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## **A Profile of Selected Conservatorships in Failing Mississippi School Districts**

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A PROFILE OF SELECTED CONSERVATORSHIPS IN FAILING  
MISSISSIPPI SCHOOL DISTRICTS

by

Joshua Jones

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Education and Psychology  
and the Department of Educational Research and Administration  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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**MISSISSIPPI.**

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine factors associated with the success of conservatorships as a method for school district improvement by analyzing school accountability ratings, results from an adaptive leadership instrument, and action plans of conservators. A sequential exploratory design was used to examine the action plans implemented by conservators to increase academic achievement in five failing school districts. The quantitative data from this study consisted of accountability ratings from districts under the control of a conservator within the 2012 – 2016 time period and data from the adaptive leadership questionnaire. This questionnaire was sent to administrators in the districts mentioned previously to rate the adaptive leadership behaviors of their assigned conservator. These data were then used to inform the qualitative portion of the study by helping the researcher determine which conservators should participate in the interviews. The historical accountability data revealed that only two of the districts reached and maintained a successful accountability rating. High adaptive leadership scores were not necessarily linked to a higher accountability rating. The lowest adaptive leadership conservator achieved a successful rating, while the highest adaptive leadership score did not meet that rating. Conservator interviews were conducted to determine what took place in each of the districts during the conservatorship. The interviews determined that some of the issues these districts are facing included: ineffective leadership, poor attendance, lack of standards-based teaching, and problems with data analysis. The action plans implemented by each conservator varied based on the issues they noticed after gaining control. Plans were set up to address issues with poor facilities, financial and personnel issues, and instructional concerns.

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The months spent on this dissertation have been some of the most rewarding, but also most difficult times in my academic journey. None of this would have been possible without the help of the professors who led me to this point and my committee members who guided me through.

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to several people who have made a tremendous impact on my life.

First, I would like to thank Vallerie Lacey for pushing me professionally and academically. Without her, I would not be in the field of education and would have never considered attending USM. She was my first and best mentor.

My grandfather, Ralph Jones, always encouraged my academic pursuits as a child. As I passed each milestone, I thought of him. Reflecting on the lessons he taught me over the years, is still my best cure for discouragement.

To my daughter, Ellery, I want you to know that nothing worth having is easy. Be willing to work each day to achieve lofty goals. I have sacrificed a lot over the past few years to hopefully provide better for you each day. Dream big, Rimshot.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NCLB	No Child Left Behind
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
MAEP	Mississippi Adequate Education Program
MDE	Mississippi Department of Education

## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Mississippi often sits at the bottom in lists of national rankings. Particularly in the realm of education, Mississippi seems to consistently hold the bottom spot. Recently, Mississippi was ranked second to last above Nevada (Associated Press, 2016; Harwin, Lloyd, Reimer, & Yettick, 2016). The Mississippi legislature has made attempts to correct low academic achievement by creating laws that could improve failing school districts. Takeovers are an example of a state-led initiative to improve school districts. In spite of all the attempts at educational reform, the citizens of the state have good reason to doubt school district improvement plans. Many school districts in the state that have experienced a takeover have remained under state control for several years with continued low academic achievement. Even though these takeovers are intended to improve school districts so that students and employees are no longer at risk, some districts have not shown improvement.

Currently, 31 states have legislation that allows the state government to reconstitute or takeover failing school districts (Institute on Education Law and Policy, 2014). Mississippi law allows for a conservator to be appointed to run a school district if a state of emergency is declared following two years of failure (MS. Senate Bill No. 2628). A conservator takes the role of the superintendent of the district and answers directly to the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) rather than the school board. Even though this type of improvement plan was officially put into law 2009, the state has allowed for conservator control of districts since 1996. Since that time, sixteen different school districts have experienced a takeover and three from that list have experienced a takeover twice (Mader, 2014). There is a great amount of variability in the methods used

to accomplish school improvement across the United States, but many states pass legislation based on nearby states (McDermott, 2003). The goal of school improvement should be to select the best solution that is grounded in research and not to choose the plan that neighboring states have in place.

### History of School Improvement

Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were strong proponents of public education and saw the need to create a system of leadership and accountability to the public in the 1700s (Mercer, 1993; Sell, 2005). It was ultimately decided that the Constitution should steer clear of issues related to public education and instead each state should be allowed to run schools as they saw fit. This led to a lot of variation in school governance over the years. Some states, like Massachusetts, were always on the forefront of education. In the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thanks in large part to Horace Mann, Massachusetts developed a training program for teachers that allowed for a more consistent instructional approach state-wide (Brickman, 2010). Mann studied other models of education and developed a system that helped move his state forward. The American South often lagged behind in the field of education where more attention was given to agriculture (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). The Civil War and Reconstruction only exacerbated the problems in Southern schools. Urban and Wagoner (2009) also explain that the segregation of schools created achievement gaps that have been long lasting.

Along the way some Federal intervention began to take place. Many United States legislators placed an emphasis on intellectual competition among other countries (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). Between 1950 and 1972 more education legislation was passed in the United States than in the previous 150 years (Carleton, 2002). The aim was

to create a better education system from elementary school through college. In 1994, Congress passed the Improving America's School Act, which called for increasing student achievement and developing measures of school district accountability (Civic Impulse, 2016). Several years later No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed and it amplified the accountability measures school districts needed to meet. NCLB also created a system that placed a great deal of emphasis on standardized testing and linked the results of those tests to the accountability rating each state received (Klein, 2015). The role that tests results played in determining the accountability rating led some states to alter their school improvement legislation. Many states created school reform laws for the first time in an attempt to improve their ratings. NCLB was repealed in December of 2015 and replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The goal was to remove some of the controversial federal mandates in lieu of more state control over individual school systems, but the corrective action options from NCLB remained (Klein, 2015).

Even though Mississippi receives a great deal of criticism regarding education, there have been several Mississippi governors who considered education their top priority. William Winter served as governor from 1980-1984 and often discussed the importance of improving education. Mississippi schools were not competing academically with many neighboring states. While in office, Winter stressed the importance of improving the Mississippi economy and in order for that to occur more businesses had to locate in Mississippi. His plan to improve economic development involved reducing the number of high school dropouts and increasing academic achievement. (Governors, 2001). His work to pass the Educational Reform Act of 1982

created many lasting changes for the Mississippi's public education system. Because of his efforts, spending on education increased, laws governing attendance were passed, and kindergarten programs were created (Governors, 2001).

Ray Mabus ran for office in 1988 with the topic of education coming up often in his campaign. Mabus was convinced that students would perform better compared to other students in the nation if they had access to computers in school. He urged the legislature to increase teacher pay and to set aside more money for educational resources. By the end of his term, over \$900 million dollars had been spent to improve the educational infrastructure in Mississippi (Governors, 2001). The amount of money specifically dedicated to education may have ultimately led to his failed re-election bid in 1991.

Less than a decade later, Ronnie Musgrove emerged on the scene as the lieutenant governor from 1996 to 2000, then as governor from 2000 to 2004. He played a major role in the passage of the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP), which created a formula for funding state schools. Former Governor William Winter called MAEP, "the most significant piece of education legislation in the state's history" (Harrison, 2008). This funding was designed to provide every student in the state of Mississippi with an adequate education. During his term, teacher pay was increased to be more in line with the rest of the Southeast. This would help ensure that Mississippi could hire and retain talented teachers without fear of them crossing the state line for a higher salary. Even though state leaders made many attempts to improve academic achievement by increasing funding, improving the educational infrastructure, and increasing teacher pay, Mississippi schools continued to struggle academically. A plan for school district

reform was needed to help school districts that consistently fell behind the rest of the state.

### School District Improvement in Mississippi

In 1994, the Mississippi legislature put laws into place that allowed for a school district takeover (Mader, 2014). In this case, the governor could appoint a superintendent to make decisions on behalf of the district. The initial reason for most district takeovers was usually financial mismanagement of a district (Wong & Shen, 2003). However, Mississippi soon created legislation that outlined the steps involved in a takeover. Specifically, Mississippi now uses the term conservatorship in reference to a complete takeover because a conservator is appointed to correct financial, academic, and/or safety issues in failing school districts (MS Code § 37-17-6, 2015). MDE now has an Office of Conservatorship that oversees the actions of conservators once they have been appointed to a failing school district. The Office of Conservatorship website explains that the State Board of Education may abolish the school district and assume control and administration of the schools formerly constituting the district and appoint a conservator (Office of Conservatorship, 2016). These conservator appointments occur when a state of emergency has been declared in a school district.

The Officer of Conservatorship offers the following reasons for the declaration of a state of emergency.

An extreme emergency exists in a school district that jeopardizes the safety or educational interests of the children enrolled in the schools in that district and that the emergency situation is believed to be related to a serious violation or violations of accreditation standards or state or federal law;

If a school district meets the State Board of Education's definition of a failing school district for two consecutive full school years;

Or in the event that more than 50 percent of the schools within the school district are designated as Schools At-Risk in any one year;

A lack of financial resources; or

Failure to meet minimum academic standards as evidenced by a continued pattern of poor student performance (Office of Conservatorship, 2016).

Most conservatorships in Mississippi now occur if a school district is designated as failing for two consecutive years. School districts are considered failing if the accountability ratings fall below a certain cut-off point. These ratings are based on standardized test scores, which are given in various subjects at the end of each school year. Between 1996 and 2015, the increased attention on standardized tests scores and accountability rankings caused some districts to violate accreditation rules in order to receive a better rating. This was the case with Tunica county schools during 2015 – 2016 school year (Royals, 2015). Even though the repeal of NCLB may ease some of the pressure associated with standardized test scores, the goal of MDE should be to improve academic achievement within the state. An effective school district improvement plan is one area that should be considered when developing an overall plan to move the state forward academically.

Unique opportunities and problems exist in every state and Mississippi is no different. Currently, when a state of emergency is declared in a school district a conservator is appointed to take control of decision-making. The use of a conservator is not inherently bad, but one would expect to see more documented cases of success.

Mississippi has used the current system for nearly two full decades and continues to rank in the bottom of the national rankings of academic achievement. Mississippi may benefit from a multi-faceted approach to school district improvement. NCLB required that states use some corrective action in order to address failing school districts (Oluwule & Green, 2009). ESSA still requires each state to monitor student progress and corrective actions such as takeovers are still in place (Klein, 2017). Three different solutions were proposed in NCLB including: replacing district personnel, appointing a designee to make decisions of the district, and closing or restructuring a school or district (McDermott, 2003; Oluwule & Green, 2009; Wong & Shen, 2002). In a state that is struggling to keep up with the rest of the nation, it is possible that multiple corrective actions may be needed. In other words, there may not be a single solution in this case.

#### Theoretical Framework

Three different theories were used as a basis for this research. Contingency theory explains that a leader's decisions are highly dependent on the situation (Donaldson, 2001). Lewin's Change Theory addresses the steps needed to successfully implement a change within an organization (Lewin, 1947). Finally, adaptive leadership theory describes a type of leadership that involves effectively preparing individuals within an organization to handle difficult problems (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

This study is partially grounded in contingency theory. Essentially, contingency theory proposes that there is no one-way to accomplish organizational goals, but instead leaders should select the appropriate method based on each situation (Donaldson, 2001). Differences in organizational culture, size, and strategies can affect how decisions are made in an organization. This applies directly to schools that can also have different

cultures, student populations, and school wide goals. Morgan (1986) proposed that organizations are all different and there is no best solution to any problem. Instead he believed that each organization was an open system that required managers who would carefully consider unique internal and external factors in order to be successful (Morgan, 1986). Different types of organizations will have different needs. Even if differences in organizational size were the only consideration, there are major disparities in Mississippi. The most recent report on district enrollment placed Desoto County School District as the largest school district in the state with over 32,000 students (Office of Public Reporting, 2012). When compared to the Benoit School District of only 287 students, it is easy to see that a one size fits all solution may not always be effective.

Because the overall goal of school district improvement should be to enact positive change, this study also draws from Kurt Lewin's Change Model. Lewin's Change Model involves a three-step process to produce change within an organization (Lewin, 1947; Manktelow et al., n.d.). Lewin also stated that understanding the need for the change was needed before the three steps could begin. The first step in the process is called the unfreezing stage. During this stage, the leader has to prepare the organization for an upcoming change. It is also during this stage that the leader demonstrates why the current system is inadequate (Lewin, 1947; Manktelow et al., n.d.). Once, the organization is primed for change the second stage, appropriately named the change stage, can begin. During this stage, the leader reveals the new direction for the organization and the employees make an effort to move toward that goal. This will be the longest step in the process since people are often reluctant to change. Manktelow et al., (n.d.) mentioned that it may take some time to even arrive at this stage since most people

will have a difficult time adjusting to the unfreeze stage. The final step in the process is called the refreeze stage. During this step, the changes have created an organization that is viewed as both stable and efficient (Manktelow et al., n.d.). This three-step process related to change could easily be employed in the field of education.

Lastly, adaptive leadership theory also provides a theoretical foundation for this study as well. The concept of adaptive leadership was developed at Harvard University and draws some elements from both leadership theory and scientific theory. Leaders are called to adapt to challenging situations similar to animals evolving to survive in the wild (Heifetz et al., 2009). Conservators are often faced with very difficult situations in school districts and adapting to a very specific circumstance may be needed to create success in the district. Adaptive leadership proposes that any individual can adapt to become a leader by diagnosing problems, creating a system to correct those problems, and implementing the system by thriving as a leader to inspire others to act (Heifetz et al., 2009). Leaders are asked to diagnose the organization and take actions to improve negative situations. They are also expected to reflect on their own behavior while facing the challenges within the organization. This self-diagnosis allows them to better meet the needs of the organization and motivate others to work through difficult situations (Heifetz et al., 2009). Conservators must eventually return districts to local control so inspiring others to carry out effective systems of change is a necessity.

#### Statement of the Problem

Current research on school district improvement tends to focus on specific cases (Barth, 2014; Bishop, 2009; Wong & Shen, 2002). Furthermore, these case studies are often conducted in large metropolitan areas where the takeover system involves a mayor

assuming control or in states that outperforms Mississippi in terms of academic achievement (“Mayoral Takeovers in Education: A Recipe for Progress or Peril?,” 2006; McGlynn, 2010; Wong & Shen, 2003). It should also be noted that these studies occur in areas with higher median incomes and lower rates of unemployment and poverty (Dill, 2014). The literature on school district improvement lacks studies that address the statewide use of school district takeovers in underperforming states. Since 1996, 16 different school districts in Mississippi have experienced a takeover through a state appointed conservator, but no research has been conducted on the effectiveness of conservatorships (Mader, 2014). Research is needed to examine the academic results for the districts affected by the current model to determine what factors contribute to the success of conservatorships. Currently, there is no known data that addresses the link between conservator’s action plans and academic improvements in failing school districts. Districts are returned to local control based on improvement in accountability ratings and in some cases this return has taken many years.

#### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine factors associated with the success of conservatorships as a method for school district improvement by analyzing school accountability ratings, results from an adaptive leadership instrument, and action plans of conservators.

#### Justification

Studying the most effective means for improving school districts has a great deal of significance in the state of Mississippi. The current system of using conservatorships needs to be examined to determine if it is actually the best method for creating positive

change within a school district.

Research in the area of school conservatorships suggests that it would be beneficial for schools to be returned to local control with improved academic results (Wong & Langevin, 2005). However, other studies show that conservatorships do not always produce positive academic results especially after being relinquished to local control (Bishop, 2009; Smith, 2009; Wong & Shen, 2003). As an example, three Mississippi school districts (North Panola, Tunica, and Oktibbeha County) have been under the authority of a conservator more than once.

If it is found that the conservatorship model is not effective in improving school performance; then some revisions may be necessary to the current system. The children of Mississippi would benefit directly from effective school district reform strategies because they would have an equal chance at academic success in any district. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2011) explains that students from good education systems are more likely to acquire the knowledge and skills required to enter a global job market. They are also less likely to need unemployment or welfare benefits in their lifetime. This is advantageous to the tax-paying public because an effective school system can eliminate some of the costs associated with unemployment and welfare.

Further, there are certain direct costs associated with the conservatorship model that could be avoided if this strategy is found to be ineffective, namely the salary provided to the conservators. An April 2016 agenda from the State Board of Education meeting revealed that three different conservators received a contract for over \$90,000 for half of the fiscal year, from July 1, 2016 through December 31, 2016. However,

research from other states suggests that effective school reform has been accomplished at the school level without passing on high costs to the public (Mullen & Patrick, 2000; Thielman, 2012). Removing an expensive school improvement option has the potential to greatly benefit the taxpayers in Mississippi because they are ultimately responsible for the salary of an appointed conservator. In some cases of conservatorship, there are also costs associated with hiring and training staff members. Districts could save money by creating improvement plans for the current staff and by providing them with effective professional development (Mullen & Patrick, 2000).

Overall, the results of this study can be valuable in examining school performance variables related to conservatorships. These findings can then be used to evaluate the practicality of continuing to use the current conservatorship model for district improvement, which has both educational and financial implications for students, schools, and the state.

### Research Questions

The following questions were answered through the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative:

1. Does analysis of accountability ratings during and after a conservatorship indicate that the conservator had a positive influence on academic achievement in the school district?
2. Are conservators with high scores on the adaptive leadership instrument associated with school districts that have maintained successful accountability ratings?

3. What did the conservator report as a contributing factor to the school district's failure?
4. What plans were implemented to raise academic achievement during the conservatorship?

### Definition of Terms

*School District Improvement:* Any attempt to improve a specific aspect of a school district through the implementation of a previously unused strategy or plan. Typically, this is related to academic performance, but it could be related to financial, safety, or managerial issues as well (Wong & Langevin, 2005).

*Accountability Ratings:* A rating given to schools and districts to indicate their level of success based on the previous school year's end-of-year testing results, growth, and graduation rate. For this study, the accountability rating system released in 2012 by MDE will be used (Office of Accreditation and Accountability, 2015).

*Growth:* The movement across a performance level from one school year to the next, or maintaining a level of proficiency or above from one school year to the next, or crossing over the midpoint of the lowest two levels. For example, crossing from the low end of Basic to the upper end of Basic would constitute growth (Office of Accreditation and Accountability, 2015).

*Takeover:* A method of school district improvement in which the state or local government either takes control of school district or grants control to an expert in the field (Oluwole & Green, 2009).

*Conservator:* A person (typically a former principal or superintendent) that is given power by the Mississippi Board of Education to make all decisions concerning a school

district. The conservator takes all of the responsibilities from the superintendent of that district when the state declares a state of emergency (Office of Conservatorship, 2016).

*Graduation Rate:* The percentage of students who are able to complete high school and receive a high school diploma within four school years after entering the ninth grade (“Public High School Graduation Rates,” 2016).

#### Assumptions

1. All data related to test scores and academic growth is maintained accurately by MDE.
2. All conservators and principals who agree to participate in the interviews provide honest answers to the questions asked.
3. The conservators selected from 2012 through 2016 were chosen by the Department of Education based on similar criteria that was used in previous years.
4. Conservators from 2012 through 2016 have been in control of school districts in similar academic circumstances.

#### Delimitations

1. The study will focus on conservatorships in the state of Mississippi.
2. The conservators who are interviewed will be from districts that entered a conservatorship from 2012 – 2016.
3. This study will focus on the action plans used by the conservators to improve the school district and the effect of these plans on academic achievement variables.

#### Summary

Conservatorships have been used in the state of Mississippi since 1996 as a method of school district improvement. The researcher has provided justification for determining factors associated with conservator success.

Chapter II provides a review of the literature related to school conservatorships. The chapter begins with a historical background of school district improvement in the United States. Next, specific information is provided about the creation of the public school system in Mississippi. Previous school improvement attempts and detailed information about conservators will also be explained. Chapter II ends with an explanation of the theoretical framework that provides a basis for this study.

## CHAPTER II - REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This literature review examines different aspects of school district improvement including the following: the historical background of school improvement in United States, examples of comparable takeover methods from states other than Mississippi, the development and implementation of the Mississippi public school system, previous school improvement attempts in Mississippi, and the conservatorship model in Mississippi. This chapter will also examine the theoretical foundation for this study, which is based on contingency theory, Kurt Lewin's Change Theory, and adaptive leadership theory.

### Historical Background of School District Improvement in the United States

Before the Constitution was ratified in 1789, there was a rich history of education in the American colonies (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). The early Protestant colonists formed school houses shortly after arriving and developed courses for what would be deemed an appropriate education (Wickham, 2007). The early colonists maintained that a proper education revolved around being able to read and understand religious texts. These texts took the form of psalter books or the Bible itself, which were available in most homes. Basic reading and arithmetic skills instruction initially started in the home with parents and other relatives taking on the role of the teacher. However, some small schools emerged during this time and became increasingly involved in providing reading and math instruction leading up to the framing of the Constitution in 1787 (Urban & Wagoner, 2009; Watras, 2007). From the beginning of the Revolutionary War in 1776, New England states placed a major emphasis on schooling, that included apprenticeships. This was not the case in the South due to the role that agriculture played in the economy

(Mondale et al., 2001). Many children in the South learned some reading and math skills in the home, but the main focus was learning skills that would benefit them in an agrarian economy. Since there were no mandatory school attendance laws or laws to prevent child labor, children throughout the United States began to work at a very young age (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). This practice was particularly prevalent in the South.

After the Revolutionary War, there were many individuals in northern states who urged the newly formed government to create a common school for all of the children in the colonies to receive an education in line with British school children (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). Thomas Jefferson was a strong proponent of public education at the time of the creation of the Constitution. By 1781 as governor of Virginia, he had already proposed many ideas for his state to usher in a different type of education. He was one of the first leaders in the United States to suggest that children should receive a free education with funding provided by a specific tax (Mercer, 1993). He also believed that children should be educated in stages based on their age. Ultimately, decisions related to public schooling were left out of the Constitution. Each state then had the responsibility to create the best system of education for their citizens. Jefferson saw the need to reform education because it was linked too closely to religious factions (Mercer, 1993). Many of the schools were teaching with religious texts; Jefferson believed that citizens should be informed on a wide variety of subjects. Carpenter (2004) explains that Jefferson proposed that a better educated citizenry was necessary to avoid tyranny. During this time, many states began to add subjects into the curriculum.

Although Jefferson's ideas about education were not included in the Constitution, many people shared his views about public education and saw the need to make

improvements to create an intelligent population of workers and voters (Brown, 1996; Mercer, 1993). Brown (1996) explained that, although Jefferson's ideas were rejected on a national scale, they did begin to catch on in certain states. Leaders from both Connecticut and Massachusetts were early innovators of improved education systems, which included specific taxes to be used for public school operation (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). They were among the first to create a more public system of education that was provided free to the students. This occurred during the early 1800s when many states did not have public education, and parents were required to pay if they wanted their children to continue schooling beyond a certain age (Brown, 1996). The idea of a free, public education began to slowly flourish once other state leaders saw that it was possible to provide school funding by taxing the general population (Urban & Wagoner, 2009; Watras, 2007).

These improvements in schools were made possible because of individuals like Horace Mann of Massachusetts. Mann was elected as the first secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education in 1837. When he took the position, Mann immediately started creating plans to improve the education system in Massachusetts (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). Mann believed that education was the great equalizer and that improving public education would allow children to set goals beyond what their parents expected of them (Falk, 2014). During his time in office, Mann visited each school in Massachusetts to develop the best public education (Mintz & McNeil, 2016). Mann worked to create uniform teacher education programs, longer school years, and improved curriculum. He also brought the concept of students being placed in grades based on their age to the United States. His concept of grades was adapted from his

research on Prussian schools. Prior to this change, there could be a range of students from 5 to 15 years of age in one classroom (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). Mann's time as the secretary of education also helped to create mandatory attendance laws for students, which established requirements for the number of days each year a student needed to attend school (Mintz & McNeil, 2016).

By the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, most northern states were beginning to make changes to improve their schools. Improvements in teacher education and curriculum were being realized in the North, but the South still lagged behind (Watras, 2007). The one-room school house was still prevalent throughout much of the South and, in most cases, students quit formal education altogether after primary school age. However, parents took a major role in educating children and believed that literacy was necessary to be an informed member of society (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). Parents often taught their children to read using Bibles and newspapers in the home. Even with the lack of uniformity of education in the nineteenth century, the literacy rate among white children in 1870 was at 80% (Snyder, 1993). During this time in American history, white males typically received the most formal education. However, the end of the Civil War would bring about legislation that improved education for all children.

Reconstruction at the conclusion of the Civil War began to improve the educational landscape for African American children. Legislation and assistance from northern Republicans allowed over 1,000 black schools to be built in the South between 1867 and 1870 (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Prior to this, most black children in the South received no education and were only taught enough by their owners to allow them to function as workers. The education of black children was difficult because

segregation efforts from state and local governments allowed for less tax money to be appropriated for those schools (Harper et al., 2009). Even with all of these setbacks, the literacy rate among African Americans jumped drastically over a 40-year period from around 20% in 1870 to 56% by 1900 (Snyder, 1993). The ‘Jim Crow laws’ that emerged in the late 1800s also created more hurdles for the African American students to overcome, but the initial efforts after Reconstruction ensured that these students were at least receiving a basic education (Urban & Wagoner, 2009).

It was during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that school boards began to emerge as well (Land, 2002). School boards worked alongside the superintendent to make decisions for the district. They were initially seen as a way to fight corruption in areas with one elected superintendent. However, school board members were given more responsibilities over time. The responsibilities of board members eventually included the following: approving contracts of some or all employees, creating policies, approving the district budget, adopting curriculum, and keeping facilities up to date (Sell, 2005). The ability to make good decisions on behalf of the school district is predicated on an understanding of the field of education. School districts across the country have experienced issues with unqualified school board members. Most states only have a requirement that school board members take a course to learn about their roles and responsibilities (Allen & Mintrom, 2010). Most school boards grant a great deal of power to the superintendent, but, in many cases, the school board is responsible for hiring that superintendent (Sell, 2005). As schools have become more complex and the population has grown, the task of school district improvement has become more difficult as well. Federal and state legislation has often been used to strengthen the public school system (Urban &

Wagoner, 2009; Watras, 2007).

### Federal Policy to Improve Schools

After World War II, the Federal government began to be more involved in educational policies (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). Many of the laws that were passed between 1950 and 1975 specifically dealt with equality in education. Schools across the country continued to deny individuals an education, because each state was allowed to have complete control over their educational system. For many years, this meant that minority students and the special education population were not receiving an education comparable to non-disabled, white children. The literacy rate among those populations was much lower than their white counterparts until the Federal government intervened (Snyder, 1993).

In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was no longer legal in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case (Hunter, 2009). The ruling did not officially end segregation when the decision was released. Many states in the South were often forced to integrate schools through federal orders. In some cases, the violence surrounding the integration was so intense that many African American students refused to go to these schools to avoid harassment or injury (Hunter, 2009). The Federal Government became further involved when Southern states blatantly ignored integration orders. Different methods were used to compel schools to comply including legislation, the threat of losing of federal assistance, and in extreme cases, sending troops to specific schools (Urban & Wagner, 2009). However, some schools managed to keep students racially divided for many years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The most extreme of these cases was in the Saint Louis Public School District in Missouri,

where a federal court order was imposed in 1983 to force integration (Smith, 2009). After integration, many schools were often overcrowded and did not have adequate resources to provide a quality education for all of the students. It became apparent that other interventions were needed to help overcome the achievement gaps.

During his State of the Union address in 1964, Lyndon Johnson launched what he called the War on Poverty (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013). Johnson urged Congress to create legislation that would lower the rising poverty rate in the United States. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed in 1965 in response to Johnson's request. Johnson believed that the Civil Rights Act and ESEA "would help to advance quality education as a lever out of poverty for children and families across the country" (Schott Foundation for Public Education, Bishop, & Jackson, 2015, p. 2). The ESEA increased funding for schools with a high percentage of impoverished students. This funding was to be used to provide more instructional resources for these students. The act also reemphasized equal opportunities to quality education and established some accountability measures for state boards of education (Hauptli & Cohen-Vogel, 2013).

The ESEA became even more important in the years that followed because Congress reauthorized the act frequently (Jennings, 2015). ESEA opened up educational opportunities for many other students through the years. Jennings (2015) noted that because of ESEA students with disabilities, English language learners, and immigrant children all have access to quality education. District preschool programs were established as a result of ESEA as well. The act was also the precursor to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which created testing accountability measures to hold specific school districts responsible for adequately educating students. The increase in accountability

was another attempt at improving the American public education (McDermott, 2003).

In 2001, the United States spent more than 423 billion dollars on education, yet America continued to fall in the global rankings of reading, mathematics, and science (Wirt et al., 2002). NCLB was passed to improve America's academic standing in the world. This act contained literacy goals for the country and created a system to administer standardized tests to students each year. These standardized tests were intended to improve academic performance by holding schools accountable for teaching certain standards to all children (Klein, 2015). NCLB also set up several methods of corrective action that could be used by states to ensure that failing schools were improved (McDermott, 2003; Oluwole & Green, 2009). These corrective actions included replacing members of the school staff and administration, selecting a new curriculum, restructuring the school district, extending the school day or year, and appointing an expert to advise on school operations (McClure, 2005). These corrective actions were required for any district that failed to meet specific academic standards for two consecutive school years. Each state was responsible for ensuring that these corrective actions were effectively implemented (McClure, 2005). Some states even created additional legislation to strengthen the corrective actions laid out in NCLB, but many of the states had existing school district improvement legislation prior to 2001 (McDermott, 2003).

Some state boards of education across the country noticed declines in academic performance years before NCLB was passed and created their own policies to correct these issues. As a result, some states had corrective action policies on the books by the late 1980s. In 1989, New Jersey became the first state to use one of these actions when

their board of education took over the New Jersey City School District by appointing an individual to make administrative decisions on behalf of the district (Karp, 2005). This first takeover case was due to financial mismanagement within the district's central office, but in 1995, the state again intervened in three separate school districts, this time due to poor academic performance of their students (Burns, 2003). By the mid-1990s, many states started to enact legislation that would allow for the state government to assume control of a school district. Other states chose restructuring or parental choice as options for school district improvement. Some states even allowed for multiple types of corrective action. Each state's leaders were responsible for selecting the best option to improve school districts that were considered failing for consecutive years. During this time, more research was needed to identify the best course of action, but McDermott (2003) noted that rather than selecting the option that was research based, many state leaders simply chose the method that neighboring states were using. By 2008, 35 states had created legislation that allowed for some type of takeover (Oluwole & Green, 2009).

### State Takeovers

The laws regarding takeovers are varied. In some cases, the state board of education directly appoints a new superintendent to take over the school district. There are takeover options that allow the state to appoint a new school board (McDermott, 2003). Some states with large metropolitan areas allow the mayor to take control of failing school districts within the city limits (Wong & Shen, 2003). The results from these different options have been mixed.

Appointing new superintendents or board members occurs quite often in the United States. The three New Jersey districts that were placed under state control in 1995

were put under the authority of newly appointed superintendent (Burns, 2003). There were some benefits to the takeover, including a restructuring that eliminated some non-essential employees. However, test scores improved only minimally and only in the primary grades (Burns, 2003). Several other cases across the country indicate that primary grade standardized test scores often increase following a takeover (Craciun & Ziebarth, 2002; McGlynn, 2010; Wong & Shen, 2003). Research also shows that takeovers that occur because of financial mismanagement alone are generally successful (Arsen & Mason, 2013; Craciun & Ziebarth 2002; Wong & Shen 2003). Long term academic success seems to be more difficult to accomplish, but there have been isolated cases of success, specifically in cases of mayoral takeover.

States that have large cities often allow a mayor to take control of failing school districts. Large cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia have budgets that are large enough to support failing districts by providing additional resources, personnel, and professional development (Marschall, Cuellar, & Lakshmanan, 2007). Simmons, Foley, and Ucelli (2006) explain that mayoral takeovers can have a positive effect if handled properly. When a mayor is accountable for the results of the school district, he or she often employs individuals with the experience to handle the complex financial, personnel, and curriculum issues that are found in school districts (Hill, 2006). Successful cases of mayoral takeover have been seen in Boston, Chicago, and New York (Barth, 2014; McGlynn, 2010; Wong & Shen, 2003). However, in each of these cases, it was an appointed expert who improved the district and not the mayor. Barth (2014) argued that not all mayoral takeovers are successful, but some mayors are more successful than others at finding the right experts.

Research on takeovers and school improvement suggests that the biggest predictor of academic improvement is developing a district-specific plan (Barth, 2014; Superville, 2015; Thielman, 2012). This same research suggests that takeovers may fail because many appointed experts implement strategies from their previous employment, which may not always be successful.

An interesting contrast is proved by Jeffrey Riley who was appointed by the Massachusetts Board of Education to make administrative decisions on behalf of Lawrence School District. After Riley was given control of the district, he immediately conducted a study of the schools in the district (Superville, 2015). The purpose of his study was to determine causes of low academic performance. Riley then developed an action plan based on the results of his study. Riley was able to initiate his plan by creating an action plan committee that was made up of teachers, administrators, community members and parents (Superville, 2015). His plan involved creating a charter school in one of the lowest performing areas, making a slight change to the elementary curriculum, increasing parental involvement through improved communication, and adding extra-curricular activities at the middle and high schools (Superville, 2015). After two years under Riley control, the district saw an increase of two performance levels. Riley then continued to evaluate the progress and worked with teacher unions and parent organizations to determine the next steps for the district.

In some cases, an outside expert may not be needed if appropriate measures are taken to start improvement plans. At Cristo Rey High School in Boston, Massachusetts, the principal started an improvement plan after his superiors threatened to replace him (Thielman, 2012). The principal of the Catholic high school conducted a study similar to

Riley's to determine the best course of action for the school. He implemented a plan that involved training his teachers on data analysis, setting aside times for professional development, developing a consistent classroom observation schedule, including parents and other members of community in school events, and requiring end-of-year assessments for each grade (Thielman, 2012). The end-of-year assessments were only required for the non-parochial schools. The first year the students for Cristo Rey scored near the middle, but by the following school year, their scores were in the top ten.

Failing schools are not a new problem and, although each school district is unique, some common reasons for school decline have been identified. Duke (2008) spent four years studying schools that were considered failures because of low academic performance. These were not schools that had always been classified as academic failures. In fact, some were once characterized as successful. These schools were found throughout the state of Virginia as a part of University of Virginia's School Turnaround Specialist Program (Duke, 2008). This program was designed to help school leaders identify issues that caused schools to fail. Their instructors also provided training to help administrators develop effective turnaround plans. From his research, Duke was able to identify eleven different issues found consistently among failing school districts, which included the following:

1. Failure to differentiate instruction or interventions for struggling learners
2. Lack of progress monitoring through data analysis
3. Rigid schedules that do not allow students to seek help during the school day

4. Teaching from standards or curriculum that are not aligned with assessments
5. Inadequate professional development opportunities
6. Losing focus of academic priorities such as literacy and attendance
7. Ineffective leadership
8. An expedited hiring process
9. Increases in class size
10. Tutoring programs led by teacher aides or volunteers
11. Teachers dedicating large amounts of time to enforcing rules and punishments

Duke (2008) did not suggest that he has created an exhaustive list that can be used to improve any school. However, some of the same issues were mentioned in the successful school improvement plans in Lawrence, Massachusetts and Cristo Rey High School (Superville, 2015; Thielman, 2012). These cases suggest that conducting a study to determine some explanation of the failure would be a beneficial first step in any school district improvement plan.

Research has also shown that takeovers are more likely to occur in areas with high poverty and larger percentages of minority students (Hunter, 2009; Simmons et al., 2006; Usdan, 2006). High rates of poverty and large minority populations are often associated with low academic achievement and high dropout rates (Cramer, Gonzalez, & Pellegrini-Lafont, 2014). This puts some areas at a higher risk of creating effective improvement plans for failing schools. Based on the most recent estimates from the United States Census Bureau (2016), Mississippi has the highest rate of poverty with 22% of citizens

living below the poverty line. Mississippi ranks 12<sup>th</sup> on the list of states with the highest minority populations. Thirty-eight percent of the total population is African American, which is the highest percentage for any state; second only to the District of Columbia (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Mississippi has consistently fallen near the bottom of rankings of academic performance (Associated Press, 2016; Harwin et al., 2016).

Mississippi has corrective action legislation in place in the form of school conservatorships, but further research may be warranted to determine if the current model best suits the needs of the state.

### Education in Mississippi

Prior to Mississippi becoming a state in 1817, “schools and schooling were rare commodities” (Lucas, 1973, p. 353). During this time, most of the schooling took place in Southern homes (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). There were a few wealthy landowners in the Natchez region who were able to pay for private tutors for their children. Typically, if a child was to receive an education beyond basic reading, a private tutor was hired to provide instruction in other subjects. Once the child was old enough to attend college, he or she was sent to established colleges in the east (Lucas, 1973).

Education was a concern to the first leaders of the state in 1817, but the first state constitution did not create a public education system (Lucas, 1973). Academies were the first form of education outside of the home in the state of Mississippi. Between 1820 and 1860, over 200 academies were opened. These were typically owned by wealthy individuals or stock companies. However, the first free academy, Franklin Academy, did open in 1821, and it is considered the first public school in Mississippi (Lucas, 1973). A few free academies followed, but for the most part, education was a luxury reserved for

the richest families. Most of these institutions were boarding schools, and only the wealthiest families could afford to give up the free labor their children could provide. The academy curriculum was considered rigorous and students could attend from elementary age through high school.

During the 1840s, the first public school system was created, although funding the system proved to be difficult (Lucas, 1973). Wealthy landowners from Natchez made up most of the early Mississippi government, and their interests rested in creating profitable business deals. Slowly, the idea of public education began to catch on and by 1850, there were 782 schools servicing 18,746 students (Lucas, 1973). Just a decade later, the number of schools and students in the public school system had increased drastically with 1,116 buildings and over 30,000 students. Educational expenditures were on the rise and Mississippi spent more on public education in 1860 than either of Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island (Lucas, 1973). Even with these expenditures, the education system in Mississippi lagged behind other states. Teacher education programs began to emerge in the 1860s as families started to value education more. However, many of the early teacher programs consisted of local superintendents discussing issues that occurred at schools throughout the year (Lucas, 1973).

Slaves generally did not receive any education. The legislature actually created laws to prevent slaves from attending public schools when the second state constitution was written (Lucas, 1973). Black children did not have a designated school and were not allowed to congregate in groups of more than five for any purpose other than work (Dalehite, 1974). There were no laws that prevented slave owners from educating slave children, but there are very few documented cases of slave owners providing instruction

to slaves.

When the Civil War started in 1861, the public education system in Mississippi was all but ignored for four years. Most of the state's money went to finance the war effort (Lucas, 1973). Enrollment during these years suffered as well due to a lack of teachers and an increase in the number of children who served in the war. There were many cases of students leaving a secondary school to fight in the war or assist in the effort.

After the Civil War ended, money for schools was scarce (Dalehite, 1974). The public school system needed to be re-established after four years of low attendance, school closures, and lack of teacher training. Many families began to send their children to private academies once again, which hurt funding for the public school system even more. The state legislature did not see the need to put more money into the system with attendance at an all-time low (Griffith, 1973). Teachers were underpaid for many years following the Civil War, but their pay was slightly higher through the Reconstruction era (Dalehite, 1974). It was also difficult to keep school leaders and school board members during this time (Dalehite, 1974; Griffith, 1973). School board members quit frequently because of the demands that were placed on them with no pay. In some cases, school board members were responsible for ensuring that firewood was available to warm schools in the winter (Dalehite, 1974). This lack of consistent leadership in schools created a lot of variation in instructional programs across the state (Griffith, 1973).

The first school for African American children in Mississippi was built in 1870 (Dalehite, 1974). Even though many schools were built specifically for black children after 1870, it was still no easy task for these students to receive an education. It became

even more difficult when Republicans from the North left at the conclusion of Reconstruction. The Democrats who took control of the government treated the black schools unfairly and these schools were often overcrowded and underfunded (Dalehite, 1974).

Public school attendance was low through the 1880s, but began to pick up by 1890. In 1890, the state constitution was again rewritten and an official State Superintendent of Education position was created (Griffith, 1973). James Preston became the first person to hold this office, although he had been in a similar position unofficially since 1878. His leadership helped to boost enrollment in public schools, which allowed for more schools to be built.

By 1900, many people in the state realized that Mississippi's public education system still had some weaknesses. The State Teachers' Association created a committee in 1901 to study these weaknesses. The committee determined that many schools needed to be consolidated to avoid costly issues with managing completely separate facilities for small student populations (Griffith, 1973). Consolidations led to a new issue because most of the schools that had been built up until that time only housed a few classes. When James Vardaman was elected governor in 1903, he urged the legislature to help with some of the problem areas schools were facing. Because of Vardaman, the legislature set aside a large portion of the budget to fund the purchase of textbooks, upgrades to add room to existing facilities, and the establishment of agriculture schools. These schools were used to create work opportunities for students and skilled laborers for the economy (Griffith, 1973).

At this time, teachers were not adequately prepared to provide instruction to

students at the turn of the twentieth century. The State Teachers' Association and other education interest groups had urged the legislature to create a teacher education program at one of the colleges in the state. In 1910, the Mississippi Normal College was established by a legislative act. The purpose of the institution was to train teachers to provide instruction to Mississippi students (Griffith, 1973). In 1922, the Mississippi Association for Teachers in Colored Schools created training programs for teachers in black schools. In 1940 the state assumed support of Jackson College. This became the state's first teaching college for African Americans (Griffith, 1973).

After *Brown v. Board of Education*, Mississippi schools suffered another setback. Southern states were tasked with developing a plan to desegregate schools because of the Supreme Court ruling (Griffith, 1973). The state did not develop such a plan and many districts continued segregating schools into the 1960s. At this time, the Federal Government intervened by forcing the state to begin the process of integration. During this time, many white families enrolled their children in private schools (Griffith, 1973). This caused public school attendance numbers to drop yet again. There were many in Mississippi who still did not value the importance of public education, but in the decades that followed integration several governors helped to boost the public perception of the school system (Governors, 2001).

William Winter began his campaign for governor in 1978 and initially he focused on creating better jobs in the state of Mississippi. Once Winter had won the primary, he shifted his focus to education stating "that efficient economic development began with education reform" (Wickham, 2016, p. 65). He was easily elected in 1980 and immediately started working on the largest education reform plan in Mississippi history.

His cabinet, which was named the Boys of Spring, helped Winter to shape his plan (Lane, 2012). The first attempts at passing education reform failed, but Winter continued to work diligently. He stated publicly that the education system in Mississippi was holding the state back economically. The negative racial perception, low literacy rates, and low percentages of skilled workers kept many businesses away (Wickham, 2016). Winter felt that it was impossible to correct these issues without developing a major educational reform bill. He called for a special session in 1982 in order to make an attempt at passing education reform again. A media campaign through local television and newspapers helped Winter gather support from the public (Wickham, 2016). The public pressure helped the Educational Reform Act (ERA) of 1982 pass. The ERA included better funding for public schools, a statewide public kindergarten, a compulsory school attendance law, and programs to increase teacher and student performance (Lane, 2012). Furthermore, the ERA laid the groundwork for other educational reformers that followed Winter.

Ray Mabus, who was part of the Boys of Spring, ran for governor with education reform as a top concern (Applebome, 1991). Mabus wanted a program to increase teacher pay, but he also believed that computers were needed in the classrooms. Computers were not widely used in classrooms during the late 1980s, so there were many members of the legislature who were skeptical (Applebome, 1991). Mabus argued that students would be able to perform better in school and prepare for higher paying jobs if they had access to computers (Governors, 2001). Mabus never gained support from the legislature for most of his term, but finally managed to pass an education bill just before leaving office. The Better Education for Success Tomorrow (BEST) Act contained

proposals for pre-kindergarten programs, merit pay raises for schools with high achievement, and a large pay increase for teachers (Harrison, 2012). Mabus never could get the support he needed to fund the bill after it passed, but he continued to be viewed as a champion for Mississippi education. Fortune magazine even named him as one of their ‘Ten Education Governors’ in 1990 for his attempts at improving the public education system in Mississippi (Dowd, 1990). Although he was unable to complete his reform plan, by the end of his term the legislature had spent over \$900 million dollars on the educational infrastructure (Governors, 2001). During his re-election bid, Mabus was portrayed as wasteful by his opponent because of the money spent during his term (Mahtesian, 1991).

Education began to play an important role in both state and national politics in the late 1990s. Ronnie Musgrove served as lieutenant governor during that time and became the governor in 2000 (Governors, 2001). It was during his tenure as lieutenant governor that the state began working to rectify some of the issues associated with poor school performance (Mader, 2014). Musgrove was a strong supporter of increasing teacher salaries to the regional average in order to retain quality teachers (Bradley, 2000). He was also a strong supporter of the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP), a formula designed to fully fund the public education system (Harrison, 2008). Like Winter years earlier, Musgrove argued that strong schools were necessary to boost the Mississippi economy (Harrison, 2008). Musgrove visited many schools during his time in office to see the needs first hand. When he became governor in 2001, he signed a bill that provided the largest raise for teachers in the history of the state (Harrison, 2008).

Leaders at MDE also developed an Office of School Improvement (OSI). This

office helps to identify Schools-At-Risk based on an accountability rating of F (MS Code § 37-18-3, 2013). One of the main responsibilities of the OSI is to develop a plan to help schools avoid continued low performance. Schools-At-Risk must create an action plan that is based on a needs assessment interview (MS Code § 37-18-3, 2013). Needs assessment interviews for schools must be attended by the superintendent, a school board member, the principal, and a school staff member. The answers from the interviews develop an action plan that is based on the following areas: leadership, curriculum and instruction, professional development, climate and safety, and assessment (MS Code § 37-18-3, 2013). This plan is implemented and evaluated throughout the year to create positive changes in schools.

Even with improvement procedures in place for individual schools, education continues to be a source of concern for many Mississippians. Schools were only fully funded through MAEP twice between 1997 and 2016 (Harrison, 2015). Academic achievement results continue to rank near the bottom each year. Mississippi lawmakers have made many attempts to address these issues by providing additional funding, training, and resources (Griffith, 1973; Harrison, 2012; Wickham, 2016). When other states began to adopt the option of allowing a school district takeover, Mississippi added a similar bill hoping to finally have a solution to raise academic achievement (McDermott, 2003; Oluwole & Green, 2009).

### Conservatorships in Mississippi

The state legislature first added a school takeover option in 1994; with the state first appointing a conservator to take control of a school district in 1996 (Oluwole & Green, 2009). Different states have developed various terms for their version of a school

takeover, but Mississippi chose the term conservatorship. The term is often found in the legal lexicon when the court appoints someone to assume the duties or responsibilities of caring for an individual or an estate (Izzi, 2016). Similarly, conservators are experts in the field of education that can assume the duties and responsibilities of managing a school district.

In addition to understanding the academic aspect of public education, conservators need experience with school operations. They are appointed by the Mississippi State Department of Education once a state of emergency has been declared by the governor (Office of Conservatorship, 2016). A state of emergency can be declared in a school district when financial, academic, accreditation or safety issues could have an effect on the employees or students (MS Code § 37-17-6, 2015). The state of emergency also prevents the local superintendent and school board from making decisions on behalf of the district. Mississippi Code § 37-17-6 (2015) provides a list of responsibilities to be carried out by the conservator to ensure the successful operation of the school district.

Those responsibilities include:

“(i) Approving or disapproving all financial obligations of the district, including, but not limited to, the employment, termination, nonrenewal, and reassignment of all licensed and non-licensed personnel, contractual agreements and purchase orders, and approving or disapproving all claim dockets and the issuance of checks; in approving or disapproving employment contracts of superintendents, assistant superintendents or principals, the interim conservator shall not be required to comply with the time limitations prescribed in Sections 37-9-15 and 37-9-105;

(ii) Supervising the day-to-day activities of the district's staff, including reassigning the duties and responsibilities of personnel in a manner which, in the determination of the conservator, will best suit the needs of the district;

(iii) Reviewing the district's total financial obligations and operations and making recommendations to the district for cost savings, including, but not limited to, reassigning the duties and responsibilities of staff;

(iv) Attending all meetings of the district's school board and administrative staff;

(v) Approving or disapproving all athletic, band and other extracurricular activities and any matters related to those activities;

(vi) Maintaining a detailed account of recommendations made to the district and actions taken in response to those recommendations;

(vii) Reporting periodically to the State Board of Education on the progress or lack of progress being made in the district to improve the district's impairments during the state of emergency; and

(viii) Appointing a parent advisory committee, comprised of parents of students in the school district that may make recommendations to the conservator concerning the administration, management and operation of the school district” (MS Code § 37-17-6, 2015).

MDE has created a conservator contract that explains some of the additional responsibilities that are expected. The conservator should continue any corrective action plans that were put in place by the superintendent, if they are deemed appropriate to

correct academic, financial, or managerial issues (“Office of School Improvement, Oversight and Recovery Agenda,” 2012). They should also attend any meetings that would have previously been attended by the superintendent. Conservators are also expected to “communicate with staff on a continuous basis, beginning to try to get them involved in the decision-making process emphasizing the fact that lasting change must come from within the district and cannot be sustained from outside” (“Office of School Improvement, Oversight and Recovery Agenda,” 2012, p. 2). While they are in control of the district, the conservator should continually evaluate “all components of the system including instruction, food services, transportation, custodians, facilities and make needed changes” (“Office of School Improvement, Oversight and Recovery Agenda,” 2012, p. 2). Part of the job duties includes informing the local community of changes that are occurring within the school and taking steps to get them more involved in the schools. The conservator is also expected to provide a plan to move the district out of conservatorship within 45 days of taking control of the district (MS Code § 37-17-6, 2015).

No specific information is available in public records that explains how the conservators are selected following the declaration of a state of emergency. The law states that it should be an expert, but it does not specify that this individual must have district level administrative qualifications and experience (MS Code § 37-17-6, 2015). Other states do have stipulations that require any candidate to have at least district level experience, since the individual will essentially assume the role of superintendent (Oluwole & Green, 2009). There is also no information available about the length of time the conservator will have control of the district and as a result conservatorship length in

Mississippi has varied greatly. Some school districts have been in conservatorships for a single school year, while others have remained under conservator control for over five years (Mader, 2014). There are a few states that have guidelines requiring improvement within a certain time frame (Oluwole & Green, 2009).

### Conservatorships in School Districts

Between 1996 and 2016, there were 19 occurrences of a school district being placed under the control of a conservator in Mississippi (Mader, 2014; Office of Conservatorship, 2016). Like many states that have a takeover option, Mississippi's first takeover, North Panola School District, occurred due to financial mismanagement (Karp, 2005; Mader, 2014; Oluwole & Green, 2009;). North Panola was under the control of a conservator for a single year before returning to local control with an improved financial situation (Mader, 2014; Office of Conservatorship, 2016). Immediately after the release of North Panola, two more districts entered conservatorship in March of 1997. Both Oktibbeha County School District and Tunica County School District were placed in a conservatorship because of low academic proficiency (Office of Conservatorship, 2016). Oktibbeha County and Tunica County remained under the control of a conservator until the spring of 2002. Schools in Mississippi can also be placed in conservatorship due to safety violations. This has occurred in two school districts: Holmes County School District and Scott County School District (Office of Conservatorship, 2016). In both cases, the schools were able to correct the safety violations in a single school year and were then released to local control. These examples support the research on takeovers, which explains that improving low academic performance is the most difficult and time consuming tasks placed on conservators (Arsen & Mason, 2013; Craciun & Ziebarth

2002; Oluwole & Green, 2009; Wong & Shen 2003).

In total, 19 conservatorships have occurred in the state of Mississippi. Of the 19 conservatorships, three occurred only because of financial issues within the district and two occurred because of safety violations. Twelve different school districts have been under a conservatorship because of academic proficiency deficiencies (Mader, 2014). In 2020, Okolona School District was assigned a conservator because of poor academic proficiency and financial difficulties. Oktibbeha County School District and Tunica County School District have been in a conservatorship twice due to poor academic proficiency (Office of Conservatorship, 2016). North Panola County School District spent the longest amount of time under conservatorship from 2008 through 2013. Three districts were dissolved and consolidated with another school district because of their conservatorship: Indianola School District, Drew School District, and Oktibbeha County School District (Office of Conservatorship, 2016).

Former State Superintendent, Tom Burnham, explained that conservatorships exist “to improve the school district and return it back to the community in better shape” (Mader, 2014). These improvements have been evident in conservatorships due to safety violations: Holmes County School District and Scott County School District (Office of Conservatorship, 2016). In both cases, the districts were asked to correct issues related to school accreditation standards such as safe transport for special needs students, bus inspections, verification of graduation requirements for student records, and sanitary facilities (Office of Educational Accountability, 2014). In these cases, audits of accreditation standards took place throughout the school year as the districts worked to correct the issues. Once the audits indicated that student safety was no longer a concern,

the school districts were returned to local control.

Conservatorships, due to financial concerns have also been successful, but the process has taken as much as four years in some school districts (Office of Conservatorship, 2016). North Panola School District, Indianola School District, Tate County School District, and Okolona School District were all placed in conservatorship because of financial concerns in accreditation audit report. According to the state accreditation standards, schools are required to keep a uniform system of accounts, to allocate funds for classroom supplies, materials, and equipment properly, and to pay any bills or interest premiums in a timely manner (Office of Educational Accountability, 2014). When any of these issues are not in compliance, the failed items on the audit can be used to develop a corrective action plan (Mader, 2014).

Research shows that corrective action plans are not as easy to develop for low academic performance (Oluwole & Green, 2009; Wong & Shen, 2003). Academic proficiency issues continue to occur in school districts across the state and unlike conservatorships due to safety or financial violations, “the state does not set academic criteria for the district’s exit from a takeover” (Mader, 2014). As of 2016, only three districts in Mississippi were under the control of a conservator and all of these cases were due to low academic performance (Office of Conservatorship, 2016). Each of these cases were in at least the third school year of a conservatorship. Bishop (2009) expressed concerns about takeover schools being returned to local control too soon. This seems to be a valid concern because many of the school districts that have been returned to local control have struggled to maintain the academic proficiency attained during the conservatorship (Mader, 2014).

## Theoretical Foundation

Three main theories serve as the basis for this research: contingency theory, Lewin's Change Theory and adaptive leadership theory. Contingency theory is an organizational theory and suggests that leaders must select a solution that best fits an organization. This theory directly applies to the research because each school district is different and leaders need to select the best option to handle the unique situation. Lewin's Change Theory explains that effective change takes place in three stages – unfreezing, changing, and refreezing (Connelly, 2016). Conservators that hope to implement lasting change need to first unfreeze the school district, which involves preparing everyone for the upcoming changes. Adaptive leadership theory is pertinent because leaders are asked to create an organization that can adapt to challenges. The leader then mobilizes individuals within the organization to tackle these issues rather than trying to correct them alone (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksy, 2009).

### *Contingency Theory*

Every school district has characteristics that make it unique. Differences in the student population, the school staff, and the surrounding community make it difficult to create a school improvement plan that will apply to every school. Contingency theory explains that there is not a universal method for organizations to achieve success (Scheerens, 2015). Instead, each situation is highly dependent upon the internal and external characteristics that make up the organization (Morgan, 1986).

Contingency theory suggests that each school district should be organized in a way that would address any uncertainties in the internal or external environment (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Miner, 2005). Legislation at both the federal and state levels create

changes from year to year in the field of education. These changes in funding, curriculum, and assessments lead to many uncertainties among school leaders. Companies have to consider many contingencies when developing plans for organizational success including: technology, suppliers and distributors, consumer interests groups, customers and competitors, government, and unions (Miner, 2005). School districts deal with many of these same contingencies.

Technology is playing a larger role in education each year. In the 2014 – 2015 school year, school districts across the United States spend more than \$8.3 billion on software and digital content for classrooms (Davis, 2016). Each year, schools are increasing the number of computers in classes and some districts are even starting initiatives to allow each student to have an individual laptop or tablet for school use. Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math or *STEAM* schools are emerging across the United States and students are using innovative technology like robotics to accomplish tasks (Sterman, 2016). Districts also have to consider contracts with suppliers of assessment materials, textbooks, technology, and other educational resources. There are many educational interest groups across the country now. These can range in size from just a few individuals to thousands. Some groups form to offer assistance to local schools, while others are established to influence policy makers (Stephens & Haughey, 1993).

The students of each school are the customers in the business of education. Consequently, public education now has many competitors in the form of charter schools, private schools, and homeschool organizations. Since legislation regarding education is passed frequently, educators have to stay informed of state and federal educational

policies. In addition to examining the different contingencies that exist within a school district, leaders must also consider the structure of their particular organization (Miner, 2005).

Burns and Stalker (1961) suggested that organizations can be structured in one of two ways: either mechanistic or organic. The mechanistic structure is suited for organizations that are considered stable. This type of structure lends itself to organizations that are not faced with many changes and are not required to make decisions quickly (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Miner, 2005). Large farms and factories often fall into a mechanistic structure. Most of the decision making in mechanistic structured organization only occurs at the top level because the environment lacks the complexity of organizations with organic structure.

Organic structures work best in organizations that may be considered subject to change (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Minor, 2005). Policy changes at the state and local level can have an effect on standards, curriculum, resources, and assessments. From 2010-2015, Mississippi schools transitioned from the Mississippi State Frameworks to Common Core State Standards and then to the College and Career Readiness Standards (McGraw, 2014). These types of changes have made school district governance rife with uncertainty. Effective communication and a decentralized decision making process are essential in these ever-changing organizations (Burns & Stalker, 1961). There are also fewer department divisions and more responsibility is placed on individuals within organizations that are organically structured. If an individual notices an issue that they are able to handle then they work to correct the issue. Work within the organization is not shuffled to different departments. Organic structures generally allow for more

collegiality among co-workers because more verbal communication is required (Miner, 2005). School governance has gone through many changes throughout our nation's history and continues to undergo changes today (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). Individual schools also face many changes throughout a school year due to personnel changes or budget cutbacks within a school district. Based on the work of Burns and Stalker (1961), many school districts would benefit from an organic structure.

### *Lewin's Change Theory*

Lewin's Change Theory suggests that any effective change that takes place is divided into three essential steps: unfreezing, change, and refreezing (Connelly, 2016; Lewin, 1947; Manktelow et al., n.d.). This theory is applicable to conservatorships because the conservator's purpose is to implement an effective action plan to bring about a positive change in a failing school district.

The first stage involves unfreezing the organization which requires two important steps (Connelly, 2016; Manktelow et al., n.d.). Initially, the leader will address the issues within the organization that have caused failure. This should create a situation where the individuals in the organization want to change. In a school district, a conservator may address issues such as staff development, poor curriculum, lack of educational resources, etc. The leader then prepares the people within the organization for the upcoming changes (Lewin, 1947; Manktelow et al., n.d.). By this time, everyone should understand that change is necessary and it is the job of the leader to motivate them towards that goal. Most individuals do not accept change easily so this can be a difficult stage to work through (Manktelow et al., n.d.).

Over time, the organization will transition into the change stage. During this

stage, the plan of action that will lead to success is implemented (Connelly, 2016; Lewin, 1947; Manktelow et al., n.d.). The leader of the organization should monitor and provide feedback frequently during this stage. Manktelow et al. (n.d.) identify two keys for success during the change stage: time and communication. The individuals in the organization need enough time to process what is changing and they should feel like they are a part of the process as the changes take place (Manktelow et al., n.d.). Conservators are expected to implement action plans that will lead school districts to success. As they are initiating these plans, evaluation and communication are necessary, but they also need to allow the administrators, teachers, and students time to process these changes.

Once the changes have started to take place in the organization and the stakeholders are accepting of those changes, the final stage of refreezing can occur (Connelly, 2016). The leader will continue to provide support during this stage, but will also begin to anchor the changes into the culture of the organization (Manktelow et al., n.d.). This will ensure that the changes are utilized consistently. The leader may also develop ongoing professional development to ensure that the changes remain as employees are hired or retire. During this time, a conservator would prepare local leaders to resume control with the positive changes already successfully implemented. They would ensure that the new superintendent and school administrators had the necessary information to sustain those changes in the future.

### *Adaptive Leadership Theory*

According to Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009, p. 14), “adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.” Leaders often face difficulties and are asked to find solutions. The concept of adaptive leadership

theory draws some inspiration from biology, where cells adapt to both survive and thrive (Heifetz et al., 2009). Organizations thrive when they are able to demonstrate success, but in order for this to occur, adaptation has to take place. The process of adaptive leadership first requires a diagnosis of the issues.

Diagnosing issues within an organization can be difficult if you are already a part of the organization. The authors point out that a leader may need to get on the balcony in order to get a clear perspective of what is actually happening. (Heifetz et al., 2009). The authors use the metaphor of a balcony to explain seeing the situation as an outsider. This applies to school conservators because they have a unique point of view that an elected or appointed superintendent may not have. Individuals who are part of an organization become comfortable and often develop default responses. These defaults can be quick and easy, but they could lead to serious problems for an organization (Heifetz et al., 2009). In the context of education, a superintendent may make the decision to continue using a particular textbook or program within a district because of its familiarity. It can often be difficult to research and find new classroom resources, but it may be necessary in order for academic growth to occur. Effectively diagnosing the system will allow the leader to see the challenges facing the organization as well as the potential capacity for adapting to the challenge (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Effective adaptive leaders then motivate and mobilize the people within an organization to solve problems. This requires an understanding of the entire system, which includes studying the default behaviors within the organization (Heifetz et al., 2009). A deep understanding of any organization will include examining the problem-solving culture. Default behaviors are used by organizations because they have worked

in the past. If a behavior allows for success, then it is repeated continually until it no longer works. However, this may only allow the organization to grow to a certain point. Allowing certain default behaviors may create a blinding effect, where people do not recognize the possibility of other solutions (Heifetz et al., 2009). Additionally, default behaviors may not work in constantly changing climates. This suggests that leaders in schools should constantly innovate in order to address changes in curriculum, assessments, technology and staff. Many situations that arise in organization are unique and adaptive leaders teach the organization how to handle these situations.

Part of the education process involves distinguishing between technical problems and adaptive challenges. Technical problems are clearly defined, have accepted solutions, and can be resolved by following a set of procedures (Heifetz et al., 2009). By contrast, adaptive challenges do not have known solutions and may require people to change their habits and beliefs (Heifetz et al., 2009). Technical problems are easily solved with default behaviors, but that is not the case with an adaptive challenge. It is also important to teach the people within the organization to work through conflict. The authors explain that dealing with conflict is essential because unacknowledged conflict only creates more issues (Heifetz et al., 2009). Most people either handle conflict by ignoring it, avoiding attempts to resolve it, or taking the issue to a superior. In many organizations, conflicts often arise as employees seek positions, resources, or approval (Heifetz et al., 2009). Adaptive leaders must orchestrate conflicts so that opposing groups are able to bring solutions to help resolve the issues. These arranged conflicts allow the individuals who make up an organization to continue working toward the overall goal rather than avoiding certain individuals because of a conflict (Heifetz et al.,

2009).

After creating some changes in the culture, adaptive leaders then mobilize people to address challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009). The leader needs to develop an intervention strategy so the people within the organization will be prepared to face the challenges that are affecting the organization. This principle relates to school conservators, who are working to return to the district to local control. They must prepare the people from the school district to make improvements instead of completing all the necessary work on their own. The intervention strategy is based on the cycle of “move, reflect, and move again” (Heifetz et al., 2009 p. 125). If the strategy needs to be modified, the adaptive leader allows the people enough flexibility to determine a better solution before putting it in place.

Heifetz et al., (2009) also suggested that thinking and acting politically throughout the process is important. In order to act politically, the leader needs to truly become a part of the organization in order to understand the relationships, concerns, and loyalties that exist (Heifetz et al., 2009). The adaptive leader then uses these as leverage points to help motivate people toward a common goal. It is important to develop alliances along the way with people who support the efforts of the leader. These alliances are invaluable because they allow corrective action to continue in the absence of the leader (Heifetz et al., 2009). Conservators should develop these alliances to prepare the district to return to local control. Political thinking also requires the leader to acknowledge and deal with conflict in a way that leads to problem solving rather than discord among the employees that would slow progress.

This study will incorporate the adaptive leadership questionnaire, which provides

multi-rater feedback on six dimensions related to adaptive leadership. These dimensions will be explained in the following paragraphs.

*Get on the balcony* is the concept associated with seeing the big picture of an organization (Heifetz et al., 2009). Part of being an adaptive leader is being able to view the things within an organization as an outside observer rather than an internal participant. This often allows the leader to see solutions that may not be immediately evident to members who have been part of the organization for a lengthy period of time. Within a school district it is important to see all the pieces that make each school function such as federal and state regulations, hiring policies, budget issues, etc.

The adaptive leadership instrument will also rate the leader's ability to identify adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges are different from technical issues. Heifetz et al (2009) explained that technical issues are problems that can be fixed by leaders with knowledge or skills they possess. Adaptive challenges, however, are unique and cannot be solved by the leader alone (Northouse, 2015). These challenges often have an effect on people's emotions and require collaboration to solve. The adaptive leader must be able to identify these challenges, determine how to work with the staff to solve the problem, and provide support and motivation throughout the process.

Adaptive leaders must also be able to regulate distress, which may occur as a result of the adaptive challenges the organization encounters (Northouse, 2015). It is noted that distress is inevitable in an organization that is going through major changes, but it should not become counterproductive to the overall goal (Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2015). Adaptive leaders must create an environment where there is enough stress to keep the workers productive, but not so stressful that the individuals become

resentful of the organization or leadership.

The next adaptive leader behavior addresses maintaining disciplined attention (Northouse, 2015). As organizations go through difficult changes, the adaptive leader has to ensure that the workers are motivated to accomplish the overall goal. It is human nature to resist change and it is necessary for the leader to help the workers become more comfortable with the idea of change (Heifetz et al., 2009). It is the leader's job to constantly focus on the progress toward the goal. This allows the leader to intervene with the appropriate response if some staff members get off track.

One major dimension associated with adaptive leadership is giving the work back to the people (Heifetz et al., 2009). Effective adaptive leaders understand that major changes within an organization rely on a team effort rather than an individual. The workers need direction, motivation, resources and support to accomplish their day-to-day tasks. It is the leader's job to provide these necessities to the workers and constantly monitor the process (Northouse, 2015). Adaptive leaders also need to learn when individuals are relying too heavily on their direction and allow them to problem-solve to address issues on their own (Heifetz et al., 2009).

The last adaptive leadership behavior is *protecting voices from below* (Northouse, 2015). There are many individuals within organizations who may have a lower position or they may have an opinion that is in the minority. If the leader stifles the opinions of these individuals, it only creates discord in the organization by alienating a particular group of people (Heifetz et al., 2009). Instead, the adaptive leader will allow these group members to have an outlet to express their opinion. This allows an adaptive leader to hear all the possible voices within an organization, which could result in a new idea or

solution. It also gives workers a level playing field regardless of their position within the organization (Northouse, 2015).

### Summary of Literature

The review of literature has demonstrated that Mississippi has a long history of attempting to improve the public education system. There have been obstacles along the way, but there has been some progress as well. Despite all of these attempts, the state struggles to remain academically relevant when compared to other states (Harwin et al., 2016). NCLB offered some options for corrective actions that state leaders could use to turn around failing schools (Oluwule & Green, 2009). The option that was selected by Mississippi leaders created the conservator model that now exists.

Academic improvement has not been easily attained in failing school districts with the conservator model. Conservators are currently asked to create a plan to return the district to local control within 45 days of assuming power (MS Code § 37-17-6, 2015). This short time period is not supported by the research of successful takeover districts. The schools and districts that have shown the greatest academic success have created action plans after an extensive evaluation period (Superville, 2015; Thielman, 2012). The research suggests that more time is needed to create effective action plans.

The theories related to this study demonstrate the need of leaders to adapt to constantly changing situations (Heifetz et al., 2009). Conservators also need a good understanding of the change process because negative behaviors need to be addressed in failing districts (Manktelow et al., n.d.). Each school district has unique situations that will affect how the leader works to educate the staff to address negative behaviors, but part of the education process involves creating a force of workers who can mobilize to

face any challenge (Heifetz et al., 2009; Miner, 2005). This supports the ultimate goal of a conservatorship, which is to return the district to local control with the resources necessary to achieve and maintain academic success (Mader, 2014).

## CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to determine factors associated with successful conservatorships as a method for school district improvement. These factors were explored by analyzing school accountability ratings, results from an adaptive leadership instrument, and action plans of conservators. This chapter will explain the process that was used to achieve the purpose.

The following pages will provide the research questions for this study, the research design, a description of the participants and instrumentation, and the procedures for data collection and analysis. All instruments mentioned in this section are included as appendices.

### Research Questions

The following questions were answered through the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data:

1. Does analysis of accountability ratings during and after a conservatorship indicate that the conservator had a positive influence on academic achievement in the school district?
2. Are conservators with high scores on the adaptive leadership instrument associated with school districts that have maintained successful accountability ratings?
3. What did the conservator report as a contributing factor to the school district's failure?
4. What plans were implemented to raise academic achievement during the conservatorship?

## Research Design

A sequential exploratory research design was used to explore factors associated with the success of conservatorships in Mississippi (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006). Quantitative data was used to inform the qualitative portion of the study by helping the researcher select interview participants.

Quantitative data was ex-post facto in nature and included accountability ratings from conservatorship districts pre- and post-takeover. This data was obtained from data archived by the MDE. This data was presented to show how many years passed between a conservator taking control of a district before it was considered successful. Principals and assistant principals from conservatorship districts were also asked to rate their conservator using the adaptive leadership instrument. Scoring from this instrument provided quantitative data that was used as a basis for the conservator interviews.

Qualitative data was collected from a series of interviews. These interviews were conducted with conservators who were in control of school districts between 2012 and 2016. The researcher wanted to conduct interviews with conservators to determine if there was a difference in action plans when comparing the high scores and low scores and the adaptive leadership instrument. Conservator A agreed to interview and this provided an account from the highest scored conservator. Conservator C also agreed to interview, which provided an account from a school district that showed growth in accountability. Although, the score for Conservator C was in the low range. Both conservators from School District D agreed to interview as well. Conservator D2 represented the lowest score and neither conservator demonstrated academic success in accountability. Interviews were conducted at school districts that experienced a conservatorship from the

2012 – 2016 time period. Using conservatorships from this period allowed for more accurate responses from the participants by only asking the participants to recall incidents from a more recent period of time. It also allowed the researcher to maintain the anonymity of the participants because multiple school districts were under the control of a conservator during the 2012-2016 period. Each district and conservator was addressed in the findings with pseudonyms. These interviews were used to collect information about the plans that were implemented in the district to increase academic achievement thereby increasing the accountability rating for the district.

### Participants

This study targeted two different groups of participants: principals and assistant principals in conservator districts and conservators. All the participants were from K-12 public school districts in the state of Mississippi that were part of conservatorship districts from 2012-2016. Principals and assistant principals from schools within conservator controlled school districts from 2012 – 2016 were asked to complete the adaptive leadership questionnaire to rate leadership behaviors for the conservator appointed to their district (Appendix A). After the scores from the adaptive leadership survey were calculated, conservators from those school districts were asked to participate in an interview to gather information about their specific action plans.

Five different school districts were controlled by conservators from 2012 – 2016. These five districts represent 22 total schools. A total of 37 administrators, both assistant principals and principals, experienced working under a conservator after the takeover went into effect. Some of these administrators retired or changed positions, but the districts did have some information on these individuals.

The participants for the qualitative portion on the study consisted of conservators who controlled a school district in the state of Mississippi in the 2012-2016 time period. These participants were selected based on their scores on the adaptive leadership questionnaire. The criteria for participant collection is explained in the following pages.

### Instrumentation

The researcher used two different instruments to conduct this study. The first instrument provided information about each conservator's adaptive leadership behaviors (Appendix A). Adaptive leadership behaviors involve creating an environment in which employees are to adapt to difficult situations, work through difficulties, and move the organization toward success (Heifetz et al., 2009). The second instrument was developed by the researcher and consisted of interview questions for the conservators (Appendix B). More detailed information about both instruments is explained in the following paragraphs.

#### *Adaptive Leadership Instrument*

The adaptive leadership questionnaire consists of 30 different items covering various components of adaptive leadership theory (Northouse, 2015). This questionnaire was intended to be used to give multi-rater feedback about a particular leader. It provided information on six different dimensions related to adaptive leadership behaviors: get on the balcony, identify the adaptive challenge, regulate distress, maintain disciplined action, give the work back to the people, and protect leadership voices from below. The scoring of the questionnaire provided a score for each of these six components in four different ranges (Northouse, 2015).

- High Range – scores between 21 and 25

- Moderately High Range – scores between 16 and 20
- Moderately Low Range – scores between 11 and 15
- Low Range – scores below 10

Conservators who consistently fell into the moderately low range and low range when rated by administrators were classified as weak adaptive leaders. The conservators who consistently fall in the moderately high range and high range when rated by administrators were classified as strong adaptive leaders. The highest rated and lowest rated adaptive leaders were contacted to participate in an interview.

Northouse (2015) stated that the psychometric properties for the questionnaire would need to be established for research purposes. For this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .859, which means the questionnaire has a level of internal consistency to make it reliable. The questionnaire is considered valid for the purpose of this study because it measures all six constructs within the adaptive leadership theory.

#### *Action Plan Interviews*

Conservators were interviewed over the telephone and these interviews were typically scheduled through email correspondence. The instrument (Appendix B) consists of 16 questions that specifically addressed information related to the implementation of a corrective action plan for the district that was placed under their control. Questions from the interview also addressed Duke's factors associated with school decline (Duke, 2009). These interviews were then transcribed and coded for analysis.

#### Procedures

Once the researcher received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the

University of Southern Mississippi, the researcher used the MDE reports database to record the accountability rating for the conservator districts. The accountability ratings were recorded for each district for the initial takeover year and for two full school years following the takeover. The two-year time period was used by the researcher because failing school districts are allowed two school years to demonstrate improvement before a state of emergency can be declared, which allows a conservator to take control. The accountability system for the 2012 – 2016 time period had five possible ratings: A, B, C, D, and F. This rating system allowed the general public to easily determine which school districts are performing well. MDE determines the point values associated with the letter ratings each year. The A rating is reserved for the school districts with the highest test scores, growth and graduation rates. The F rating is given to school districts with failing scores, no growth, and high dropout rates. The legislature and MDE have determined that schools are considered successful or proficient if they maintain at least a C. For the purposes of this study, conservators were considered successful if they were able to move a failing district to a C rating.

Following the analysis of accountability ratings, letters (Appendix C) were sent to request permission to conduct research within conservatorship districts from the 2012 – 2016 time frame. These letters were sent to the superintendent if the district had already returned to local control, or to the conservator if he or she was still in control.

Once the districts granted permission to conduct research in the district, the researcher made a request to obtain either a mailing or email address for school administrators who were employed by the school district during the time of the conservatorship. The districts did provide information about administrators who have left

or retired as well as administrators who remained in the district. The researcher forwarded the adaptive leadership questionnaire to these administrators to gather information about the adaptive leadership behaviors displayed by the conservator. The adaptive leadership questionnaire asked multiple administrators from each district to rate a single conservator. Each questionnaire included questions about the year(s) each individual was employed. It also asked which district they were a part of so that the appropriate conservator could be matched to their ratings. The results from the questionnaire aided in determining which conservators should participate in the interviews. The results were also used to determine if there was a positive relationship between adaptive leadership and measures of accountability.

The researcher then contacted the conservators based on information from the adaptive leadership survey to set up interviews. These interviews were scheduled through email correspondence and took place over the phone. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The conservators answered interview questions to provide details about the action plan they implemented to correct the failures within their school district. The interview questions also gathered information to determine if their schools experienced any of the factors typically associated with school decline (Duke, 2008).

#### Data Analysis

The quantitative data was examined in an ex post facto format. The nature of this study did not allow the researcher to randomly assign variables since the outcomes already existed. The statistical analysis of the accountability ratings and adaptive leadership survey results were primarily descriptive in nature. The historical data from MDE and the results from the adaptive leadership questionnaires were used to create a

descriptive profile of each of the conservators. Information presented in the literature review suggests that high levels of adaptive leader behaviors will correlate with increases in accountability ratings.

The adaptive leadership questionnaire results were then used to select interview participants. A total of four conservators agreed to participate in the interviews. The interviews were transcribed and coded to examine differences in responses. This data allowed the researcher to examine how action plans varied between high range adaptive leaders and low range adaptive leaders.

### Summary

This chapter provided the research questions that were explored during this study. The quantitative data consisted of accountability ratings for school districts as well as ratings from the adaptive leadership questionnaire provided to administrators from conservator districts in the 2012 to 2016 time period. The qualitative data was obtained from interviews with conservators who were selected based on the results of the adaptive leadership questionnaire. This chapter also included a description of the participants and the instrumentation that were used in this research. The chapter concluded with a description of the data analysis that was conducted during this study.

## CHAPTER IV – RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to determine factors that are associated with the success of conservatorships as a method for school district improvement. The study was a sequential exploratory design that used quantitative data to inform the qualitative portion of the study. Quantitative data was primarily descriptive in nature and included historical rating data for the school districts that were of interest for this study. Quantitative data also included the scores associated with school district conservators on the adaptive leadership questionnaire. This information was used to select the highest rated and lowest rated conservators for interviews. Qualitative data from the interviews provided specific information about the plans that were implemented by these conservators in order to move their particular districts towards higher academic achievement. Each phase of the research was carried out to answer the following research questions:

1. Does analysis of accountability ratings during and after a conservatorship indicate that the conservator had a positive influence on academic achievement in the school district?
2. Are conservators with high scores on the adaptive leadership instrument associated with school districts that have maintained successful accountability ratings?
3. What did the conservator report as a contributing factor to the school district's failure?
4. What plans were implemented to raise academic achievement during the conservatorship?

## Phases of Research

Three phases of research were conducted during this study. First, the researcher used historical data from MDE to determine the accountability ratings before and after the conservator takeover. The second phase involved sending the adaptive leadership questionnaire to administrators, who worked with a conservator. The administrators were providing a rating for the conservator's leadership behavior. Finally, conservators were interviewed in the final phase of research.

### *Phase 1: Historical Data Review*

The first data set was obtained through MDE. This data consisted of historical accountability ratings for each district in the study and was collected from the MDE reports database. MDE maintains a reporting section on their website that provides accountability ratings for each school district in Mississippi from 2002 to present. The current accountability model gives a score of A for the highest status and a score of F for the lowest status. These ratings are assigned to districts based on the performance of the schools that make up that district. Schools within the district earn points in several categories and this helps to determine the overall rating of the district (Office of Educational Accountability, 2014). Test results and growth for reading, math, science, and history earn points for schools. ACT scores and graduation rates also earn points for schools. Of interest for this study was the time period two school years prior to a takeover, which provided a historical context for each district. The researcher also examined two school years after a conservator took control of the district. A two-year timeline is provided to school districts at risk of takeover so this same timeframe was used as a reasonable period for a conservator to show improvement for the district. Table

1 shows results for the five districts that were under conservator control within the 2012-2016 time frame.

Table 1 shows that both School District C and School District D were considered academically successful two years prior to be taken over by a conservator as indicated by their C rating. The C rating for both districts dropped to an F the following year, some potential reasons for that decline will be detailed in the next chapter. School District A, School District B, and School District E consistently kept either a D or F rating in the years prior to their takeover. Several districts showed improvement after one full school year under the control of a conservator: School District B, School District C, and School District E. Two of the districts maintained their proficient status two years following a conservator takeover.

Table 1

District Improvement Before and After Conservatorship					
District	2 SY Prior	1 SY Prior	Takeover	1 SY After	2SY After
School District A	D	D	F	D	D
School District B	D	F	D	C	C
School District C	C	F	D	C	C
School District D	C	F	F	D	D
School District E	F	D	D	C	D

The historical data from MDE does provide at least minimal indication that school districts improved with new leadership, but the data does not provide an explanation of how this was accomplished. The next portion of the study involved determining which conservators should be interviewed about their improvement plans. The conservators were selected based on the ratings from the adaptive leadership survey. After obtaining permission from the school districts of interest, the adaptive leadership questionnaire was

sent to 37 administrators across the five districts.

### *Phase 2: Adaptive Leadership Survey*

The school districts that were a part of the study granted permission to the researcher and provided email addresses for the appropriate administrators. Some of the districts within the study were still under the control of a conservator during the research so the entire administration team for the district could be used. For districts that were no longer in conservatorship, contact information had to be provided for remaining administrators and in some cases for administrators who had retired or left the conservator-controlled district.

An anonymous link to the electronic survey was sent to all of the email addresses provided. A brief statement was provided within the email that explained the purpose of the study (Appendix D). The secure link directed the participants to a Qualtrics based questionnaire that included 4 questions to determine which district and conservator was being rated. The next 30 questions in the survey asked the school administrators to rate certain adaptive leadership behaviors of the conservator. Upon completing the last question in the adaptive leadership portion, participants were given an opportunity to rate a second conservator if they had worked with more than one during their time as an administrator. The same adaptive leadership survey was used to rate the additional conservator.

The adaptive leadership questionnaire provided each administrator the opportunity to rate their conservator on six different leader behavior dimensions: Get on the Balcony, Identify the Adaptive Challenge, Regulate Distress, Maintain Disciplined Attention, Give the Work Back to the People, and Protect Leadership Voices from

Below. Each of the six categories corresponds with 5 different questions within the questionnaire. Conservators needed multiple ratings and the average of those ratings was used to calculate their score in each of the categories. These ratings were used to create an adaptive leadership profile for each conservator. Table 2 shows the average score received by each conservator for each of the behavior categories. A complete table of the adaptive leadership survey results can be found in Appendix E. An average between 21-25 is considered high range, 16-20 is moderately high range, 11-15 is moderately low range, and 5-10 is low range. The categories have been abbreviated B1 – B6 for the table. Each of the leader behaviors was discussed in Chapter II and will be explained in more detail in Chapter V. The leader behaviors left to right on the table are: Get on the Balcony, Identify the Adaptive Challenge, Regulate Distress, Maintain Disciplined Attention, Give the Work Back to the People, and Protect Leadership Voices from Below.

Table 2

Adaptive Leadership Behavior Profile									
District	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	n	Mean	SD
Conservator A	19	13.5	22	18.5	14.75	17.75	4	17.6	3.1
Conservator B	24	10	23	15	14	19	1	17.5	5.5
Conservator C	13.66	14.33	12	14.66	15	10	3	13.3	1.9
Conservator D1	15.5	15	14.5	14.5	12	12	2	13.9	1.5
Conservator D2	10.16	15.33	12	12	14.8	12	6	12.7	1.9
Conservator E	20	11.75	19.5	19	14.5	16	4	16.8	3.3

B1 (Get on the Balcony), B2 (Identify the Adaptive Challenge), B3 (Regulate Distress), B4 (Maintain Disciplined Attention), B5 (Give the Work Back to the People), B6 (Protect Leadership Voices from Below)

### *Adaptive Leadership Profiles*

*Conservator A.* Conservator A was rated highest in the Regulate Distress category. The lowest rating for Conservator A was for the Identify the Adaptive

Challenge category. Get on the Balcony, Give the Work Back to the People, and Protect Leadership Voices from Below were all rated in the moderately high range. Two behaviors were rated in the moderately low range: Identify the Adaptive Challenge and Give the Work Back to the People. There was some variability among individual ratings for Conservator A, which was particularly evident in the Give the Work Back to the People category. One administrator rated the conservator at 18 which is considered moderately high, while the lowest rating was a 13 which is considered moderately low. Similar ratings were given for the other categories.

School District A moved from an accountability rating of F to a D within a school year of the takeover. The D rating was maintained for two full school years after the conservator's takeover. This school district had received a D rating for the two years prior to state takeover. This conservator did not meet the criteria for a successful takeover, which required a rating of C or proficient for two school years after the initial takeover year.

*Conservator B.* This conservator received the highest rating of any of the conservators in the Get on the Balcony category. The 24 score represents a near perfect rating in that particular category. Conservator B also received a high rating in the Regulate Distress category. A moderately high rating of 19 was given for Protecting Leadership Voices from Below. The remaining categories were all in the moderately low range. Conservator B also received one of the lowest ratings of any conservator with a 10 for Identify the Adaptive Challenge. This score falls into the low range, meaning the conservator rarely demonstrated this behavior.

School District B had a pattern of receiving D and F accountability ratings

throughout the years. The district had alternated between the two ratings up until the takeover year. Under the leadership of Conservator B the school district moved from a D rating to a C. The following year the decision was made to consolidate the district with a neighboring school district. The rating for the consolidated district remained at a C at the two-year mark.

*Conservator C.* Conservator C was rated in either the moderately low or low range for each of the categories. The highest rating for a behavior was in the Give the Work Back to the People category. The conservator received a 15, which is at the top of the moderately low range. The next highest rating was 14.66 in the Maintain Disciplined Attention category. This conservator received a low rating of 10 in the Protect Leadership Voices from Below. Some variability was evident with the scores provided by administrators for Conservator C, particularly in the Regulate Distress behavior. The highest rating for that category was 14, while the lowest rating was 8.

One school year prior to the takeover of School District C, the district received an F as the accountability rating. During the takeover year, the school district moved to a D rating. After two years under the control of Conservator C, the district obtained and maintained a C rating. The accountability rating results show academic improvement for the district despite the low ratings for adaptive leadership behaviors for Conservator C.

*Conservator D1.* Two conservators served in School District D during the conservatorship period. The first of which, Conservator D1 served during the initial takeover for 1 year and 1 month. Conservator D1's ratings were also all in either the low or moderately low range. The highest rating for this conservator was in the Get on the Balcony category. Ratings for the first four behavior categories were similar with scores

between 14 and 15.5. Conservator D1 received a rating of 12 in both Give the Work Back to the People and Protect Leadership Voices from Below.

Conservator D1 took control of the district for one full school year. The conservator made some changes during that time that led the school district to a D accountability rating 1 full school year after the initial takeover. Conservator D1 left after a full school year had passed. At that time, Conservator D2 was selected to take control of the district.

*Conservator D2.* The second conservator in School District D was also given low or moderately low ratings in all the adaptive leadership behavior categories. The highest rating (15.33) was in the Identify the Adaptive Challenge behavior category. Conservator D2 received a rating of 12 in three different categories: Regulate Distress, Maintain Disciplined Attention, and Protect Leadership Voices from Below. The lowest rating provided by administrators from School District D was in the Get on the Balcony Category. Conservator D2 did have some variability among raters. The highest rating for Regulate Distress was 17 while, the lowest rating was 5. Get on the Balcony and Maintain Disciplined Action also had a larger range of average when compared to the other categories. One administrator rated Conservator D2 at 15 in Get on the Balcony while another rated Conservator D2 at a 5. The highest rating for Maintain Disciplined Attention was 15, while the lowest rating was a 9. Ratings for the other categories were not as varied.

Conservator D2 took control of the school district after another conservator had already been in place. The accountability rating was at D when Conservator D2 started. After another school year, Conservator D2 unfortunately maintained the D accountability

rating.

*Conservator E.* This conservator received high or moderately high ratings for 4 of 6 adaptive leader behavior categories. The highest rating was in the Get on the Balcony category. Conservator E received a rating of 19.5 and 19 for the categories Regulate Distress and Maintain Disciplined attention respectively. Administrators rated this conservator lowest (11.75) for being able to identify the adaptive challenge. A rating of 14.5 was given for Give the Work Back to the People. There was a great deal of variability in the averages for two categories. One administrator rated Conservator E a perfect 25 for Get on the Balcony, while another provided an overall rating of 13. This was also the case for Regulate Distress, where one administrator provided a rating of 25, while another rated Conservator E at 12.

When Conservator E took control of School District E, the accountability rating was a D. The district had alternated between a D and an F rating for several years leading up to the takeover. After one school year in the district, the accountability rating moved to a C. The conservator remained in the district, but the following year the district had moved down to a D accountability rating once again.

### *Phase 3: Conservator Interviews*

The researcher contacted the conservators through email or telephone to request permission to interview. 4 of the 6 conservators agreed to participate in the interview via telephone and gave consent for those interviews to be recorded. Conservator A received the highest overall rating on the adaptive leadership survey with a total across all of the categories of 105.5. Conservator C received the next highest rating with 79.9 across all of the categories. The lowest ratings for the adaptive leadership survey were Conservator

D1 and Conservator D2, with a 73.5 and a 76.26 respectively. The sums for leaders in School District D are relatively close to that of Conservator C, but there are some important differences among the three conservators. Conservator D1 and Conservator D2 were only able to receive an accountability rating of D throughout their time within School District D. Conservator C moved the district from a D rating to C and School District C maintained that rating for two consecutive school years. Conservator A received a high score on the adaptive leadership survey and improved the district initially from an F to a D. However, School District A remained at a D for two full school years after the initial takeover.

All of the interviews were conducted over the phone. The initial conversation was recorded. The researcher then transcribed the interviews to code the information. The transcripts of the interview are arranged in chronological order of interview in Appendices F – I. The following paragraphs will examine each of the questions and the responses that were provided by each of the conservators.

The first question for each of the conservators asked them to tell how long they had been a conservator. It is interesting to note that each of the conservators had previously been a conservator in a district not part of this study. Conservator A and Conservator D2 had the most experience with school takeovers. Conservator A had almost five years of experience as a conservator during the 2012-2016 time period. Conservator D2 had about 4 years over the same period. Each served in another district that was not part of the research because the conservatorship started in a year where the accountability rating was determined by completely different means. Conservator C was a conservator for two years during that time period and Conservator D1 only had about a

year and a half of experience during the 2012-2016 time frame.

Each of the conservators had experience in both school and district leadership. Conservator A, Conservator C, and Conservator D1 had all coached and taught initially. Each of the four conservators had been principals in a district. All four had been an assistant superintendent or head superintendent in a district before stepping into the role of conservator. The conservators discussed drawing on their experience in other districts. Conservator A stated, “I learned things from my teaching all the way through my superintendent position that helped me when I started as a conservator” (Conservator A).

When a conservatorship takes place, the outgoing superintendent has very little contact with the conservator. The conservators are able to meet with the P-16 advisory council, which is typically made up of members of the community, parents, and teachers. In one case, the superintendent did remain in the district, but not in a district leadership role. Conservator C had a vacancy for an elementary school principal and allowed the former superintendent to fill that role. Conservator D1 had some interaction with the previous superintendent, but only because he worked as a consultant within the district prior to the takeover.

The conservators were asked about the stakeholders who were involved with their initial meetings after taking over the school district. The information from these meetings is used to provide some information for the action plan. The conservators had very similar responses and it typically only involved the P-16 advisory council. Conservator D2 discussed the importance of the local stakeholders saying, “Coming in as an outsider, you don’t really have a sense of the culture of the community or how the school plays into that. I was glad to have some heading of what I was walking into”

(Conservator D2). Conservator C said the following about the difficulty of working with local stakeholders during the interview; “One of the things you have to realize as a conservator, is that you basically come in where it is two groups. You have one group that thinks it’s rosy and one group that thinks it should have been done six months ago” (Conservator C). The importance of this statement as it relates to the adaptive leadership ratings will be discussed in the next chapter.

Each of the conservators had very different responses for their first step in developing a corrective action plan. Conservator A started by researching the data from the district: test results, demographics, and human resources practices were specifically mentioned. That data allowed the conservator to begin having discussions with district and school leaders about ways to address deficiencies. Conservator C looked at deficiencies from a previous audit to begin finding a way to create an action plan. Test data was also examined during this time. Conservator C wanted the community members to be able to see progress quickly, so the plan was to find some areas where improvements could be shown. Conservator D1 tried to address some issues with technology and the facilities to help student achievement. Many issues within departments had to be corrected. There were problems with the maintenance, transportation, and finance departments that had to be addressed initially to ensure that the school district continued operating. Conservator D2 continued to work on those issues after taking over. Hiring was another concern within School District D. Before the conservatorship period, people were hired whether they were qualified or not. Many employees received raises before the state took over even though there were budgetary concerns in the district. Conservator D2 also mentioned that the test scores were always

among the worst in the state.

Answers were similar when conservators were asked who was involved with their data gathering and decision making process. Conservator A explained that when the conservatorship began most of the data gathering was done alone. Principals from specific schools were called to meetings once specific information was needed. Principals were part of the decision-making process to an extent, but Conservator A did not shy away from giving specific directives. The principals within School District A seemed willing to grow and were open to Conservator A's suggestions. Conservator C researched a lot individually, but did share some of the information with the school leaders. Conservator D1 used some education consulting companies for data gathering, but also involved the principals. Conservator D1 also mentioned that a big part of the job was preparing principals to make good decisions. Conservator D2 also mentioned working with administrators, "I worked with administrators a lot because they should know what is going on in their schools" (Conservator D2).

The responses about issues that required immediate action were also varied. Conservator A wanted to immediately start to improve student achievement. The teachers within the district were not using data to drive their instruction. The leaders at the district level and the principals started to make data based decisions after Conservator A took control. Conservator C focused more on financial and personnel issues that were bankrupting School District C. The district had borrowed \$500,000 just before the state took control to meet payroll. Conservator D1 focused on better security for testing materials, which was a major concern. In the interview, Conservator D1 mentioned walking into a high school and noticing the state algebra exam on the counter. School

District D also had major issues with facilities. Several grants were used to repair some of the buildings within the district. Conservator D2 wanted to address the issues with hiring. Principals within the district were still making poor hiring decisions well into the conservatorship.

Duke (2008) mentioned 11 different issues that consistently emerge in failing schools. Each of the conservators were asked to discuss any of the issues they noticed during their time in the district. The first issue on the list was a failure to differentiate instruction. Conservator A and Conservator C did not notice any issues with differentiated instruction. Conservator D1 mentioned that all the instruction was low-level knowledge based instruction. Conservator D2 added that there were several issues with special education paperwork and incorrect accommodations.

All of the conservators noticed issues with progress monitoring through data analysis. Conservator A stated that the teachers had enough data, but did not use it the right way. This issue was mentioned as one of the reasons for the takeover. The teachers within School District A were not using data to drive instruction. Conservator C echoed some of the same comments with teacher benchmark testing frequently, but not using the data they acquired. Conservator D1 said that there was no progress monitoring through data analysis at the time of the takeover. School District D also had problems with data analysis under the leadership of Conservator D2, who also mentioned issues with data analysis.

None of the conservators noticed any issues with scheduling that prevented students from seeking help throughout the day. Conservator D2 had some interesting insight about students seeking help during the day stating, "I'm not sure who they would

have asked help from, but they would have had time at some point” (Conservator D2). This statement illustrates some of the issues with teaching staff in these districts.

Each of the conservators interviewed noticed issues with teachers providing instruction that was not aligned with the standards. Conservator A explained that most of the teachers taught the standards, but did not do enough to cover the bulk of the material. Conservator C mentioned that there were a few issues with teachers covering material that was not part of the assessment. Conservator D1 expressed some concern for this particular issue stating that some of the teachers may not have even been aware of what the standards were. By the time Conservator D2 took over, the standards were being addressed, but they still were not being taught well.

None of the conservators noticed major issues with professional development opportunities. Each mentioned that their district had some opportunities. Both conservators from School District D said that the opportunities were there, but the professional development sessions were not productive. Conservator C used state resources to ensure that the teachers received good professional development opportunities. School District C received a variety of opportunities through the North Mississippi Education Consortium and Mississippi State University.

The conservators were asked if they observed issues with a lack of focus on academic priorities. Each of the conservators mentioned that attendance was not a priority in any of the schools. Conservator D1 explained that some of that stemmed from students being more focused on athletics than academics. Conservator A added that instructional time was not utilized properly in School District A. The students within the district were often engaged in off-task behavior. Conservator A explained that principals

were responsible for holding teachers accountable for their classrooms, which was not the case at the time of the takeover.

Ineffective leadership was noticed at each of the districts. The conservators discussed issues with both district and school leadership that caused problems that contributed to the takeover. Conservator A provided the most detailed response about ineffective leadership saying, “That is probably the biggest issue, the person who was supposed to be leading did not set an example for the rest of the district starting with principals and going all the way down to the teaching assistants” (Conservator A).

Duke (2008) cited speedy hiring procedures as a common issue in failing districts. The conservators seemed to think that the issues were more due to the individuals being hired rather than the speed of the hiring procedures. Conservator A stated that the human resources department had a good set of hiring procedures in place. Conservator C mentioned the lack of good candidates coming into School District C. Conservator D1 and Conservator D2 explained that the individuals who were hired were generally not qualified for the position.

The conservators did not mention any specific issues with overcrowding in classrooms. They also did not encounter tutoring programs that were led by volunteers or teacher’s assistants. Conservator C worked with a foundation to set up tutoring in the elementary schools. The other conservators did not mention anything specific with tutoring programs. Conservator D1 mentioned community members who were interested in the schools typically did not put a lot of emphasis on academics.

When questioned about the amount of time dedicated to discipline in the schools, the conservators had a varied set of responses. Conservator A frequently noticed a high

number of discipline referrals in the schools with academic issues. Conservator C did not feel that discipline was a big concern within School District C. Conservator D1 felt safe in the halls of the schools. The middle schools in School District D had more discipline referrals than the other schools, but not an excessive amount. Conservator D2 explained that many of the parents within School District D relied on the school for correcting misbehavior. There was very little parental involvement. It seemed that the discipline issues that occurred were more major, but infrequent. Even after explaining this, Conservator D2 said, “Definitely not the worse situation I’ve seen in terms of discipline, but not the best either” (Conservator D2).

The conservators had different methods for determining the success of a conservatorship. For Conservator A, it was all about test scores. The performance on the state test was the main factor in determining how successful the action plan was. Conservator C focused on the graduation rate. School District C implemented tutoring programs for state tests and created some dropout prevention measures to ensure that students were graduating. Conservator D1 wanted School District D to be in a financially stable situation to avoid teacher turnover each year. Conservator D2 echoed concerns about financial stability, but also wanted the test scores to improve.

Conservators were asked to discuss what they believed had the greatest effect on student achievement. Conservator A believed that a hands-on approach and finding good teaching candidates had the greatest impact on student achievement. Conservator A stated this by saying “Problems in schools aren’t solved in data rooms; they are solved in classrooms” (Conservator A). School District A began to hold teachers more accountable because Conservator A spent more time in buildings with principals and visited

classrooms. The district also found some qualified candidates to fill vacancies.

Conservator C changed some practices with classroom instruction and thought that the effects on student achievement were due to those changes. Conservator D1 admitted that part of the reason for leaving the district was due to what was perceived as a lack of improvement on achievement. Conservator D1 did mention being pleased with the improvements to technology, but the student achievement did not seem to improve as a result. Conservator D2 thought that good leaders in the school buildings would have the greatest impact on student achievement.

Long-term success in these school districts seemed to be tied to student performance. The accountability rating of the district is ultimately what moves conservatorship districts back to local control. Conservator D2 summed this up by explaining, “I think schools are successful if they can hit that proficient rating. If a school can do that after a conservator leaves, then they are successful in my book” (Conservator D2).

Conservator A and Conservator D1 both said they had a good understanding of the situation in the districts before they started as conservators. Looking back on the conservatorship, Conservator C wished there was more information available about how to use federal funds to improve the financial situation. Conservator D2 wanted to know more about the situation in the district, but also mentioned that in many cases it is impossible to get an understanding of the schools before visiting the district for the first time.

Finally, each of the conservators was asked to provide recommendations for future leaders in their school district. Conservator A recommended that all leaders stay

familiar with the accountability model and make frequent classroom visits. Conservator C suggested that district leaders work on the relationship with the school board.

Conservator D1 felt that leaders must work to put quality teachers into classrooms and explained this by saying, “Even in poor districts, if you have a good teacher, kids are going to learn” (Conservator D1). Conservator D2 made several recommendations for future leaders of School District D, indicating that school leaders need to ensure that tax dollars are spent appropriately. Conservator D2 also discussed the importance of principals and superintendents conducting classroom observations. Leaders also need to be prepared to research what is needed within their district to help students become successful.

### Summary of Findings

The research for this study was carried out to address four specific questions related to conservatorship success.

1. Does analysis of accountability ratings during and after a conservatorship indicate that the conservator had a positive influence on academic achievement in the school district?
2. Are conservators with high scores on the adaptive leadership instrument associated with school districts that have maintained successful accountability ratings?
3. What did the conservator report as a contributing factor to the school district’s failure?
4. What plans were implemented to raise academic achievement during the conservatorship?

The three phases of the research were used to obtain data to answer these questions.

Addressing the first question involved examining accountability ratings from historical data provided by MDE. Conservator B, Conservator C, and Conservator E were able to demonstrate a positive influence on the academic achievement by moving their districts to a C rating. This C rating came after the initial takeover where the district previously maintained an F or D rating each year.

The second question required the second phase of research through surveying administrators who served under conservators during the time of a conservatorship. The conservators with high ratings on the adaptive leadership survey were not necessarily associated with school districts that obtained successful accountability ratings.

Conservator A received the highest overall rating on the adaptive leadership survey, but during the two school year period following the takeover School District A was only able to obtain a D accountability rating. Conservator B was a conservator that received a high rating on the adaptive leadership survey and moved School District B to a C rating overall. Conservator C received one of the lower scores overall, but the district moved from a D rating to a C rating. School District C maintained that C rating for two school years. Both School District D conservators received low scores and the district was either an F or a D for each conservator. Conservator E received the third highest rating on the adaptive leadership survey. School District E initially moved to a C rating, but then dropped back to a D the following school year. The results for Conservator B, Conservator D1, and Conservator D2 seem to follow a logical pattern between adaptive leadership results and accountability ratings.

The third research question addressed what the conservators reported as a contributing factor to their district's failure. Each of the conservators presented different information in their interviews, but there were some issues that were consistently mentioned. The lack of effective leaders at both the district and school level was given as a potential reason for school district failure. The conservators also frequently discussed poor financial decisions within the school districts. Data analysis was lacking in these districts. The conservators also noticed that teachers within these districts were providing instruction that was not aligned to standards. These districts did not seem to emphasize good teaching prior to the state takeover.

Finally, the conservators were asked to explain what was done to raise academic achievement during their conservatorship. Conservator A started by researching the data within the district and then addressed student achievement by ensuring that teachers were using data to drive instruction. Conservator C addressed some of the deficiencies noted in an audit, but wanted to address issues with personnel and finances initially. Conservator D1 was most concerned about the district's lack of technology and ensuring that repairs were made on some dilapidated schools within the district. Conservator D2 wanted the principals in the School District D to make better hiring decisions to secure a better instructional staff. Discussion and recommendations about the research data will be presented in Chapter V. Chapter V will also provide more detailed information regarding the analysis of conservator interviews.

## CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

The state of Mississippi has used conservatorships as a method for improving school districts. In cases of financial or safety concerns, conservatorships have been an effective means for bringing about positive change. The results have been mixed when academic failure in a school district has been a concern. A system is needed to improve school districts in the shortest time possible, but also the changes that take place need to be lasting.

### Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to determine factors associated with the success of conservatorships as a method for school district improvement. Historical data from MDE, results from the adaptive leadership survey, and qualitative data from interview with conservators were used to determine which factors lead to a successful conservatorship. Four research questions were addressed in this research.

1. Does analysis of accountability ratings during and after a conservatorship indicate that the conservator had a positive influence on academic achievement in the school district?
2. Are conservators with high scores on the adaptive leadership instrument associated with school districts that have maintained successful accountability ratings?
3. What did the conservator report as a contributing factor to the school district's failure?
4. What plans were implemented to raise academic achievement during the conservatorship?

Each of the research questions will be analyzed in the following pages.

*Analysis of Research Question One*

The first research question asked if the accountability ratings from before and after the conservatorship indicated that the conservator had a positive impact on the district. In the case of School District A, it seems that initially the conservator did not have an effect on the accountability rating. The district was rated at a D rating for two full years before the conservatorship. The year of the takeover, the rating for the district had fallen to an F. The district returned to a D after the conservator took power, but remained at a D the following school year.

School District B was rated at a D at the time of the takeover; the district also had a history of being rated either D or F. The following year the district moved to a C under the leadership of a conservator. However, in this case it is important to note that some of district schools were restructured. The district combined the schools of one area with those of a neighboring school district. The combination of the positive influence of the neighboring school district is probably the reason for the increase in academic achievement.

Prior to the takeover, School District C dropped from a C rating to an F rating. MDE declared a state of emergency the next school year when the district had moved up to a D. Within one school year, the district was rated at a C and maintained that rating. It is important to note that School District C did not have a history of consistent D and F ratings. The year of the F rating coincided with a major change to both the state curriculum and the testing platform that was used for subject area testing. These changes could have led to the low scores during the year of the F rating. However, the

conservator did note several deficiencies during the interview that also could have caused scores to suffer. Examples like this district demonstrate the complexity of public school ratings in Mississippi.

School District D also had scores that dropped during a curriculum and testing platform change. There were some differences between School District C and School District D. School District D did have a reputation for consistently having D or F ratings. The district had managed to achieve a C rating two school years prior to the takeover, but that rating was not typical. The conservators were also not able to improve academic achievement to affect the accountability rating during their times in office.

The ratings in School District E were consistently low leading up the state takeover. The conservator who took control of the district had experience as a conservator and created some changes to improve the rating the first school year following takeover. However, the rating subsequently lowered from a C to a D the following school year.

The lack of improvement within a two-year time period under a conservator selected by the state demonstrates the need for a better system for initiating state takeovers. School districts at risk of being taken over are granted two years to make corrections to raise academic achievement. Conservators who are considered experts by MDE are often not able to create a positive change within two years. Later discussion will provide some ideas suggested by conservators for creating an improved system of school district takeover.

#### *Analysis of Research Question Two*

The second question addressed whether high scores on the adaptive leadership

survey were associated with conservators who improved accountability ratings within their school districts. This also suggests that the opposite would also be true or that lower adaptive leadership scores would be associated with conservators who were not able to improve accountability ratings.

The adaptive leadership scores and accountability ratings did not necessarily have any type of predictable relationship. Conservator A had one of the highest overall scores for the adaptive leadership survey, but after two full school years in control of the district had not managed an accountability rating higher than a D. Conversely, School District C had one of the lowest overall ratings on the adaptive leadership survey, the conservator improved the accountability rating to a C. The rating was also maintained for two full school years following the takeover.

It is important to note that had this particular study included an adaptive leadership survey for the full number of conservators since 1996 that a different result may have been obtained. Allowing each conservator more school years to show improvement within the district could have also created a different result. These limitations were created by both the need for a consistent measure of accountability and the state imposed time frames for school district improvement.

#### *Analysis of Research Question Three*

The third research question involved determining what each conservator believed was a contributing factor to the school district's failure. Each of the school districts had unique situations, but there were some recurring themes that emerged from the conservator interviews. Each of the conservators mentioned that within their districts, poor leadership was evident. The conservators were moving into districts where

academic improvement was not necessarily the focus. They were also often placed in situations where poor financial planning had left the school district in a situation that made it difficult to find funding to improve deficiencies.

Each of the conservators also mentioned a lack of focus on good teaching. In an era of data-driven instruction, these school districts did not monitor progress through data analysis. Conservators mentioned issues with appropriate pacing in the classroom and lack of alignment with standards. Education and education leadership programs should address topics such as data-driven instruction and standards-based instruction. Districts across the state also need a way to get the best candidates for available teaching positions. Conservator D1 explained it this way, “you are never going to affect change in a school until you change who is in the classroom” (Conservator D1). The need for highly qualified teachers will be addressed further later in this chapter.

#### *Analysis of Research Question Four*

The final research question asked conservators to discuss the plans that were implemented within their school districts to increase academic achievement to improve the district’s accountability rating. Each of the conservators created a different type of action plan for their district. The issues that existed among these districts was not consistent even though there were some similarities. The conservators each mentioned something specific that was addressed during their conservatorship.

Conservator A was in a district where the academic achievement had been historically low. Correcting this type of problem is not the same situation as in a district that has only had a low accountability rating for a few years. Conservator A entered the district and immediately began researching everything about the school district and

surrounding community. Testing data was examined as a part of this research, but other data related to demographics, hiring, and turnover was reviewed as well. Conservator A's action plan only revolved around student achievement. The plan involved training principals to be able to make the right decisions and make teachers understand that they were accountable for their students' performance.

Conservator C came into a district that had many deficiencies. The initial data gathering process involved going through available test data and a review of budgetary concerns for the district. Conservator C initially had to deal with some issues related to district finance because upon accepting the position it was determined that School District C had borrowed money during the previous year to meet payroll. Conservator C wanted the school district to be on a firm financial footing, but also wanted the community to see that there were some improvements academically. There were several issues that could have been addressed, but the district began to focus more on academics. Conservator C hired retired teachers to serve as tutors for students who had failed a subject area test. There was also a push to increase attendance and lower the number of dropouts. The approach in this case was multifaceted, but School District C moved to a C rating. The rating was maintained for several years after the takeover began.

Two conservators from School District D agreed to interview for this study. Conservator D1 worked in School District D as a consultant before accepting the position as the conservator. The data collection process was not as exhaustive in this case because many of the issues were already known. Conservator D1 was particularly concerned about the lack of technology in the district and took steps to incorporate more technology in the schools. School District D also had many buildings that had not been maintained

properly. Conservator D1 also replaced the administration team in each of the schools. Only one principal was allowed to remain in the district. Conservator D1 stated, “We only kept her because she was from the community” (Conservator D1). Conservator D1 also addressed some issues with instruction by bringing in educational consultant groups to help in the classrooms.

Conservator D1 left the district and a new conservator was selected by MDE to take control of the district. Conservator D2 entered the district and tried to become an expert on the school by looking at various sources of data and meeting with the administrators from the different schools. School District D had a new group of administrators at this time, but they still needed guidance to lead their schools effectively. The district office was still struggling with making responsible financial decisions and that became a part of Conservator D2’s focus. Hiring issues existed even after Conservator D1 left the district and those issues had to be addressed as well. Finally, Conservator D2 wanted to improve test scores by specifically focusing on the growth component. “Getting students to show growth can really boost that district score” (Conservator D2).

The action plans of these conservators demonstrate how there are a diverse set of issues occurring in each school district daily. Their plans of action involved looking at the available information to determine what specific issues needed to be addressed and how they needed to be corrected.

### Discussion and Implications

This findings from this study have reinforced previous research that suggests developing corrective action plans for academic performance is difficult (Oluwole &

Green, 2009). MDE should take some steps to create some criteria to allow conservator districts to be returned to local control (Mader, 2014). Even though difficulties exist, and some work is needed from the state legislature to create change within the system, this study did produce some interesting findings.

When beginning this research project, it was difficult for both the researcher and the committee to determine the best group of school districts to consider because of the variations within the accountability model. Between 1996 and 2016, the accountability rating system underwent five changes (Office of Accreditation and Accountability, 2015). The first system developed only addressed individual school ratings and did not provide a rating for the district. Following that system, the state provided a score for both schools and districts, but there was no accountability tied to the district. The third system involved a rating scaled that was referred to as a Quality Distribution Index. It was used to provide a rating for both schools and districts. This rating included scores on different tests, growth goals on tests, and graduation rates (Office of Accreditation and Accountability, 2015). The next accountability ratings were based on a number ranking before finally arriving at the letter grade system that is currently used. The use of different rating systems would be confusing enough, but changes were also made to the curriculum and testing several times. Within a five-year time period, the state administered three different types of standardized tests. Conservator A had this recommendation for future leaders of his school district, “The leaders need to stay familiar with the nuances of accountability. The state is constantly changing things, so leaders have to be prepared to learn constantly” (Conservator A).

Teachers and school leaders face many issues each day, even in school districts

that are not at risk of failing. A variety of challenges including, but not limited to, constantly changing, testing platforms, and testing procedures creates confusion for students, teachers, administrators and parents. An example of how constant these changes are can be found in a single example. In 2010, the Mississippi legislature adopted the Common Core State Standards (LeCoz, 2015). The previous standards, the Mississippi Frameworks, were eliminated that year, but the first Common Core assessment was not to be given until the 2014-2015. This meant that students were still tested on standards from the Mississippi Frameworks, while Common Core standards were being phased in (LeCoz, 2015). Immediately after the first set of Common Core end-of-year assessments were given during the 2014-2015 school year, the state legislature voted to change the standards again (LeCoz, 2015). During this time period, there were many upset students, parents, and teachers because of the misinformation and low scores that surrounded the assessments.

Just before data collection took place on this research project, MDE began to make changes to the conservatorship itself. The “Office of Conservatorship” webpage disappeared from the MDE website during this time and was initially replaced with the “Office of Interim Superintendency.” That page was later replaced with one titled the “Office of District Transformation” (Office of District Transformation, 2017). The changes being made are not apparent yet because the language still mimics what was previously on the conservatorship page, but it seems like changes to the system will take place in the future. The conservatorship system that was in place was not necessarily the best approach, but multiple name changes in a period of a few months further demonstrate the lack of consistency in many of the state led initiatives.

Lack of consistency was not the only issue that was evident during this study. The districts involved in the takeovers seem to have a deeply rooted fear of outside influence. During the interview with Conservator C, he discussed the split in the community upon accepting the position of conservator. According to Conservator C, “You have one group that thinks it’s rosy and one group that thinks it should have been done six months ago. You sort of ride the horse you have for a while trying to cultivate some support in the community” (Conservator C). The local community seems to be reluctant to allow outsiders to correct issues within their district. Once the initial data collection portion of the research had concluded, Jackson Public School District (JPS) was faced with a takeover. JPS had received an F rating and there were many other safety issues occurring at the schools (Amy, 2016). Several hearings took place in the months following the release of the ratings because the governor ultimately makes the decision regarding a takeover. Parents made their way to these hearings and expressed their concerns over a state takeover. A large group of parents even filed a federal lawsuit over the attempt to take control of the failing district (De La Garza, 2017). An outspoken group of parents or community members, who are against a conservator could make creating changes in failing schools difficult. These conservators are often outsiders and need help to be able to determine the best way to help the school district (Conservator D2).

It was also surprising that the conservators who agreed to interview had so many issues with basic instruction within their districts. Each of the school districts had some issue with the instructional component that had to be corrected after becoming conservator. Conservator A felt that the teachers were covering the appropriate

standards in their instruction, but needed help with pacing because they were not covering enough content within a school year (Conservator A). Conservator C felt that making changes to how teachers were providing instruction, had the greatest effect on student achievement (Conservator C). Conservator D1 explained that the district was so bad at the time of the takeover, that some of teachers may not have even known what standards were (Conservator D1). A big part of the action plan in School District D was improvements to instruction through work with educational consultation groups. All of the districts saw issues with data being used appropriately to drive instruction in the classroom. These separate issues point to a larger problem in the areas of teacher preparation programs and vetting processes for teacher hiring. Every education program in the state should be consistent and prepare teachers the same way. Some important aspects of that training are: effective planning, standards based instruction, and data driven decision making. The other issue is that teachers are not properly vetted when hired and schools are often left with bad teachers in classrooms. Teacher hiring procedures within the state may need some examination before moving to a different takeover method.

Many school districts in Mississippi are not heavily populated and do not have businesses to attract employees. The conservatorships for this research project were all in smaller rural districts. The lack of quality candidates was mentioned in the interviews frequently. Conservator D1 felt that the success of a school leader is based on the effectiveness of the teachers in a building (Conservator D1). School districts in the state may be able to get more qualified candidates into their schools if the state would create some type of grant program to supplement teacher salaries in these areas. Studies have

shown that teachers have the strongest effect on influencing successful learning in schools (Arnold, 2011; Terhart, 2011). Finding a way to draw better teachers into these districts could have a stronger effect than changing the district level leadership.

### Theoretical Framework

This research study was based on three many theories: contingency theory, Lewin's Change Theory and adaptive leadership theory. Contingency theory suggests that leaders develop solutions that are best for each individual circumstance. Lewin's Change Theory explains how changes take places in the phases of unfreeze, change, and refreeze (Connelly, 2016). Adaptive leadership theory addresses how leaders create a plan for developing individuals to adapt to difficult challenges (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

Contingency theory was evident throughout the study because each of the school districts were completely unique. Even in cases where the demographics and locations of the districts were similar, there were still differences in culture and school community. The interviews with the conservators revealed that there is not one solution that will work for each school district. Conservators in each district needed input from the P-16 committee and the individuals who remained in the districts in order to develop a plan that would suit the specific circumstances within the district.

The concept of change was prevalent throughout the research process. Each of the conservators who entered a failing school district were required to implement a change that would lead to academic success. These districts had often been in situations where low academic achievement had become normal. Conservators had to unfreeze the situation, which was not an immediate process. The faculty within the district were often

reluctant to change, which made things difficult. However, in some cases the community was reluctant to change as well. Conservator C mentioned the community being divided over the new leadership. The churches in School District D1 seemed to be reluctant to completely give over control. These types of challenges are what make the unfreeze phase of Lewin's Change Theory so difficult.

Following the unfreeze phase, the conservators had to implement the changes that they thought would create improvements in academic achievement. The plans were all specific to the school district they were in, which relates to contingency theory. The conservators were former superintendents and principals who had seen success elsewhere in their career. The issues with failing school districts are unique and a plan that worked in another district may not work elsewhere. Conservator C explained how challenging it can be simply because of a lack of personnel in the district office. Larger districts in the state have dedicated offices for finance, human resources, curriculum, and federal programs. In some smaller, rural, districts a superintendent could be filling all of those roles. The plans that were created by these conservators were specific to all of the unique circumstance within the district including the number of faculty and staff members.

The refreezing phase followed after some effective strategies were put into place. There have been some issues with the refreezing phase historically in Mississippi as there have been cases of a school district in a conservatorship twice. This phase is critical because it effectively creates a shift in school culture. Refreezing ensures that the district is set up for success after the school district has been returned to local control. The administrators and teachers within the district need to be set up for long term success so that the students are receiving the best education possible.

Adaptive leadership challenges were evident throughout the research. The conservators enter situations that are atypical. As discussed previously, each of the school districts is unique. The solutions to the problems in these districts are not found in an instruction manual, but have to be created. Changes at the state level mean that the problems many of these districts are encountering are constantly evolving into something different. Conservators come into situations where they must build the capacity for administrators to handle school-level issues. It also means that teachers should be able to handle classroom and instructional issues. Get on the Balcony was on category within the adaptive leadership questionnaire. High scores in this area suggest that a leader is able to see the problems as an outsider rather than as a person entrenched in the issue. The conservators were all able to bring an outsider's perspective into a very local problem to attempt to implement changes within these districts. The questionnaire revealed some of the lower scores in the Give Work Back to the People category. The reluctance to begin to relinquish some control back to the individuals who will remain in the district could be one of the reasons that conservatorships have been relatively unsuccessful in the past. A defined plan for returning specific tasks back to local control may need to be part of any future school district improvement plans created by the legislature.

### Limitations

The researcher noted several limitations throughout this study. First, the study only looked at a small portion of the conservatorships that have taken place in Mississippi. The 2012-2016 time frame was used in order to have a consistent method for comparing accountability ratings. To examine each of the conservatorships in the

same manner would require some type of method for converting all the accountability ratings from the past to the model that was put into use before the 2012-2013 school year. The more recent time frame also aided in the adaptive leadership survey and the interview process. The participants were only asked to recall events from within a five-year period. If the full-time frame had been used, participants from the first conservatorship would have to remember events from twenty years prior.

Secondly, the administrators who participated in the adaptive leadership survey were rating conservators who may have a profound effect on their work environment. It was expected that the administrators would provide an honest rating about the conservator's full body of work during their time within the district. However, it is possible that some of the administrators could have rated the conservators low as a retaliatory response, introducing responder bias.

The researcher also encountered some resistance from within the participating districts. Several of the district gatekeepers made it difficult to acquire permission letters to conduct research. The letters were acquired, and IRB approval was obtained a semester prior to sending out surveys or conducting interviews. During the data collection for the adaptive leadership survey, it was difficult to get administrators to respond. The low response rate from administrators could have affected the ratings of conservators.

Following the adaptive leadership survey, the conservators were asked to participate in the interview portion of the research. At this point, some of the conservators seemed unwilling to participate in the interview. Access was difficult

throughout the research process, but a bulk of the information in this study was to be obtained through the interview process.

The conservators mentioned the distrust of outside influence in the districts they were serving. The interviews also revealed that many of these schools had a culture that focused on athletics first and foremost. A culture that does not place an emphasis on education could also create problems in academic achievement. Administrators accustomed to a culture where education is not necessarily the focus could also provide lower ratings to a conservator who attempted to change that culture. In some cases, stricter educational policies could place some student athletes in jeopardy of losing eligibility. For some of the schools involved in conservatorships, the athletic programs were of utmost importance.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

Additional research on the success of school district takeovers is still needed. If a new system is eventually implemented, the success of that system essentially determines the academic success of the students within the affected districts.

Further research could be conducted on the school districts that were considered successful. Rather than looking at a specific time period, a researcher could develop a study that specifically examined the contributing factors associated with success in the districts that were able to demonstrate proficiency. This would require some method of comparing the different accountability ratings throughout the years, which was mentioned in the previous section.

A study could be conducted to obtain information from teachers who were part of a conservatorship district. The teachers within these school districts may have specific

information about how planning, instruction, and assessments changed after a conservator took control of the district. A study involving that many teachers would have some inherent limitations as well. The researcher would need a way to contact all the teachers, who were part of the conservatorship districts, which could be difficult due to teacher turnover issues. The researcher would also need a way to identify successful teachers since most of the conservators mentioned issues with unqualified teachers.

### Summary

This study focused on the action plans of conservators who were appointed to increase student achievement in failing school districts. The research involved three separate phases; review of historical accountability data, adaptive leadership questionnaires, and interviews with conservators from the district.

The first phase of research revealed that some of the conservators were able to increase accountability ratings after having control of the district for one school year. The criteria for success in this research was a rating of C after two full school years, which was only met by Conservator B and Conservator C.

Following the review of historical data, adaptive leadership questionnaires were sent to school administrators in the failing districts. These administrators were asked to complete the questionnaire to provide a rating for the leadership qualities of the conservator they served under. The results of the questionnaire did not necessarily link high adaptive leadership scores and increased student achievement. Conservator A received the highest overall rating, but School District A only moved to a rating of D after two full years under conservatorship. However, Conservator C had one of the lowest ratings, but improved the accountability rating to a C. The fact that school

administrators could have provided inaccurate or biased ratings was listed in the limitations of the study.

The final phase of research involved interviewing the conservators to get more specific information about what took place after they were granted control of the district. First steps in action plans included thorough reviews of the data, addressing audit deficiencies, correcting issues with hiring, and updating facilities. Each of the conservators interviewed noticed some common problems. The conservators mentioned that the outgoing superintendent was ineffective in the leadership role for the district. Attendance seemed to be a problem in each of the districts as well. The conservators also noticed a lack of standards-based teaching and data analysis. Both of these issues would contribute to low standardized test scores, which directly affects the accountability rating of a district.

APPENDIX A - Adaptive Leadership Questionnaire

Indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements regarding specific leadership behaviors exhibited by your school district’s conservator by circling the number that corresponds with the key below.

Key: 1 = Strongly Disagree    2 = Disagree    3 = Neutral    4 = Agree    5 = Strongly Agree

Agree

Agree

- |   |           |
|---|-----------|
| 1. When difficulties emerge in our organization, this leader is good at standing back and assessing the dynamics of the people involved.  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 2. When events trigger strong emotional responses among employees, this leader uses his/her authority as a leader to resolve the problem. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 3. When people feel uncertain about organizational change, they trust that this leader will help them work through the difficulties.      | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 4. In complex situations, this leader gets people to focus on the issues they are trying to avoid.  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 5. When employees are struggling with a decision, this leader tells them what he/she thinks they should do.                               | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 6. During times of difficult change, this leader welcomes the thoughts of groups members with low status.                                 | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 7. In difficult situations, this leader sometimes loses sight of the “big picture.”   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 8. When people are struggling with a value conflict, this leader uses his/her expertise to tell them what to do.                          | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 9. When people begin to be disturbed by unresolved conflicts, this leader encourages them to address the issues.                          | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 10. During organizational change, this leader challenges people to concentrate on the “hot” topics.                                       | 1 2 3 4 5 |

- |   |           |
|---|-----------|
| 11. When employees look to this leader for answers, he/she encourages them to think for themselves.                     | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 12. Listening to group members with radical ideas is valuable to this leader.   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 13. When this leader disagrees with someone, he/she has difficulty listening to what the other person is really saying. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 14. When others are struggling with intense conflicts, this leader steps in to resolve their differences for them.      | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 15. This leader has the emotional capacity to comfort others as they work through intense issues.                       | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 16. When people try to avoid controversial organizational issues, this leader brings these conflicts into the open.     | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 17. This leader encourages his/her employees to take initiative in defining and solving problems.                       | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 18. This leader is open to people who bring up unusual ideas that seem to hinder the progress of the group.             | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 19. In challenging situations, this leader likes to observe the parties involved and assess what's really going on.     | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 20. The leader encourages people to discuss the "elephant in the room."   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 21. People recognize that this leader has confidence to tackle challenging problems.                                    | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 22. The leader thinks it is reasonable to let people avoid confronting difficult issues.                                | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 23. When people look to this leader to solve problems, he/she enjoys providing solutions.                               | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 24. This leader has an open ear for people who don't seem to fit in with the rest of the group.                         | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 25. In a difficult situation, this leader will step out of the dispute to gain perspective on it.                       | 1 2 3 4 5 |

- |   |           |
|---|-----------|
| 26. This leader thrives on helping people find new ways of coping with organizational problems.               | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 27. People see this leader as someone who holds steady in the storm.  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 28. In an effort to keep things moving forward, this leader lets people avoid issues that are troublesome.    | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 29. When people are uncertain about what to do, this leader empowers them to decide for themselves            | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 30. To restore equilibrium in the organization, this leader tries to neutralize comments of out-group members | 1 2 3 4 5 |

## APPENDIX B - Conservator Interview Questions

1. How long have you been (were you) a conservator?
2. What was your experience in education prior to becoming a conservator?
3. What information did you gather from the superintendent after being appointed to take control of the district?
4. What information did you gather from the superintendent after taking control of the district?
5. Did you meet with any other stakeholders (parents, school board members, teachers) once you had taken control of the district? If yes, what information did you gather?
6. What was your first step in developing a corrective action plan for the district?
7. What steps did you take after that?
8. Who did you involve in your data-gathering process?
9. Who did you involve in your decision-making process?
10. What issues did you notice that required immediate attention?
11. Were any of the issues that led to the district failure related to \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Failure to differentiate instruction?
  - b. Lack of progress monitoring through data analysis?
  - c. Schedules that do not allow students to seek help during the school day?
  - d. Teaching standards that aren't aligned to assessments?
  - e. Lack of professional development opportunities for teachers?
  - f. Lack of focus on academic priorities such as attendance, literacy, use of instructional time?
  - g. Ineffective leadership?
  - h. Speedy hiring procedures?
  - i. Overcrowding in classrooms?
  - j. Tutoring programs led by volunteers or teachers' assistants?
  - k. Large amounts of time dedicated to discipline?

If yes for any of the above, the conservator will be asked to explain how the issue was addressed in the action plan.

12. What measures did you use to determine the success of your conservatorship?
13. What change do you believe had the greatest impact on student achievement?
14. How will you measure the long-term success of the steps taken under your conservatorship?
15. What did you wish you had known before you took control of the district?
16. What recommendations do you have for the future of the district?

APPENDIX C – Research Permission Letter

Dear Sir/Madam:

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study in your school district. I am a doctoral student at The University of Southern Mississippi. My study is entitled *Contributing Factors Associated with Conservator Success in Failing Mississippi School Districts*.

This study focuses on the action plans that conservators implemented within their tenure in order to increase academic achievement. For this study, I need administrators within the district to complete a 30 question survey to rate certain leader behaviors of the conservator. The survey can be sent electronically and can be completed after school hours. The survey itself should only take around 10 minutes to complete.

If you give approval, I would need assistance in acquiring an email address for the administrators who still remain in the district. I would also like to mail a survey to any administrators who have retired or left the district.

Your approval would be greatly appreciated as this study can provide helpful information about our current school district improvement system. I will follow up with a telephone call next week and would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have at that time. You may contact me at my email address: Joshua.V.Jones@usm.edu.

If you agree, please complete the information at the bottom and return this signed letter in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Joshua Jones, Ed.S  
The University of Southern Mississippi

-----  
I, \_\_\_\_\_, give approval for Joshua Jones to conduct research within \_\_\_\_\_ School District for his study entitled *Contributing Factors Associated with Conservator Success in Failing Mississippi School Districts*.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX D – Administrator Request Letter

Dear Administrators,

I am conducting research as a part of my doctoral program at The University of Southern Mississippi. I am writing to invite you to participate in the survey because you have worked in a district that experienced or is experiencing a conservatorship. Your participation in this survey would help me with my study on determining factors associated with successful conservatorships.

Participation in this study requires responding to an online survey which is linked below. This study is voluntary and all of your responses will be anonymous. If you agree to participate in this study you will be providing vital information that could be used by local districts and the state in the area of school district improvement.

Thanks for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Joshua Jones, Ed.S

Survey Link:

[https://usmep.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_4GD05bEke05yOxf](https://usmep.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4GD05bEke05yOxf)

APPENDIX E – Adaptive Leadership Survey Results

Table 3.

*Adaptive Leadership Survey Category Scores*

		Get on the Balcony					
		Q1	Q7	Q13	Q19	Q25	Total
Conservatorship A	Conservator A	5	4	4	4	4	21
		5	5	1	5	5	21
		4	2	1	4	4	15
		5	5	1	4	4	19
						AVG	
Conservatorship B	Conservator B	5	5	5	5	4	24
						AVG	24
Conservatorship C	Conservator C	2	2	3	4	2	13
		2	3	4	3	3	15
		2	3	2	4	2	13
						AVG	13.7
Conservatorship D	Conservator D1	3	3	3	4	3	16
		3	4	2	3	3	15
						AVG	15.5
	Conservator D2	2	2	1	1	2	8
		3	3	3	3	3	15
		1	1	1	1	1	5
		3	3	2	3	3	14
		2	3	2	3	2	12
						7	
				AVG	10.2		
Conservatorship E	Conservator E	4	5	5	4	4	22
		5	5	5	5	5	25
		1	3	2	4	3	13
		4	4	4	4	4	20
				AVG	20		

Table 3 Continued

*Adaptive Leadership Survey Category Scores*

		Identify the Adaptive Challenge					
		Q2	Q8	Q14	Q16	Q20	Total
Conservatorship A	Conservator A	2	2	2	5	4	15
		1	1	1	5	5	13
		2	1	2	4	4	13
		1	2	1	5	4	13
						AVG	13.5
Conservatorship B	Conservator B	1	1	3	1	4	10
						AVG	10
Conservatorship C	Conservator C	3	2	4	3	2	14
		4	4	3	2	2	15
		3	2	4	2	3	14
						AVG	14.3
Conservatorship D	Conservator D1	3	3	3	3	3	15
		3	4	4	2	2	15
						AVG	15
	Conservator D2	4	4	4	2	2	16
		3	3	3	3	3	15
		5	3	3	3	1	15
		4	4	4	3	3	18
		2	2	3	3	3	13
	4	4	4	2	1	15	
				AVG	15.3		
Conservatorship E	Conservator E	2	2	2	4	4	14
		1	1	3	1	4	10
		2	3	2	2	2	11
		2	2	2	3	3	12
						AVG	11.8

Table 3 Continued

*Adaptive Leadership Survey Category Scores*

		Regulate Distress					Total	
		Q 3	Q 9	Q1 5	Q2 1	Q27		
Conservatorship A	Conservator A	4	4	4	5	4	21	
		5	5	3	5	5	23	
		5	4	4	4	4	21	
		4	5	5	5	4	23	
							AVG	22
Conservatorship B	Conservator B	5	5	5	4	4	23	
							AVG	23
Conservatorship C	Conservator C	2	2	4	4	2	14	
		2	2	2	1	1	8	
		2	2	3	4	3	14	
							AVG	12
Conservatorship D	Conservator D1	3	3	2	3	4	15	
		4	2	3	3	2	14	
							AVG	14.5
		Conservator D2	2	3	2	1	3	11
			3	3	3	3	3	15
	1		1	1	1	1	5	
	Conservatorship E	Conservator E	3	3	3	3	4	16
			2	3	4	4	4	17
			2	1	1	2	2	8
								AVG
4			4	4	4	4	20	
					AVG	19.5		

Table 3 Continued

*Adaptive Leadership Survey Category Scores*

		Maintain Disciplined Attention					Total		
		Q3	Q4	Q10	Q26	Q22	Q28	Total	
Conservatorship A	Conservator A	4	4	4	4	4	3	19	
		5	5	5	1	1	1	17	
		4	4	4	2	2	2	16	
		4	5	5	5	5	3	22	
							AVG	18.5	
Conservatorship B	Conservator B	5	3	5	5	5	5	23	
							AVG	15	
Conservatorship C	Conservator C	3	3	2	4	4	4	16	
		3	3	2	4	2	2	14	
		3	2	2	4	4	3	14	
							AVG	14.66	
Conservatorship D	Conservator D1	3	3	2	4	4	3	15	
		3	2	2	3	3	4	14	
							AVG	14.5	
		Conservator D2	2	2	2	4	4	4	14
			3	3	3	3	3	3	15
	1		1	1	3	3	3	9	
	3		2	2	3	3	3	13	
	2		2	3	3	3	2	12	
		1	2	1	2	2	3	9	
							AVG	12	
Conservatorship E	Conservator E	5	4	4	4	4	5	22	
		5	3	5	5	5	5	23	
		3	1	3	3	3	3	13	
		4	3	4	4	4	3	18	
							AVG	19	

Table 3 Continued

*Adaptive Leadership Survey Category Scores*

		Give the Work Back to the People					
		Q5	Q11	Q17	Q23	Q29	Total
Conservatorship A	Conservator A	1	4	4	2	2	13
		1	5	5	1	3	15
		2	4	5	2	5	18
		2	4	4	1	2	13
						AVG	14.75
Conservatorship B	Conservator B	1	3	5	1	4	14
						AVG	14
Conservatorship C	Conservator C	2	4	4	2	4	16
		3	2	2	4	2	13
		3	3	3	3	4	16
					AVG	15	
Conservatorship D	Conservator D1	2	3	3	3	2	13
		3	2	1	3	2	11
						AVG	12
	Conservator D2	4	1	1	5	2	13
		4	3	3	3	3	16
		5	1	1	5	1	13
		4	4	2	4	2	16
3		2	3	4	4	16	
4	2	2	4	3	15		
					AVG	14.83	
Conservatorship E	Conservator E	1	4	4	2	4	15
		1	3	5	1	4	14
		3	2	3	3	3	14
		2	4	4	2	3	15
							AVG

Table 3 Continued

*Adaptive Leadership Survey Category Scores*

		Protect Leadership Voices From Below					
		Q6	Q12	Q18	Q24	Q30	Total
Conservatorship A	Conservator A	4	3	2	4	3	16
		5	5	5	5	1	21
		4	4	4	5	1	18
		4	3	1	4	4	16
						AVG	17.75
Conservatorship B	Conservator B	5	5	1	5	3	19
						AVG	19
Conservatorship C	Conservator C	2	2	2	2	2	10
		2	2	2	2	3	11
		3	2	2	1	2	10
						AVG	10.33
Conservatorship D	Conservator D1	3	2	1	2	3	11
		2	3	2	3	3	13
						AVG	12
	Conservator D2	2	2	3	2	4	13
		3	4	2	3	3	15
		1	1	3	3	5	13
		3	2	2	2	3	12
		2	2	2	2	2	10
				AVG	12		
Conservatorship E	Conservator E	4	3	4	4	2	17
		5	5	1	5	3	19
		1	2	3	3	3	12
		4	3	2	4	3	16
						AVG	16

## APPENDIX F – IRB Approval



### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001

Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | [www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board](http://www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board)

### NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.  
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 17071902

PROJECT TITLE: Contributing Factors Associated with Conservator Success in Failing Mississippi School Districts

PROJECT TYPE: Doctoral Dissertation

RESEARCHER(S): Joshua Jones

COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology

DEPARTMENT: Educational Research and Administration

FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 07/24/2017 to 07/23/2018

**Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.**

**Institutional Review Board**

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