference between *pivoting* from school to district level leadership and *shifting* from one leadership context to another. Assuming that one's school-based frame of reference would be an easy pivot once

reaching the district office proved to be a fool's errand. Successful transitioning required more than simply reapplying one's skills to a new role. Unlike pivoting, making the necessary shifts to district leadership required significant unlearning and relearning among the study's participants. As discovered over the course of this study, the idea of unlearning was not inherent in leaders who had spent a large portion of their career in one setting—in this case, the school building—as demonstrated in their struggles to make the shifts as presented by Harden (2009).

Unlearning, as well as the ability to seek feedback, self-reflect, and learn vicariously from others, were all found in this study to be necessary to make those shifts. Continued research into learning agility is strongly encouraged. The question of whether learning agility is a skill that can be developed (Church & Seaton, 2022; De Meuse, 2017; Harvey & Prager, 2021; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Milani et al., 2021) or is a natural ability that can simply be used as a predictor of future success (Dries et al., 2012) must be explored further. While many of the activities conducted during this study were predicated on the research that learning agility could be taught and learned, the scope of this action research case was far too narrow to settle that question.

The next recommendation bridges the implications of this study from researchers to the ESSD's practitioners. The scope of this action research study was limited to onboarding those who received appointments to serve in the ESSD's central office. However, deeper inquiry is suggested for understanding "how" and "why" these leaders were chosen. At the academic research level, that question should be posed for public school settings. Muchinsky and Monahan's (1987) seminal work on person-work environment fit should be explored in the context of school system hiring practices. Are vacancies in district leadership positions being filled for complimentary or supplementary needs, or are positions being filled based on the reputations or personal connections of candidates (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987)?

School system succession planning requires deeper academic inquiry, as well as local consideration. While succession planning is an important area for further research, it is something that applies very much to the ESSD directly, as this system has continued to see a growth in leadership roles due to its expanding size as a district. Additional implications from this study for the ESSD are explored in the next section of this chapter.

Implications of the Study for Practitioners

This study provided the lead researcher and participants an opportunity to analyze and articulate the challenges associated with moving from school to district level leadership in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). As findings and themes emerged to provide answers to the study's research questions, additional observations were made that require future consideration. The following implications for further study are accompanied by recommendations.

One revelation that emerged during this study was that most of the ESSD's leadership positions at the coordinator level or higher served as "singletons," meaning they had no peer within their departments nor job-alike colleagues with whom to navigate their new role. As shared by this study's participants, their new reality was one that they simply were not prepared for, as it was so different from their school-based experiences. Being a "lone" leader with high-level responsibilities added to the weight carried by the ESSD's newcomers, as well as the sense of isolation they felt upon their arrival to the central office.

New Food and Nutrition Director, Jim Young, shared his level of reliance on connecting with neighboring district and state-level leaders in his field. While working with his district coach and department supervisor helped him make the transition to his new leadership environment, he received nothing that helped him understand the day-to-day work involved in

his new role. His experience was one shared by multiple participants in this study. For Mr. Young, the connection to peers across the state helped him tremendously. Intentionally connecting newcomers with job-alike peers outside of the district should be something considered for all singletons moving into the ESSD central office.

In addition to the singleton challenge facing the ESSD's newest district leaders, the actual structure of the central office lent itself a silo-effect between departments. This reality also added to the sense of isolation newcomers felt as they transitioned into the ESSD's central office. The loss of their support system, coupled with territorial lines between departments, made it difficult for newcomers to know who to turn to when initiating important district work. While the isolation part of this challenge was confronted in this study, the silo structure should also be addressed, as failing to do so can lead to serious strategic challenges for the district (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Moore Johnson et al., 2015; Zepeda et al., 2021).

As Zepeda et al. (2021) noted, the conditions needed for success can best be created where system leaders have a coherent approach to strategic objectives. Cross-departmental collaboration at the district level models the effectiveness that can emerge when leaders step out of their silos to work together (Zepeda et al., 2021). It is recommended that practitioners in the ESSD systematically collaborate to address strategic goals and improve a sense of system coherence (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Zepeda et al., 2021). The work of the ARDT in this study demonstrated a model for cross-departmental collaboration, addressing an important school system need that, based on the study's findings, enhanced system coherence.

An additional recommendation for improving cross-departmental collaboration and increasing district coherence in the ESSD is to expand the onboarding experiences implemented during this study to include leaders of all levels in the central office. This study focused on a

group of seven leaders that had all been school level leaders and who served at the district level in coordinator or higher roles. As the activities they engaged in improved levels of collaboration and coherence, the ESSD's decision makers should consider implementing an onboarding program for anyone entering central office leadership. This is particularly important for new leaders coming into the ESSD from different districts, as they face the combined challenge of learning a new role with learning the nuances associated with leadership in the ESSD.

As this study aimed to reduce uncertainty among newcomers and to assist them with leading in a new context, the relatively new concept of learning agility served as the third focus of the interventions implemented. This study's ARDT designed activities to build up newcomers' learning agile behaviors such as self-reflection, feedback seeking, unlearning, and vicarious learning. In the academic community, the debate still remains over the nature of learning agility: can it be developed or is it simply a predictor of future leadership success? (De Meuse, 2017; Dries et al., 2012; Harvey & Prager, 2021).

It is recommended for practitioners in the ESSD to follow the research on learning agility to aid in the identification and development of new leaders. This recommendation has two streams of thought emanating from it. This first is that the use of learning agility to identify future central office leaders should be part of a wider investigation into the ESSD's succession planning and hiring practices. As demonstrated in this study, learning agile behaviors overlap with the ESSD Leader Profile. This provides a ready-made matrix for identifying leaders in a coherent manner—one which also helps to eliminate biases from hiring practices.

The second stream of thinking stemming from learning agility relates to the potential for it to undergird a district office leadership preparation program. The concept of learning agility in the context of this study demonstrated its value in two clear ways. The first came as it was used

to help newcomers make the shifts described by Harden (2009). These shifts in the newcomers' leadership lenses required learning agile behaviors. The second came as learning agility proved to enhance the attributes spelled out in the ESSD Leader Profile. Just as these three elements—learning agility, the Leader Profile, and the Harden Shifts (2009)—all worked together to provide a foundation for an onboarding program, they could be leveraged to develop a preparation program for the school district, as well. In considering this, the ESSD could see a continued enhancement of district coherence found in this study.

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this action research case study was to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in the East Smithfield School District (ESSD). In a system that prided itself on its leadership development and intentional induction practices for school level leaders, there was no such level of preparation or support afforded new central office leaders. Surprisingly to the lead researcher, very little evidence existed that other school districts had developed systematic programs of support in their central offices, either.

This study was developed through an organizational socialization framework for onboarding new employees (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). While the research was not specific to public school environments, it was adopted for this study and quickly showed to be instructive. Many of the predictions made by Van Maanen and Schein (1977) regarding a lack of intentional socialization emerged quickly, as frustration, fear, and disillusionment described the feelings of those new to the ESSD's central office. Given the recent growth in the ESSD, as

well as the increase in turnover among the system's leaders, the study was conducted out of urgency.

Adding to that urgency was the fact that the study commenced at the heels of a global pandemic, as well as against the backdrop of heated political-cultural battles that had made their way into the ESSD board room. The environment for educational leaders in the ESSD reflected that of the “volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous new world” described by Harvey and Valerio (2022, p. 269). The best protection against the perils that school systems face in an increasingly VUCA world is to have a common purpose with a deep level of school district coherence (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021). According to Zepeda et al. (2021), district coherence can be the most vital component in keeping a school system stable.

Strengthening the abilities of the ESSD's new central office leaders was a driving motivation behind the study. However, before attempting to provide solutions, the need to understand the challenges facing the newest leaders had to be considered from their perspective, first (Bryk et al., 2015). The ESSD's primary administrative decision-makers came together as the study's Action Research Design Team (ARDT) to collaborate on the development of an onboarding program that addressed newcomer challenges. Using a Determine, Select, Implement, Assess and Address (DSIAA) logic model over three cycles of action research (Bryk et al., 2015; Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Jones, 1986; Moen, 2009, Van Maanen & Schein, 1977), the ARDT became a more reflective and collaborative unit guided by a common purpose.

Over the course of the study, participants became more cognizant of the importance of their work and the intentionality needed for continued success in the ESSD. As the study's Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), the newcomers shared their experiences, challenges, and frustrations. Before headway could be made in strengthening the newcomers'

leadership skills, the ARDT had to address the growing isolation experienced by the ARIT members, which stemmed from feelings of loss, lack of clear expectations, little constructive feedback, and coming to grips with the weight and breadth of their new roles.

The ARDT addressed those challenges by leaning into organizational socialization tactics, which included bringing together the newcomers as a cohort, as well as providing them individualized attention through supervisors and coaches (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). As a result, the uncertainty that drove much of the ARIT members' anxiety was reduced and their ability to adjust their leadership lenses from a school to a district perspective improved. In making those adjustments, ARIT members began reaching out across district departments and finding support networks.

The use of common tools, meeting agendas, and activities by members of the ARDT allowed for greater collaboration among the veterans as they reflected on the effectiveness of the interventions. The use of the Harden Shifts Chart, Leadership Situation Scenarios, and the ESSD Leader Profile, along with activities designed to enhance learning agility, provided both the ARDT and ARIT members with a common lexicon. Meeting as a large group on a regular basis for District Leadership Onboarding (DLO) Workshops provided a cohort experience that deepened to connections among the newcomers and their leaders across district departments.

There appeared at the time of this study to be no end in sight for growth in the ESSD and its surrounding community. More than two dozen district leaders are within three years of full retirement. The ESSD will be adding more new members to its central office in the years to come. District coherence and strong leadership will be required to maintain the success that the ESSD community demands (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Thessin, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2021). It will be vital that the work commenced by this study

is reviewed and regularly improved for the successful onboarding and support of new leaders in the ESSD central office.

REFERENCES

- Adams, C.M., & Miskell, R.C. (2016). Teacher trust in district administration: A promising line of inquiry. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 52(4), 675-706.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X16652202>
- Anderson, E., & Young, M.D. (2018). If they knew then what we know now, why haven't things changed? An examination of district effectiveness research. *Frontiers in Education*, 3(87), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2018.00087>
- Annink, A. (2017). Using the research journal during qualitative data collection in a cross-cultural context. *Entrepreneurship Research Journal*, 7(1), 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/erj-2015-0063>
- Bakker, A.B., Demerouti, E., & Sanz-Vergel, A.I. (2014). Burnout and work engagement: The JD-R approach. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 1(1), 389-411. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091235>
- Bauer, T.N. (2010). Onboarding new employees: Maximizing success. *SHRM Foundation's effective practice guideline series*. SHRM Foundation.
- Bauer, T.N., Bodner, T., Erdogan, B., Truxillo, D., & Tucker, J. (2007). Newcomer adjustment during organizational socialization: A meta-analytic review of antecedents, outcomes, and methods. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(3), 707-721.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.3.707>

- Becker, K., & Bish, A. (2021). A framework for understanding the role of unlearning in onboarding. *Human Resources Management Review*, 31(1), 1-13.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2019.100730>
- Bengtson, E., Zepeda, S.J., & Parylo, O. (2013). School systems' practices of controlling socialization during principal succession: Looking through the lens of an organizational socialization theory. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 41(2), 143-164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143212468344>
- Bertrand, M., & Sampson, C. (2022). Challenging systemic racism in school board meetings through intertextual co-optation. *Critical Studies in Education*, 63(3), 323-339.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2020.1765823>
- Bialek, T.K., & Hagen, M.S. (2021). Cohort-based leadership development for high-potential employees: A model for programmatic design. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 33(4), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.21459>
- Bloomberg, L.D. (2023). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A roadmap from beginning to end* (5th ed.). SAGE.
- Bloomberg, L.D., & Volpe, M. (2019). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A roadmap from beginning to end* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Boyce, J., & Bowers, A.J. (2018). Toward an evolving conceptualization of instructional leadership as leadership for learning. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 56(2), 161-182. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-06-2016-0064>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *American Psychological Association*, 9(1), 3-26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qap0000196>
- Bray, D.W., Campbell, R.J., & Grant, D.L. (1974). *Formative years in business: A long-term AT&T study of managerial lives*. Wiley. <https://lccn.loc.gov/73015990>
- Bryk, A.S., Gomez, L.M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P.G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.
- Cable, D.M., Gino, F., & Staats, B.R. (2013). Breaking them in or eliciting their best? Reframing socialization around newcomers' authentic self-expression. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 58(1), 1-36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839213477098>
- Caldwell, C., & Peters, R. (2018). New employee onboarding - psychological contracts and ethical perspectives. *Journal of Management Development*, 37(1), 27-39. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-10-2016-0202>
- Campbell, D., & Fullan, M. (2019). *The governance core: School boards, superintendents, and schools working together*. Corwin.
- Castiglione Andrews, T., O'Connor, M., Hartmann, A., Buckner, M., de Beer, Y., Sipsma, L., & Such, M. (2022). The application of learning agility: A practitioner perspective. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 74(3), 311-328. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000234>
- Cegarra-Navarro, J.G., Wensley, A.K.P., & Sanchez Polo, M.T. (2014). A conceptual framework for unlearning in a homecare setting. *Knowledge Management Research & Practice*, 12(4) 375-386. <https://doi.org/10.1057/kmrp.2013.6>
- Church, A., & Seaton, G. (2022). Learning agility as a key driver of leadership potential for talent identification, pipeline development, and succession planning in organizations. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 74(3), 237-252. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000238>

- Coghlan, D., & Brannick, T. (2014) *Doing action research in your own organization* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Cohen, D.K., & Mehta, J.D. (2017). Why reform sometimes succeeds: Understanding the conditions that produce reforms that last. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(4), 644-690. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217700078>
- Corey, S.M. (1954). Action research in education. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 47(5), 375-380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.1954.10882121>
- Creswell, J.W. (2013) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Daskalaki, M. (2012). Recontextualizing new employee induction: Organizational entry as a change space. *The Journal of Applied Behavior Science*, 48(1), 93-114. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886310395899>
- De Meuse, K.P. (2017). Learning agility: Its evolution as a psychological construct and its empirical relationship to leader success. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 69(4), 267–295. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000100>
- De Meuse, K.P. (2022). Learning agility: Could it become the g-factor of leadership? *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 74(3), 215-236. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000216>
- De Meuse, K.P., & Harvey, V.S. (2021). Learning agility: The DNA for leaders and organizations in the twenty-first century. In Harvey & De Meuse (Eds.), *Age of agility: Building learning agile leaders and organizations* (pp. 3-30). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190085353.003.0001>

- De Meuse, K.P., Dai, G., & Hallenbeck, G.S. (2010). Learning agility: A construct whose time has come. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 62(2), 119–130.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019988>
- DeRue, D.S., Ashford, S.J., & Myers, C.G. (2012). Learning agility: In search of conceptual clarity and theoretical grounding. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 5(3), 258 –279.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01444.x>
- Dries, N., Vantilborgh, T., & Pepermans, R. (2012). The role of learning agility and career variety in the identification and development of high potential employees. *Personnel Review*, 41(3), 340-358. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00483481211212977>
- Dweck, C.S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Ballantine Books.
- Ellis, A.M., Nifadkar, S.S., Bauer, T.N., & Erdogan, B. (2017). Newcomer adjustment: Examining the role of managers' perception of newcomer proactive behavior during organizational socialization. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102(6), 993.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/apl0000201>
- Ellis, A., Bauer, T., Mansfield, L., Erdogan, B., Truxillo, D., & Simon, L. (2015). Navigating uncharted waters: Newcomer socialization through the lens of stress theory. *Journal of Management*, 41(1), 203-235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314557525>
- Farley, A.N., & Leonardi, B. (2021). Beyond bathroom bills and the gender identity debate: Complicating the policy conversation about supporting trans students in schools. *Educational Policy*, 35(2), 274-303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904820986770>

- Ferrare, J.J., & Phillippo, K. (2023). Conflict theory, extended: A framework for understanding contemporary struggles over education policy. *Education Policy*, 37(3), 587-623. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048211042567>
- Fiol, M., & O'Connor, E. (2017). Unlearning established organizational routines - Part II. *The Learning Organization*, 24(2), 82-92. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-09-2016-0063>
- Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2016). *Coherence: The right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems*. Corwin.
- Glanz, J. (2014). *Action research: An educational leader's guide to school improvement* (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Goldring, E.B., Clark, M.A., Rubin, M., Rogers, L.K., Grissom, J.A., Gill, B., Kautz, T., McCullough, M., Neel, M., & Burnett, A. (2020). Changing the principal supervisor role to better support principals: Evidence from the Principal Supervisor Initiative. *Mathematica*.
- Grace, J., Simieou, F., Lastrapes, R.E., & Decman, J. (2022). Confronting the racism boogeyman: Educational leaders make meaning of the impact of George Floyd. *Education, Citizenship, and Social Justice*, 0(0), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17461979221123014>
- Greenlee, B., & Karanxha, Z. (2010). A study of group dynamics in educational leadership cohort and non-cohort groups. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 5(1), 357-382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/194277511000501101>
- Groves, K.S., & Feyerherm, A.E. (2022). Developing a leadership potential model for the new era of work and organizations. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 43(6), 978-998. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-06-2021-0258>

Harden, D. (2009). Shifts: District office professional development program orientation guide. *Georgia School Superintendent Association*.

Harter, J. (2023). US employee engagement needs a rebound in 2023. *Gallup.com*.

<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/468233/employee-engagement-needs-rebound-2023.aspx?version=print>

Harvey, V.S., & Prager, R.Y. (2021). Developing learning agile behavior: A model and overview. In Harvey & De Meuse (Eds.), *Age of agility: Building learning agile leaders and organizations* (pp.145-181). Oxford University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190085353.003.0006>

Harvey, V.S., & Valerio, A.M. (2022). Coaching to accelerate the development of learning agility. *Consulting Psychology Journal* 74(3), 269-290.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000223>

Hines, E.M., Mayes, R.D., Harris, P.C., & Vega, D. (2023). Using a culturally responsive MTSS approach to prepare Black males for postsecondary opportunities. *School Psychology Review*, 52(3), 357-371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.2018917>

Honig, M. (2012). District central office leadership as teaching: How central office administrators support principals' development as instructional leaders. *Education Administration Quarterly*, 48(4), 733-774. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X12443258>

Honig, M.I., & Hatch, T.C. (2004). Crafting coherence: How schools strategically manage multiple, external demands. *Educational Researcher*, 33(8), 16-30.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033008016>

- Honig, M.I., & Rainey, L.R. (2019). Supporting principal supervisors: What really matters? *Journal of Educational Administration*, 57(5), 445-462.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-05-2019-0089>
- Jeske, D., & Olson, D. (2022). Onboarding new hires: Recognising mutual learning opportunities. *Journal of Work Applied Management*, 14(1), 63-76.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JWAM-04-2021-0036>
- Jones, G.R. (1986). Socialization tactics, self-efficacy, and newcomers' adjustments to organizations. *Academy of Management Journal*, 29(2), 262-279.
<https://doi.org/10.5465/256188>
- Kang, S., & Berliner, D.C. (2012). Characteristics of teacher induction programs and turnover rates of beginning teachers. *The Teacher Educator*, 47(4), 268-282.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730.2012.707758>
- Karagiorgi, Y., Afantiti-Lamprianou, T., Alexandrou-Leonidou, V., Karamanou, M., & Symeou, L. (2018). 'Out of the Box' leadership: Action research towards school improvement. *Educational Action Research*, 26(2), 239-257.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2017.1310052>
- Kiger, M.E., & Varpio, L. (2020). Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE Guide No. 131. *Medical Teacher*, 42(8), 846-854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030>
- Klein, H.J., & Heuser, A.E. (2008). The learning of socialization content: A framework for researching orientating practices. *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, 27, 279-336. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-7301\(08\)27007-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-7301(08)27007-6)

- Klein, H.J., Polin, B., & Sutton, K.L. (2015). Specific onboarding practices for the socialization of new employees. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 23(3), 263-283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsa.12113>
- Kolb, D.A. (2015). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2nd ed.). Pearson.
- Kristof-Brown, A.L., & Billsberry, J. (2013). *Fit for the future*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Krueger, R.A., & Casey, M.A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Sage
- Lanoue, P.D., & Zepeda, S.J. (2018). *The emerging work of today's superintendent: Leading schools and communities to educate all children*. Rowan & Littlefield.
- Leithwood, K. (2010). Characteristics of school districts that are exceptionally effective in closing the achievement gap. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 9(3), 245–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700761003731500>
- Leithwood, K., Sun, J., & McCullough, C. (2019). How school districts influence student achievement. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 57(5), 519-539. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-09-2018-0175>
- Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. *Journal of Social Issues*, 2(4), 34-46.
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1986). But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New Directions Program Evaluation*, 1986(30), 73-84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1427>
- Lombardo, M., & Eichinger, R. (2000). High potentials as high learners. *Human Resources Management*, 39(4), 321-329. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-050X\(200024\)39:4%3C321::AID-HRM4%3E3.0.CO;2-1](https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-050X(200024)39:4%3C321::AID-HRM4%3E3.0.CO;2-1)

- Maier, G., & Brunstein, J. (2001). The role of personal work goals in newcomers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment: A longitudinal analysis. *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(5), 1034-1042. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0021-9010.86.5.1034>
- Marzano, R.J., & Waters, T. (2009). *District leadership that works: Striking the right balance*. Solution Tree Press.
- McCauley, C.D., & Yost, P.R. (2021). Stepping to the edge of one's comfort zone. In Harvey & De Meuse (Eds.), *Age of agility: Building learning agile leaders and organizations* (pp.145-181). Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190085353.003.0008>
- McQuillan, M.T. (2023). Scaling gender and sexual diversity policies in K-12 schools. *Educational Policy*, 37(4), 910-952. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048211058461>
- Melin, U., & Axelsson, K. (2007). Action in Action Research – Illustrations of what, who, why, where, and when from an E-Government project. *International Conference on Electronic Government*, 44-55. [LNCS 4656 - Electronic Government \(springer.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-72881-2_5)
- Merriam, S.B., & Grenier, R.S. (2019). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Mertler, C. (2021). Action research as teacher inquiry: A viable strategy for resolving problems of practice. *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation*, 26(19), 1-12.
https://scholarworks.umass.edu/pare/vol26/iss1/19?utm_source=scholarworks.umass.edu
- Milani, R., Setti, I., & Argento, P. (2021). Learning agility and talent management: A systematic review and future prospects. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 73(4), 349-371.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000209>

- Mitchinson, A., Gerard, N.M., Roloff, K.S., & Burke, W.W. (2012). Learning agility: Spanning the rigor-relevance divide. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 5(3), 287-290.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01446.x>
- Moen, R. (2009, September). Foundation and history of the PDSA cycle. In *Asian network for quality conference*. Tokyo.
[PDSA History. 16th Deming Research Seminar Feb. 2010.Moen.docx \(neuplace.net\)](#)
- Moore Johnson, S., Marietta, G., Higgins, M., Mapp, K., & Grossman, A. (2015). *Achieving coherence in district improvement: Managing the relationship between the central office and schools*. Harvard Education Press.
- Muchinsky, P.M., & Monahan, C.J. (1987). What is person-environment congruence? Supplementary versus complementary models of fit. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 31(3), 268-277. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791\(87\)90043-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(87)90043-1)
- Nicolaides, A., & McCallum, D.C. (2013). Inquiry in action for leadership in turbulent times: Exploring the connections between transformative learning and adaptive learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 11(4), 246-260.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344614540333>
- Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E., & Moules, N.J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1-13.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Owens, S. (2015). Georgia's teacher dropout crisis: A look at why nearly half of Georgia's public school teachers are leaving the profession. *Georgia Department of Education*.
[Teacher Survey Results.pdf \(gadoe.org\)](#)

- Park, S., & Kim, E.J. (2020). Exploring linkages between unlearning and human resource development: Revisiting unlearning cases. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 31(2), 6-16. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.21387>
- Peel, K.L. (2020). A beginner's guide to applied educational research using thematic analysis. *Practical Assessment, Research, & Evaluation*, 25(2), 1-16. <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/pare/vol25/iss1/2/>
- Pulakos, E.D., Kantrowitz, T., & Schneider, B. (2019). What leads to organizational agility: It's not what you think. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 71(4), 305-320. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000150>
- Rogers, L., & Van Gronigen, B. (2021). Beyond preparation: State approaches to early career principal induction. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 22(3), 600-624. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2021.1977333>
- Ronfeldt, M., & McQueen, K. (2017). Does new teacher induction really improve retention? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 68(4), 394-410. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117702583>
- Rothwell, W. (2010). *Effective succession planning: Ensuring leadership continuity and building talent from within* (4th ed.), American Management Association.
- Rushmer, R., & Davies, H.T.O. (2004). Unlearning in health care. *BMJ Quality & Safety*, 13(suppl 2), ii10-ii15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/qshc.2003.009506>
- Saks, A.M., & Gruman, J.A. (2018). Socialization resources theory and newcomers' work engagement: A new pathway to newcomer socialization. *Career Development International*, 23(1), 12-32. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-12-2016-0214>

- Schmitt, J., & De Courcy, K. (2022). The pandemic has exacerbated a long-standing shortage of teachers. *Economic Policy Institute*.
- Silzer, R., & Church, A.H. (2009). The pearls and perils of identifying potential. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 2(4), 377-412.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2009.01163.x>
- Smith, S.S., Peters, R., & Caldwell, C. (2016). Creating a culture of engagement - insights for application. *Business and Management Research*, 5(2), 70-80.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/bmr.v5i2p70>
- Somekh, B., & Zeichner, K. (2009). Action research for educational reform: Remodeling action research theories and practices in local contexts. *Educational Action Research*, 17(1), 5-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790802667402>
- Steinberg, M., & Yang, H. (2022). Does principal professional development improve schooling outcomes? Evidence from Pennsylvania's Inspired Leadership Induction Program, *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 15(4), 799-847.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2022.2052386>
- Sutherland, D. (2023). Capacity and control: Superintendent-school board relations in locally controlled districts. *Education Administration Quarterly*, 59(3), 667-699.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X231159135>
- Swaminathan, R., & Reed, L. (2020). Mentor perspectives on mentoring new school leaders. *Journal of School Leadership*, 30(3), 219-237.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684619884785>

- Tavory, I. (2020). Interviews and inference: Making sense of interview data in qualitative research. *Qualitative Sociology*, 43, 449-465.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-020-09464-x>
- Thessin, R.A. (2019). Establishing productive principal/principal supervisor partnerships for instructional leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 57(5), 463-483.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-09-2018-0184>
- Tingle, E., Corrales, A., & Peters, M.L (2019) Leadership development programs: Investing in school principals. *Educational Studies*, 45(1), 1-16.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2017.1382332>
- Uhl-Bien, M., Marion, R., & McKelvey, B. (2007). Complexity leadership theory: Shifting leadership from the industrial age to the knowledge era. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(4), 298-318. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.04.002>
- Uhl-Bien, M., & Arena, M. (2018). Leadership for organizational adaptability: A theoretical synthesis and integrative framework. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 29(1), 89-104.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.12.009>
- Van Maanen, J.E., & Schein, E.H. (1977). *Toward a theory of organizational socialization*. MIT. dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/1934/?sequence=1
- Van Vianen, A.E.M. (2018). Person–environment fit: A review of its basic tenets. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 5(1), 75-101.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104702>
- Warin, J., Maddock, M., Pell, A., & Hargreaves, L. (2007). Resolving identity dissonance through reflective and reflexive practice in teaching. *Reflective Practice*, 7(2), 233-245.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14623940600688670>

- White, R.S., Evans, M.P., & Malin, J.R. (2023). Political battles in suburbia. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 104(5), 6-10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00317217231156223>
- Williams, M., & Moser, T. (2019). The art of coding and thematic exploration in qualitative research. *International Management Review*, 15(1), p. 45-55.
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (Vol. 5). SAGE
- Yost, P.R., DeHaas, C., & Allison, M. (2021). Leaning agility, resilience, and successful derailment. In Harvey & De Meuse (Eds.), *Age of agility: Building learning agile leaders and organizations* (pp. 301-324). Oxford University Press.
- <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190085353.003.0012>
- Zieman, G.A. (2012). Participant Observation. In: Klein, S.R. (Eds) *Action Research Methods*. (pp. 49-67). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137046635_3
- Zepeda, S.J., Bengtson, E., & Parylo, O. (2012). Examining the planning and management of principal succession. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 50(2), 136-158.
- <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231211210512>
- Zepeda, S.J., Derrington, M.L., & Lanoue, P.D. (2021). *Developing the organizational culture of the central office: collaboration, connectivity, and coherence*. Routledge.
- Zepeda, S.J., Jimenez, A.M., & Lanoue, P.D. (2015). New practices for a new day: Principal professional development to support performance cultures in schools. *LEARNing Landscapes*, 9(1), 303-322. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v9i1.759>

APPENDIX A

Empirical Findings Table

Topic	Author(s)	Research Findings / Impact on Scholarship
Theoretical Framework: Organizational Socialization	Van Maanen, J.E., & Schein, E.H. (1977). Toward a theory of organizational socialization. MIT. dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/1934/?sequence=1	Van Maanen and Schein's (1977) seminal work focused on how newcomers reacted to a range of activities aimed at transitioning new employees into a company. Van Maanen and Schein's (1977) six dimensions of common tactics used by companies to socialize their new employees, either intentionally or unintentionally. These dimensions included collective versus individual approaches, formal versus informal, sequential versus random, fixed versus variable, serial versus disjunctive, and investiture versus divestiture. Van Maanen and Schein posited that the combination of socialization tactics led to one of three predictable newcomer responses: custodian, content innovation, or role innovation.
Theoretical Framework: Organizational Socialization	Jones, G. R. (1986). Socialization tactics, self-efficacy, and newcomers' adjustments to organizations. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 29(2), 262-279. https://doi.org/10.5465/256188	Through a longitudinal study of 127 M.B.A. students starting their first jobs, Jones (1986) investigated the impact of socialization tactics used by employers to transition the newcomers into their companies. The socialization tactics studied came from the six dimensions of organizational socialization proposed by Van Maanen and Schein (1977), as well as their predicted newcomer responses. Jones (1986) found a significant correlation between organizational tactics and newcomer adjustment, empirically supporting Van Maanen and Schein's (1977) claims and demonstrating that different approaches to socializing newcomers leads to different responses. Further, Jones (1986) provided greater clarity to the six dimensions by grouping them into institutionalized tactics employed very intentionally by companies and individualized tactics that left employees to their own methods of gathering information when adjusting to their new roles.

Logic Model: Determine, Select, Implement, Assess, and Address	Bryk, A.S., Gomez, L.M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P.G. (2015). <i>Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better</i> . Harvard Education Press.	Bryk et al. (2015) provided a case study of the use of the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) methodological approach to action research in the Austin Independent School District (AISD), where leaders were focused on creating conditions for improved teacher retention and, thus, improved student achievement. Starting with small tests of the process, Bryk et al. (2015) walked the reader through the steps taken by AISD, providing details in the planning (P), doing (D), studying (S), and acting (A) as each small test led to another level of testing. The end result was that a case was made for the application of the PDSA process to finding solutions to the challenges public school leaders face in a simple, yet scalable, scientific approach.
Uncertainty Reduction During the Onboarding Process	Bauer, T.N., Bodner, T., Erdogan, B., Truxillo, D., & Tucker, J. (2007). Newcomer adjustment during organizational socialization: A meta-analytic review of antecedents, outcomes, and methods. <i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i> , 92(3), 707-721. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.3.707	Bauer et al. (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 70 studies concerned with the organizational socialization of new employees, resulting in the claim that the onboarding process of newcomers is more interactionist than simply the design of those activities initiated by the company and stressed that both the organization and the newcomer play roles in the reduction of anxiety. Bauer et al. (2007) demonstrated that the combination of information seeking along with collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture socialization tactics led to three newcomer adjustments: role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance. From there, Bauer et al. (2007) demonstrated a correlation between the newcomer adjustment and uncertainty reduction with positive socialized outcomes of better performance, improved job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, greater intention to remain, and lower turnover rates, illustrating empirical evidence about the significance of Van Maanen and Schein's (1977) seminal work on organizational socialization.

Role Clarification for New School District Leaders: Unlearning	Becker, K., & Bish, A. (2021). A framework for understanding the role of unlearning in onboarding. <i>Human Resources Management Review</i> , 31(1), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmmr.2019.100730	Becker and Bish (2021) reviewed the literature surrounding organizational socialization, onboarding, and learning theories from the human resource management (HRM) perspective. Their qualitative analysis led Becker and Bish (2021) to conclude that the onboarding process should be designed through a learning and unlearning framework, where the needs of the newcomer--and not just the organization--should be considered. While new learning requires the unlearning of previous held assumptions and beliefs, Becker and Bish (2021) suggested that the organization's leaders can also benefit from increased interactions with newcomers by modeling the importance of unlearning, thus making way for new ideas and approaches to the work. In short, Becker and Bish (2021) made the case that onboarding new employees should go beyond the reduction of uncertainty that has been the primary focus of traditional organizational socialization tactics.
Role Clarification for New School District Leaders: Shifting to a New Leadership Lens	Harden, D. (2009). Shifts: District office professional development program orientation guide. <i>Georgia School Superintendents Association</i> .	The tool developed by Harden (2009) that provided an overview of the shifts in leadership context that school building leaders must undergo when transitioning to district office positions. Based on the collection of superintendent experiences with, observations of, and challenges posed by hiring new district office leaders, Harden's (2009) "Shifts" guide demonstrated the need for intentional onboarding activities that included socialization tactics, unlearning practices, and the development of learning agility in the newcomers.

Developing Learning Agility in New School District Leaders: Categories of Agility	De Meuse, K.P. (2017). Learning agility: Its evolution as a psychological construct and its empirical relationship to leader success. <i>Consulting Psychology Journal</i> , 69(4), 267–295. https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000100	De Meuse (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of 19 studies and 4,863 participants to jumpstart the development of a scholarship-based theoretical framework for the concept of learning agility. De Meuse (2017) concluded that there is empirical evidence pointing to the connection between learning agility and leader success. The results yielded evidence that the individual elements that comprise learning agility--learning from experience, experimentation, reflection, mindfulness, flexibility, resiliency, responsiveness to feedback, and seeking to understand the needs of others--are all integral to the success of the leaders studied. While the study provided empirical support to the theories of Lombardo and Eichinger (2000), who first promoted the concept of learning agility as a meta competency needed for successful leadership, it also raised several questions still to be researched, including a common definition, the ability to develop learning agility, and appropriate tools for measuring it.
Developing Learning Agility in New School District Leaders: Categories of Agility: Learnable Behaviors	Harvey, V.S., & Prager, R.Y. (2021). Developing learning agile behavior: A model and overview. In Harvey & De Meuse (Eds.), <i>Age of agility: Building learning agile leaders and organizations</i> (pp.145-181). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190085353.003.0006	Harvey and Prager (2021) provided a framework for developing learning agility in current and aspiring leaders, rooted in the experiential learning work of Kolb (2015), Dweck's (2006) research on growth mindsets, and De Meuse's (2017) meta-analysis of learning agility. The result of Harvey and Pager's (2021) efforts was the development of five categories of learnable behaviors that lead to learning agility. These categories included observing, doing, connecting, thinking, and mobilize. Each included multiple, specific behaviors to be learned and practiced. Although the concept of learning agility is still considered relatively new, Harvey and Pager (2021) provided researchers and practitioners specific behaviors that can be learned, observed, and measured as part of studies focused on leadership development.

School District Coherence: Defining Coherence	Zepeda, S.J., Derrington, M.L., & Lanoue, P.D. (2021). <i>Developing the organizational culture of the central office: Collaboration, connectivity, and coherence</i> . Routledge.	Zepeda et al.'s (2021) book on school systems' central office cultures draws from a multitude of research-based studies and meta-analyses, while also drawing directly from practitioners in the field. A consistent theme throughout the book is the importance placed on system coherence, as Zepeda et al. (2021) demonstrated that coherence provides the best protection against internal turmoil and external challenges, serving as the great stabilizer. Zepeda et al. (2021) provided several proven concepts to enhance coherence, which all serve those researchers and practitioners who aim to improve the performance culture of their school systems. Among those were ideas such as developing a common nomenclature to be used system-wide, establishing non-negotiables, providing opportunities for teacher and school building leaders to have a voice in district decision-making, and a system approach to professional learning, with an emphasis on understanding data and how to monitor student progress.
School District Coherence: Drivers of Coherence	Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2016). <i>Coherence: The right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems</i> . Corwin	Testing their theories through the works of practitioners in public school systems in California and in the Canadian province of Ontario, Fullan and Quinn's (2016) book made the case for the importance of school district coherence. At the foundation of their findings were, what Fullan and Quinn (2016) called, the "right" and the "wrong" drivers of school system coherence. Those falling into the right driver category leaned toward relationship-building and collaboration, whereas those in the wrong driver category focused on compliance, individualism, and punitive accountability. In providing a framework, Fullan and Quinn (2016) provide researchers and practitioners a basis for developing and measuring coherence.

Appendix B

Action Research Implementation Team Individual Interview Protocols

ARIT Individual Interview 1

The Research Questions
RQ #1 How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level?
RQ #2 How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership?
RQ #3 How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?

Research Question(s)	ARIT Interview #1 Questions
RQ #1 & #2	1. How would you describe the early reception and interactions you experienced with the following people: a. Your new supervisor? b. Your new peers?
RQ #1 & #2	2. Describe in your words what you were feeling as you shifted into your new role at the district office. Was there any anxiety or fear...and to what do you attribute those negative feelings?
RQ #1	3. How have your relationships changed with school leaders since you accepted your new central office role?
RQ #1	4. What strengths/experiences do you believe you possessed in your previous role that prepared you for and enabled you to obtain your new position? Were any of those strengths not utilized during the early days in your new role...explain.
RQ #1	5. Describe some of the decisions you have had to make in your new role and your comfort level in making them. How are these different from the types of decision you made at the school level?
RQ #2	6. What do you feel is missing from your preparation for your new role? What knowledge do you wish you possessed early on about your new role that simply was not provided or that you feel you did not learn quickly enough?
RQ #1	7. What sources have you leaned on to learn your new job...and how does that compare to learning the job of an AP or principal at the school level?
RQ #2	8. Describe the types of feedback you have received in your new role from your supervisor and/or other system leaders. Was it offered or did you seek it or both? How is this different from feedback you received in your previous role at the school level?
RQ #1	9. Prior to starting in your new role, what did you anticipate would be the biggest challenge(s) in your transition? What has actually been the biggest challenge to this point?
RQ #1 & #2	10. When you have questions regarding your new role and responsibilities, who do you seek out for advice, guidance, and answers? How does this compare to finding support in the early days on the job in your previous role?
RQ #1 & #2	11. Describe the <i>local</i> professional learning you participated in that helped you prepare to navigate leading from a central office context. How has that compared to preparation for school leadership provided by our system?
RQ #2 & #3	12. What has been the most impactful source of support to you during your transition, thus far? What would aid you in feeling more prepared, productive, and satisfied in your new role?

ARIT Individual Interview 2

The Research Questions

RQ #1

How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level?

RQ #2

How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership?

RQ #3

How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?

Research Question(s)	Interview #2 Protocol
RQ #3	1. Since starting this study, what changes, if any, have you seen in the approach to working with you by your supervisor(s)?
RQ #2	2. How have you changed over the course of this study – changes that you can attribute to the activities in which you have participated?
RQ #2 & #3	3. Put yourself in the role of Chief or Associate Superintendent for a minute. Based on your transition experiences and activities conducted during this study, what would be the primary tools and activities you would use to help the people you promoted from the school building into your central office department.
RQ #2 & #3	4. What would be your advice to newcomers coming to the central office from the school setting about how to adjust to their new leadership context?
RQ #2 & #3	5. The concept of learning agility has been embedded throughout, but probably discussed the least in 1-on-1 sessions and DLO workshops. Take a look at the Leader Profile – Learning Agility Behaviors chart. We spent a time really focusing on the first three tenets of the Leader Profile. When you look at the corresponding learning agile behaviors, talk me through the ones that speak to your experiences during this study. Share (circle) areas that you have grown in and/or (underline) areas that still need your attention.
RQ #3	6. Take a look at the Learning Agility categories chart. Take me through the ones that you feel are most vital to central office success – or leadership, in general – based on your experiences over the past few months.
RQ #2 - #3	7. Based on previous conversations, it seems that the Vertical-to-Horizontal Shift and the Facilitating to Networking Shift are the ones former school leaders struggle the most with when coming to the central office. What have we done – or should we have done – to improve the process for helping newcomers make these shifts?
RQ #2 & #3	8. Describe the types of feedback you have received in your new role from your supervisor and/or other system leaders since this study began. Has this been improved – and in what way was it delivered?
RQ #3	9. What activities and tools used in this study do you feel has helped our district office to develop a more coherent approach to leadership?

Appendix C

Action Research Design Team Individual Interview Protocol

The Research Questions
RQ #1 How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level?
RQ #2 How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership?
RQ #3 How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?

Research Question(s)	ARDT Interview #1 Questions
RQ #1	1. How would you compare the onboarding or induction process(es) and systems of support used for new teachers, assistant principals, and principals with that of newly named district leaders? Please reference your own experiences.
RQ #1	2. What are the common assumptions many newcomers have about the central office – including you prior to your arrival – that you believe must be unlearned once they begin in their new role?
RQ #1 & #3	3. How can the strengths that made new members of your department attractive candidates sometimes work against them? How do you address those challenges?
RQ #1 & #3	4. Examine the <i>Leader Profile</i> . Identify at least one indicator under each main tenet that you have witnessed newcomers struggle with when they began in their central office leadership roles. Include your own experiences when moving into the central office.
RQ #3	5. When it comes to onboarding new members of your department, what are the intentional steps taken and practices employed to ensure that each newcomer has a smooth transition. How would you describe a “smooth transition” for a newcomer?
RQ #3	6. What are the indicators of success for each new leader brought into your department? When and how are these articulated to the newcomer?
RQ #1 & #3	7. In your experience, how are newcomers to the central office helped to understand and adjust to their role, which often requires a shift in their leadership lens? In other words, how are they intentionally developed to apply previous experiences to new challenges?
RQ #3	8. Describe the intentional leadership-focused professional development opportunities offered in your department to stretch the capacity of new leaders?
RQ #3	9. Describe the nature of collaboration among department leaders in the central office aimed at providing intentional, coherent practices that support a system approach to onboarding newcomers.
RQ #1 & #3	10. What suggestions do you have to help newcomers to the central office make the necessary shifts in their leadership lens and experience a smooth transition?

Appendix D

Action Research Implementation Team Questionnaires

ARIT Questionnaire 1

The Research Questions
RQ#1 How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level?
RQ#2 How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership?
RQ#3 How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?

Each of the perception questions posed in this questionnaire were connected to Research Question number two.

For this questionnaire, the phrase “early weeks” includes any of the time between the announcement of your appointment and your first, full month of serving in your new role.

Question #	ARIT Questionnaire #1 Items	Your Rating
1.	With a “1” as the lowest level of clarity and “5” being the highest level of clarity: At the time you accepted your new position, how clear were (are) you regarding the nature of the work associated with your new role?	
2.	With a “1” as the lowest level of clarity and “5” being the highest-level clarity: How clear were (are) the performance expectations placed on you in your new role by your supervisor in your early weeks on the job?	
3.	With a “1” as the lowest score of effectiveness and “5” being the highest score of effectiveness: How effective was (is) the district training you were provided to prepare you for your new role prior to or in your early weeks on the job?	
4.	With a “1” as the lowest levels of negative emotion and “5” being the highest levels of negative emotion: How high would you rate your level of fear, anxiety, and/or frustration during the early weeks in your new position?	
5.	With a “1” as the lowest levels of productivity and “5” being the highest levels of productivity: How high were (are) your levels of job productivity during the early weeks in your new role?	
6.	With a “1” as the lowest levels of discomfort and “5” being the highest levels of discomfort: In your early weeks on the job, how uncomfortable or unsure were (are) you in knowing who to contact when you had questions?	

Question #	ARIT Questionnaire #1 Items	Your Rating
7.	With a “1” as the lowest level of clarity and “5” being the highest level of clarity: How clear were (are) you in your understanding of the core values established in your new department during the early weeks in your new role?	
8.	With a “1” as the lowest level of understanding and “5” being the highest level of understanding: In your early weeks at your new job, how well did (do) you understand the internal politics associated with the leaders within your specific department at the central office?	
9.	With a “1” as the lowest level of understanding and “5” being the highest level of understanding: In your early weeks at your new job, how well did (do) you understand the office politics associated with various leaders throughout the central office?	
10.	With a “1” as the lowest level of feeling welcome and accepted and “5” being the highest level of feeling welcome and accepted: How welcome and accepted did (do) you feel by your colleagues in your new department in the early weeks on the job?	
11.	With a “1” as the lowest level of self-confidence and “5” being the highest level of self-confidence: How confident were (are) you in taking on responsibilities outside of your normal comfort zone as you transitioned into your new role?	
12.	With a “1” as the lowest level of clarity and “5” being the highest level of clarity: In the early weeks in your new role, how clear were (are) you in the connection between your job responsibilities and the objectives established in the district’s strategic plan?	

Question #	ARIT Questionnaire #1 Items	Your Rating
13.	With a “1” as the lowest levels of discomfort and “5” being the highest levels of discomfort: In the early weeks in your new role, how comfortable were (are) you in asking your new supervisor for detailed feedback on your job performance?	
14.	With a “1” as the lowest level of confidence and “5” being the highest level of confidence: In the early weeks in your new role, how comfortable were (are) you in explaining to others what your new job entails?	

15. In the space provide, please feel free to share any thoughts you have regarding the transition process that you underwent or are currently experiencing, including how the process might be improved.

ARIT Questionnaire 2

The Research Questions

RQ #1

How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level?

RQ #2

How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership?

RQ #3

How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?

Question #	Questionnaire Items	Your Rating
1.	With a “1” as the lowest level of clarity and “5” being the highest level of clarity: Rate your current level of clarity regarding the nature of the work associated with your new role. (RQ #2)	
2.	With a “1” as the lowest level of clarity and “5” being the highest-level clarity: Rate how clear you currently are regarding the performance expectations placed on you in your new role by your supervisor. (RQ #2)	
3.	With a “1” as the lowest score of effectiveness and “5” being the highest score of effectiveness: Rate the overall effectiveness of the district training you were provided to support you in your new role over the past seven months. (RQ #2)	
4.	With a “1” as the lowest levels of negative emotion and “5” being the highest levels of negative emotion: How high would you rate your current levels of fear, anxiety, and/or frustration in your new position? (RQ #2)	
5.	With a “1” as the lowest levels of productivity and “5” being the highest levels of productivity: How high would you rate your current levels of job productivity in your new role? (RQ #2)	
6.	With a “1” as the lowest levels of discomfort and “5” being the highest levels of discomfort: Currently, how uncomfortable, or unsure, are you in knowing who to contact when you have a question regarding your role in the district? (RQ #2)	
7.	With a “1” as the lowest level of clarity and “5” being the highest level of clarity: Currently, how clear are you in your understanding of the core values established in your new department? (RQ #2)	

8.	With a “1” as the lowest level of understanding and “5” being the highest level of understanding: Currently, how well do you feel you understand the internal politics associated with the leaders within your specific department at the central office? (RQ #2)	
9.	With a “1” as the lowest level of understanding and “5” being the highest level of understanding: Currently, how well do you feel you understand the office politics associated with various leaders throughout the central office? (RQ #2)	
10.	With a “1” as the lowest level of feeling welcome and accepted and “5” being the highest level of feeling welcome and accepted: Currently, how welcome and accepted do you feel by your colleagues outside of your new department? (RQ #2)	
11.	With a “1” as the lowest level of self-confidence and “5” being the highest level of self-confidence: Currently, how confident are you in taking on responsibilities outside of your normal comfort zone? (RQ #2)	
12.	With a “1” as the lowest level of clarity and “5” being the highest level of clarity: Currently, how clear are you about the connection between your job responsibilities and the objectives established in the district’s strategic plan? (RQ #2)	
13.	With a “1” as the lowest levels of comfort and “5” being the highest levels of comfort: Currently, how comfortable are you in asking your new supervisor for detailed feedback on your job performance? (RQ #2)	
14.	With a “1” as the lowest level of confidence and “5” being the highest level of confidence: Currently, how comfortable are you in explaining to others what your new job entails? (RQ #2)	

15. In the space provide, share any thoughts you have on how your experiences in this study will impact your professional practices in helping future newcomers make successful transitions from the school level to the district office. **(RQ #3)**

Appendix E

Action Research Implementation Team Focus Group Protocols

ARIT Focus Group 1

The Research Questions
RQ #1 How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level? RQ #2 How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership? RQ #3 How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?
Focus Group #1 Protocol
Please respond to each of the following prompts. We will make certain that everyone has a chance to respond. 1. Share the onboarding activities you have participated in at this point in your transition that you would like to see continued in the future. How would you compare these activities to the supports or onboarding you received at the school level as new principals or assistant principals. (RQ #1 & #2) 2. Share the onboarding activities you have found to be <i>least</i> impactful to this point in your transition period. What would you do to improve them, or would you eliminate them altogether? (RQ #2 & #3) 3. What leadership shifts do you anticipate – or have you found – to be the most challenging in your new role? What has most helped you make the transition to leading in a new context? (RQ #1 & #2) 4. Share with the group your thoughts on the timing of onboarding activities for future newcomers. (RQ #2) 5. Please share any final thoughts about your early transition experiences.

ARIT Focus Group 2

The Research Questions
RQ #1 How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level? RQ #2 How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership? RQ #3 How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?
ARIT Focus Group #2 Protocols
1. Share the onboarding activities you have participated in during your transition that you would like to see continued in the future. Give a brief explanation on how they have impacted your confidence, productivity, and overall job satisfaction. (RQ #2 & #3) 2. What most excited you most and, conversely, what caused you the most concern, as you headed into your new role? What activities best addressed those issues? (RQ # 1 & #2) 3. How would you describe the effectiveness of the activities you participated in to accomplish the following goals (RQ #1, #2 & #3): • Reduction of uncertainty • Ability to adjust your leadership lens from a school view to a district view (shifts) 4. How would you describe the effectiveness of the activities you participated in to help you develop the following learning agile behaviors and skills (RQ #2 & #3): • Reflection • Seeking feedback • Self-awareness • Learning Vicariously • Unlearning • Metacognition 5. Talk about the impact that participating in this study – and the development of a system onboarding program – has had on your own professional practice. (RQ#3) 6. Talk about how developing a program has (or could) increase a common sense of purpose and consistency in central office practices. (RQ#3)

Appendix F

Action Research Design Team Focus Group Protocol

The Research Questions
RQ #1 How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level?
RQ #2 How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership?
RQ #3 How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?

ARDT Focus Group Protocol

Please respond to each of the following prompts. We will make certain that everyone has a chance to share.

1. Describe the growth you have seen in your subordinates who participated in this study, as well as in your coaching assignments. **(RQ #2)**
2. Describe any benefits you gained from coaching leaders from other departments, as well as from meeting monthly with your subordinates in monthly Supervisor Expectations Check-in meetings. **(RQ #3)**
3. Compared to the experiences of previous new central office leaders, how would you describe the impact that our activities have had on this group of newcomers, particularly in these three areas:
 - a. The reduction of their uncertainty
 - b. Their ability to adjust to leading in a new context
 - c. Their ability to apply previous experiences to new challenges **(RQ #2)**
4. Compared to the experiences of interacting with previous new central office leaders, how would you describe the impact that our activities have had on your own professional practices, particularly in aiding newcomers with:
 - a. The reduction of their uncertainty
 - b. Their ability to adjust to leading in a new context
 - c. Their ability to apply previous experiences to new challenges **(RQ #3)**
5. Which onboarding activities would you like to see expanded upon for future appointees to the central office? Which would you adjust? Which would you eliminate? **(RQ #2 & #3)**
6. While the onboarding activities in this study were designed to both acclimate and stretch new leaders, what are your thoughts on including similar onboarding activities for those appointed below the coordinator level? **(RQ #2)**
7. How did your participation in this study impact your own leadership practices, in general? **(RQ #3)**
8. How would you describe the nature and level of impact that this study has had on the development of a commonsense of purpose and coherence in central office practices? **(RQ #3)**

Appendix G

Leadership Situation Scenario Examples

Situation A

- It is November 15th, 2024.
- The XXX Middle School principal from your former vertical cluster reaches out to you for your thoughts on a new social-emotional well-being program that he wants to implement with 7th graders at the start of 2nd semester.
- He provides you with student discipline data, SOS data, and results of the recent State Health Survey.
- You read the literature and see very clearly that this program is aimed at improving the EXACT set of issues on which the principal shared his data.
- He explains to you that he has a local business partner that is willing to pay the \$5,000.00 price for the software program, so there is no money coming from the school system to support this. In fact, it may be a great example schools and the community working together.
- When you reflect on your time as a building leader, this is just the type of program that you had searched for, as it provides students tools for coping with the challenges they face and encourages a spirit of perseverance.
- It's data-driven, it's affordable, it's tied to the strategic and school improvement plans.
- What will you say &/or do?

Situation C

- You have just provided your supervisor with a detailed report on the status of a project you were assigned three months earlier.
- In your 45-minute presentation to your supervisor and several colleagues, you included a power point and handouts that clearly demonstrated the success of the project – the data backs up this notion of success. The Q & A that followed went on for another 45-minutes...and the positive affirmation you received was very satisfying.
- Two days later, your supervisor shares with you about a call that she received from the superintendent's secretary. She tells you that the superintendent heard about your project and would like to learn more the following morning at 8:00 AM.
- The next morning, you grab your flash drive, gather up your handouts, and head to the superintendent's suite.
- As you prepare to plug in the flash drive, your supervisor waves you off, saying that it won't be necessary.
- *She* then proceeds to give a very abbreviated version of *your* presentation along with one of your handouts.
- The superintendent asked two or three questions and states how impressed he is, telling your supervisor that she should be prepared to present at the next Board Meeting.
- The whole meeting lasts less than twenty minutes. You were asked no questions and, beyond pleasantries, never spoke.
- In a 24-hour period you have gone from exhilaration to feeling a mix of frustration, anger, and something similar to abandonment. When your supervisor asks, "Wasn't that awesome?" you just want to spit!
- What is going on – and what do you do, next?

Appendix H

Orientation Meetings: Overview of the Study

Guiding Questions	Information Vital to Action Research Study Design
What is the title of the study?	<i>The Onboarding of Central Office Leaders</i> (Handout #1 on next page)
Why is this study <i>significant</i> to the work of the East Smithfield School District (ESSD)?	Second only to classroom instruction, school leaders have significant impact on student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2019). Capacity building, formal onboarding, coaching, and mentoring are all examples of the support provided principals and assistant principals when they are appointed to their positions. Research also tells us that effective central office leaders have the power to create the necessary conditions for school leaders and teachers to impact student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021). Unfortunately, neither formal onboarding nor ongoing systems of support exists for new district leaders in ESSD, let alone capacity building programs. As ESSD is a rapidly growing suburban system with everchanging demographics, it is vital to prepare district office leaders for the challenges they will face in their new roles—roles that will require them to lead within a new context and with a different perspective than what they have experienced in their previous roles.
What is the stated <i>purpose</i> of this study?	The purpose of this action research study is to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments in order to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in ESSD.
What are the <i>research questions</i> that will guide this study?	1. How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level? 2. How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership? 3. How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?

Guiding Questions	Information Vital to Action Research Study Design
Why is a <i>qualitative, action research</i> approach being used in this study?	Facing the simultaneous challenges of rising turnover rates among central office leaders and rapid growth as a school system, ESSD continues to welcome new leadership talent into its central office at an increasing rate. As many of these new appointees have come directly from the school level, an area of concern centers on the transition from one type of leadership role to another. Finding a timely, research-based solution to these challenges is imperative to the ongoing success of ESSD. A qualitative approach to ESSD’s challenges allows for research to be conducted within the natural environment of the school district. The practitioners of district leadership have voices, concerns, and experiences that need to be captured and analyzed in order for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of problems they face (Bloomberg, 2023). Qualitative research requires that the primary researcher be directly involved in gathering data through direct interactions with the subjects of the study (Creswell, 2018). Action research, which brings together validated theories, researchers, and practitioners, is the form of applied qualitative research chosen for this study. Action research studies can lead to timely solutions to current problems in educational settings such as ESSD (Mertler, 2021). While solutions to ESSD’s challenges are one goal of the action research study, the process of finding those solutions is also documented with the hopes of adding to the greater body of scholarship surrounding the challenges--in this case, leadership transitions (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Glanz, 2014; Melin & Axelsson, 2007).

The Onboarding of Central Office Leaders

A Qualitative Action Research Case Study Conducted by
James M. Young

The East Smithfield School District (ESSD)

That is the pseudonym under which we will be conducting this study.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this action research study is to analyze the challenges faced by recently appointed district leaders at the onset of their appointments in order to develop an avenue for best meeting the needs of future leaders promoted to district office leadership positions in ESSD.

The following research questions will guide this study:

1. How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level?
2. How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership?
3. How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?

Why is this study significant—and urgent—in our school district at this time?

Second only to classroom instruction, school leaders have significant impact on student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2019). Capacity building, formal onboarding, coaching, and mentoring are all examples of the support provided principals and assistant principals when they are appointed to their positions. Research also tells us that effective central office leaders have the power to establish the necessary conditions for school leaders and teachers to impact student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, neither formal onboarding nor ongoing systems of support exist for new district leaders in ESSD, let alone capacity building programs specific to district leadership. As ESSD is a rapidly growing suburban system with everchanging demographics, it is vital to prepare district office leaders for the challenges they will face in their new roles—roles that will require them to lead within a new context and with a different perspective than what they have experienced in their previous roles.

Appendix I

Action Research Design Team Questionnaire

The Research Questions
RQ #1 How do district level leaders in one suburban school system articulate the variations between leading at the district office with leading at the school level? RQ #2 How do district leaders in one suburban school system describe the impact of participating in a district onboarding program on their transition from school level to district office leadership? RQ #3 How do the action research design and implementation teams articulate the impact of developing, facilitating, and participating in an onboarding program on their own professional practices?

Uncertainty Reduction Interventions

With “1” being no impact and “3” being significant impact, rate each of the following activities designed and discussed by the ARDT to help newcomers overcome uncertainty in their district office roles:

Rating	District Office Onboarding Activity
	1. Discussion over the 240-day Employee Calendar / annual leave / best time to take a vacation.
	2. Discussion stemming from the common question asked of the newcomer: “What do you (newcomer) believe are my (supervisor) criteria for you to be successful in your role?”
	3. Discussion stemming from the review of your actual success criteria for the newcomer.
	4. Establishment/discussion of the short-term and long-term performance goals that you developed with your newcomer.
	5. The Superintendent’s Welcome Reception for newcomers to begin developing a cross-departmental network of support.
	6. The cohort-based experience of participating in District Office Leadership (DLO) Workshops as a means for newcomers to begin developing a cross-departmental network of support.
	7. The use of the Leader Profile in Supervisor Expectation Check-Ins as a means for newcomers to better understand their roles in your department.
	8. Your discussion with the newcomer on the importance of inter- and intra-office lines of communication in the district office setting.

Leadership Role Clarity Interventions

With “1” being little-to-no impact and “3” being significant impact, rate each of the following activities designed and discussed by the ARDT to help newcomers develop greater clarity about their district office roles:

Rating	District Office Onboarding Activity
	1. The use of the Harden Shifts document as a means for understanding the different context of school level versus district level leadership in 1-on-1 coaching discussions.
	2. The individual use of Leadership Situation Scenarios for newcomers to think critically about the decisions made and courses of action followed by leaders in the district office.
	3. The 1-on-1 coaching discussions stemming from the review/comparison of both your (coach) and newcomer responses to Leadership Situation Scenarios as a means for vicarious learning opportunities.
	4. The use of the Leader Profile in coaching sessions as a means for newcomers to better understand their roles in a district setting.
	5. Your coaching discussions with newcomers about how best to navigate the political environment that exists in the district office – the “do’s” and “don’ts” from your perspective shared with them.
	6. The panel discussion/presentations designed to unpack the Harden Shifts in DLO Workshops

Learning Agility Interventions

With “1” being little-to-no impact and “3” being significant impact, rate each of the following activities designed and discussed by the ARDT to help newcomers develop greater learning agility:

Rating	District Office Onboarding Activity	Learning Agile Behavior (Corresponding Leader Profile Tenet & Attributes)
	1. Personal journey discussions and share-outs in DLO Workshops	Reflecting (<i>Relationship Building</i> – striving for self-awareness; motivates & inspires <i>Developing Leaders</i> – demonstrates vulnerability through open reflection)
	2. Leadership Situation Scenarios - individually	Scanning (<i>Leads with Intentionality</i> – anticipates the impact of decisions from multiple perspectives)
	3. Leadership Situation Scenarios – in 1-on-1 coaching sessions	Scanning, Unlearning, and Learning Vicariously (<i>Leads with Intentionality</i> – anticipates the impact of decisions from multiple perspectives <i>Communicates Effectively</i> – Listens actively, seeking to understand multiple perspectives <i>Embraces Innovation</i> – seeks feedback and accepts coaching for continuous improvement)
	4. Goal setting and progress-monitoring during Supervisor Expectation Check-In meetings	Goal Setting and Planning & Monitoring (<i>Leads with Intentionality</i> – connects short-term goals with global objectives; uses data-driven processes for making improvements; reflectively analyzes and adjusts appropriately)
	5. Stretch Activity	Stretching, Demonstrating Resilience, and Mindfulness (<i>Leads with Intentionality</i> – Anticipates the impact of decisions from multiple perspectives <i>Developing Leaders</i> – Models the importance of a balanced life)
	6. Mindfulness Training	Stretching, Demonstrating Resilience, and Mindfulness (<i>Building Relationships</i> - striving for self-awareness <i>Leads with Intentionality</i> – Anticipates the impact of decisions from multiple perspectives <i>Developing Leaders</i> – Models the importance of a balanced life)

In reflecting on all of the interventions that were referenced in the previous sets of questions, please share thoughts on any of those activities that you might use – or have already incorporated – into your own work in helping your employees adjust to life in the district office. This could include, but is not limited to, those employees who are participating in this study.

Appendix J

ARIT Onboarding Program Proposal Example

Pre-work: Any thinking or experiences that happen prior to starting the DLO cohort meetings.

Timeline	Activity/ Delivery/ Tools	Purpose
After naming	What's your why?- Think through these pieces, be prepared to share with the group at large	Articulate your story-what led you to your new role, how has your past determined your future?
Late April	District Welcome Reception	Establish Cohort, build relationships
Late April or Early May	One to One session with the DLO Leader.	Set purpose and understanding. Build relationship and trust with DLO leader.

Cohort Work: A cohort model builds relationships across departments and creates a sense of community for new members while bringing awareness to different roles. Ideally, these sessions are led by the Superintendent or Chief of Staff with Associate Superintendents/ Chiefs of each department presenting/ participating for 20ish minutes.

Timeline	Activity/ Delivery/ Tools	Purpose
Late April	Who are we questions? Who are the influential leaders in your professional Journey?	Build relationships and trust within cohort *Ideally, cohort participants and Direct Supervisors would all share at this session
Early May	Harden's Shifts Introduction District Leader Panel- Shifts 1-3	Increase self-awareness, preview upcoming potential challenges/ experiences (prior to Leadership Retreat),
June (Leadership Retreat?)	Shifts-in-action check-in District Leader Panel- Shifts 4-6	Increase self-awareness, preview upcoming potential challenges/ experiences (prior to Leadership Retreat),
June/July	Wellness Session	Focus on personal well-being in new role
Monthly	Hardin Shifts in action, Learning Agility	Increase self-awareness, job satisfaction

Individual Coaching: An individual coach outside of the DLO participant’s current department provides an opportunity to seek an outside perspective, support, and aids in cross-departmental collaboration. This coach’s role is to mentor and provide guidance.

Timeline	Activity/ Delivery/ Tools	Purpose
Late April through duration of DLO	Monthly meetings with DLO Coach: work through scenarios, discuss department connectivity, introductions to various department members.	Provide perspective and a different lens in which to see the district. Exposure to scenarios that may be new to the DLO participant. Establish and build relationships outside of each other’s department.

Supervisor Check-ins: one-on-one monthly or every 6 weeks.

Timeline	Activity/ Delivery/ Tools	Purpose
After Naming	What’s my role? Explain major duties/responsibilities, dynamics of the department and inter-departmental communication expectations, mutually agreed-upon goal to work on until fully immersed in the job,	Clarify role/ responsibilities. Introduction to the department and building a rudimentary knowledge of the climate and culture.
Monthly through duration of DLO	Scenario exercises	Clarify role expectations/ support success/ build cohesion in thinking. How does the DLO participant’s thinking align with the supervisors?