In 2010, Public Act 205 was passed and signed into law revising the Michigan School Code section 1250. This revision required compensation for teachers based on job performance and job accomplishments. Compensation based on performance or merit is a significant departure from the current practice where teachers are paid based on salary and combined with a scale that includes both years of service and educational qualifications.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the “lived experience” of nine superintendents responsible for implementing of this legislative mandate in their respective districts. The subjects for this study were divided into categories based on their responsiveness, or lack of responsiveness to this legislative mandate. Uncovering the “how” and “why”
these superintendents responded to the school code revision was the main purpose of this study.

Overall, all the superintendents in this study supported the concept of merit pay as an improvement over the current salary and step schedule. They supported merit pay ideologically, as it would increase teacher accountability. However, substantial policy evasion occurred with most superintendents who did implement a merit pay system. The reasons superintendents did not implement the state policy included concerns regarding the level of conflict it would cause with the teacher bargaining group, the lack of external sanctions, and limited stakeholder support. Superintendents that implemented new merit pay systems did so when certain contextual conditions were in place. These included a “policy champion” at the ISD level who guided the superintendents towards compliance, collaboration with the teachers when creating the merit pay models, and the development of local and unique merit pay programs. Moreover, this study concluded with several recommendations for policy makers and school superintendents who wish to implement merit pay programs in the future.