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Gibsonburg Case Study

Background and Rationale

WordFarmers Associates undertook case studies of Ohio districts nominated for having made long-term commitments to using the Ohio Improvement Process and the support materials provided by state and regional organizations (e.g., State Support Teams, the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council). The purpose of developing the case studies was to provide a deep description of each district to serve as material for teaching cases to be used in professional development materials offered by the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council (OLAC). That is, the case studies were to be conducted by the standards of genuine research, respecting what districts are *actually doing* with the tools rather than what others might advise or prefer that they do with them. This orientation permits the studies to bring to light the messy and nonlinear process of district and school improvement in Ohio. The process should permit OLAC to offer professional development founded on authentic practice.

WordFarmers visited the Gibsonburg Exempted Village School District to collect data during the week of December 11, 2017. The overarching question for the case study was:

> What are the Gibsonburg Schools doing to improve education for all learners?

Subsidiary questions, used in interviews, but also guiding observations and conversations among the researchers were as follows:

- What are the district's improvement goals and why were they selected?
- What is the district's improvement strategy and how did leaders in the district arrive at that strategy?
- What structures enabled the district to make improvements?
- Who has been involved in the leadership of the improvement initiative and how have they been involved?
- What were the challenges that the district faced as it implemented its improvement strategy?
- What is the role of OIP teams (DLT, BLTs, and TBTs) in the improvement process?
- What is the role of data in the improvement process?
- How have instructional practices changed as a result of the improvement process?
- How has student grouping changed as a result of the improvement process?
- What effects has the improvement process had on curriculum (e.g., depth versus breadth, use of standards, or teachers' role in curriculum development)?

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- What is the role of professional development in the improvement process? What professional development has been most helpful and why?
- What role has the local community played in the improvement process?

Context

Gibsonburg Schools serves the village of Gibsonburg and environs (parts of Madison and Washington townships in Sandusky County), about 23 straight-line miles from Toledo and about 19 from the shore of Lake Erie. Gibsonburg Schools belong to a category of Ohio schools known as "exempted village" districts. Created in 1943, the category exempted these villages from oversight by the county educational office.[1]

In 2016-17 the Gibsonburg system enrolled 916 students in grades PK-12; the five-year average (2012-13 through 2016-17) was 991 (see Table 1). The data show enrollment declines—a change that is seldom a welcome phenomenon in small districts. Most surrounding districts (Fremont to the east is an exception) are smaller than the state average of about 3,000 students.

The Gibsonburg Schools' enrollment is about 3% Multiracial, 13% Hispanic, and 85% White.[2] Proportions have remained stable for the past five years. Also remaining stable (see Table 3) has been the proportion of students with disabilities (about 12%) and the proportion of students confronting economic disadvantage (about 30%).

This section describes the context, first, of the town of Gibsonburg and, second, of the school district. The principal sources for the description of the school district are the extensive datasets assembled annually by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE); and for the city, the U.S. Bureau of the Census data from both the 2010 decennial census and the more recent American Community Survey.

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[1] The exemption thus refers to an entity that no longer exists. At the time the category was implemented, state and national educational leaders expected districts would be consolidated to county lines in Ohio and in the United States (see, e.g., Bard, Gardener, & Weiland, 2006).

[2] The Ohio Department of Education follows U.S. Census versions of "race" and ethnicity, in which *Hispanic* is an ethnicity only and Black and White are non-Hispanic "races." Other ethnicities (such as Polish, Russian, or Brazilian) and so forth are not dealt with in this way, likely because Spanish-language speakers from Latin America have been the major immigrant group in the US in recent decades.

The Town

Gibsonburg was created in 1871 by Ohio pioneer and resident of nearby Tiffin, William Gibson (1821-1894) "after the railroad had been surveyed" (Meek, 1909, p. 324). Gibson laid out 40 acres of town lots. A 574-page biography of Gibson exists (Bigger, 1901) as well as a Wikipedia entry[3]: He was a state politician and civil war veteran; he opposed slavery and social distinction. Harriet Beecher Stowe praised him, and William McKinley delivered his eulogy. A statue commemorates his life at the Seneca County Courthouse in Tiffin.

Gibsonburg was incorporated in 1880, established a municipal water plant in 1897, and an electric light company in 1893; the light company added telephone service in 1903 (Meek, 1909). The town's original economic base followed a familiar, but also unique, frontier progression of natural resource extraction, starting with timber and then agriculture. According to Meek (1909), 100 laborers were employed at the sawmill, which ran "night and day" (p. 330) until the timber was cut to the point of unprofitability. The first grain elevator was built in 1875; its 1894 replacement had a capacity of 8,000 bushels.

Oil production began in Madison Township in 1887, and a nationally famed "gusher," initially producing 20,000 barrels a day, was drilled in 1894, four miles west and one mile south of town (Meek, 1909). For a time, Gibsonburg boomed economically, and was briefly known as the *national center* of oil production (WPA, 1940, p. 106). By 1940, the oil reserves, like the timber, had been fully exploited and no longer contributed economically to the area (Works Progress Administration, 1940).

Oil, however, had been pumped from a subterranean limestone reservoir, which rises to the surface in western Sandusky County. To this day, limestone remains the substance of an ongoing local economic reality: the basic ingredient for hydrated lime production (in Woodville, to the north of Gibsonburg, though no longer in Gibsonburg). Currently, Woodville advertises itself (Village of Woodville, 2018) as "the lime center of the world," but Gibsonburg, too, was producing about 500 tons of hydrated lime daily in 1940 (WPA, 1940, p. 107). The principal quarry, White Star Quarry, was flooded and abandoned about 1980 (Mindat.org, 2018) and is now a Gibsonburg park. A firm headquartered in Marietta operates a lime transportation terminal not far from Gibsonburg's elementary-school campus, near one of the flooded quarries (Google, 2018).

According to the Bureau of the Census (2009), manufacturing is still the leading employer of school district residents (about 25%), followed by education and social

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[3] A photo of Gibson with his horse "Morgan," taken during the war, accompanies the entry (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Harvey_Gibson).

services (about 20%), retail (15%), and construction (10%).[4] By census-defined occupational categories, "management and professions" employ about 25% and "production and transportation" about 20%. Despite the extensive agricultural lands surrounding the district, less than 2% of the district's workers are involved in agriculture (about the national average for rural areas). The median household income in the district was about $51,000 in 2009 (Bureau of the Census, 2009).

The School District

According to the ODE, in 2016-2017 the Gibsonburg Exempted Village Schools enrolled 916 students (ODE, 2018) in one high school (grades 9-12), one middle school (grades 6-8), and one elementary school (grades PK-5). Schools are located on two campuses: the high school and middle school to the south of town, and the elementary school to the west of town.

Gibsonburg is neighbor to five other districts, four of similar size (Eastwood, Elmwood, Lakota, and Woodmore) and one (Fremont, the county seat) enrolling about 4,000 students. Of these six districts, Fremont has the lowest median annual household income (about $45,000) and Eastwood the highest ($65,000). At $51,000 Gibsonburg district's median household income ranked at the national median of individual household incomes (Daniels, 2018); Fremont's ranked at the 44th percentile and Eastwood's at the 69th percentile.[5] Poverty rates of Gibsonburg families with children have been comparatively low, at 7.2% (Bureau of the Census, 2009).

None of the districts, then, is notably impoverished or affluent. The six districts' "grades" on "district report cards" from the ODE are similar. Observers cannot discover large differences on casual inspection of the report cards.

This section next reports on: (1) students at the district level (five years of data), (2) professional staff; (3) schools (enrollment, accountability-test scores—current year only); (4) district-level process indicators (attendance and discipline); and (5) outcome indicators (district-level accountability-test scores and graduation rates). For detailed

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[4] The Gibsonburg district workforce (all residents living within the boundaries of the district) numbered 2,495 in 2009: a labor-force participation rate of 64% of the population 16 and older (Bureau of the Census, 2009). Note that these data apply to the territory of the school district and not only the town and not, of course, those employed by the school district itself.

[5] Calculations by WordFarmers of percentile ranks for 2016 are based on constant-dollar interpolations of 2009 ACS dollars reported in the Daniels site (i.e., the ranks given in this report are adjusted for inflation since 2009).

data displays, consult Tables 1-6 in Appendix A. Again, all data in this section and in the appended tables come from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE, 2018).

Students

From 2012 to 2016 racial/ethnic composition of the student body changed very little (see Table 1). Across the five years, about 3% of students were Multiracial, 13% were Hispanic, and 85% White. No Black enrollment was reported.

Further detail appears next about student groups classified by whether or not they have been identified as (1) having a disability, (2) facing economic disadvantage, or (3) exhibiting limited English proficiency (all data from ODE, 2018). See Table 2 in Appendix A for the full data display. Table 2 shows six mutually exclusive groups: students are categorized by three variables—disability (yes or no), low-SES (yes or no), and limited English proficiency (LEP, yes or no). The first row, for instance, is a group in which students are low-SES (economically disadvantaged) but do not have a disability or exhibit limited English proficiency.

- Across all years, the largest of the six groups (first row in Table 2), comprising 58% of all students in 2016-17, exhibited none of the three possible conditions.
- Across all years, as well, the second largest group (about 30% of enrollment) was classified as economically disadvantaged only. Another 6% (on average across all years) were identified only as having a disability (and did not exhibit economic disadvantage or limited proficiency with English).
- Across all years, about 7% of students were identified as having a disability and facing economic disadvantage (third row in Table 2).
- No other groups accounted for an appreciable proportion of total district enrollment.

Professional staff

The district is led administratively by a superintendent. The ODE data show no other central office professionals. The elementary school has its own principal. The middle and high school are led by a single administrative team, which includes a principal, dean of students, and guidance counselor (Gibsonburg Schools, 2018). The Gibsonburg teaching staff (59.5 FTE) is 95% White, 3% Black, and 1% Hispanic (ODE, 2018).

Schools

About 28% of the district's students (258) attended the high school in 2016 (see Table 3). The three-grade middle school enrolled 217, and the seven-grade elementary school 441.

The distribution of subgroups across Gibsonburg's schools is comparatively even by race (see Table 3), with all schools near the district average (i.e., 85% White, 13% Hispanic, 3% Multiracial). The fewest Hispanics (about 11%) attend the elementary school, and the most (more than 14%) attend the high school. The proportion of disadvantaged

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students declines from about 40% in the elementary school to about 30% in the high school (a common pattern in U.S. schools). The distribution of students with disabilities is lowest at the high school (about 12%) and highest at the middle school (about 15%). Again, these are not large differences. Finally, despite the enrollment of a notable proportion of Hispanic students, no student in the Gibsonburg Schools is identified as exhibiting limited English proficiency (LEP).

Process indicators

Selected process indicators feature attendance rate and disciplinary actions per 100 students by subgroup (all data in this section from ODE, 2018). Each is summarized next (see Table 4 in Appendix A for details). The district attendance rate is the highest the state reports (i.e., above 95%)—across the entire five-year period.[6]

The frequency of disciplinary actions by subgroup (Hispanic, Multiracial, White, disadvantaged, disabled, LEP) shows notable differences (see Table 4 in Appendix A). In 2016-17, the differences are dampened as compared to rates for the previous years, as suggested by data in Table 4. Overall, disciplinary rates are down *substantially* from 2012-13 and they are *substantially* lower than for the state as a whole in 2016-17 (see Table 4 for further details).

For 2016-17 none of the subgroup disciplinary rates is above 10 actions per 100 students. Such actions are least numerous among Hispanic students (1.8) and most numerous among those with disabilities (9.2). Each of these rates, though, is *dramatically* lower as compared to the corresponding rates for 2015-16 or for the state in 2016-17 (see Table 4).

Another pattern visible in Table 4 is the instability of disciplinary rates overall. The rate for Hispanic students varied between almost 20 per 100 students (2015-16) and fewer than 2 per 100 in 2016-17. That is an order-of-magnitude difference in a single year. The same magnitude of difference (i.e., very large) is observable for Multiracial students (2012-13 vs. 2014-15: 40 vs. 4). These differences represent the most extreme variability, but the rates are volatile overall: 17 of the 30 cells in Table 4 report rates in double digits, and 2016-17 is the only year to report no rates in double digits. The meaning of this variability remains unclear: the low current rates might (or might not) be the start of a period of lower and more stable rates.

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[6] Attendance rates are typically high and vary, statewide, within a narrow range for traditional public-school districts.

Outcome indicators

Selected outcome indicators (all data in this section from ODE, 2018) feature test scores (proportion of students judged proficient on state accountability tests) and graduation rates (see Tables 5 and 6 in Appendix A for details). Ohio's accountability tests, as in other states, change periodically—and for a variety of reasons.[7] For whatever reason, Gibsonburg's overall accountability-test scores—an average of all available scores for the district as a whole—declined somewhat over the five years between 2012-13 and 2016-17. During the five-year period, a decline in overall accountability-test scores was a general phenomenon across the state of Ohio.

The trend data, however, obscure the fact that, overall, the district's accountability-test scores exceeded state averages to a modest degree. The Ohio district average (of all available scores) is 59.4%, whereas the Gibsonburg average is 62.9%.[8]

By grade level, the 2016-17 scores range from an average of 38% proficient (8th-grade average for three tests) to about 80% (the average proficiency rate for Grade 3 with reading and math combined). The district received a "D" on achievement and an "F" on achievement gap-closing from the ODE, but an "A" for progress and an "A" for graduation rate. Accountability-test scores and ODE "grades" correlate with local median incomes very strongly statewide (see, e.g., Exner, 2017).

Graduation rates are another typical schooling outcome. The rates can be calculated in various ways. An accepted standard is the cohort graduation rate, which is based on the proportion of entering 9th-grade students who graduate four years later. For the five years from 2011-2012 through 2015-16 the rates have been *consistently high*.[9]

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[7] The upshot is that test-score trends cannot be inferred in detail. For 2015-16, tests developed by the American Institutes for Research replaced the "PARCC" tests developed by Pearson PLC (headquartered in Britain). Patterns in Table 4 likely reflect this change and others (e.g., the replacement of the Ohio Graduation Tests by subject-specific end-of-year tests).

[8] One should not make too much of the difference: the accountability data embed multiple error streams. The main point is that the district produces average scores and exhibits an average median family income.

[9] These are the rates: 2015-16: above 95%; 2014-15: above 95%; 2013-14: 93.1%; 2012-13: 93.5%; 2011-12: 88.9% The rate of student mobility would influence the meaningfulness of these rates somewhat. Approximately 5-7% of students at each enrollment-reporting have been in the district for less than a year, with the trend declining to 5%.

One may also ask if racial/ethnic subgroups graduate in proportion to their district enrollment proportions. What are such proportions for Hispanic and White students as graduates—particularly as to 9th-grade cohorts? The ODE does not report specific statistics, but a relevant inference is possible. Table 6 (see Appendix A) reports the authors' calculation of the proportions of graduates in these groups, and also the proportion of the groups enrolled overall in the high school four years earlier.[10] The trends show that the graduating proportions for Hispanic students *substantially exceed* the proportion of 9th-grade enrollment four years earlier. A contributing influence is the converse situation among White students, who graduate in a somewhat smaller proportion as compared to their ninth-grade enrollment four years earlier (in four of the five years reported in Table 6).

Context Recapitulation

The Gibsonburg Schools serve an ethnically mixed patronage (with 13% Hispanic students). In terms of family resources, the district population is at the national median for household income. The town has an interesting—even colorful—social and economic history. The district seems to have a viable middle class; poverty rates of families with children are comparatively low. Accountability-test performance is commensurate with, or better than, Ohio averages. Discipline rates have been volatile over the past five years but appear to have stabilized at lower rates. The district has comparatively low student mobility and graduates most students.

Methods

In this section of the report, we describe the methods used for developing the case study of improvement efforts in the Gibsonburg Exempted Village School District. We examine the theoretical bases for the research design—*appreciative inquiry* and *portraiture*. Next, we describe the steps used to organize and schedule data collection as well as the methods used to collect data, instrumentation, the types of data collected, and procedures for analyzing the data.

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[10] The comparison is approximate, since these proportions do not represent the ninth grade per se. Nonetheless, the approximation is reasonable because differences in proportions by grade within the same year are probably not great. The ODE does not report data for Multiracial graduates because the district enrolls fewer than 10 Multiracial students in the 12th grade.

Methodology and Study Design

In designing and executing the study, we combined two methodologies: appreciative inquiry and portraiture. Appreciative inquiry was originally developed to study organizational management. Using this approach, researchers focus their interviews with study participants on learning primarily about their positive experiences rather than the negative or critical features of their stories. This approach, while not ignoring challenging issues or problems expressed by participants, attempts, with a focus on storytelling, to build rapport and foster trust between the interviewer and a study participant by encouraging dialogue (Michael, 2005, p. 224).

One difficulty often encountered in short-term research—with only one interview per participant—is that of building trust. Trust-building is an especially critical part of doing organizational research because interviewees may hesitate to offer some information or opinions out of concern that their words might find their way back to colleagues or supervisors (Webb, 2002). Appreciative inquiry addresses this concern.

The portraiture method (e.g., Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) seeks to understand the many contexts, actors, influences, and variables that operate in and on the areas of investigation by capturing a complete story or snapshot. Although the portraiture method may sometimes incorporate a researcher's identity or perspective in the narrative, that was not the case in this study.

Both of these methodologies are compatible with the aims of this study, which involve examining, assessing, and illuminating the Gibsonburg School District's improvement efforts. Appreciative inquiry in organizational research typically is undertaken in the hope of improving an organization's structures and practice by focusing on its positive features. Portraiture further contributes to a more complete picture of an organizational milieu by highlighting details and complexities.

Access and Logistics

The lead researcher, in collaboration with the district's superintendent, designed a research plan that would enable data collection to be efficient, of sufficient scope, and minimally disruptive. To facilitate the work of two researchers, the superintendent selected study participants, and prepared a master schedule for interviews and observations. Study participants were chosen according to three criteria: they held leadership roles in the district, they held positions different from one another, and their schedules were compatible with the research plan.

Although the lead researcher discussed the focus and intent of the study with the superintendent before beginning the interviews, she shared none of the interview questions with him or with any other district employee.

Instrumentation

Before beginning the study in the Gibsonburg School District, the lead researcher developed questions to guide interviews with stakeholders who had participated, or were continuing to participate, in the district's improvement efforts. The interview guide had customized but similar questions for the different types of interviewees: board members, central office administrators, principals, other BLT members, and TBT members. These questions elicited interviewees' impressions of the district's improvement efforts (including who was involved and in what capacity), improvement goals and strategies, different structures' roles (e.g., the OIP teams), and how data and professional development played a part in the process. There were also questions about general outcomes, specific targeted instructional changes, curriculum, and grouping practices. The idea was to encourage interviewees to consider and reflect on challenges faced by the district in the process of improvement. For a complete list of questions, see Appendix B.

Data Collection

Two researchers (not including the lead researcher) conducted interviews and observations in the district for three days. During this data-collection phase, they met each day to discuss their impressions and findings and adjust and refine their interview questions and data-collection strategies; the lead researcher participated in these meetings via conference call. The lead researcher joined the team on the fourth day and conducted a short debriefing meeting with the district's superintendent and the State Support Team member.

Interviews

During their three days in the district, the researchers conducted 17 interviews. They interviewed a school board member; several central-office and building administrators; and TBT, BLT, and DLT members (including classroom teachers and intervention specialists). Other than the school board member and the treasurer, all participants were members of one or more OIP teams.

The interview questions followed a semi-structured format. Interviewers initiated conversations by posing prepared questions, but then allowed participants to tell their stories using their own language, and, in effect, guide the discussion. This open-ended approach encouraged interviewees to offer their personal versions and interpretations of key events and dynamics in the improvement process.

Interviews were designed to last one hour. Many did take the whole time, but a few were cut short because of complications arising during the arranged time. All interviews were conducted in the district, either in the central office or in classrooms and offices in the schools. All were digitally audio-recorded, verbatim typed transcripts of the

recordings were created, and material from these typed transcripts was extracted and examined during data analysis.

Observations

The researchers also observed classroom teaching in the district, at different grade levels and in different subject areas. The district superintendent was asked by the research team to identify effective teachers. In addition to locating teachers for observation, this approach gave the research team a sense of district leaders' ideas of good instruction. This strategy—eliciting district leaders' positive views—also cohered with the study's appreciative-inquiry approach. In addition to observing the recommended teachers, the research team was invited to drop in on other classrooms and observe on an ad hoc basis. None of the classroom observations were recorded with video or audio equipment. Researchers wrote field notes on their observations, and these were analyzed along with the interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

The research team used an iterative approach to data analysis. They began by assigning a set of 13 *a priori* codes to the verbatim transcripts of the 17 interviews. Two researchers used the codes to categorize quotes from the interviews. Discussion with a third researcher helped the team reach a final determination about the best code to use to categorize each quote.

During the process of coding, the researchers sought connections between the codes, to identify themes and patterns emerging from the data. The researchers agreed that four themes (each including several subthemes) characterized improvement efforts in the Gibsonburg schools.

In the next stage of the data analysis, the researchers verified the salience of the themes by mapping coded quotations to themes. All of the coded quotations—with the exception of a very few outliers—related closely to one of the themes.

Once the themes were recoded and counted, the research team began to construct a narrative description of the four most salient themes. This process included a review by one researcher of all the field notes, in order to find observation data that would either support or contradict the thematic interpretation of the coded transcripts.

In the final step of the process, the lead researcher shared the findings section of the report with the district superintendent, asking for feedback about the study's thematic interpretation and a verification of the accuracy of the report's details about the district's improvement process.

Findings

Analysis of data revealed four themes, which can be expressed briefly in the following four sentences:

- The new leadership in the district grounded improvement efforts in existing district and community strengths.
- Before focusing on improvement work per se, the district found it necessary to deal with survival threats.
- A strategy to strengthen direction, alignment, and commitment was underway in response to evident breakdowns in alignment and communication.
- With survival threats at bay, district leaders were making efforts to use OIP structures to foster improvements to instruction, behavior management, and morale—and thereby to foster a culture of openness and inquiry.

Theme 1: Building on Strengths

The first theme describes an intentional strategy that the district's new superintendent and his team of new district leaders[11] are working to implement, namely to build on and extend district strengths. Most notable among the strengths is the district's close connection to a supportive rural community. Other strengths include positive relationships with consultants from the State Support Team, and the engagement in improvement efforts of at least some teachers with long tenure in the district.

Close district-community relationships

Like many rural and small-town communities, Gibsonburg appeared to benefit from a strong relationship between the schools and the community. The relationship, in fact, seemed cordial. Even though the district was hardly affluent, interviewees did not speak of the community in terms of its deficits. Rather, they praised the community for its support of the school district: "We have a really good community, number one. We have a lot of involvement in activities that happen here at the school" (Administrator). Teachers, especially those from the elementary school, also mentioned high levels of parent involvement.

Interviewees talked about the engagement of the broader community in athletics and fundraising. According to a board member, Gibsonburg is a "small town where the school is the center of everything." An administrator described district-community relations by saying, "They're a very involved community... they are very much an

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[11] A more extensive discussion of leadership changes in the district is provided in the discussion of Theme 4, below.

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athletic-driven community. They very much care about football and, you know, the sports end of it."

Study participants also described family and community members as "willing to communicate" (Middle School Teacher) with the schools. One said,

> We have a fair amount of parents who are not afraid to bring their concerns to the administration. When we had some cuts… we had parents who would speak up about that, you know… Our community wants to be involved in what's happening here, and… in a positive way. (Middle School Teacher)

Another interviewee described how the community supports the school through an initiative at the local supermarket:

> They just collect the receipts and then just by collecting receipts, then we get things purchased. That maybe if the budget is tight, we're able to go through them… So, those kind of things… things that parents in this community are doing to help the school. (Middle School Teacher)

An administrator added that "parents care, which is awesome. And we are improving because they care… If they can be a part of what we're doing in the classroom, it just makes it a lot better."

Interviewees gave the impression that multiple channels of communication were open to parents and community members to share opinions with district educators or to engage in the decision-making processes at the schools. For example, study participants said that community members can (and often do) speak at board meetings.

Some study participants also reported that the district has expanded community outreach efforts in recent years, especially since the arrival of the new superintendent and building principals. One teacher explained how a leadership team dedicated to community engagement has taken steps to improve district staff members' involvement with the community through involvement at school athletic events and band concerts. This teacher noted the superintendent's leadership role in this effort, specifically his commitment to "move our community forward and move our school forward" (Middle School Teacher).

This teacher connected the district's increased effort at community outreach to a more positive school climate overall. She noted that the district has been coming out of a difficult period that had lowered morale and strained the relationship between the school and the community:

> So, I think our community is getting stronger… like we've really worked hard this year, our administration has, on school spirit; community spirit. I think it's working because I feel like we have… more people at our athletic events. We

have more kids. We have more excitement. We have more spirit. (Middle School Teacher)

Interviewees also described ongoing district efforts to communicate with community members. They mentioned a number of different approaches: an emergency alert system, school newsletters, a weekly community email, the district website, the district Facebook page, and an annual "state of the schools" report. The superintendent described the "state of the schools" community forum that district leaders hold once each year:

> We do that in January, where we invite the community in. We show them where we're at financially. We show them where we're headed. We talk about our successes, and we talk about the areas that we need to improve on.

Another administrator reported that the district was also seeking other ways to involve parents and community members. Apparently offering presentations to family and community members was a new approach that the district was trying. The first such effort involved a presentation on "digital empowerment," which focused on social media safety and privacy concerns.

A third administrator also described efforts to involve families and community members, but she indicated that community involvement in decision-making was limited.

> We are involving them more in our day-to-day. They have an option to share information with us, ask us questions… They're not necessarily a part of the decision-making and that type of stuff, but we're trying to [help them]… see what's going on and understand how the process works. (Administrator)

Parent and community engagement with Gibsonburg schools appeared most robust at the elementary school. Two school-run programs were identified by participants as highlighting the role the community plays in school improvement efforts. In both cases, parents and other community members volunteer their time to help with school programs.

The first program is called the "Watchdog Program" and involves fathers. The program recruited fathers to volunteer time during the school day to sit in different classrooms. One administrator described the fathers as "role models" and explained the program was a way to get parents more involved with the school on a day-to-day basis. An elementary school teacher shared that a father in the Watchdog Program joined her class and served in the role of a co-teacher: "I had one last week while I was working with a group, and he… took the kids that were high [achievers] and worked with them on something else while I worked with the struggling kids."

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A mentoring program at Gibsonburg also recruited community members (and high school students) to work with students during the school day. This program relies on volunteers to spend one-on-one time reading with students who have been identified by teachers as needing help. One elementary school teacher described the time commitment of volunteers, and the role of the program coordinator:

> I mean, people give up a half hour of their day three times a week to come in. Maybe sometimes an hour and they'll do a double shift. But then she [the coordinator] plans the lessons for each individual child, and the mentors are just trained how to follow those lesson plans, and how to work with the kids, and they report back to her. If she has concerns about their behavior or even how they're doing, she'll come to us and talk.

This teacher went on to praise the program, commenting that "The mentoring program is a true highlight… They just get that time that I wouldn't be able to give them in the class."

Interviewees also noted parent and community engagement outside of the classroom. Two interviewees reported on how a parent organization, Hilfiker Elementary Parents (HEP), has taken actions to support the school district:

> We've had a couple of mothers that have stepped up and… just the togetherness they've created like just the last three years. Like a Father-Daughter Dance, a Mother-Son thing. Just a family affair… Now that's not in the classroom but that is something that… can… trickle back into the classroom. (Elementary School Teacher)

> It's a Hilfiker Elementary parent group. And they do a lot for us. Like, they bought a couple classes a whole set of Chromebooks. So… that's kind of helped with our instructional strategies. (Administrator)

At the middle/high school, the new principal has prioritized community and parent relationships, saying:

> I think the thing is, just keep opening the lines of communication with the parent… My goal as a teacher, was to make sure that it was *never* a communication issue… So, now as a building principal, that's what I'm trying to do. How can we open up the lines of communication, because there are some parents out there that I think we could get ahold of, if we find what works for them… I do think that they play a huge role in the [improvement] process and we have to… figure out how to get them involved.

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Her strategy for increasing parental involvement included implementing a requirement that every parent be contacted by teachers at some point during the school year. She said, "It could be upfront introducing yourself to them [the parent], or if their [the child's] grade does start to slip. I don't want it always to be email" (Middle/High School Principal).

Regarding the district's new outreach efforts to engage parents and the community, she added: "We want to begin servicing our community as a school so that they are here enough that maybe they'd want to be involved even a little bit further with their kids."

At the high school level, the community has also been engaged in the planning process for providing College Credit Plus (CCP) classes at the high school. Interviewees described how the loss of high school students, who leave campus to take CCP courses elsewhere, has hurt the school both financially and in terms of community--school relations. District leaders, responding to this challenge, have invited community members to serve on the committee to address adding College Credit Plus classes to the high school curriculum. The superintendent described this strategy:

> You've just got to listen to what they say. You know, we're going through that with College Credit Plus, now. There was a community committee that was put together and they had great ideas. Now, implementing those ideas aren't always that easy. But, we went from zero classes offered on campus, last year, to 10 this year.

Gibsonburg appeared to benefit from an established cordial relationship with the community, with multiple new avenues for connecting the schools and the community and providing mutual supports. Recent strategies within the district have focused on how the district can do more to engage the community and parents specifically. District leadership, as evidenced by the following quote from an administrator, has acknowledged that student improvement and overall success is connected to positive parent and community relationships.

> I mean they're everything: If they're involved, they're everything to the whole improvement process… If the parents were involved, and they were really teaming up with us, I think it would not take us as long to get to where we need to be.

Positive relationship with SST consultants

Several interviewees had positive things to say about the district's involvement with the consultant from the State Support Team (SST), particularly in reference to the Ohio Improvement Process. One teacher mentioned the SST consultant's efforts to help focus TBTs' efforts, and in general with moving the TBT process forward:

He has helped us a lot with just how to keep moving through that process. When we would be in TBTs… and he'd be in our rooms: "What are you guys working on? How are you? Did you find any data that worked… that didn't work?" So, that has helped… leadership from people who have done it before. (Middle School Teacher)

It seemed that the SST was also helpful as a resource during the most recent administrative transition, particularly for the two new principals. The middle/high school principal credited the State Support Team consultant with helping to regroup and refocus the middle school and high school TBT teams: "TBTs are beginning to function. We're looking at instructional strategies this year. I've regrouped the teachers into new teams, with [the SST consultant's] help" (Middle/High School Principal).

Other participants mentioned the SST's professional development opportunities. One such event, for example, focused on instructional strategies. An administrator discussed working with the SST on how to administer rewards, and on shifting toward a "ninety-five and five mentality," which she described as:

> We want our kids to focus on more of the 95 percent: what are we doing that's really good, instead of focusing on all of the bad things. Because that's the five percent. And… we don't want to harp on that. We want to focus these kids on the 95.

The superintendent also commented on the strong relationship with the SST and its value as a resource for the district: "The State Support Team has been very valuable to us… if I need [the SST consultant] for something [snaps fingers] I call him on the cellphone, he's here."

Committed teachers

Of the teachers interviewed, all but one had worked in the district for 14 years or longer. In general, these teachers expressed positive sentiments about working in the district and their commitment to improving instruction in their own classrooms. Notably, many of these teachers also reported improvements subsequent to the district's involvement with the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP). One elementary school teacher expressed this by saying: "I feel like it's been a successful process… I guess just the feeling of knowing what I'm doing differently, and seeing what other people are doing differently, I feel like that has to be a success."

Other teachers described their commitment to working within the OIP framework—for example by pursuing professional development opportunities. At least one of the teachers interviewed, for instance, had enrolled in continuing education classes to become certified to teach "College Credit Plus" courses at the high school. She decided

to take this step when she learned that the lack of CCP options at the high school was hurting the district:

> I have kids [in high school], too, that I'm encouraging, you should take these college credit classes. But they're not offered here. So, they're going off, taking these classes at Terra, mostly. So we're losing money. So, he [the superintendent] said at the negotiation team, we need to brainstorm, figure out how we're going to bring these kids back. Well, we need to offer CCP. Then I was just going online and there was this grant that they would offer for teachers interested in getting certified. It was free. So I'm like, free money! I'm gonna get on this. And I'm just finishing up my class this Friday—I've been taking classes this whole time, too, this whole past year, to finish my certification… you had to get fifteen credit hours, if you have your Masters. So that's what I did… We've already had the meeting where we're trying to build on it and get more classes to offer so the kids stay here.

A number of veteran teachers also were active in serving on the district's leadership teams, including the BLT and DLT, and in the teachers' union. As a whole, their tenure in the district seemed to foster a sense of commitment to the district, as well as a measure of resiliency in responding to challenges.

Theme 2: Addressing Survival Threats

The second theme explained the district's strategies for addressing issues that threatened its survival. Two interrelated developments were responsible.

Fiscal health and enrollment decline

The district confronted two developments over the past decade: A tenuous financial outlook coupled with declining student enrollment interacted to pose a survival threat.

The 2015-16 academic year marked the first time that Gibsonburg's books were in the black since 2008, with the district previously relying on deficit spending to operate. When asked about the challenges facing the district as it worked to improve, the superintendent acknowledged this concern first: "Money is a big issue."

As several interviewees noted, the district had lost significant funding from the state *due to declining enrollment* ("several hundreds of thousands of dollars" according to the treasurer). One major reason for the decline was the exodus of high-school students who pursued dual-credit options by taking classes at community college campuses in the region. Under the CCP provisions, of course, the district was responsible for paying tuition to those institutions. This expense removed money from the school's operating budget. This outflow of students was not only a budgetary concern, however, as it reportedly also influenced the high school culture and educational program for the worse.

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Addressing these developments has involved balancing the budget by reducing spending and increasing earnings as well as stemming the tide of students taking classes outside of the district by offering more of the CCP classes in house.

Gibsonburg has pursued several tactics to ensure conservative spending; the superintendent commented, "We've really got to be good stewards of the taxpayer's money." The most drastic of these tactics involved making large spending cuts. "With nearly 80 percent of any school district's budget being in personnel, when… you see your finances are forecasting a budget deficit, there's really only one place you can look" (Superintendent). This reality, as articulated by the treasurer, led Gibsonburg's new administration to the difficult choice of cutting staff in spring 2016. The district laid off seven teachers and one administrator. These cuts moved the district toward financial stability, but also created a sense of fear among staff. In addition, the cuts made it impossible for the district to offer several high-school courses, especially electives, that had previously been offered.

Personnel cuts exacerbated a persistent challenge confronting Gibsonburg as a small district: a limited staff of teachers to cover state-mandated curricular requirements. Staff cuts saved money, but left gaps in course offerings. One example mentioned by an interviewee was the loss of the district's French language teacher. As a result of staffing cuts, affected students have increasingly participated in off-campus programs. At the high school, one administrator gave a "rough estimate" that only one quarter of seniors attend school in-district full time, with the remaining three quarters leaving the district to take courses at external institutions—either local community colleges or the career-technical school in the region.

Having so many students leave to take classes elsewhere has created several problems. First, it has changed the culture of the school. Classroom observations at the high school, for instance, revealed that some class sizes were quite small. As one teacher reflected:

> When I started here, the parking lot was full of students. And now, there's just a few cars in the parking lot. It's a huge difference. And now when you have those kids who do venture out, they don't come back: and those are your strong leaders, your role models. And then, you know, who's here to guide those that might be kind of stuck in a limbo, you know? Like, they could make good choices if they had good influences. But, if they don't have that, then they are stuck… So, yeah, I mean, it's very challenging.

It also has consequences for the budget. As the treasurer noted, "That's an area of added expense to the district without any added funding." An elementary school teacher put it even more simply— "We're losing money."

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The primary mechanism for students taking classes outside of the district has been the College Credit Plus (CCP) program. It allows students to take classes at nearby institutions of higher learning, and the district pays the students' tuition so long as they pass their courses. A similar program exists for taking courses at a nearby vocational school. The arrangement produces tuition savings for families, but at the expense of the district budget.

Gibsonburg has therefore expanded on-campus CCP course offerings. This move preserves benefits for families, keeps more resources within district, and retains the participation of students in the culture of the high school.

As numerous interviewees reported, this effort has involved getting district teachers certified to teach CCP courses. Typically, such certification requires a teacher to hold a master's degree plus 15 credit hours of graduate work in the discipline in which he or she will be teaching (e.g., English, history, biology). Although one (previously mentioned) teacher received a grant that partially covered tuition for these credits, another noted that recruiting teachers to this mission required building trust between the administration and the teaching staff. This teacher explained that teachers needed to trust that, if they spent time and money taking the course work, they would be allowed to teach the CCP courses for more than just one or two years. According to the teacher,

> We… had to have an agreement between the school and the teachers and the board saying, you know, it's not going to be a year and if it doesn't work we're dropping it… When you go back to teach a CCP class, of course, you have to do all those hours, you have to have your master's. I mean it's a commitment on the teachers' part, too. (Middle School Teacher)

Gibsonburg appears to have found success with this initiative. As one administrator reflected, "We have a lot of teachers now who can teach CCP," while another administrator noted, "We went from having zero [CCP classes] in house, to this fall [2017] we've offered four or five… and then up to 10 next semester. And then even more for next school year. It's been a quick process." One district principal forecast upwards of 20 CCP classes to be offered the following academic year.

Offering CCP classes has brought students back into the district's classrooms (one teacher suggested it was as many as 30 students during the then-current semester, with more projected to return the following semester). Educators believed it also would improve the district's test scores—a logical inference from the assumption that, when better performing students who take CCP classes at postsecondary institutions (where they do not take state-accountability tests) return to the high school (where they *do* take accountability tests), the high school's scores will increase.

This effort worked in parallel with a plan to bus students who attend a local career-technical school back to the high school for their academic classes, thereby generating

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more money for the district. Under this arrangement, the state allocation for the students will be given to Gibsonburg rather than to the career-technical school. One principal asserted that these strategies have "brought in about a hundred thousand dollars to our district."

In addition to generating funds, the district intended this approach as a way to improve education. One teacher reflected that sending students out to take these postsecondary classes left them without the opportunities of the high school experience: "They kind of find themselves in a limbo where they don't really feel like a college student… and they don't really feel like a high school student." As one administrator reflected, bringing these students back was "one of the beneficial things that we've done right now."

In addition to methods to *retain* revenue, Gibsonburg has also targeted ways to *augment* revenue. The most significant of these was through raising the district's income tax levy, which is set to expire in December 2018. Rather than renewing the levy at its current rate, district leadership sought to increase the rate from 0.75% to 1%, thus making it a new tax rather than a renewal. Multiple interviewees noted, however, that language on the ballot confused some voters, leading them to believe that the new tax would be on top of the existing levy rather than in place of it, thus representing a 1% increase (raising the total tax levy to 1.75%) rather than merely raising it to 1%. According to interviewees, this misunderstanding caused the levy to fail. As one administrator reflected, "Initial levies pass at about [a] 20 [or] 25 percent rate, which is terrible. [But] renewals here pass at about an 82 [or] 83 percent rate."

Needing the extra quarter percent to be financially solvent, however, meant not seeking a straight renewal. A new levy campaign set to begin in January 2018, one with revised language and voter education efforts, left several interviewees hopeful that it would pass successfully. Gibsonburg also faces new potential tax revenue from the planned Nexus natural gas pipeline and a medical marijuana-growing facility, but at present the district's financial future remains uncertain.

Gibsonburg's efforts clearly improved the financial health of the district—key administrators acknowledged, "We're emerging from the economic strains that we had about 10 years ago," and "We're going to be all right." These same efforts also changed the educational landscape. While having fewer teachers raised some problems, bringing CCP classes in house enabled more students to stay on campus, thus giving them more support as they complete college-level course work. Teachers who deliver CCP classes, moreover, receive a salary supplement.

Theme 3: Working on "Direction, Alignment, and Commitment"

The third theme concerned the challenge of instituting a coherent set of goals and strategies. Aware of the challenge, the superintendent had formed a study group to discuss *Direction, Alignment, Commitment: Achieving Better Results through Leadership* by McCauley and Fick-Cooper (2015).
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Most interviewees were, in fact, unable to speak confidently about district goals and strategies. Data analysis pointed to three relevant dynamics:

- With new leadership, the goals and strategies were just beginning to emerge.
- The goals were so fundamental that they tended to be implicit.
- District goals and strategies did not appear to educators to be aligned with specific tactics.

Emerging goals and strategies

> New leadership has, in the past three years, been employed by a district that had lost focus, motivation, and identity. Budget difficulties had led to staffing cuts and low morale. Frequent turnover in leadership reportedly unsettled staff; teachers worried about the future. As one reported, "We do have district goals. And those are district-wide that are shared with us. We have a mission statement. But that differs with each superintendent that comes along" (Elementary School Teacher).

According to interviewees, administrators in the past seemed unfocused and unclear in their messaging: "Teachers were saying they haven't felt a commitment" (Middle/High School Principal). One board member described the instability in this way:

> Communication wasn't as great, and the impression that I received as a board member was… it [OIP] was… forced on us… something we had to do; we had no choice… So, the process was started with [the previous superintendent] and [he] was only here for the first year. [The current superintendent] came on board and [though] things were a little chaotic that first year, he turned things around. Got everybody on the same page, working together. I don't think we had the direction from the superintendent. But now, we do. In the last three years there's been no doubt about that.

Comments from a teacher suggested, moreover, that the first work of top leadership was to reestablish trust.

> You've got to have that support at the top saying, "This is important; we need you guys to commit."… So, our administration has been good about providing the time and the structure, and even the materials a lot of the time. To force us – not that we don't want to, but if that's already done for you it's easier to say, "All right, let's look at these test scores and break them down."… In the beginning… people were like, "Pffff, what do we do with all this?" [Now] we're getting a lot better at breaking that down.

Survival issues (see above) also influenced the early work of reestablishing trust and setting a new course for the district. The most pressing of these seems to have been the

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loss of enrollment among high-school students. Discipline at the middle/high school was a second survival issue. Hiring a new principal was the first step in making the needed improvements. The new principal had had experience in another district and, according to study participants, oriented quickly to the needs of the school and used an assertive approach to raising expectations for the behavior of staff and students. See the context section for the probable results of these changes with respect to disciplinary events. One of several student discipline policies she instituted was a cell-phone policy to ensure that students would remain focused on schoolwork. According to the dean of students, "This year we went with a cellphone policy, which they haven't had here. Just trying to get kids not [to] be on phones all class, and [to] pay more attention to their teachers."

Implicit goals and strategies

Although the superintendent described a set of district goals and strategies, most other study participants regarded the goals and strategies as too basic, too organic, or too unclear to come to mind readily. Two quotes from the superintendent revealed his perspective on the district's goals (first quote) and improvement strategies (second quote).

> Well, we do have… three simple goals. And people laugh at me, I know, and you probably talk to these districts that have these elaborate plans. But we have, we want all our kids to be able to read, write, and do mathematics. That's goal number one.

> It's "Direction, Alignment, and Commitment." Our direction is good. Our commitment is outstanding. I mean, these people are committed to this process. But we're not aligned. We are way out of whack. So, starting in January, our administrative meetings are shifting gears. We're going to go strictly into this idea of direction, alignment, and commitment.

> A comment from one teacher, though vague, characterized the district's major goal in a way that was not too far removed from what the superintendent seemed to intend: "Our school mission statement outlines those things for us… Those goals are, I think, pretty clearly outlined, just to keep making improvements with students every day" (Middle School Teacher).

A comment from another teacher showed some understanding of the strategy the superintendent described:

> They talked about [district goals] at the beginning of the school year, and I'd have to pull out the paper and revisit those myself, but, communication, I know, is… they just want to make sure we're… on the same page… But, you know, for me to say them verbatim I'd have to go back and look. (High School Teacher)

But quotes from most others in the district showed even less clarity, as the following selection illustrates.

> Interviewer: And do those get… discussed, or everyone just kind of knows them already? Respondent: It's just kind of assumed, yeah. (Middle School Educator)

> Every year when we meet it seems like the superintendent has some sort of goals and philosophies—this is what we need to do this year. So, I guess my answer would be… I think we do. But the honest answer is I'm not quite sure what those are. (Middle School Educator)

> That's something we haven't really spelled out. I mean, when we did our OIP process when we fill out our forms, it's always math that we want to improve. Get a year's worth of growth out of math and reading. Specific types of things… we haven't gotten there yet because our leaders have changed so much the last couple years. So that's definitely something that we need to improve. We haven't quite gotten there yet. I mean, we all, each building, kind of has something that they're focusing on but not necessarily as a district per se. (Elementary School Educator)

Alignment and coherence

Some evidence, especially comments from the superintendent and other leaders in the district, suggested that establishing greater coherence was an important improvement strategy. The tactics involved, however, remained unspecified. Other tactics, by contrast, especially those focusing on survival issues, seemed concrete and immediate, but their alignment with the broader improvement goals and strategies was not disclosed. Study participants, in short, did not connect the dots.

For example, not all teachers saw the links between providing greater clarity of purpose, implementing specific approaches, and thereby improving district performance. Instead they tended to see specific initiatives—such as tightening up discipline at the high school, expanding family engagement, increasing competence with co-teaching, and adopting new textbooks as discrete efforts. Few study participants described how a specific initiative connected to another initiative or functioned to accomplish a district goal. A comment about the implementation of a technology initiative illustrates the prevailing sense of disconnection between actions and intended aims:

> There's things hinted at, like we do a lot more technology-based stuff, maybe, than we've done in the past, and… it's just one of those things that's almost assumed: like, "Hey we need to try this with our students." (Middle School Teacher)

In a few cases, comments suggested that some educators were beginning to see the connections between means and ends, as in this comment (about links between discussions in leadership teams):

> But I do feel like it's a district push… [and] because of the process of looking at these [things in] TBTs, it makes you think of it yourself. Like, "Okay, this same kid seems to be falling in this pattern every time, so what can I do to help the kid?" (Elementary School Teacher)

In addition, some teachers appeared to understand the superintendent's efforts to link short-term decisions and actions to long-term goals and strategies. The comment below shows how one teacher interpreted the superintendent's way of thinking about this type of alignment:

> We were financially struggling, and he was committed to working with the teachers and asking, "What can we do to move forward?"… I was on the BLT with him that year, and we had discussions about what we had done before, when we were successful; before we lost staffing; before we got into this financial issue… And he shared with the staff that [it] was very important for him and for us as a district to start looking at what we had done in the past and seeing if we could get back to that, in spite of what we were working with. (Middle School Teacher)

Overall, the superintendent's assessment of the need to build coherence was borne out by the interview data. Interviewees seemed to be awaiting (and anticipating) the next step.

Theme 4: Shifting Structures and Cultures

The fourth and final theme described the changes made over the past several years, as Gibsonburg leaders worked to align structures and culture in the district to facilitate improvement. District leaders were intensifying efforts to tighten structures and shape cultural norms as starting points for creating stronger alignment of improvement work district wide.

Initial work to shift the district's culture began with an administrative turnover, followed by strategic employment of personnel in key positions. New district leadership then reinvigorated improvement structures, especially the OIP leadership teams. The improved operations, especially of these teams, fostered more open communication and more collaboration, particularly about effective instructional practice (i.e., for all students).

Hiring

Several years before this study, the district replaced a significant proportion of its administrators, beginning with the superintendent. Originally hired as the high school
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principal for the 2014-15 academic year, he moved into the superintendent role after 10 months, leaving him to hire his own replacement.

Describing the experience of hiring one person who was not a good fit for the role of high school principal and then another to replace that hire led the superintendent to reflect on the importance of using hiring to build "a team that I can trust." Using what he described as a "very intense interview processes" to ensure a good fit, the superintendent "created that environment" where "the trust… has just grown, because [there are] great people in a great spot." The superintendent saw principals as critical: "You need to have certain power players for the people on your staff that are your cheerleaders. The building principal is *the person.* If your building principals aren't into it, it's not going to happen."

The new administrative team (e.g., new superintendent, principals, special education director) has reportedly helped foster a more open and productive culture. As one teacher observed, one major change concerned "just the whole attitude of the staff. I don't know if it's the new administration, but… just more positivity in general." Another teacher specifically tied administrative changes (new hires and departures) to improved morale, where "people are smiling and are happy again." The reinvigorated collaborative process (OIP leadership teams), this teacher noted, "has helped bring us together a little bit." Seemingly, new administrators were able to direct the OIP leadership team processes, improving communication and focusing the process on improvement efforts. They also established clear expectations for teachers to engage with the OIP process seriously and commit to making some changes in their methods of instruction.

Leadership teams

Gibsonburg had adopted the OIP process the year before the current superintendent was employed. The adoption was mandated by the ODE, and the work was reportedly undertaken in the spirit of compliance. According to study participants, the new administration reanimated the process, not as an exercise in compliance, but as a process of collaboration in the name of instructional improvement.

The new administrative team seems to have employed several tactics to improve the structure and operation of TBT meetings. One teacher pointed to the use of designated timekeepers and notetakers that helps to keep the participants "open to everyone's ideas." Another tactic involved improving participation and engagement. As one principal remembered, the State Support Team (SST) representative had commented that some of the problems developed "because we would have a TBT meeting and people wouldn't show up on time and nobody was accountable."

The new principals reportedly worked to support the OIP teams and set clear expectations for teachers' participation. According to the superintendent, "In the past, [the middle/high-school teams met] in different rooms. Now, they're all in a centrally located library and [the principal is] monitoring and just doing a tremendous job."

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The administrative team also looked at improvement practices in other districts for practices that might work in Gibsonburg. As one interviewee recalled, "We constantly are communicating with other schools." As a result of such contacts, the district scheduled a one-hour time slot every Friday morning in which leadership teams meet (which involved a commensurate delay for the beginning of instruction). The district consulted about leadership teams with the SST representative, as well, and then made other changes. One principal recalled how the elementary school TBTs had been organized by grade level only but were expanded to include different arrangements to promote different conversations. For instance, periodically teams change from a grade-level structure to a multi-grade structure that includes a representative from each grade on every team. This approach, according to study participants, is helping the elementary school improve vertical alignment of the curriculum.

The modest changes, however, involved a substantial reorientation of the OIP process. The superintendent explained it as follows:

> We started tackling some things… The OIP process is all based on, you know, bottom-up. And it seemed to be a lot of top-down [as implemented]… It was just a struggle from the get-go. I mean, we just weren't all on the same page… I stepped into this role and we really started to focus on that five-step process [i.e., from the bottom up].

Other interviewees described a team structure that fostered this reorientation—one elementary school teacher observed that a member from every TBT attends the BLT to share out important information and improve communication, while another teacher was especially appreciative of the "vertical teaming."

New lines of communication

As the superintendent noted, "Communication is the key. You gotta keep people aware of where you're at." One teacher noted, "I feel like the collaboration is huge. I feel like there's more communication. I feel like I can go to my principal and I can go to my superintendent and talk about issues, and they listen."

Such improvement occurred widely. One board member, for example, noted that communication with the board had been poor: Previous changes had been "forced on us."

The new administration, he said, "in a sense turned things around, got everybody on the same page, you know, working together." According to a teacher, "The communication piece I think is really valuable." She reported improved communication among educators, with students, and with parents. One interviewee spoke of these changes as "unifying the whole district."

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Outcomes

Better communication predictably enabled additional improvements. For example, replacing the top-down hierarchy promoted district-wide conversations about key educational strategies. One teacher noted that:

> [The DLT created] more of a connection between the middle school and high school and what's happening in the elementary… And so I think that has helped because we can put in place things that might help as [students] transition over to the other building. (Elementary School Teacher)

Similarly, the BLTs also worked to promote an upward flow of information, rather than enacting a top-down hierarchy. One elementary school teacher and BLT member described the process as a forum for collecting information, with members gathering feedback from TBTs to inform the BLT: "It was all about coming together, let's unify our lesson plans." Yet, BLTs only met quarterly, according to a building administrator, thus the flow of information was "not enough." This prompted a planned shift to monthly meetings, though this had not yet been implemented at the time of the study.

In general, many interviewees' remarks pointed to a broad shift in the leadership teams' focus from data-centered compliance to instructional improvement, especially in the TBTs. As one principal commented, the focus on instruction is part of a concerted effort "to continue to grow the teachers professionally… It has to start with how they are presenting their lessons." Many interviewees described TBTs' involvement with using and evaluating varied instructional strategies. One teacher characterized the work as "focusing on just a couple of different ones and breaking it down in our TBTs."

Conversations about data have also shifted, moving from a summative mode (accountability test scores) to a formative mode (supporting instructional improvement). One elementary teacher recounted a reinvigorated discussion of standards and then using students' benchmark data against these standards to inform conversations about instructional strategies: "[The process is] showing me that [a certain instructional routine] didn't work, so I need to try something else… which is then improving that class."

Interviewees also reported that TBTs used data in the process of curricular alignment. In small districts like Gibsonburg, teachers are often singletons—the only ones to deliver instruction in a particular academic field. This circumstance, usually represented as a disadvantage, led to a productive outcome in Gibsonburg, namely cross-grade level discussions in TBTs. As described by one middle school teacher, "We're looking at our vertical alignment. So, you know, how are you teaching this topic in sixth grade… 'cause that's where it's being introduced [and] how is it evolving all the way up?"

District leaders were now also in the habit of asking for feedback from teachers about the curriculum. Such experiences in leadership teams seemed to offer teachers a voice

in district decision-making. One teacher described the process of adopting a new reading/language arts curriculum. Without a district curriculum director, leadership teams carried out much of the necessary work. According to one elementary school teacher, "We spent a lot of time researching… and so we came up with this one… I don't think any [curriculum's] perfect… but it's bringing us all together, which is kind of nice."

The district also worked to solicit teacher feedback outside of TBTs. For example, district leaders distributed surveys to staff to help plan more meaningful PD.

Numerous improved instructional practices emerged as a result of the district's ongoing efforts in this respect. Several participants described their recent adoption of flexible grouping practices for differentiated instruction. One teacher described several PD opportunities on differentiation that provided "skills" and "set-ups." Another teacher described working with students at different levels in the same classroom, trying to ensure "one year's growth" for each of them.

Greater competence with differentiated instruction also seemed to result from instructional conversations among TBT members. One teacher described "brainstorming strategies" and bringing "a different perspective" to the table to provide differentiated instruction. Interviewees described such conversations between individuals as well as within and across leadership teams (TBTs, BLTs, DLTs, and the RTI teams). One teacher, for instance, spoke of cross-team collaboration, where the TBT and the IAT might work together to help monitor and provide effective interventions for students.[12]

Another instructional practice that teachers discussed in TBT meetings and also learned about in PD sessions involved a co-teaching model in which a general education and special education teacher worked alongside one another in the same classroom. Better use of co-teaching and more precisely focused interventions throughout the district seemed, according to interviewees, to improve the help offered to struggling students. Observations in classrooms also revealed routines promoting collaboration between general and special educators.

Teachers, moreover, appeared to be experimenting with different instructional methods and talking about these ventures in TBT meetings. One teacher reported using a pedagogical model ("Formative Instructional Practice") in which students monitor their own progress, using targets and assessments to help them gauge their own learning. Another was observed using a project-based approach as a way to encourage students to learn independently. The use of technology-mediated instruction also seemed evident, especially in the middle and high schools. Observations in classrooms revealed

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[12] Known in the district as Intervention Assistance Teams (IATs), these teams enact Response to Intervention tactics at each school.

several instances in which laptop computers were deployed for different instructional purposes: to develop students' research skills, to provide opportunities for students to practice newly acquired skills, and to administer and score formative assessments.

Overall, as the discussion of the related subthemes shows, Gibsonburg implemented several strategies to refine district structures, especially those relating to the OIP teams. The district worked to build a culture of improvement, in part using these structures. Building this culture of improvement led to more effective leadership teams, which in turn seem to have fostered deeper communication throughout the district. Deeper communication helped build trust but also focused attention on instruction. The transcript data demonstrate that conversations about instruction produced changes in instruction, reportedly leading to improved practices. Observations in classrooms also revealed experimentation with the instructional strategies that interviewees mentioned in their reports of TBT and BLT decision making.

Discussion

The Gibsonburg study, according to the evidence, illustrates a district in recovery from an unfortunate period of crisis. Local actors (particularly the school board, one might surmise) worried that failure to take appropriate action might compromise the quality (and possibly even the existence) of the Gibsonburg district. The history of school closures in America does suggest that a poorly led district in financial difficulties is a candidate for closure (see, e.g., Bard et al., 2006).

In the midst of the crisis, the board hired a new high-school principal, whom, as the superintendency again became open, they judged a good choice for superintendent. The new (i.e., current) superintendent then replaced most of the leadership team.

The new team took the measures described in the themes derived from interview and observation data: (1) building on existing strengths (which notably included strong connections to the community and once-good morale); (2) addressing survival threats (particularly by changing CCP arrangements that undercut district finances and enrollment); (3) reestablishing trust and morale so that instructional practices could be directed and aligned; and (4) reconceptualizing the OIP process as a distributed instructional leadership structure (instead of an onerous compliance ritual resented by educators).

As to educational outcomes, Gibsonburg shows average proficiency levels in a community with average socioeconomic status. Readers should *clearly note* that Gibsonburg is *not an underperforming district*—even though judged deficient by the state (a status that triggered a compliance-oriented use of the OIP process).

Perhaps instructional improvement will yield somewhat higher academic performance in the future. After all, the reorganized OIP process is reportedly fostering collaboration around instructional practice. The district's attendance and graduation rates are high,

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circumstances that are typical of *healthy* rural school districts (see, e.g., Schafft & Jackson, 2010). Gibsonburg's "story" is of course ongoing, and that continuation is the fundamental accomplishment, and the main finding of the case study. The district seems to be "back on track."

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APPENDIX A

Table 1 Gibsonburg Total Enrollment: Black, White, Hispanic 2010-2016

	School Year				
Group	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14	2012-13
Total Enrollment	916	954	1,020	1,049	1,016
Percent Black, non-Hispanic	0	0	0	<1.0%	0
Percent White, non-Hispanic	84.6%	84.7%	84.8%	85.8%	86.1%
Percent Hispanic	12.5%	12.7%	12.8%	11.5%	11.7%
Percent Multiracial	2.8%	2.5%	2.4%	2.4%	2.0%
Percent Asian	<1.1%	<1.0%	<1.0%	<1.0%	<1.0%

Note 1. Because of missing groups (Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islanders) and rounding, percentages do not sum to 100.
Note 2. The district's teaching staff is about 95% White, 3% Black, 1% Hispanic, and less than 1% other (ODE, 2018).

Table 2 Gibsonburg Schools Enrollment: Proportions with Coincident Disability, Economic Disadvantage, and Limited English Proficiency

Group			School Year				
disability	low-SES	LEP	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14	2012-13
No	No	No	58.2%	58.8%	59.5%	55.2%	54.7%
No	Yes	No	28.8%	29.7%	29.1%	32.3%	32.4%
Yes	Yes	No	7.5%	7.6%	6.0%	6.6%	6.5%
Yes	No	No	5.5%	6.2%	5.5%	5.9%	6.0%
No	Yes	Yes	NA	NA	NA	<1%	<1%
No	No	Yes	NA	NA	NA	<1%	<1%

Note. Proportions calculated by the authors. Percentages do not sum to 100% because of data unreported for some cells, and because of rounding. NA= not available. Precise numbers are not reported in cells with fewer than 10 students (i.e., about 0.2% of the Gibsonburg total enrollment).

Table 3 Gibsonburg Schools 2016-17: Total Enrollment and Subgroup Proportions by School

Schools	Total	Black	White	Hisp	Mult	LEP	DISAD	DISAB
			Subgroups					
High School	258	0	83.4%	14.4%	<3.8%	0	31.6%	11.6%
Middle School	217	0	83.3%	13.5%	<4.6%	0	35.2%	14.9%
Elementary School	441	0	86.0%	10.8%	3.2%	0	39.6%	12.9%

Note 1. Black and White are exclusive of Hispanic; Hispanics may be any "race." Cells with "less than" percentages (<) reflect the ODE practice of not reporting counts under 10. Percentage upper limits were produced by dividing 10 by total enrollment.
Note 2. LEP=limited English proficient, DISADV=economically disadvantaged, DISAB=disability. These subgroups are not mutually exclusive.

Table 4 Gibsonburg Schools: Attendance & Disciplinary Actions/100 Students, by Subgroup

Indicator	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14	2012-13	OH 2016
			School Year			
Attendance	>95%	>95%	>95%	>95%	>95%	93.9%
D/100T	3.8	11.7	6.2	7.7	11.9	22.0
D/100H	1.8	19.9	7.7	13.2	10.1	20.3
D/100MR	7.8	25.3	4.2	23.4	39.6	30.0
D/100W	4.0	10.1	6.0	6.6	11.5	12.1
D/100DV	5.4	17.3	9.0	12.5	19.6	36.4
D/100DB	9.2	35.7	17.1	22.1	37.8	41.0

Note 1. D/100T=total disciplinary actions per 100 students for the district, D/100H=for all Hispanic students, D/100MR=for all Multiracial students, D/100W=for all White students, D/100DV=for all students confronting economic disadvantage, and D/100DB=for all students with disabilities. OH 2016=state average for districts. Data not calculated for Asian or Black students (n<10).
Note 2. State-level data (OH 2016) may be misleading due to the confounding of charter *schools* and public *districts*.

Table 5 Gibsonburg Schools: Percentage Proficient by Level

Level	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14	2012-13	STATE (16-17)
3rd	80.2%	78.3%	82.4%	89.0%	88.0%	67.2%
4th	76.8%	76.2%	67.9%	86.6%	91.2%	70.9%
5th	79.9%	78.2%	52.5%	74.5%	73.5%	65.9%
6th	70.2%	53.1%	53.0%	68.0%	81.4%	61.5%
7th	57.7%	50.8%	54.8%	77.7%	87.7%	57.7%
8th	38.4%	53.0%	44.2%	86.4%	71.3%	57.0%
10th				80.3%	86.9%	92.0%
11th		92.5%	95.3%	96.7%	92.3%	
HSGov&Hist	60.8%	67.7%	61.3%			53.3%
HSEng1&2	55.1%	59.3%	49.1%			56.8%
HSAlg1&Geo	41.9%	46.5%	60.1%			44.1%
All Avail	62.9%	65.6%	63.7%	83.2%	84.7%	59.4%

Note 1. Percent proficient for each level is the average of all available scores at that level.
Note 2. HSGov&Hist=average of the government and history end-of-year tests; HSEng1&2=average of the English 1 and English 2 end-of-year tests; HSAlg1&Geo=average of the Algebra 1 and Geometry end-of-year tests; All Avail=the average in the given year of all available district-level test scores (percent proficient).
Note 3. The "HS" tests (end-of-year tests) replaced from 2014-15 forward the sections of the Ohio Graduation Test previously given in grades 10 and 11.

Table 6 Gibsonburg Schools: Proportions of Hispanic and White Graduates

	School Years									
Groups	15-16	2011	14-15	2010	13-14	2009	12-13	2008	11-12	2007
N_Grads	82		95		82		59		80	
PrGradsH	15.9%	12.9%	15.8%	10.1%	14.6%	10.5%	NR	11%	13.8%	10.6%
PrGradsW	80.5%	85.3%	82.0%	88.7%	85.4%	88.9%	94.9%	88.1%	85.0%	88.9%

Note 1. The two bottom rows (PrGradsH and PrGradsW) indicate the percentage of the number of graduates (N_Grads) who were Hispanic or White. The ODE does not report percentages for subgroups with fewer than 10 graduates (e.g., as for Hispanic students in 2012-13).
Note 2. Table 6 *also* includes the proportion of the subgroup of the *total high school enrollment* four years earlier (italicized column head) for each of the years 2011-12 through 2015-16. For instance, in 2016 15.9% of the graduates were Hispanic, whereas four years earlier 12.9% of the high school enrollment was Hispanic.

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

Superintendent/Central Office Administrators/Board President

- Could you describe your current position/current role? How long have you been at your current role? How long have you been in the district?
- Would you describe the district's efforts over the past several years to improve education for all students?
    - When did the district decide to make significant improvements and why?
    - What actions did district leaders take?
    - Who was involved? What role did each key participant play?
- What has your role been in relation to district improvement efforts? OR – for specific roles: What has the role of the board been? What has the role of the curriculum specialists been?
- Does the district have a set of improvement goals?
    - What are the most important goals?
    - How were the goals developed? With whom are they shared?
    - How often does the district revisit the goals?
- What strategy or set of strategies has the district used in the improvement process?
- Have parents or community members played a role in influencing district improvement efforts? If so, how?
- What internal structures or structural changes enabled the district to make improvements?
    - What has been the role of Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) teams (i.e., DTL, BLTs, and TBTs) in the improvement process?
    - Can you describe your role on the DLT/BLT? Or how do you interact with the DLT/BLT/TBTs?
- Did professional development opportunities help the district make improvements? If so, what PD was helpful and why do you think it was helpful?
- Did data collection and analysis help the district make improvements? If so, what types of data were helpful? How did the district use these data?
- What improvements have you seen as a result of the district improvement process?
- What parts of the improvement process have worked well? What parts worked less well?
- What were the outcomes of the district improvement process?
    - Did instructional practices change? If so, in what ways?
    - Did grouping practices change? If so, in what ways?
    - Did the curriculum change? If so, in what ways?

- ○ Have there been measurable outcomes such as improvements in test scores or graduation rates?
- What challenges did the district face as it worked to improve?
  - ○ Have improvement processes been implemented equally throughout the district?
  - ○ How has the leadership team worked to reach all district personnel in implementing changes? Has this been successful? Why or why not?
  - ○ What do district educators perceive as the external challenges the school district has faced in improving education for all learners?

Principals/Other BLT Members

- Could you describe your current position/current role? How long have you been at your current role? How long have you been in the district?
- Would you describe your school's efforts over the past several years to improve education for all students?
  - ○ How do your school's efforts fit in with district efforts?
- Does the district have a set of improvement goals? If so, how are those shared with you? How often do you discuss district goals with central office administrators?
- Do you have a set of school improvement goals?
  - ○ How were the school improvement goals established?
  - ○ How do your school improvement goals fit with the district's improvement goals? How do they diverge?
- What particular strategy or set of strategies has your school used for making improvements?
- Have parents or community members played a role in influencing school or district improvement efforts? If so, how?
- What internal structures or structural changes enabled the school to make improvements?
  - ○ What has been the role of Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) teams (i.e., DTL, BLTs, and TBTs) in the improvement process?
  - ○ Can you describe your role on the BLT? What about the DLT? OR - how do you interact with the DLT/BLT/TBTs?
  - ○ Can you talk about how TBTs function in your building?
- Did professional development opportunities help the school make improvements? If so, what PD was helpful and why do you think it was helpful?
- Did data collection and analysis help the school make improvements? If so, what types of data were helpful? How did the school use these data?
- What improvements have you seen as a result of the district improvement process?
  - ○ What aspects of the improvement process have worked well?
- What were some outcomes of the district improvement process?

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- Did instructional practices change? If so, in what ways?
        - Did grouping practices change? If so, in what ways?
        - Did the curriculum change? If so, in what ways?
        - Have there been measurable outcomes such as improvements in test scores or graduation rates?
    - What challenges has your building faced as it worked to improve education for all students?
        - How has your building worked to include all teachers and staff in improvement efforts? Has this been successful?
        - What are some of the external challenges the school district has faced in improving education for all learners? (e.g high poverty, high transience among population, low parental involvement, funding difficulties)

TBT Members

- Could you describe your current position/current role? How long have you been at your current role? How long have you been in the district?
- Could you describe how your TBT works?
- What topics does your TBT consider?
- How does your TBT review data?
- How does your TBT talk about and plan for instruction?
- How does your TBT monitor the use of the instructional strategies you decide to use?
- How does your TBT fit into other school and district structures (e.g., the BLT, the DLT, other planning groups)?
- Are you aware of the district's specific improvement goals? If so, how did you become aware of the district's goals?
- Would you describe what you know about the district's overall efforts over the past several years to improve education for all students?
- How do parents and community members contribute to the plans your TBT and/or BLT make?
- Do you think your teaching has improved as a result of your participation as a member of a TBT? Why or why not and in what ways?
- What overall improvements have you seen as a result of the district improvement process? What aspects of the improvement process have worked well?
- In terms of specific outcomes, can you speak to any of the following:
    - Have instructional practices changed? If so, in what ways?
    - Have grouping practices changed? If so, in what ways?
    - Has the curriculum changed? If so, in what ways?
- What have some of the challenges been in this process?