

School Climate and Leadership: Levers for School Improvement Efforts

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Dedication

My journey as a doctoral student began in 2012 after my school had been named a School of Excellence by the New Hampshire EDies. It was at that time that I became interested in deepening my knowledge of leadership as it related to theory and practice. That summer I joined the first cohort of doctoral students enrolled in Educational Leadership at Southern New Hampshire University, under the leadership of Dr. Mark McQuillan, then Dean, and Dr. Margaret Ford, Associate Dean of the School of Education.

It was through the leadership and guidance of these extraordinary leaders and professors, along with former New Hampshire Commissioner, Dr. Lyonel Tracy, that I have continued to grow as a leader and learner. For this, I am appreciative and grateful. Throughout my coursework and dissertation, my passion for learning has been reignited in my continued quest to understand the complexities of leadership in today's school.

What I have come to learn is that people and relationships matter the most. Therefore, I dedicate this dissertation to my family; Edward and Shirley Wheeler, Robert, Rebecca, and Jessica Costa. Without their continued love and support during this time, my success would not be possible. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the 2012 School of Excellence, along with School Administrative Unit 90. Together, we have built a school climate that cares about students, staff, and the community. It is a pleasure to know and learn from you each and every day. Although the challenges may seem insurmountable at times, collectively we make the difference.

Abstract

This qualitative study considers which aspects of school climate support or inhibit student achievement as each aspect relates to school leadership and school reform efforts. Due to the increased responsibility and accountability which schools face during these challenging times, school climate and the role of the school principal formed the basis of this study. It is important to determine what successful schools are doing in order to address student achievement gaps. This will help to inform practices and serve as models for others as school leaders consider school climate as it relates to student achievement.

Interviews, surveys, and a collection of documents from three designated Schools of Excellence were used to triangulate data and bring understanding to these complex research areas. Fullan's (2014) Three Keys of Leadership and the National School Climate Framework (2009) were the two theoretical frameworks that served as the lenses for looking at school climate and leadership. It is with great hope that these Schools of Excellence will provide our schools and leaders with insight about which levers will lead to increased student achievement.

Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

Introduction

This qualitative study considers which aspects of school climate support or inhibit student achievement as each aspect relates to school leadership and school reform efforts. Due to the increased responsibility and accountability schools face during these challenging times, school climate and the role of the school principal formed the basis of this study. It is important to determine what successful schools are doing in order to address student achievement gaps. This will help to inform practice and serve as models of what effective schools do to promote student success.

Statement of the problem

Research verifies that school climate makes a difference in creating the right environment for student learning. Rosenholtz (1989) states that the degree of openness, trust, communication, and support that is shared by teachers not only contributes to learning, but also to job satisfaction and improved performance. Keefe, Kelley, and Miller (1985) contend that if the teacher is responsible for the classroom climate, then it is the principal who is responsible for the school climate. They further state that teachers feel that principals are the key persons responsible for establishing school climate. Sergiovanni and Starratt (1998) state that this change does not just happen on its own. It is the combined efforts of the administration and staff that establish those factors that will create and sustain a positive climate. Administration must exercise leadership for climate improvements in order to impact student achievement.

Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) note that there is a “glaring gap between school climate research findings on the one hand, and policy, school improvement practice, and teacher education efforts on the other” (p. 203). Unless action is taken to address this, the gap

will continue to grow, contributing to students' inability to learn and develop in healthy ways. Cohen et al (2009) contend that school improvement practices must be aligned with research in order to address this critical area. School climate matters and research findings should be reflected in educational practices.

According to Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, and Higgins-D'Alessandro (2013), "Building on the current research, there is a need to examine school climate from multiple research perspectives, including experimental, quasi-experimental, and correlational as well as case studies and qualitative analysis, and as much as possible to integrate process and outcome concepts into time-sensitive analyses" (p. 372). This field is in its developmental stage and calls for research that can focus on relating specific aspects and activities or interventions to changes in specific socio-moral, emotional, civic, and cognitive development, and the teaching and learning of both students and teachers. Understanding these interactions in the context of the school may enable adoption of interventions that have proven successful. School climate research can also contribute to the development of policies that will ultimately support all schools.

Thapa et al (2013) express their concern, when they state: "There are a number of limitations that color current school climate research findings related to problems with definitions, models, and experimental methodologies" (p. 371). There have been a wide range of definitions and models used to describe school climate, which has complicated how it is measured. Lack of consensus surrounding a definition of school climate has prevented the advancement of research needed to inform school improvement efforts.

However, even with the ambiguity surrounding an absolute definition, it is generally agreed that school climate is the backdrop for understanding difficult problems and complex

relationships within schools (Stolp, 1994). Evidence suggests that healthy and sound school climates correlate with increased student achievement and teachers' attitudes toward their work. According to Stolp (1994), in school environments where there is strong organizational ideology, shared participation, charismatic leadership and intimacy; teachers experienced higher job satisfaction and increased productivity. Stolp (1994) further asserts that this leads to teacher motivation and job satisfaction, which increases student growth. Stolp (1994) also contends that teachers who feel valued as a part of the change process through involvement with the decision-making will ultimately improve the climate of the school. This impacts student achievement.

Leadership is an indispensable element in the process of initiating and sustaining the development of quality culture in schools (Berry, 1997). If school leaders have a good understanding of their school climate, they will be better able to shape the values, beliefs, and attitudes that are essential to promoting a positive learning environment. Berry (1997) describes effective leadership as a process by which behaviors, values, beliefs, and attitudes of members of a group, organization, or community are influenced in a way that promote collaborative action towards the attainment of shared outcomes or goals.

According to Fullan (1992), "Principals are often blinded by their own vision when they must manipulate the teachers and school culture to conform to it" (p.19). A shared vision that allows for collaboration, team building, and distributive decision making will strengthen the school and lead to achievement of shared outcomes. Fullan (1992) further stated that leaders must create a culture of mutual respect where the vision of the school is clearly understood by all and equally shared and valued. Leadership will be used as a lens for looking at school climate because the principal directly impacts school improvement efforts.

Theoretical Framework for the Qualitative Study

Aspects of School Climate

School climate improvement efforts are grounded in ecological systems' theories of child and youth development. This theory recognizes that characteristics of the individual, family, school, and environment impact individual learning and behavior (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972). Additionally, Bryk and Schnieder (2002) found there was a relationship between school climate and school improvement efforts. Their study, based in Chicago, revealed that schools that promoted high relational trust between members of the community were more likely to make changes that improved student achievement.

Researchers have developed frameworks for looking at school climate. The work of Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu and Easton (2010), along with the Center for Social and Emotional Education (2010) will be considered as part of this qualitative study. These models align with the National School Climate Council structure as illustrated below:

Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu and Easton (2010)	Center for Social and Emotional Education (2010)	National School Climate Council (2009)
Professional capacity	School improvement efforts	Shared vision, capacity building
Order, safety, and norms	Safety	Community and environment
Parent-school-community ties	Relationships	Social and civic responsibilities
Instructional guidance	Learning and teaching	Practices of teaching and learning

Table 1: Frameworks for School Climate

Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2010) detail how four systems interact to support or challenge school improvement efforts. The systems include professional

capacity, order, safety and norms, parent-school-community ties, and instructional guidance. Bryk et al (2010) contend that relational trust is the essential element that coordinates and supports these processes associated with school improvement efforts.

The Center for Social and Emotional Education (2010) has placed an emphasis on the importance of school climate as it relates to the promotion of safety, healthy relationships, engaged learning and teaching, and school improvement efforts. They outline four essential components of school climate which include safety, relationships, learning, and institutional environments.

The National School Climate Council (2009) has identified five standards that support improvement efforts and closely align with the aforementioned research models:

1. The school has developed a shared vision that supports a positive school climate.
2. The school has specific policies that support academic, behavioral, and social emotional skills with systems in place that address teaching and learning for all students, specifically those students with challenges or who are at risk.
3. The school has identified practices that support academic, behavioral, and social emotional skills with systems in place that address teaching and learning for all students, specifically those students with challenges or who are at risk.
4. The school has created a welcoming environment where all students and staff feel socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically safe.
5. The school has developed practices, activities, and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice (p. 3).

These standards have become guideposts for schools as they contemplate the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices, and organizational

structures that are essential to creating effective 21st century schools. These five standards provide the theoretical framework for this study of school climate.

Aspects of Leadership

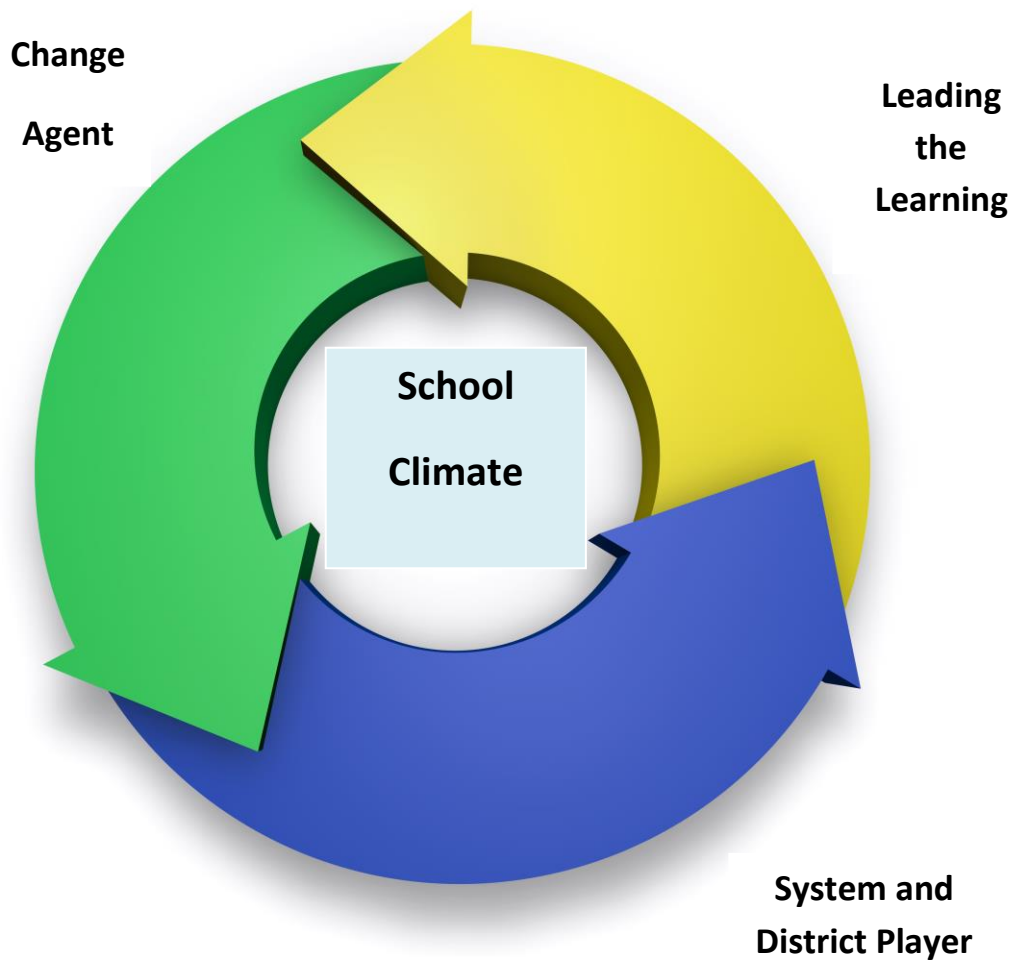


Figure 1: Fullan's Three Keys of Leadership

In addition to NSCC's five standards, Fullan (2014) has identified three keys to maximizing the principal's impact which include leading the learning, being a district and system

player, and becoming a change agent. “The principal’s role is to lead the school’s teachers in a process of learning to improve their teaching while learning alongside them about what works and what doesn’t” (p. 57). Collaboration around instructional practice is central to this belief. Furthermore, it is the process of building human and social capital that becomes instrumental in producing results. Through an effective evaluation system and meaningful professional development, teachers receive feedback and opportunities for growth that contribute to the entire organization. Fullan (2014) further clarifies that there is recognition that the principal cannot lead the learning alone, and the responsibility for this enormous task rests on the entire organization.

Fullan (2014) stresses the importance of the principal’s role in working within systems and districts. In order to improve the school, the principal must look inside and outside the walls of the organization. Fullan (2014) calls our attention to the research conducted by Ken Leithwood (2011) on the characteristics of high performing districts. Leithwood contends that leaders must cultivate relationships with others schools and leaders so that they can have a better understanding of their own school environment. Leithwood (2011) further states, “In order to maximize impact, the principal must seek ideas from other similar schools that have had more success, and must see herself or himself as a system player” (p. 116). Leithwood suggests that as principals work with fellow colleagues in different schools and districts, they become more informed about their own practice.

Effective principals must be able to facilitate change even in the face of challenging circumstances. Fullan (2014) describes this as “acting sooner than later but always alert to feedback” (p. 123). Fullan (2014) cites the work of Lyle Kirtman (2013) and the skills for leading change. These skills include “challenging the status quo; building trust through clear

communication and expectations; creating a commonly owned plan for success; focusing on team over self; having a sense of urgency for sustainable results; committing to continuous improvement for self; and building external networks and partnerships” (p. 128). Kirtman further states that these competencies are the building blocks for professional capital, and that it is the interdependence of learning and managing that is most critical for principals to master.

Leading the learning, being a district and system player, and becoming a change agent are essential to leadership in today’s schools. As principals are challenged by the demands that they are confronted with each day, these keys may open the doors to new avenues of hope. Fullan’s (2014) Three Keys of Leadership serve as the leadership framework for this qualitative study of school principals in this research.

Definition of Terms

School Climate: For the purpose of this study, school climate refers to the patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. This also includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families and educators work together to develop and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits of, and satisfaction from, learning. Each person contributes to the operation of the school as well as the care of the physical environment (National School Climate Council, 2007).

School Culture: For the purpose of this investigation, school culture refers to the specific focus on relationships, norms, and values of a given school rather than the broader aspects of school climate (Anderson, 1982). Climate and culture, nonetheless, are inseparable and will be treated as a single conceptual unit, as the terms are used interchangeably in the literature review.

Physical Appearance: Examines the relationship between the physical characteristics and environment of a school and the climate that it promotes. This aspect includes the degree to which deliberate efforts have been made related to the consideration of the perception of outsiders and expectations and treatment of custodial staff (School Climate Assessment Inventory, 2011).

Faculty Relations: Examines the relationship between how members of the faculty relate to one another and its effects on the climate of the school. This aspect includes the degree to which collaboration, respect, capacity to interact, and a sense of collective purpose exists among the members of the faculty. It also includes the explicit expectations among faculty members as to how decisions are made and duties are delegated and performed (School Climate Assessment Inventory, 2011).

Student Interactions: Examines the relationships among student expectations, peer interactions, and their place in the school and the climate that exists. This aspect includes the degree to which students' interactions are governed by intentions versus accidental behaviors (School Climate Assessment Inventory, 2011).

Leadership and Decision-Making: Examines the relationships among the systems to make decisions, how administrative authority is established, and how the climate is created as a result. This aspect includes the degree to which the collective professional staff possesses a shared sense of values and an operational vision. It also explores the ways in which the quality of leadership affects school life (School Climate Assessment Inventory, 2011).

Discipline and Management Environment: Examines the relationship between the management and discipline approaches used within the school, and the climate that is created as a result. This aspect includes the degree to which management strategies promote higher levels

of responsibility and motivation. It also examines teacher-student interactions as a source of management and motivation (School Climate Assessment Inventory, 2011).

Learning, Instruction, and Assessment: Examines the relationship among the instructional strategies and the assessment methods used in the school, and the climate that is created.

Instruction is explored as it relates to its level of engagement, student empowerment, and authenticity. Higher quality instruction and assessment methods are contrasted to less effective methods by the degree to which they promote an attitude of success rather than an attitude of failure (School Climate Assessment Inventory, 2011).

Attitude and Culture: Examines the pervasive attitudes and cultures that operate within the school and their relationship to the climate. This aspect explores the degree to which social and/or communal bonds are presented within the school, attitudes that the members of the school possess, and the level of pride and ownership they feel. It includes the degree to which efforts in this area are made intentionally or left to chance (School Climate Assessment Inventory, 2011).

Community Relations: Examines the relationship between the way that the school is perceived externally and its climate. This aspect includes the degree to which the school is welcoming, takes advantage of the resources in the local community, including parents, and acts intentionally as a center of community life (School Climate Assessment Inventory, 2011).

Leading the Learning: The principal's role is to lead the school's professional staff in the process of learning in order to improve their teaching, while also learning alongside them about what works and what doesn't (Fullan, 2014).

Being a District and System Player: The principal's role is to be a mutual learner, both within and across districts considering the system's perspective (Fullan, 2014).

Becoming a Change Agent: The principal's role is to move people forward under very difficult circumstances. The leader must work through, and help others work through, ambiguities by overcoming resistance by reassuring the potential losers that there is something to gain; other times by helping the willing gain the grounded confidence essential to success (Fullan, 2014).

Research Questions

The dissertation explores three questions:

1. Which aspects of school climate does professional staff perceive as promoting or inhibiting student achievement?
2. Which aspects of school climate do principals perceive as having the greatest impact on student achievement?
3. Which aspects of school climate emerge as most significant to members of the school community?

In order to reach a better understanding of the relationship between school climate and student achievement, a qualitative study was conducted utilizing the framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). Their recommendations for research design, analysis, and display of data assisted in drawing and verifying conclusions. Additionally, greater understanding of the principal's role as it relates to school climate was examined where descriptive data was analyzed to determine central themes and trends through the emergence of ideas using Seidman's (2006) interview protocol.

Research began with administering surveys to professional staff in order to determine which aspects of school climate promoted or inhibited school success. Based on the results of the survey, an interview protocol was developed for use with the principals (Appendix C). Principals were interviewed three times in order to understand their role as the school leader and

how he/she influences school climate. Specific questions were asked in order to obtain information that pertains to the frameworks guiding the research. The participants' views were used to establish which factors of school climate promote or inhibit student achievement.

Documents were then analyzed to determine what additional information could be obtained that would support the research questions and enhance the findings. Specifically, mission and vision statements, policies, safety plans, supervision and evaluation plans, social emotional learning programs, and professional development plans were reviewed. Additionally, New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) data was also examined to determine student achievement. This included language arts, mathematics, writing, and science data from 2012-2014.

Data collected from surveys, interviews, and documents was analyzed to determine what aspects of school climate emerged as most significant to the school community. Fullan's (2014) keys to maximizing the impact of the principal and the National School Climate Framework (2009) served as the theoretical frameworks as data was triangulated from all three schools. As schools struggle with pressing federal mandates around Common Core Standards, teacher effectiveness plans, and assessment programs, this study offers the hope and guidance that is needed in today's schools.

Significance

On January 8, 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act, signed by President George W. Bush, called for greater accountability of student performance by requiring states to issue annual report cards on school performance and statewide results as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Included in the Act was the promotion of data

management systems, and a push for improved teacher quality in an effort to increase student performance.

Up until 2014, the state of New Hampshire had been using the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) as part of the No Child Left Behind Act. Since then, there has been a shift to federally mandated curriculum frameworks known as Common Core State Standards or the College and Career Ready Standards (<http://www.corestandards.org/2014>). The two most common assessment programs of these standards are Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). As of this writing, 43 states have adopted these standards. Seventeen states currently use SBAC, nine states and Washington D.C. use the PARCC, while 17 have made plans to use tests designed by other vendors. As of spring of 2015, all districts in New Hampshire administered the SBAC. Given the transition from NECAP to SBAC, districts have been realigning curriculum given the shifts to College and Career Ready Standards.

The move to Common Core represents a monumental change for all public schools, bringing inevitable difficulties for principals and teachers alike. According to Fullan (2003), schools should promote collaborative cultures based on powerful close relationships. He further states “if you want to challenge people to change, you need to develop a relationship with them first” (Fullan, 2011, p. 64). Many districts around the nation are not only transitioning to new curriculums, but they are also implementing new evaluation systems. Teacher and principal evaluations are being linked to student performance. Assessment data is being used to determine the success or failure of the schools and districts. Districts are under pressure to show growth and achievement, while transitioning to a new curriculum and assessment program. School climate is one of the levers that can transform schools into positive learning environments that

support all members of the organization towards improvement and success. Therefore, leaders must have clarity in their purpose with a laser focus on students, teaching, and learning.

Fullan and Watson (2000) state that students' success or failure is determined by the way that a school is run. Their research suggests that successful schools have developed school climates characterized by shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and transparent communication. School principals increasingly are held accountable for educational quality. Therefore, educational leaders must take an active role and understand how to influence the climate of their school so that it will ultimately impact student achievement.

Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) searched for climate-related policies in state legislative documents, state standards, and documents related to states' accreditation. This included No Child Left Behind assessments and support systems. They found that most states left school climate out of their accountability systems. Most improvement efforts were strictly focused around curriculum reform while completely discounting school climate policies. If state and district leaders are considering methods of measuring and improving school climate, then policy, practice, and guidelines must be central to policy makers and school reform efforts.

General Procedures

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to better understand which perceived factors of a school's climate promote or inhibit student achievement. The researcher conducted surveys with teachers and professional staff, interviews with principals, and reviewed school documents to have a better understanding of these factors. The sample consisted of three elementary schools that have been identified as being Schools of Excellence in the state of New Hampshire within the past five years. The process used allowed for comparing and contrasting the data collected in the quest for patterns or regularities, seeking out more data to support or

qualify emerging clusters, and then gradually drawing inferences from the links between other new data segments and the theoretical frameworks (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014). This allowed for seeking of common threads, themes, and patterns to emerge as the researcher sought to answer the research questions. Through the use of surveys, interviews, and review of documents, analytic practices were applied and carefully conducted as a means for triangulating data.

Delimitations and Limitations

The following limitations apply to this qualitative study:

1. This study was limited to three elementary schools in different districts that have been named Schools of Excellence.
2. This study was conducted in the 2014-2015 school year and the findings pertain to that time frame only.
3. A survey was used to collect data from professional staff and is limited based on their perceptions on factors that promoted or inhibited school success.
4. Interviews were used to collect data from principals and are limited based on their perception of aspects of school climate that have the greatest impact on student achievement.
5. Documents were collected and limited to the schools' mission/vision statements, safety plans, professional development plans, policies, and teacher effectiveness plans that were in effect during the time of this qualitative study.
6. The assessment data was limited to New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) for students in grades three through six in New Hampshire from 2012-2014 in the areas of language arts, mathematics, writing, and science.

7. This study was limited to its transferability to the context and framework provided and may not be generalizable to the larger population. Despite these limitations, the findings will help to inform practices of schools and principals that are challenged by the many competing demands including accountability and school reform efforts.

Summary

Teaching and learning are critical components of school climate. There is a need for school leaders and teachers to strive to create norms, goals, and values that shape the school environment, which is central to school climate. Research supports that a positive school climate promotes students' ability to learn (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, and Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Some aspects of school climate, such as cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect, and mutual trust directly improved the learning environment (Finnan, Schnepel, and Anderson, 2003). Therefore, it is the assumption of this study, based on the theoretical framework, that it is incumbent upon schools to carefully examine these aspects of school climate that impact student achievement.

Knowledge of organizational cultures and climates support understanding the collective attitudes, behaviors, and performances of those involved with teaching and learning (Ostroff, Kinicky, and Tamkins, 2003). Studies have shown that there is a relationship between school climate and student achievement. There is a need to identify the range of factors that include classroom and school processes and climate indicators when considering learner outcomes. It is the intent of the study to look more closely at these relationships to determine which variables, if any, ultimately have the greatest impact on schools.

Although there is extensive research on school climate, "few studies investigated the effects of school climate within multilevel/hierarchical frameworks which is essential to

understanding school improvement processes and efforts” (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, and Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013, p. 371). These frameworks include students, staff, administrators, and parents. This qualitative study will shed light on which aspects of school climate have the greatest impact on student achievement, and what principals can do to maximize their impact on student learning while considering the needs of staff and other administrators.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The research verifies that school climate makes a difference in creating the optimal environment for student achievement. The research on school climate has led to a study of school culture. School culture refers to the norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that build up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges (Peterson and Deal, 1998). This set of informal expectations and values shapes how people think, feel, and act in schools. It is the role of the principals, teachers, and parents to help identify, shape, and maintain strong, positive, student-focused climates. Therefore, school climate and school culture are difficult to separate, and will be treated as a single conceptual unit in this literature review.

This literature review provides an overview of the history of school climate including the theoretical bases that have shaped research efforts. This includes teaching and learning, leadership, school reform efforts, preventative measures, and teacher and student perceptions. The study includes a summary for next steps which are supported in this review of research on school climate.

History of School Climate

The term *school climate* dates back as far as Perry's initial study (1908) on the attributes of the atmosphere of the school as it relates to systems and units of analysis (Cohen, 2012). The ecological or system's perspective informed his work. Perry believed that schools operate within larger systems including the school community, neighborhood, state, and nation. Perry's research was influenced by Felix Adler's (1892), who was a contemporary of John Dewey (1916) and the first scholar to develop a course on ethical and civil learning. Perry and Adler believed that the school should support the development of moral character and that schools were the building blocks for a democratic society.

Early Influences

School climate was influenced by the work of Dewey (1916) and Durkheim's (1961) theory on organizational culture as it related to the social sciences. However, more recent climate research stems from organizational climate and research on how schools affect student learning. "Although it has evolved and inherited instruments, theory, and methods from both of these research paradigms, it can be distinguished as a separate area of inquiry" (Anderson, 1982, p. 368). Research continued through the 1960's and early 1970's that examined socioeconomic and race differences as it related to achievement (Zullig, Koopman, Patton, and Ubbes, 2010). It was Renato Tagiuri (1968) who first defined organizational climate in the following way:

relatively enduring quality of the internal environment of an organization that
(a) is experienced by its members, (b) influences their behaviour, and (c)
can be described in terms of the values of a particular set of characteristics
(or attributes) of the organization (p. 27).

He further defines "climate and atmosphere as summary concepts dealing with the total environmental quality within an organization" (Anderson, 1982, p. 369). This includes the ecology which was related to the physical and social dimensions, its milieu which was related to the social systems concerned with the pattern of relationships, and its culture which was related to the social dimensions associated with the belief systems, values, cognitive structures, and meanings.

Organizational Climate

Roger Barker (1963) introduced the "behavior setting theory" of organizational climate, which was rooted in space and time and described the people and the setting they occupied. It was later modified by Barker (1968) to include more properties, characteristics, and elements,

which were considered to be interrelated. Most of this work focused on settings outside of the school. However, school size as it related to student behavior and attitude was also studied along with classroom climate as it related to teacher behaviors that were integral to the early research conducted.

Litwin and Stringer (1968) relate organizational climate first to behavior theory and then to organizational theory. They contend that Lewin's (1951) model of field theory was closer to organization climate in which behavior was the result of interactions between the person and his environment, as he psychologically perceives it. At that time, there was no fully agreed upon theory for this concept. Although organizational climate was in its infancy, it was clear that the climate or atmosphere of an organization was worthy of research and consideration since it was an important part of a working environment.

Social Ecology and Educational Climates

Wiatrowski, Gottfredson, and Roberts (1983) contend that social environments are difficult to research because of the difficulty in measuring them, and the lack of an agreed upon instrument. Insel and Moos (1974) suggest an instrument that looks at six components of the human environment as a means for conceptualization and organization of the research on environments. They term it *social ecology* which involves human interactions with the physical and social dimensions of the environment (Anderson, 1982). It includes ecological dimensions, dimensions of organizational structure, personal characteristics of an environment's inhabitants, behavior settings, functional or reinforcement properties of environments, and psychosocial characteristics and organizational climate (Wiatrowski et al, 1983). These systems initially focused on how research on educational climates was structured. However, Tagiuri's system

was preferable by researchers because it was considered broader and included the total environmental quality within a given school building.

Research Instruments

The school climate research and measurement tools initially focused on three areas: the business context, the college context, and the classroom context.

“Early instrument development in school climate,” Anderson notes, “is closely linked to the instruments and theory in organizational climate research” (Anderson, 1982, p. 373). In this context, organizational climate originated as an answer to the growing need for insight into organizational research (Argyris, 1958). Through the work of March and Simon (1958) and Argyris (1958), the influences of an organizational environment on employee morale, productivity, and turnover were studied. Argyris’ case study of how one bank organized its work environment involved the following:

ordering interrelated systems’ variables including the formal policies, procedures, and positions of the organization; personality factors including individual needs, values, and abilities; and the complicated pattern of variables associated with the individual's efforts to accommodate his own ends with those of the organization (Argyris, 1958, p. 501).

The research concludes that this complex area of inquiry requires in-depth analysis of the many variables given their multi-layered level of relationships in the organization.

There were many concerns surrounding the theory and measurement instruments involved in studying the business context, including questions around theory and measurement. This led to further questions, including the validity of perceived versus objective climate measures, with climate seen as a reflection of organizational features as opposed to individual attributes, and the distinction between the employees’ perception and their attitudes toward work

(Hellriegel and Slocum, 1974). The Organizational Climate Index (Stern, 1970) developed for use in business organizations was one of first in a series of environmental measures.

Theoretical Bases

Three theoretical bases have been used to frame school climate research. They include input-output theory, sociological theory, and ecological theory.

Input-output theory contends that there are a number of inputs in a school which, when converted, become the outputs (Averch, Carroll, Donaldson, Kiesling and Pincus, 1974). Each input is assumed in linear fashion to contribute somewhat to an output; inadequate output calls for more of some input variables like money, time, materials, teaching techniques, or a shift in the allocation of resources (Anderson, 1982). The inputs create a climate which impacts the outputs that are produced. This theory is considered faulty since it does not deal directly with the intricacies of school influences on outcomes or with interactions of school and students. The input-output theory was the basis of the work done in the 1970's and the Central Advisory Council for Education in England (1967).

The sociological theory views school climate as a cultural system of social relationships between families, teachers, students, and peers (Brookover and Erickson, 1969). The research looks at these relationships and how they meet educational goals. "Student behavior is viewed as a social process of the school: its norms, expectations, evaluations, and relationships" (Anderson, 1982, p. 382). Different social environments will yield different student outcomes.

This theory differs from the input-output theory since there is an emphasis on social systems and culture. In the early studies, climate was measured by examining a work environment's milieu or the average characteristics of the participants by using quantifiable

characteristics like ability, socio-economic status (SES), or race. However, this shift led researchers to measure climate by social systems and cultural variables.

The ecological theory is similar to the sociological theory, in that it shares the concern for social processes and culture of the environment. However, it also embraces the elements of the input-output model (Anderson, 1982). This includes (a) the creation, maintenance, and distribution of resources, and (b) the temporal and physical aspects of the environment. This theory attempts to integrate all three theories and has been used in classroom research and non-school environments in the 1960's and 1970's including the work of Barker (1963), Eggleston (1977), Goodlad (1975), and Moos (1974). It is often overshadowed by the sociological theory.

Research on School Climate

Teaching and Learning: School Climate as it Relates to Student Achievement

Organizational culture and climate have been described as overlapping concepts. However, climate is viewed from a psychological perspective while culture is viewed from an anthropological perspective (MacNeil, Pratter, and Busch, 2009). Differences between the two concepts are often highlighted in organizational studies. Climate refers to behaviors while culture is comprised of values and norms. "Strong school cultures have motivated teachers who have greater success in terms of student performance and student outcomes" (p. 77). This evidence suggests that school culture is integral to student performance, and is an underlying component of school climate.

The relationship of specific aspects of school culture to student learning was reviewed in a study that specifically looked at 'Exemplary' schools, 'Recognized' schools and 'Acceptable' schools as measured by the State of Texas' Accountability Rating System (MacNeil et al, 2009).

These categories of schools were compared on the 10 dimensions of school climate as measured by the Organizational Health Inventory (OHI).

The sample consisted of 29 schools located in a large suburban school district in southeast Texas. The Texas Education Agency assigned one of the three ratings to the schools based on student performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Test results from 24,684 students were used for the basis of the ratings. Teachers in each of the schools rated the organizational health of their perspective schools using the OHI. There were 1,727 teachers who completed the survey. The individual schools were used as the unit of analysis for the study.

The OHI developed by Matthew Miles (1971) consists of 10 internal dimensions and include goal focus, communication adequacy, resource utilization, cohesiveness, morale, innovativeness, autonomy, adaptation, and problem-solving adequacy. These aspects of climate address the interaction among the members of the organization, as well as the organization's ability to deal with stress from the environment. They also provide diagnostic data that can help leaders recognize the effectiveness of the organization. The dimensions provide data that inform the leadership styles of the principal in addressing the aspects of climate that need improving. The results reveal that each of the schools that demonstrated higher student achievement also demonstrated healthier climates than the schools with lower acceptable ratings.

The exemplary schools consistently demonstrated higher scores on each of the 10 dimensions or organizational health than acceptable schools. The schools with higher student achievement consistently exhibited healthier school climates. However, Tukey's HSD (Honest Significant Difference) reported no statistical significance between exemplary and recognized schools or recognized and acceptable schools. There were just two exceptions in the patterns

based on the analysis of the data. The dimensions of goal focus and adaptation showed the greatest variance when looking at differences between the climates of recognized and acceptable schools.

More study was recommended to determine what principal leadership behaviors were related to goal focus and adaptations within schools. This is significant because these recommendations were closely related to student achievement. Future comparisons between school climate and student achievement, Miles argued, can help school principals focus their efforts to improve student learning. Miles' study was considered limited or incomplete because of its small sample size and because there were no low-performing schools in the sample.

Appreciative Inquiry as it Relates to School Climate

Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2011) researched appreciative inquiry (AI) as an approach to motivating change while focusing on organizational strengths. The purpose of this particular case study was to determine if focusing on strengths through AI would be related to measurable changes in school climate and trust within a small urban school district located in the Midwest Rust Belt. The three areas of inquiry included student achievement and success, trust and respect, and community pride and involvement.

AI process examines five dimensions: defining, discovering, dreaming, designing, and destiny. All of the dimensions are part of the change process that works in group settings. This process has been used for a variety of purposes in schools including district-level initiatives, building-level improvements, and classroom-level projects aimed at increasing student engagement. The cycle of AI generates a spiral dynamic of transformational change around a positive core.

Educators in Crossroads, a small city located on the Midwest Rust Belt, were suffering from an onslaught of negative publicity over school performance ratings resulting in a decline in faculty morale and trust. There had been a 25 year decline in the city's manufacturing industry. This economic difficulty, combined with the expectations of No Child Left Behind, led the district to decide to bring AI into their system. The hope was to focus on building strengths and relationships, while shifting momentum in a positive direction. The research question that guided this study was whether or not focusing on strengths would be related to measureable changes in school climate and trust (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2011).

The research was also designed as a multi-year case study with repeated measures. Survey data was collected over a year before the districtwide AI summit process was conducted, and then again nearly one year later. The school climate measures and the trust measures were evaluated on separate surveys with half of the staff at each school responding to each survey. The results were aggregated for buildings, and for the district as a whole, with the district being the primary focus of analysis.

The participants were from the faculty of the school district under study. The surveys were anonymous, and no demographic information was collected because those variables were not of interest to the researchers. The participants included 147 teachers in 2005 and 124 teachers in 2007; both groups completed the same surveys.

Teachers were asked about their perceptions of the school. The building results were standardized against a norming sample at each level of schooling. For reporting purposes, the districtwide changes over the two-year period were aggregated to the district level. The results were broken down by the three areas identified at the AI summit. Student achievement and success initiatives involved training in instructional supervision as an inquiry, guided by

teachers' curiosity about their own practice. A second initiative involved leadership coaching for all the administrators. Several school climate variables showed measurable improvement over the two years of the study. Trust and respect showed improvement as well as measures of communication developed to facilitate respectful understanding of people's feelings, needs, and desires. Training led to follow up workshops, including training for the Freshman Learning Community, student initiatives, and practice group seminars. Finally, community pride and involvement increased in the two-year study, which brought about new initiatives aimed at engaging parents and the community in the life of the school. This included the founding of a Grandparents Association, districtwide Parent-Teacher Organization, a district website, new staff positions including a school-community liaison, and hosting a town meeting facilitated by the Board of Education with future plans for the arts programs in schools.

This renewed energy brought further innovation to the district, and in the 2008-2009 school year, the entire district made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the first time. AI was deemed successful because it was structured around self-identified areas of interest, which resulted in measureable improvements. The author did, however, caution readers not to overgeneralize, to recall that AI was one of the many initiatives underway during the time of the study, making it difficult to tease out the effects of the other variables since many of them overlap. Therefore, all or even most of the improvements could not be attributed to the AI initiative alone.

School Culture's Impact on Teaching Science

Meier's (2011) ethnographic case study investigates the science practices of teachers at a large public elementary magnet school located in the United States. Consideration for how school culture influences science curriculum design and instruction is explored. The purpose of

the study is to address how school culture impacts the school's overall treatment of science as a viable content area. Meier's school served a diverse population of 550 students in grades k-6. The school employed approximately 54 teachers, as well as aides and administrators.

The school operated under a "magnet" philosophy, with 40 percent of the students qualifying for free- and reduced-lunch, receiving federal Title 1 funds. Federal dollars were used to support science instruction and other curricular programs aimed at attracting in- and out-of-district students. The school had adopted the magnet structure as a result of a federally funded, comprehensive grant awarded in the mid-90s. The integrated curricular philosophy included general education goals and additional curricular goals that enhanced each of the magnet missions. Students and parents held the school in high regard for its reputation of innovative and nurturing ideals. This secured the school excellent reviews in the yearly state report card based on reading and mathematics scores.

Meier's qualitative case study combines ethnographic approaches to data collection and analysis with the description of social phenomenon within the school. Seven informants were interviewed in semi-structured formats where they were asked to respond to guided prompts. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed to identify significant categories and themes regarding values, beliefs, practices, materials, and problems related to teaching science. The questions guiding the research centered on school culture as it pertained to values, beliefs, practices, materials, and problems, reform models and magnet structures affecting teachers' science teaching, values and beliefs teachers expressed affecting the teaching of science, and available materials and resources affecting the teaching of science practices. Data was gathered and triangulated from interviews, observations, and artifacts/document collection.

The primary finding in this study suggests that the culture of the school is organized, driven, and substantiated by curricular motives and routines in areas other than science instruction. Additional findings suggest that the discourse of innovation and the pursuit of constructivist ideals with the school's magnet structure and curricula detracted from teachers' desire to teach science at all. In fact, despite the high levels of perceived importance, as well as the generous lab space, science was infrequently taught. Unfortunately, this school resembled a more traditional school, and science had become a second tier subject. This research supports the discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. While some teachers attempted to teach science, they relied on familiar activities, and had difficulty translating their beliefs about innovation into models of instruction. What this study shows most conclusively is that more research is called for on school cultures that pursue too many innovative agendas, often described as "Christmas tree" schools by scholars (Fullan, 2001). As stated by Fullan (2001), "although these schools sparkle from afar, close up they lack depth, clear mission, and coherence between other school reform projects" (p. 820). For elementary science, the relationship between school culture, curriculum, instruction, ideology, and innovation provides one opportunity for real conversations about how all of these elements fit together conceptually. This opportunity, however, was lost in this case because teachers were apparently overwhelmed.

Preventative Approaches Aimed at Improving School Climate and Student Achievement

Fleming, Haggerty, Catalano, Harachi, Mazza, and Gruman (2005) researched proven preventative approaches that reduce problem behaviors such as drug use, violence, and delinquency in schools. With the increased emphasis on accountability as measured on standardized tests scores, schools continue to focus on issues related to academic achievement. As a result, preventative programs and policies have warranted attention as schools continue to

look for approaches that will boost test scores. Fleming et al's (2005) study assesses the degree to which variables that predict problem behaviors also predict academic success.

Participants were from the Raising Healthy Children (RHC) Project, which planned a longitudinal study of students from ten public schools in a suburban Pacific Northwest school district. The intervention was delivered at five of the elementary schools and consisted of staff development for teachers, parent workshops, summer camps, study clubs for students, and home-based case management services for high risk students who exhibited academic or behavioral problems. Seventy-six percent of the eligible families signed consent forms to participate in yearly surveys. Nine hundred and thirty-eight first or second grade students were enrolled in the program in the fall of 1993. An additional 102 students from the same grade levels transferred to the studied schools the subsequent year.

Standardized test scores from fourth and tenth grade, household structure, and reported income levels from parent surveys were gathered when students were in the seventh grade. Tests used in the analysis were given to all state schools. Four hundred and forty-seven participants from the original RHC sample moved out of their original district and attended schools that did not provide test scores. Another 17 students lacked household structure and income data, leaving 576 students in the remaining analysis sample. The sample used for analysis was not evenly representative of the original sample.

“Strong and consistent evidence was found that social, emotional, and decision-making skills, based on teacher, child, and parent report predicted both test scores and self-report of grades, even after adjusting for prior test scores and demographic variables” (p. 347). Child reports of bonding in school and student depression did not correlate with students' test scores but did predict self-reports of grades earned. These findings supported prior research linking risk

and protective factors for problem behaviors measured in early adolescence, both on grades and standardized tests. These findings validated the argument that interventions can boost the social and emotional skills of children, increase their abilities to stay focused in the classroom, improve school bonding, and increase academic performance.

There was also evidence that early disruptive and antisocial behavior reported by teachers or children had a predictive relationship with academic achievement. “Antisocial behavior of peers was found to be predictive of later academic achievement while prior studies have linked problem behavior, associated with peers engaging in problem behavior and school dropout” (p. 347). This study links these variables with standardized test scores across a three-year time span, providing evidence of the statistical strength of the relationship. At one level at least, the evidence appears to support programs that reduce disruptive and antisocial behavior during elementary and middle school years, and that established pro-social behaviors in students is an effective strategy for increasing academic performance.

Perceptions about School Climate as it Relates to Student Achievement

Brady (2006) defines school culture as being unique to the individual school, which is based on the work of Meyerson and Martin (1998). The voice of students, teachers, and parents is necessary as all of the major areas of school climate are assessed. Secondary school culture is explored in a study that examines student outcomes of academic achievement and engagement with the institution attended. Administration, professional teaching staff, and students are all inherent components of the school culture.

The sample consisted of 268 eleventh grade students attending two composite secondary schools in a mid-size Canadian city. Each school population was approximately 900 to 1,000

students with 95 percent of the students in general or advanced level courses and less than two percent in special needs classes.

The primary instrument used was a survey questionnaire using a five-point Likert style scale consisting of three sections designed to solicit students' opinions about administrative practices, the nature of their relations with staff, the extent of their involvement with the school community, and the state of their relations with their peers. Additionally, there were open-response questions designed to give participants the opportunity to expand on their answers, as well as follow up semi-structured interviews.

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used in data analysis of this mixed-methods approach. Additionally, students' academic achievement was also reviewed with regard to the level of study and grade point averages. Methodological and data triangulation were used to enhance the reliability and validity of the study.

There were several limitations of the study including the location, sample size, type of secondary schools, and the number of students who participated in the interview process. Only six students participated, five of them were female, which may have resulted in gender bias in the data gathered.

The results indicated that institutional culture had a limited impact on student achievement in terms of grade point average or level of course enrollment. However, grade point average was positively related to the level of course enrollment. In short, those enrolled in advanced courses had a higher grade point average than those enrolled in general or basic level courses.

Although the qualitative analysis of the data did not provide any information regarding the relationship between school culture and student achievement, there was evidence to indicate

that academic achievement played a role in the formation of institutional culture. Students who were members of groups held in low self-esteem by the peers were described as possessing diminished levels of academic ability or intelligence. Additionally, academic achievement without the prestige of socioeconomic stature or athletic prowess earned a respondent the appellation “nerd” or “library mouse” and membership in an equally low-stature peer group (Brady, 2006, p. 305).

The data generated from qualitative and quantitative areas of this study suggest the existence of a relationship between culture and students’ engagement:

The two variables found to be significant to the students’ belonging to the school community were the degree to which they felt they were treated with respect by others, especially the teachers, and the extent to which respondents believed that the school they attended encouraged all of its students to learn (p. 306).

Student engagement was measured in terms of the degree to which participants took part in extracurricular activities and the degree to which the individuals felt isolated within their school community. Both variables shared a common predictor, which was the extent to which respondents felt comfortable entering a new situation. Student engagement was also measured in terms of the degree to which respondents felt their school encouraged all of its students to learn. Participants felt that this was not necessarily applied evenly to all students.

In conclusion, secondary school culture can either be inclusive or exclusive in nature. Those that actively seek to enhance a sense of belonging and ownership within the context of learning and school life stand the most to gain, including increased student achievement and participation. How leadership impacts school climate is an important variable that must also be considered.

Perceptions and Perspectives of School Climate as They Relate to School Success

Parker, Grenville, and Flessa (2011) examine the school climate as perceived by students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members at large. This Canadian qualitative case study project funded by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario describes success stories of students and communities affected by poverty from a diverse sampling of eleven elementary schools throughout the province of Ontario. This collaborative partnership between the teachers' federation, 2 universities, and 11 elementary schools looked at poverty in schools to determine how to best work with students and communities. The purpose of this study was to advance understanding of school climate from multiple perspectives.

“According to the Alliance for the Study of School Climate, an excellent school is a school climate that is defined by excellent teaching, high-quality leadership, motivated staff and students, and a sense of community” (Parker, Grenville, and Flessa, 2011, p. 130). The research examines context-specific ways that schools have become successful and what they have in common. In spite of challenging circumstances such as poverty, the researchers felt that by examining schools in terms of community, climate, and culture as perceived by parents, teaching staff, administrators, and community partners, they could determine how to best work with schools.

Using the case study method of narrative telling and appreciative inquiry (a model for analysis, decision-making and the creation of strategic change within the school) qualitative methodology was used in this project that explored success stories. Participants were asked what the school did to build positive school experiences for children and communities affected by poverty, how those programs or policies came to be, how they were implemented, and why the programmatic direction was chosen for the specific school. Multiple sources of data, protocols

with open-ended questions, and analyses of systematic routines enabled the researchers to triangulate themes and categories, and then assess their theoretical propositions via follow up team meetings. Additionally, an appreciative inquiry approach was also incorporated during some of the visits as a way of focusing on what participants valued about their school community and climate, and what they valued about themselves.

The sample size included six small schools from urban areas with 140 students per school, three large schools from the same urban areas with 650 students per school, one suburban school, and one rural school. Student populations ranged from those that were all white and English-speaking to a school that was 50% new immigrant and English Language Learners. A third school mostly enrolled aboriginal or Native Canadian students.

Data was collected through 22 full days of focus groups with over 100 teachers, administrators, parents, and community partners. Public profiles were reviewed, over 35 unstructured interviews and conversations were conducted, 35 audio-taped sessions of focus groups and interview/conversations were collected, and detailed field notes from school visits were included. Questions centered on success and how it is recognized, shared goals, programs that support success, and challenges faced in the school. Researchers described using a bottom-up approach which allowed analysis of the data by culling all of the sources, reading and coding the issues, coding the issue-relevant meanings as patterns, and then collapsing the codes into themes.

The findings from the data suggest that effective interventions in these schools required commitments to high-quality collaboration, teacher mentorship, community building, parent and community partnerships, administrative leadership, and the culture valuing leadership. The data produced a rich description of attitudes, beliefs, practices, and policies of schools that were

successfully working with students affected by poverty. The three areas that were found to have “created a positive school climate, community, and culture of leadership included: (a) teaching excellence and high-quality collaboration amongst teachers; (b) parental engagement along with community partnerships; and (c) shared leadership amongst administrators and teachers” (Parker, Grenville, and Flessa, 2011, p. 143).

Perceptions of School Climate as They Relate to Consensus and Student Outcomes

Griffith (2000) conducted a study in Montgomery County Public Schools in Rockville, Maryland furthering research about perceptions. The purpose of the research was to determine the relation of perceived “consensus” among students and parents about key factors influencing school success. Focus was on the school environment, its relation to participants’ evaluations of their school environment, and the combined effect of consensus and evaluation on important student and parental outcomes. A major premise of the study was that group consensus needed to be categorized and viewed as an essential conceptual and analytic variable in school climate research. Few studies, if any, have examined consensus among school staff, student, and parent perceptions of school environment, and the relation of consensus to school and student population characteristics related to student outcomes.

There were four objectives of the study. They included: (1) examining the amount of within-school and between-school variation in student and parent perception of the school environment; (2) examining the relation between consensus among student and parent perceptions regarding the school environment and their evaluation of the school environment; (3) examining the relation of consensus among student and parent perceptions to structural and student populations’ characteristics of the school; and (4) examining the combined effects of

consensus among student and parent perceptions regarding the school environment and their evaluation of the school environment on student and parent outcomes.

Survey responses of students and parents drawn from 122 elementary schools in a large metropolitan area suburban school district were analyzed regarding school learning and social environment. The schools reflected considerable racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity and varied in structural and student population characteristics. Of the 49,875 parents surveyed, 23,107 completed the survey. Student questionnaires were group administered by teachers to all students in grades three through six. Of the 30,725 student surveys, 25,557 were completed. The student survey consisted of 42 items, while the parent survey consisted of 41 items. Likert-type scales were used to answer questions from national and regional surveys of school environment and satisfaction. Survey items were organized into scales.

The student scales assessed aspects of school learning and social environment and included helpfulness of school staff, student and teacher relationships, order and discipline, academic instruction, and student satisfaction. Six parent scales assessed various aspects of school learning and social environment including school climate, empowering parents, informing parents, academic instruction, parent involvement, and parent satisfaction.

Factor analysis was used to examine the reliability of the organizational surveys items on the various scales. To determine the reliability for the scales, internal reliability analyses were performed using the individual student and parent responses. Archival school data regarding student population characteristics were also appended to the survey data. School mean math and reading scores on the district's criterion-referenced test were also appended to the school survey data.

The schools that enrolled greater percentages of English as a Second Official Language (ESOL) students had higher school means of measures of overall satisfaction. Schools having higher mean student overall satisfaction had higher school means on teacher-student relationships. Student perceptions of helpfulness of school staff were significantly and positively correlated with student overall satisfaction when consensus among student perceptions of helpfulness of staff was high.

Schools having higher mean math and reading scores had greater percentages of students who were new to the school and who were ESOL students. Schools having lower mean reading scores had greater percentages of students enrolled in the district's Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) program. Schools having greater percentages of African-American students had lower mean math scores but higher mean reading scores.

Schools having more students-per-faculty-member and greater percentages of ESOL and FARMS students had lower school mean parent involvement. Schools having greater percentages of Hispanic students had higher school mean parent involvement. Higher parent involvement was also evident among schools having higher school means on the school empowers parent scale. School climate was significantly related to parent involvement only when consensus among parent perceptions of school climate was considered. The correlation of school means of school climate to parent involvement was negative among schools having low levels of consensus. This relation was positive among schools having high consensus.

Schools having greater percentages of FARMS students had lower mean parent overall satisfaction, while schools having greater percentages of Hispanic students had higher school mean parent satisfaction. Schools in which parents perceived higher quality of school climate and academic instruction had higher school mean parent overall satisfaction.

In conclusion, the extent of the agreement or consensus among perceptions of students, school staff, and parents is correspondingly relevant and important in the assessment of the school environment. School means of individual student and parent perceptions of the school environment were substantially and positively correlated with measures of student and parent consensus. School evaluation combined with school consensus added significant explanatory variance to school-level student and parent outcomes. Parent consensus combined with parent evaluations of school climate was a significant predictor of school-level parent involvement. Parent consensus regarding the quality of school climate and academic instruction was significantly and positively related to school-level parent overall satisfaction. The combination of consensus and evaluation among parents regarding school to parent communication was significantly related to school-level parent overall satisfaction. By considering all stakeholders' perceptions including parents, students, and staff, Griffith's study greatly clarifies issues that can impact school climate.

Relationship Between Leadership and School Climate

Kelley, Thornton, and Daugherty (2005) state that "educational leadership is possibly the most important single determinant of an effective learning environment" (p. 17). Leaders must create conditions that support continuous organizational improvement, which includes being able to deal with various skills and abilities of their faculty within the complex school environment. Hallinger and Heck (1998) argue that the principals' impact on learning is mediated through the climate and culture of the school and is not a direct effect. The principal is responsible for establishing a pervasive culture of respect for and attention to teaching and learning in each school. The principal must lead and support school climate improvement efforts. Leadership matters, (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral, 2009) particularly when the principal must

make choices that promote collaborative cultures and support effective school improvement practices.

To explore such an idea, Blanchard, Hambleton, Zigarmi, and Forsyth (1991) developed the Leader Behavior Analysis II (LBAIL) to assess leadership style. This instrument was used to investigate the relationship between selected dimensions of leadership and measures of school climate. Principals' perceptions of their own leadership style were also compared with teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership style.

Respondents in Blanchard et al's (1991) study chose from four different styles for each of the 20 different leadership scenarios. Using two different forms of the LBAIL, principals self-rated their leadership style and teachers rated their perceptions of their principal's style. The LBAIL provided two primary scores: leader effectiveness and flexibility. The Leader Effectiveness Scale (EFF) represents the degree to which the leader uses the most appropriate response for a given situation. The Flexibility Scale (FLX) represents the degree to which a leader will select varying styles over a range of situations. The more flexible leader, Blanchard et al (1991) hypothesized, will use a variety of different styles to solve situations, while a less flexible leader will use a limited number of styles to solve situations.

To analyze the relationship between style and climate, the researchers next assessed school climate using the Staff Development and School Climate Assessment Questionnaire (SDSCAQ) developed by Zigarmi and Edeburn (1980). Using a Likert-scale instrument, six scale scores were determined for communications, innovativeness, advocacy, decision-making, evaluation, and attitudes toward staff development. These scores were correlated with obtained information from the LBAIL.

The study included 31 elementary schools and involved 31 principals and 155 teachers, or five teachers from each school. The principal and one teacher responded to the LBAll and four different teachers were administered the SDSCAQ. Correlational results of the study suggested that school climate is directly linked to teachers' perceptions of principal effectiveness. However, the corresponding correlations between teachers' perceptions of principals' flexibility scores and measures of school climate were all negative. The higher the teachers' perceptions of their principal's flexibility was reported to be, the lower a principal's scores as a teacher advocate or ability to communicate effectively within the building. Teachers perceive that less flexible principals led buildings that shared information, listened carefully to their concerns, and in general, supported them more. Teachers indicated a desire for consistent treatment. This suggested that teachers may have failed to recognize that differential treatment that may have been based on the developmental level of the teacher or task in question. Finally, the principals' self-ratings of effectiveness and flexibility and the corresponding teachers' rating were not correlated.

Limitations of this study included a small sample size and imprecise, if not invalid measures of school climate. Parent involvement, student-teacher interactions, and principal interpersonal skills are also related to school climate but were not included in this study.

Principal Performance as it Relates to School Climate and Student Achievement

Williams, Persaud, and Turner (2008) examine the proposition as to whether principals' performances on selected leadership tasks will improve school climate and whether the climate will predict student achievement. Teachers from the Metro Atlanta School District were asked to evaluate principals based on five areas: (1) instructional planning; (2) interpersonal skills; (3)

decision-making skills; (4) school facilities planning; and (5) evaluation in relation to school climate.

To create these categories, the researcher utilized data from conferences between district supervisors and principals as they developed plans for improving school climate with the expectation that climate would improve student achievement. From a sample of 81 out of 84 schools, the five tasks were shown to be significantly correlated to school climate.

The Georgia school system administered the leadership skills questionnaire instrument consisting of 99 items to all teachers in the school, which were collected anonymously and analyzed. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine if there was a significant relationship between each leadership task and school climate. Several leadership skills significantly correlated with school climate and student performance that exceeded grade level. A factor analysis was conducted to determine whether or not these variables would be placed in the same factor as the student performance variables. Overall, the results indicated a stronger bonding among leadership skills and school climate than with student achievement variables.

A regression analysis was conducted to estimate the separate effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables when controlling for other selected independent variables. The results indicated that only school climate predicted significant gains in student reading scores that met and exceeded expectations. It appeared that high student reading gains were associated with positive school climate, although the relation was small but significant. The percent variance explained was nine percent.

Servant Leadership: Perceptions and climate

Black (2010) studied servant leadership to determine the extent of the relationship between principals' and teachers' perceived practice and student climate. A mixed-methods

approach was used which included the administering of two validated instruments: Laub's (1998) Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA), which measured the perceived servant leadership in the schools and Hoy, Tarter, and Kottkamp's (1991) Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire-Revised (OCDQ-RE), which measured the school's climate.

These instruments were administered to a random sample of 246 teachers from 12 schools and 15 principals working in a Catholic school in Ontario. Upon completion of the quantitative data analysis, focus group interviews were conducted with 10 percent of the sample. The data revealed a significant positive correlation between servant leadership and school climate. The empirical data collected contributes to practical application of a theoretical dialogue regarding servant leadership in three areas. Correlational analysis from the study provided insight into practical application for how principals might implement servant leadership principles to affect a positive school climate. Second, the study provides insight into areas of emphasis for individuals responsible for developing effective leadership programs using servant leadership principles. Third, the research contributes to the construction of the concept of servant leadership.

The future growth of this theory of servant leadership appears it will be dependent on expanding Black's research to public schools with a range of culturally diverse populations. Black's study centered entirely on Catholic, private schools.

If nothing else, Black's study establishes the argument about the importance of leadership and climate, even if student achievement was left unexamined. Perceptions of those impacted must also be considered in research in order to have greater understanding of the topic of school climate.

School Reform Efforts Related to School Climate

Case Study: Staff Efforts Improve Achievement

“Leadership matters and impacts student achievement” (Witziers, Bosker, and Kruger, 2003, p. 412). Although researchers have established relationships between leadership and school climate and school effectiveness, these factors cannot be studied in isolation. Leadership is necessary for school reform and improved academic performance. Developing a shared vision of what kind of school community students, parents, and school personnel want is a foundational step for school reform (Elmore, 2004; Noddings, 2007). This is the foundation for a democratic learning environment.

Two different case studies from the University of North Carolina in Greensboro were reviewed that focused on two successful elementary schools which were named “Lighthouse Schools” because of their performance on state assessments by the North Carolina General Assembly. These schools served as examples for teachers and principals across the state so that educators might learn from them. They also served as models for catalyzing school improvement efforts.

Ponder, Webb, and Travick (2003) conducted research at the first school, Hunter Elementary. Hunter served approximately 400 students in grades kindergarten through grade five, and had over 80 percent of the students qualifying for free and reduced-priced lunch, approximately 20 percent of the students spoke English as their second official language (ESOL). However, in spite of the high levels of poverty and cultural diversity, the school was named a Lighthouse School because of their continued success on their state assessment, “lighting the way” (p. 223) for other schools across the state. Research questions were centered

on success, collaboration, growth in achievement, and types of support. The goal of this case study was to determine what the staff specifically did to support student achievement.

Through the collection of data from interviews, focus-group sessions, and observation, four themes emerged that described the school community, shared beliefs, common values, and instructional practices that contributed to the school's success. The first theme was centered around Hunter's focus on the whole child and on state assessments, titled "Time to Shine" (p. 226). The second theme focused on collaborative cultures and was titled "Together We Can" (p. 227). Also included was the role of the principal as a visionary leader who procured resources including time, materials, and staff. The third theme, "First Things First" described such things as a communal sense of purpose, high expectations, focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, student engagement, success for all, and building meaningful relationships (Ponder et al, 2003, p. 232). And the final theme was titled "Whatever it Takes" and addressed the development of a school identity, access to instructional innovation and human resources, and collaboration with a larger professional community (Ponder et al, 2003, p. 234). These four areas were central to the school's accomplishments.

Three qualities of the Hunter School's culture highlighted what contributed most to its success. First, Hunter's dual-vision of meeting the child's needs while preparing them for assessments created a covenantal community where both purposes were equally respected. Second, the school combined moral purpose with accountability pressures which ultimately created co-catalysts for educational reform. Hunter's culture finally established a central focus on effective teaching and high student achievement.

Case study: Supportive School Climate Results in Student Gains

Strahan, Carlone, Horn, Dallas, and Ware (2003) conducted a case study at Archer Elementary School in Greensboro, North Carolina and described how teachers and administrators have created a supportive school climate, which resulted in student gains. Based on the work of Peterson and Deal (1998), the researchers adopted a framework for analyzing school culture that became the premise of the Greensboro study. Research questions centered on what values were shared regarding “good” teachers, beliefs and assumptions that guided instructional decisions, and instructional norms that shaped shared teaching practices (p. 207).

Archer Elementary School is a kindergarten through grade five school comprised of 600 students with 66 percent of the students on free or reduced lunch. Ninety percent of the students are minority and 20 percent speak English as a second official language. Scores on the state assessment showed a steady increase of reading and math scores from 49 percent in 1997 to over 74 percent in 2002 (Strahan et al, 2003). This turnaround resulted in an invitation to participate in the North Carolina Lighthouse School project.

Interviews, classroom observations, observation of grade-level meetings, and focus groups were conducted to collect data. Additionally archival records, planning documents, and team meeting minutes were reviewed. During the analysis of the data, comparative methods were used to ensure validity of the collection. Specific themes and patterns emerged that described how the Archer Elementary School achieved success through changes in culture.

What Strahan et al (2003) learned among other things, was that teachers and administrators developed a shared stance toward learning, linking values and beliefs into a communal attitude and posture. This led to the second major change - strengthened instructional norms that emphasized more student engagement, and finally, a third major change as teachers

and administrators developed clearer procedures for promoting data-directed dialogue regarding school reform. Archer focused on student performance through their shared commitment to student learning, which resulted in increases in student achievement.

These two case studies support the notion that leadership and school climate are essential to school reform efforts. Although their stories are limited and represent single case studies, both schools served as exemplars for North Carolina educators.

Summary of the Research

School climate has been researched for the past century when it was first introduced as part of systems and organizations. Culture emerged as part of the social science research, which was developed through the middle of the 19th century where emphasis shifted to organizational climate. Up until that time, there had been challenges with definitions and instruments of measurement. It was Insel and Moos (1974) who first introduced a tool that looked at components of the human environment as a way of developing the concept and organizing the research. They termed it social ecology, taking into account the social and physical dimensions of the environment (Anderson, 1982). This observation helped to frame research efforts and developments in this field of study.

Three theoretical bases helped structure school climate research: input-output theory, sociological theory, and ecological theory. Each theory provides a different framework for research. This elevates the importance of this dissertation.

The literature reviewed also falls into five broad categories that served as the foundation or framework for the study that will now follow: (1) teaching and learning as it relates to student achievement; (2) preventative measures aimed at improving student achievement; (3) perceptions about school climate as it relates to student achievement; (4) a clear relationship between

leadership and school climate; and (5) school reform efforts as they relate to school climate (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, and Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Major findings from the research indicated that school climate is integral to student performance. However, there is limited research considering the principal's role and his/her behaviors. Research suggests that motivating change while focusing on organizational strengths could be a lever for improvement efforts, however, it must be considered in the larger context of other school initiatives. Preventative measures to reduce problems in schools could also make a difference with student achievement increasing social and emotional skills, however, implementation of these measures are contingent on staff involvement. Leadership cannot be researched in isolation, but rather in the larger context of the organization.

Conclusions

Based on the foregoing, there is a need to look at school climate from a variety of perspectives using correlation case studies and qualitative analyses. If researchers are able to integrate process and outcome concepts into time-sensitive analyses, then schools may be better able to identify specific aspects and activities that impact socio-moral, emotional, civic, and cognitive development and the teaching and learning of both students and teachers. Understanding the interactions of these processes in the contexts of interventions will enable schools to successfully adopt practices that have been shown to promote positive outcomes. What is essential to great schools includes smarter educational policies as well as changes at the school and district level. School climate with a focus on culture and relationships could be the key to opening doors to new possibilities and promise. Therefore, it is with great hope that this qualitative study, that considered multiple sources of data and perspectives, will provide further

clarity and insight about leadership and school climate, as it relates to school improvement and academic achievement.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Overview of the Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify which factors of school climate are perceived as most likely to promote or inhibit academic achievement. This investigation made use of the School Climate Assessment Instrument (Shindler, 2011; See also Appendix D), which surveyed professional staff including classroom teachers, integrated arts teachers, and interventionists about their perceptions of school climate. The purpose in using the assessment was to examine the eight areas defined earlier in Chapter 1: physical appearance, faculty relations, student interactions, leadership/decisions, discipline environment, learning/assessment, attitude and culture, and community relations. Completed surveys were then scored and analyzed in order to identify what the teachers' perceptions were and also to guide principals' interview protocols. Following the surveys, principals were interviewed to better understand their role as school leaders. Specific questions sought (See Appendix B) information about the principal as leading the learning, being a system and district player, and acting as a change agent as described by Fullan (2014). Fullan considers these the three keys that maximize the principal's impact on school outcomes. Using the National School Climate (2009) framework, all participants' views were analyzed to establish which aspects of school climate promoted or inhibited student achievement.

The sample consisted of three elementary schools that had been identified as being Schools of Excellence in the State of New Hampshire within the past five years. Using three schools, rather than one only, allowed for comparing, contrasting, and triangulating data to determine patterns, exploring multiple data sources to support or qualify emerging clusters or themes, and then gradually drawing inferences from the links between other new data segments

and frameworks (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014). Among the other data sets were documents that highlighted each school's policies and procedures, histories, teacher effectiveness plans, mission and vision statements, and achievement scores on New Hampshire's state assessment (NECAP).

Research Questions

The research conducted was a qualitative study using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's framework (2014). Interviews, surveys, and a review of documents from three elementary schools in New Hampshire were utilized to analyze and triangulate data. Data from the staff surveys was used to inform principal interviews. These interviews were transcribed and then coded in order to identify "similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, categories, and distinct differences between subgroups" (p. 10). The review of documents helped develop a picture of understanding of the different aspects of school climate as identified in the National School Climate Framework (2009). State assessment data was also analyzed as it related to student achievement, specifically language arts, mathematics, writing, and science scores. These patterns of achievement helped to inform and guide the full collection of data. See Tables 2 and 3 below.

The following questions guided research:

1. Which aspects of school climate did staff perceive as promoting or inhibiting student achievement?
2. Which aspects of school climate did principals perceive as having the greatest impact on student achievement?
3. Which aspects of school climate emerged from all participants as most significant to members of the school community?

Table 2: Surveys, Interviews, and Document Analysis as it Relates to School Climate:

School Climate Assessment Instrument	Physical Appearance	Faculty Relations	Student Interactions	Leadership and Decision Making	Discipline and Management of Environment	Learning, Instruction, Assessment	Attitude and Culture	Community Relations
Vision	B4	S2a,e, f D1,6	S7a, b, c	S2i, S4a,b, f, h A2 D1	S5a, i	S6a, b S7g B1 D1,6	S4c, g S7a, f B3 C6	S2h, S8a B7
Policies	A3	D2	D2	D2	S5a, b D2	D2	3C D2	B7 D2
S/E Plans	*	B6 C5 D4	S3j D4	A2 D4	D4	B1 D4	B6	*
Safety Plan	*	D3	S3f, S7e, i D3	B5	B5	S6i, j, k	*	B7 D3
SEL	*	S2j D5	S1g S3a S3h, D5	S3g	S5c, d	S6f, g D-5	S 3b, e, S5j S7j	S8d

Key to Table 2:

S = Surveys with professional staff (1 – physical appearance, 2 – faculty relations, 3 – student interactions, 4 – leadership and decision making, 5 – discipline and management of environment, 6 – learning, instruction, assessment, 7 – attitude and culture, 8 – community relations)

Interviews with Principals = A – First Interview, B – Second Interview, C – Third Interview

D=Document Review (1 – Mission/Vision, 2 - Policies, 3 – Safety Plan, 4 – Supervision and Evaluation Plan, 5 – Social Emotional Learning Programs, 6 – Professional Development Plans)

Table 3: Principal Interviews and Document Analysis as it relates to Fullan's Three Keys:

Fullan's Three Keys (Interviews with Principals)	Leading the Learning	Systems/District Player	Change Agent
Vision	A4, B1 D1	A2, B4, C3, C4	A5, C1, C6
Policies	D2	A3 D2	A2, C3, C7

S/E Plans	B6 D4, D6	B2, C5 D4, D6	B3, C2
Safety Plans	B5 D3	B5 D3	B5
SEL	B7 D5	B7 D5	B7

Key for Table 3:

Interviews with Principals: A – First Interview, B – Second Interview, C – Third Interview)

D=Document Review (1 – Mission/Vision, 2 - Policies, 3 – Safety Plan, 4 – Supervision and Evaluation Plan, 5 – Social Emotional Learning Programs, 6 – Professional Development Plans)

Research Sample

As part of the strategy to identify the effects of climate on student achievement, purposeful convenience sampling was followed to identify three New Hampshire schools that had received the designation of being named Schools of Excellence. These schools were selected based on criterion taken from *Breaking Ranks* (New Hampshire's Vision for Redesign: Moving from High Schools to Learning Communities, New Hampshire Department of Education, 2007). The criteria for this designation included personalization and relationships, rigor and high standards, relevance, engagement, and whole community involvement, results of student achievement, and empowered educators. These schools selected were from three different school districts.

As designated Schools of Excellence, these schools are responsible for serving as exemplars inspiring excellence to other schools, as stated in the requirements of the application. This facilitated access to these schools, as educators across the state reach out to these schools seeking to gain knowledge that will improve their practice and ultimately their own schools.

As a preliminary first step to gathering the data, all teachers were asked and encouraged to participate in the completion of the surveys. The overall response rate was approximately 70 percent from all three schools. Although participation in the survey was voluntary, there was a small token of appreciation for the completion of the survey in the form of a certificate for coffee. Principals from each of the schools were interviewed three times based on the information obtained from the surveys using Seideman's (2006) protocol, which involved a three series approach to interviews. Assessment data from the last three years was collected from the New England Common Assessment Program that included language arts, mathematics, science, and writing scores of students in grades three through six. Again, these data were analyzed to determine trends, conclusions, central themes, and determinations around school climate and leadership.

Plan and Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative study followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) approach to integrating qualitative data analyses using a more multidimensional approach to inquiry. Although only three principals were involved with this leadership study, it was nested in the context of the school and studied in-depth (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014). This allowed for the collection of information-rich data.

Once approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board, initial contact with school administrators was made by phone or email so that there was full disclosure and understanding of the research project. Meetings were held where information about the research project were discussed. There was an opportunity for the principals to ask questions, seek clarification, and then sign the consent form (Appendix B). All principals agreed to

participation. One district required board approval. Upon presenting at a public school board meeting, this researcher was granted permission to begin her study.

Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from the principals and clarity of purpose was shared. The School Climate Quality Analytic Assessment Instrument and the School-based Evaluation/Leadership Team Assessment Protocol (2011) were used with the staffs from the three schools involved in this in-depth study. Using the School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI), professional staff was surveyed where they were asked to rank their agreement to statements in eight different areas. Within these eight areas, a five-point Likert scale (0-4 with four being the highest level of agreement) was used to measure the degree to which respondents agreed with the statements in each category: agree, not sure, disagree. The cover page explained the purpose of the survey and participants had the opportunity to decline participation. Participation in the surveys was encouraged and there was no penalty for withdrawing. Teachers were encouraged to participate without penalty. A token of appreciation in the form of a coffee voucher was provided to all staff for their completed survey.

The overall return rate for the surveys from all three schools was approximately 70 percent. After completion of the staff surveys, data was analyzed to determine themes, trends, and patterns. Responses were counted to determine levels of agreement to the statements in each aspect of the survey. A mean average score was calculated by assigning a numerical value to each of the points from zero to four. Scores from each area of SCAI were tabulated to understand what subheadings and areas had the highest and lowest levels of agreement. The highest and lowest scores were noted for the schools individually and collectively in order to have a better understanding of staff perceptions. The data was used to inform the interview

process with principals. Results from the surveys were reviewed by school to determine staff perceptions' regarding school climate.

Seidman's (2006) approach to in-depth open-ended interviews followed the collection of survey data. The three interviews were completed over a period of four weeks.

The purpose of the first interview was to gain an understanding of the background of the principals and to learn how they became school leaders. During the second interview, focus was on learning about their lived experiences as a school principal and understanding how they influenced school climate as a leader. Finally, the third interview allowed the principals to reflect on their experiences as building leaders and teachers, clarifying what these experiences meant and how they related to school climate. Additionally, the results from the surveys of the teachers informed the principals' questions as they considered aspects of school climate related to leading the school. These interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded using Dragon Speak on an iPad and a recorder on an iPhone. All participants had full knowledge that they were being recorded and each agreed.

The data from all nine interviews were transcribed by the researcher to ensure reliability and accuracy of the obtained information. Interviews were then coded using Saldana's (2014) approach to analyzing qualitative data. Of the many approaches that Saldana presents, in vivo coding seemed to best capture the essence of the first round of coding. This is also described by Saldana (2014) as "literal coding" or "verbatim" coding (p. 91). Words or short phrases from the principals were reviewed. They were then categorized and counted by terms and phrases to determine which themes and categories emerged the most.

Second cycle coding was more focused and based on thematic or conceptual codes (p. 209). The questions and theoretical framework helped to guide coding. The data was analyzed

and sorted by interviews. Pattern coding allowed for grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs (p. 210). Finally, the data was analyzed to develop comprehensive understanding of the information obtained. This informed the reporting process as it related to the research questions and theoretical framework. An outline was developed from this process which formed the basis of the reporting.

Finally, state assessment data was reviewed and discussed with principals as one more way to explore the impact of school climate on student achievement (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). This annual state assessment evaluated students in the areas of language arts and mathematics in grades three through eight, additionally science and writing in grades four and eight. Up until 2014, the State of New Hampshire had been using the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) as part of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). The following tables illustrate the state mean scaled scores and the three schools' median scores included in the sample.

New England Common Assessment Program (NECAPS)

State Mean Scaled Scores

Language Arts	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	348	348	349
Grade 4	447	448	448
Grade 5	548	548	548

Gr. 3: Prof. w/distinction – 357-380; Prof. 340-356. Partially Prof. 331-339, Substantially below 300-339

Gr. 4: Prof. w/distinction 456-480, Prof. 440-455, Partially Prof. 431-439, Substantially below 400-430

Gr. 5: Prof. w/distinction 556-580, Prof. 540-555, Partially Prof., 530 – 539, Substantially below 500-529

Mathematics	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	345	346	347
Grade 4	447	448	448
Grade 5	546	547	547

Gr. 3: Prof. w/distinction 353-380, Prof. 340-352, Partially Prof. 332-339, Substantially below 300-331

Gr. 4: Prof. w/distinction 455-480, Prof. 440-454, Partially Prof. 431-439, Substantially below 400-430

Gr. 5: Prof. w/distinction 554-580, Prof. 540-553, Partially Prof. 533-539, Substantially below 500-532

Science/Writing	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Science – Grade 4	439	440	440
Writing – Grade 5	542	542	541

Writing Scale: Prof. w/distinction 555-580, Prof. 540-554, Partially Prof. 527-539, Substantially below 500-526

Science Scale: Prof. w/distinction 463-480, Prof. 440-462, Partially Prof. 427-439, Substantially below 400-426

Table 4: State Mean Scaled Scores

- Language Arts and Math Tests are administered in the fall and based on the previous teaching year.
- Science tests are administered to grade four students only in the spring.
- Writing tests are administered to grade five students only in the fall and based on previous teaching years.
- Language arts and math assessments were replaced by the Smarter Balanced Assessment and administered in the spring of 2015.

New England Common Assessment Program (NECAPS)

School A Median Scores

Language Arts	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	*	*	*
Grade 4	*	*	460
Grade 5	*	552	*
Grade 6	653	*	*

Mathematics	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	*	*	*
Grade 4	*	*	456
Grade 5	*	552	*
Grade 6	651	*	*
Science/Writing	2014	2013	2012
Science – Grade 4	448	448	448
Writing – Grade 5	*	541	*

*Due to class size, grade level median scores were not reported

. Table 5: School A Median NECAP Scores

New England Common Assessment Program (NECAPS)

School B Median Scores

Language Arts	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	347	350	349
Grade 4	448	450	445
Grade 5	550	548	549

Mathematics	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	344	348	349
Grade 4	447	448	446
Grade 5	548	547	550

Science and Writing	2014	2013	2012
Science - Grade 4	441	443	441
Writing – Grade 5	543	542	544

Table 6: School B Median NECAP Scores

New England Common Assessment Program (NECAPS)

School C Median Scores

*Grades K-4 School

Language Arts	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	351	349	351
Grade 4	446	451	450

Mathematics	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	350	349	352
Grade 4	448	452	451

Science and Writing	2014	2013	2012
Science - Grade 4	438	443	443

Table 7: School C Median NECAP Scores

Using semi-open coding, survey data was analyzed and organized by themes and patterns as it related to the theoretical framework and the National School Climate's Standards (2009). Finally, documents and assessment scores were reviewed and analyzed. By using staff surveys

and in-depth interviews, rich data was collected. This assisted with validation, interpretation, and clarification of findings.

Generalizations about the findings were made by subsuming particulars into the general (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014). The researcher compared and contrasted the data collected to gain better understanding of the relationships between the variables. These variables included the three keys of leadership (Fullan, 2014) and the aspects of school climate. By “systematically assembling a coherent understanding of the data, the researcher hoped to build a logical chain of evidence and make conceptual and theoretical coherence (p. 277).” By collecting data from three schools and using surveys, interviews, and documents, triangulation of data strengthened the quality of the findings and integrity of this qualitative study.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Issues

It is the researcher’s responsibility to ensure trustworthiness. Ethical issues were considered before, during, and after the study. Research was conducted carefully and thoughtfully, in accordance with established practices by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) and Creswell (2013). Additionally, Marshall’s (1995) standards were reviewed as they related to assessing the value and trustworthiness of qualitative research (p. 146). This criterion helped the researcher to understand and be mindful of the issues involved with qualitative research. Emphasis was placed around sensitivity towards those being researched, guarding against personal biases and judgments while upholding the highest standards for the research and reporting process.

Creswell (2013) reminds researchers to consider who they are and the people they study as researcher bias is reflected (p. 56). It should be noted that this researcher has extensive background in public education in the State of New Hampshire, over 25 years in total, 12 of

them as an elementary school teacher and 14 as an elementary administrator. The researcher also serves on the New Hampshire Schools of Excellence board and the elementary selection committee. Research was conducted after the schools were named, in some cases several years later. It was through the selection process, that the researcher became intrigued with the principals' impact on school climate as it related to student achievement. In an effort to address researcher bias, the data was recorded and transcribed for accuracy with a laser focus on addressing the research questions as they related to the theoretical frameworks. The researcher allowed the stories to unfold organically, using a semi-structured interview protocol (Seidman, 2006). Themes emerged and other unanticipated findings are included in the analysis.

Throughout the process, there were three guiding ethical considerations that were central in the research. The researcher sought to obtain consent, protect the participants from harm, and ensure integrity in reporting. In efforts to obtain consent from the three participating schools, meetings were held with the principals. The purpose of the meetings was to seek complete understanding of the research, explain the purpose, review the methods involved, and discuss potential risks and demands as participants. This initial rapport also helped to establish an open relationship with the participants.

During the initial meetings with the participants and subsequent meetings when the data was collected, the researcher conscientiously respected the time and schedule of the participants involved while being mindful of disrupting the learning environment as little as possible. Meetings were set around the participants' schedules and at their convenience. There were efforts made to report multiple perspectives and pseudonyms were assigned to protect the participants' privacy. Throughout the research process "do no harm" was the first order of priority. Potential risks were considered in an effort to protect participants, which included

psychological stress, personal embarrassment, or other influences that may adversely affect the participants. Although no financial reward or gain was involved with the collection of data from participants, the need to further educational research and improve practice was emphasized.

Every attempt was made to establish trust with all parties to ensure validity. Upon completion of the research project, all data was discarded appropriately and within a timely manner in order to protect all participants. Throughout the study and publishing process, the researcher strived to maintain and uphold the highest levels of ethical and professional integrity.

Dissemination and Policy Relevance

Most school improvement efforts have been focused around curriculum reform, completely discounting school climate practices and policies. If state and district leaders are considering methods of measuring and improving school climate, then policy, practice, and guidelines should be central to policy makers and school reform efforts. This study, this research concludes, would contribute to the growing research on school reform efforts specifically around school climate and leadership.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The following limitations apply to this qualitative study:

1. This study was limited to three elementary schools in different districts that have been named Schools of Excellence. These schools were chosen to ensure that the fit between climate and achievement would not be obscured by extraneous factors (e.g. exceptional wealth, excessive absenteeism, crime, safety, etc.) that might otherwise overwhelm any affects climate might have on high performance.

2. This study was conducted in the 2014-2015 school year and the findings pertain to that time frame only as well as the data from NECAP which had been replaced by the time this investigation had been completed.
3. Only one instrument was used to collect data from teachers and the findings were based exclusively on their perceptions of factors that promoted or inhibited school success.
 - The Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC) developed the School Climate Assessment Instruments (2011). Teachers were asked to participate in a survey that addressed the following eight areas of school climate: physical appearance, faculty relations, student interactions, leadership/decisions, discipline environment, learning/assessment, attitude and culture, and community relations.
4. The questions used to elicit responses from principals and again focused largely on their perception of aspects of school climate that had the greatest impact on student achievement.
 - Seidman's (2006) interview protocol was used to better understand how leading the learning, being a district/system player, and becoming a change agent influenced school climate.
5. The only documents collected for review included mission/vision statements, safety plans, professional development plans, policies, and teacher effectiveness plans and came from these three schools only.
6. The assessment data was limited to New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) for students in grades three through eight in New Hampshire from 2012-2014 in the areas of language arts, mathematics, writing, and science.

7. This study was limited to its transferability to the context and framework provided and cannot be generalized to the larger population.

Chapter Summary

This qualitative study was designed to better understand the relationship between school climate and student achievement. Additionally, greater understanding of the principal's role as it relates to school climate was examined. Descriptive data was analyzed to determine central themes and trends through the emergence of ideas.

Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) framework of analysis of qualitative research was used to integrate data for a more multidimensional approach to inquiry. Interviews, surveys, observations, and the collection of artifacts from three schools were used to triangulate data and to bring understanding to these complex research areas. Given performance pressures schools face, school climate and leadership could very well be the levers for school improvement efforts.

Chapter 4: Analysis

The primary focus of this investigation was to analyze school climate as it relates to leadership in three elementary schools that were designated Schools of Excellence, by the New Hampshire EDies, in the past five years. The schools range in size from 50 students to over 440 students. Research began with surveying teachers, and using the results of the survey, an interview protocol for principals was developed (Appendix C). The surveys were used to obtain staff information and to inform the principal interviews. Then principals were interviewed using the Seidman (2006) protocol which consisted of a series of three interviews. Documents were analyzed to strengthen the study and findings in order to gain a better understanding of policies, missions, safety plans, professional development plans, and supervision and evaluation plans. Additionally, New Hampshire state assessment data from 2012-2014 which specifically included language arts, mathematics, and science, were also considered as part of this qualitative study. Through triangulation of surveys, interviews, and document analysis, themes emerged which allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the proposed research questions.

Research Question 1: Which aspects of school climate does professional staff perceive as promoting or inhibiting student achievement?

Overall participation rate for all three schools was approximately 70 percent of the professional staff which included classroom teachers, integrated arts teachers, special education case managers, and interventionists. The range of experience in all three schools varied, however, most participants had over 15 years of experience and most had been working in the school for over 15 years.

The following charts document the cumulative results for each of the three schools in the study.

How long have you been working in education?

	School A	School B	School C	Total
0-4 Years	1	2	1	4
5-10 Years	1	1	1	3
11-15 Years	2	1	4	7
15+ Years	2	9	14	25
Total	6	13	20	39

How long have you been working at this school?

	School A	School B	School C	Total
0-4 Years	2	3	3	8
5-10 Years	3	1	4	8
11-15 Years	1	3	1	5
15+ Years		6	12	18
Total	6	13	20	39

Table 8: Years of Experience of Staff

When reviewing the responses from all three schools, it was noted that most of the participants ranked all subareas under the eight headings in the high-middle range and middle range of agreement. Very few scores were ranked in the low or middle-low area or were “not sure” or “disagreed” with the statements.

The following graphic displays the rank order of the aspects of school climate that link to the School Climate Assessment Inventory (SCAI). This information was used to gather staff perceptions and to also inform the principal interviews in this study.

School A:

Area	Ave	Range
Attitude and Culture	3.69	3.33 - 3.92
Faculty Relations	3.64	3.08 - 4.00
Learning and Assessment	3.63	3.25 - 3.92
Community Relations	3.61	3.08 - 3.92
Student Interactions	3.56	3.08 - 3.92

Discipline and Environment	3.56	2.91 - 3.92
Physical Appearance	3.52	2.80 - 4.00
Leadership/Decisions	3.37	3.00 - 3.79

Table 9: Rank Order of Aspects in School A

School A scores ranged between 3.37 and 3.69, which was in the high and highest rankings on the Likert scale used to evaluate agreement of the statements in the eight areas. Attitude and Culture were scored the highest by staff, while leadership and decision making was scored the lowest by staff. Overall, School A had the highest scores when compared to School B and School C. This school is also the smallest of the three schools with approximately 50 students. Return rate for completed staff surveys was 60 percent.

School B:

Area	Ave	Range
Student Interaction	3.69	3.55 - 3.85
Community Relations	3.64	3.15 - 4.00
Physical Appearance	3.62	3.15 - 4.00
Discipline/Environment	3.57	2.92 - 3.92
Attitude and Culture	3.50	2.85 - 3.85
Learning and Assessment	3.38	3.08 - 3.69
Leadership/Decisions	3.26	3.00 - 3.50
Faculty Relations	3.24	2.96 - 3.54

Table 10: Rank Order of Aspects in School B

School B scores ranged between 3.24 and 3.69, which was in the high and highest rankings on the Likert scale used to evaluate agreement of the statements in the eight areas. Student Interaction was scored the highest by staff, while Faculty Relations was scored the lowest by staff. Overall, School B did not have the highest scores, nor did they have the lowest

scores. This school has approximately 174 students. Return rate for completed staff surveys was 76 percent.

School C:

Area	Ave	Range
Physical Appearance	3.54	2.85 - 3.85
Community Relations	3.50	2.85 - 3.85
Discipline and Environment	3.47	2.95 - 3.65
Attitude and Culture	3.46	2.89 - 3.75
Student Interactions	3.46	3.05 - 3.80
Faculty Relations	3.46	3.15 - 3.75
Learning and Assessment	3.28	3.15 - 3.45
Leadership/Decisions	3.24	3.10 - 3.35

Table 11: Rank Order of Aspects in School C

School C scores ranged between 3.24 and 3.54, which was in the high and highest rankings on the Likert scale used to evaluate agreement of the statements in the eight areas. Physical Appearance was scored the highest by staff, while Leadership and Decision Making was scored the lowest by staff. Overall, School C had the lowest scores when compared to School B and School C. This school is the largest of the three schools with approximately 440 students. Return rate for completed staff surveys was 74 percent.

All three schools:

Area	Ave	Range
Community Relations	3.58	3.50 - 3.64
Student Interactions	3.57	3.46 - 3.69
Physical Appearance	3.56	3.52 - 3.62
Attitude and Culture	3.55	3.46 - 3.69
Discipline and Environment	3.53	3.47 - 3.57
Faculty Relations	3.47	3.24 - 3.64
Learning and Assessment	3.43	3.28 - 3.63
Leadership/Decisions	3.29	3.24 - 3.37

Table 12: Rank Order of the Eight Areas by School and Combined Three Schools

All three schools' scores combined ranged between 3.29 and 3.58. All mean scores fell within the high middle range. However, the top scores leaned closer to the highest ranking while the lowest score was leaning towards the middle-high point. Based on the combined data from all three schools, Community Relations and Student Interactions were the aspects of school climate that staff scored the highest on the Likert scale based on the behaviors in their schools. According to the Alliance of the Association of School Climate (AASC), community relations referred to the relationship between the ways the school is perceived externally (2014). This included how welcoming the school is and how they utilized resources in the community which included parents. In other words, it looked at the extent to which the school served as the center of the community. Additionally, ASSC defined student interactions as consideration of student expectations, peer interactions, and the way these exchanges existed within the context of the school climate. It also included the intentionality versus the accidental qualities of the students' behaviors and how the school is governed.

For one of the lowest scores, Learning, Assessment, and Instruction examined the relationship between the management and discipline approaches within the school and the climate that is created as a result (ASSC, 2014). This category included the degree to which management strategies promoted higher levels of responsibility and motivation within the teacher-student interactions. Leadership and Decision-Making, which received the lowest score, examined the relationships within decision-making processes and the climate that is created as a result. This category included the degree to which decisions were made collectively by a group with shared values that are part of the school's vision. Additionally, Leadership and Decision-Making also considered how the leader in his/her role impacted the school.

Research Question 2: Which aspects of school climate did principals perceive as having the greatest impact on student achievement?

Introduction and Overview of the Process

Using Seidman's (2006) protocol, three interviews were conducted with each principal over a period of four weeks. The purpose of the first interview was to gain an understanding of the background of the principals and to learn how they became school principals. During the second interview, focus was on learning about their lived experiences as a school principal and understanding how they influenced school climate as a leader. Finally, the third interview allowed the principals to reflect on their experiences and bring meaning to them as they related to school climate. Additionally, the results from the surveys of the teachers informed the principals' questions as they considered aspects of school climate related to leading the school.

The data from all nine interviews were transcribed to ensure reliability and accuracy of the obtained information. Interviews were then coded using Saldana's (2014) approach to analyzing qualitative data. Of the many approaches that Saldana presents, in vivo coding seemed to best capture the essence of the first round of coding. This is also described by Saldana (2014) as "literal coding" or "verbatim" coding (p. 91). Words or short phrases from the principals were reviewed. They were then categorized and counted by terms and phrases to determine which themes and categories emerged.

Second cycle coding was more focused and based on thematic or conceptual codes (p. 209). The questions and theoretical framework helped to guide coding. The data was analyzed and sorted by interviews. Pattern coding allowed for grouping those summaries into smaller categories. Next, the data was analyzed to develop comprehensive understanding of the

information obtained. This informed the reporting process as it related to the research questions and theoretical framework.

Fullan's Three Keys

Fullan (2014) stated that in order to maximize the principal's effectiveness, three keys are essential. The principal must lead the learning, serve as a change agent, and work as a system leader. Given the extensive analysis conducted on the data obtained from the interviews, the participants clearly saw their primary role as leading the learning, although they also recognized the need to serve as a change agent as they moved their organization forward in a continuous process of improvement. Finally, given the complexities of their organization, they recognized the need to work within the system, whether that be within their district, within their school administrative unit, within their community, or within the educational system at large. This included the state level and beyond. However, it must also be stated that often these keys co-exist and that they do not always stand in isolation. There is crossover, as leadership is complex, multi-layered, and multi-faceted. The data collected reflected this.

Leading the learning

Principals are responsible for leading the learning in their schools. Fullan (2014) provided detailed information regarding how principals can support and facilitate this work. Teachers who work together to improve instruction can have a greater impact on student learning. The principal is central to this purposeful work and must lead the efforts in the process of setting goals for students, reviewing data for the individual students, establishing instructional practices to address learning needs, and provide opportunities for teachers to meet and collaborate.

Principal A is a teaching principal given the small size of her school, which is comprised of 50 students. She is a reading specialist/teacher as well as the leader. This allows for her to work with the teachers in what she described as a “real way.” As the reading specialist, she directly works with students and staff on curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. Other times, she is the principal serving on the district leadership team, representing her school at a school board meeting, or supervising staff.

Principal B who is also part of multi-district School Administrative Unit (SAU), and the leader of approximately 174 students, also speaks about leading the learning as it relates to differentiating and meeting the needs of the staff. He specifically stated:

We have a leadership team with a representative from each grade level. In the beginning of the year, we meet every two weeks and now we are in February, and we meet every six weeks. We set three priorities and the team negotiates these priorities. We are preparing for the Smarter Balanced Assessment. We are trying to develop continuity with our spelling program. We are looking for cohesiveness so we have been using *Words Their Way*. So we went to another school because they were using it. We had talked it out and decided that grades k-4 was ready to adopt it, but grade five was not. That was okay with me as a principal. I recognize that principals need to have their own timeline for adoption, but we also have to do this when people are ready. Just as we differentiate for kids. We have to differentiate for teachers. So we talked about the ten principles of the program, and I asked the fifth grade team if they had a problem with them. They said they didn't. So, I asked if they'd consider them as they continue to teach spelling. If we want our teachers to move forward, let's be honest and transparent. Let's work on our strengths, honor diversity, and people.

Principal B reflected on how the school had changed since he first arrived, which was twelve years ago. He compared the role of the principal to that of a soccer coach and referee:

When I first came here, the school was very principal-centered. I told the staff that I don't have all the answers. We have to figure them out together. I used to coach soccer for a number of years, and coaching taught me to stay out of the way. I refed a lot, too.

The best refs are hardly noticed. It's my job to facilitate. I don't have all of the answers.

Both principals, having served in their schools from seven to twelve years, had the hindsight of seeing how their school had evolved based on practices for leading the learning in their schools.

Our conversations continued as we discussed the shifts in curriculums. Schools have moved from teaching the state frameworks to the adoption of the Common Core State Standards.

Principal A provided a detailed account of how this happened in her school:

I start with the research and the reading and focus mainly on our goals in terms of what the whole district is working on. And I try to look towards assessing my teachers, like I would do with a child. What do my teachers know, what do they need to learn, and how can I best help them get there?

She further provided an example of this:

We decided to work towards the reading workshop model. I have to do some research as to what that exactly is, and check out some videos, and chat with my colleagues about what they're doing. We are looking at a facilitator to come in and teach that and then just talk, talk, talk, again.

Principal A further described how professional development helped to support staff learning and how she supported staff in her role:

Last year, I offered folks an opportunity to go and observe some classrooms that are implementing reading workshop. Let them get their brains around what it looks like in a classroom. Hopefully talk to colleagues who are having success with the model and build their interest and engagement... their desire to find out more about it. There are some subtle things like sharing readings, documents in the mailboxes, at staff meetings. Talking to them about my observations. I've spent some time in other schools looking at the model and coming back and sharing what I saw and what I found exciting and try to link it to the research. So it's a constant stream of bringing it back and talking again, bringing it up, and giving them opportunities to get comfortable with it. And now in a year, I've tried to make it clear that the expectation is they try some of the elements in reading workshop in their classrooms, not including that in any kind of evaluation way but to process it this time, inviting them to try, asking them questions, how's it going, what do you need, that kind of thing. Making sure they have the materials they need.

Principal A further commented on the professional learning community (PLC) they have developed with the larger school administrative unit:

And then what's been really helpful this year, because we've really increased our PLC time with the administrators in the district, which offers them grade level peers. I don't have that here in the building. I have one teacher that teaches 5-6 [grade levels] all by herself. She has no colleagues to bounce things off of. So we've really tried as a district, to build in our PD [professional development] time, giving them opportunities to talk to their colleagues. Next year, as they know, I will then be including some of the reading workshop in their evaluations. I will be looking for the framework.

Principal A linked leading the learning with providing professional development to her staff:

I've always encouraged staff to pursue their own interests, and certification, and things they are really excited about as well. We are fortunate that we are not a school that has budget restrictions. And I have some rural schools grant money that I have been really flexible about and send people whenever they ask, 'Can I go to the Christa McAuliffe tech conference?' And last year for the first time, we encouraged someone to go to a national level conference, which was a first since I've been here. To try and encourage them to grow professionally.

Principal A also spoke about herself as a learner, specifically as she is observing staff trying to teach the workshop model. "I am trying to learn myself. And we're all trying to learn how to give the kids the best possible experience with reading." As a reading specialist/principal, she sees herself as both a learner and a leader.

Principal B also spoke of leading the learning as it relates to knowing his students and his staff:

There are some fundamental pieces that have to take place. One is you have to know your clients. Right? That's really important. You have to know who the students are... [long, thoughtful pause] So, I make a point of being in the classrooms as much as I can. Being at recess, being at lunch, being as visible as I possibly can. And some of that time is simply observing and I try not to be that kind of stand back observer. I try to be that circle observer. Sometimes I participate, and then sometimes, I am a stand back observer. I think it's really important to know who the kids are. Not only is it important to know their names, but I also need to know who they are...[long, thoughtful pause] That means interacting with teachers, both formally and informally. Thinking about their students. I think it's really important that I know who my teacher are. What their

strengths are and what their professional needs are. And I feel the rest of my job is providing them with the resources that they need so they can be successful.

Principal B also emphasized the importance of working with teachers to provide them with feedback using a coaching model:

I try to be as visible as I can in talking with teachers, interacting with them on a daily basis. Interacting with students. I do a lot of observations, but more formative. It's not as much evaluative. I do the evaluative piece when I am required to, but most of it is just providing feedback. Talking about specific students who are doing well. Students who are struggling. And kind of getting a sense of what teachers are trying to accomplish. I think it's important that I am well-versed in best practice. So it's important that I surround myself with people who can support teachers in best practice. And it's not just me. We use a coaching model, a math coach and a literacy coach. We work with a science coach who comes in for project-based work.

Like Principal A, Principal B shared a model of embedded professional development:

Our focus is more on not to bring in support from the outside, but to recognize the expertise we have within. So that starts with the leadership team right on through the building. We don't have typical staff meetings. We have five business meetings a year after school, and every other week in the morning, we have Thursday morning PD [professional development]. And so that's where a lot of work with the coaches happens, in terms of focusing on explicit work and goals that we are working towards. Its math and science and then the coaches do a lot of push in the classrooms – observing and providing feedback.

This model allowed for staff to receive immediate feedback and assistance as they work through curriculum changes.

Principal B also spoke in-depth about the partnership the school has with a local University, and the impact it has had on his school and himself. He reflected on this:

We have hundreds of students, or practicum students, interns, common focus, graduate level interns. We have these students with us and they really influence our teaching in so many positive ways because by having them in the school we are constantly in the process of evaluating our practice. Why do you do what you do? And that's a really important question for an intern to ask and when you are a teacher, and you have a pre-service teacher constantly asking you those questions, you begin to ask, 'Why do we do what we do? Why do we do it this way?'

Principal B explained that by having these pre-service teachers, staff begins to question their own practice:

We all kind of develop those ruts of comfort. When you have those pre-service teachers you begin to recognize that it's okay to step out of a rut, or step into a new rut, or create a new rut, and be okay with that.

Principal B described instructional rounds as tool for "collaborative feedback for instruction."

It's a good model. We are doing this as a SAU too, so it's SAU-wide. So it's very broad reaching. This is more focused on the interns, but our goal is to eventually to get the teachers participating in that too. Not only evaluating the interns, but using it as a model to evaluate the teachers too.

In summary, Principal B stated that having the connection with the University “pushes the envelope of new ideas of thinking and doing things.” And if they did not have this partnership, they would not have those opportunities.

School C also connected professional development with leading the learning. Principal C, who leads a school with approximately 440 students, spoke about how the district sets the vision for this work and how it is also uses a model of embedded professional development:

It starts at the district level, and we have a really great team of administrators. So at the elementary level we have four. We have three elementary and then the upper elementary and so you know preschool through sixth grade, we are a cohort and so we plan all of that together and we set the vision for where we would like to be and then what are we going to need to do to get there. Last year, we were responsible for professional development in the district. The last two years we’ve had August Academy [August Academies are the professional days that are scheduled prior to the start of school.]. Essentially we did all of the professional development at the beginning of the school year. We planned three days before the school started. It was wonderful. We have a partnership with a local university, and we actually use their college campus. So they put us in one building and so we had beautiful surroundings and we had teacher-leaders present information and they did some work around literacy and reading. We’re just rolling out the Lucy Calkin’s program [Lucy Calkin’s Units of Study is from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University in New York City.] so we focused on those two areas. And we had brought a guest speaker and she was wonderful. She was a real writer herself and she set the tone for the whole Academy. And then administrators shared the vision of what the work was going to look like for the coming year. And then we had

teacher leaders leading small sessions and it was wonderful. It was a great way to kick off the year.

Principal C continued to explain how this was supported throughout the school year:

Because we have professional learning team time, that's where we come back and talk about the initiative. So this year, we just focused on literacy and last summer we focused on math, reading, and writing. And that was lofty and too much. It was huge. Good things happened but people were tapped out. The PLT [professional learning time] meetings and staff meetings allow us time to continue working on the units of study [From Lucy Calkin's]. The teachers have brought data and scored some of the writing pieces with rubrics. So you're sustaining that initiative because by not having professional development days in the year, you have to find time in the day.

All three principals had creatively constructed schedules that allowed teachers time during the day to collaborate around professional development initiatives. They have created Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) which has allowed professional staff to communicate and share best practices around curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These are the ways the principals 'lead the learning' in their schools.

District and System's Player

District player

Fullan's (2014) second key to maximizing the principal's impact requires the principal to serve as a district and system player. Principals must be able to work with colleagues at the district level and with those within the system. These include other principals, specialists, superintendents, school board members, community members, and anyone else who may be able to elevate the principal's position within the organization.

Principal A described her district and her role:

We have a whole range of ages and experiences on our leadership team and people with very different styles. The schools are very different, and we just started last year, actually, this is the first year we've done it consistently, we *said* we started it last year, but we really didn't, have our own weekly PLC [Professional Learning Community] meetings. In addition, the superintendent does a monthly admin council, but it's more about 'these laws have changed, clamp down on this, watch that, you know...' Whereas, in our PLC's, we've been doing joint visits to all different schools with little protocols with things we're looking for, and we come back together and talk about what we saw.

She further elaborated on their work together:

It's elementary to high school admin as well. So we get to see the high school and each other schools and talk about what we're seeing in each other schools. And right now we're planning a presentation together using a Google doc, so we are writing notes in the margin together. So, I think the expectation of 'we are a team' is there from above. We are getting time each week. We are being provided with the team time each week. It is helpful.

Principal A spoke about the impact it has on her school, "When I bring things back to our school, it's not about me, it's about us." This is an example of the benefits and impact of what Fullan (2014) described as being a district player.

Furthermore, Principal A spoke about the impact it has had on her as a leader, "And hearing some of the things that my colleagues say, help me to solidify my message." She further explained, "Yeah... that's a good point. Yeah right, I should think about that too." She also speaks of the organization's benefit, "So collectively, I think we are more effective. So that's

part of why we want to do this presentation together. We want to send that strong message to our staff, “Your principals are united.” Things were not always this way in Principal A’s district.

Principal A described and compared what it was like a few years ago:

One of the big concerns a few years back was that different things were being implemented differently, and the expectations were different in each school. It didn’t impact our district as much as it impacted the different schools. There are five schools in our district. So when one school was expected to follow the letter of the law and the other one wasn’t, and one was working on math when they should be working on science, it makes this real inequity and confusion.

She described how this impacted the organization:

So, a lot of our time was spent kibitzing about everything that was wrong. So now with everyone planning together, there aren’t these opportunities for people to sit and kibitz about what’s wrong, because they have a challenge in front of them. They’ve all had the same trainer. That’s something we’ve learned having Jane [pseudonym for outside consultant] working with everybody in the district. It gives the consistent language, the consistent message, and we as administrators are able to be consistent in our message as well and that’s made an enormous difference.

Principal A was able to articulate the change that had taken place by reflecting on how it is now and how it had been. Changes in district leadership have impacted her role as a district player.

Principal B also reflected back about how it was as he considered his role as a district player:

When I first came here, with the past superintendent, we were a separate district, and we pretty much did our own thing. It was the school board and me! You know, the SAU initiatives were really more just guiding statements and professional development around state initiatives and things. But, it's very different now.

He further explained:

I would say that back then, I was pretty much in charge. And now I am pretty much a middle manager. So big change. And it was tough to give that up... to kind of turn that over and it's still hard for me at times because I don't always agree with the top or decisions aren't always made collaboratively.

Principal B continued to speak about his role and the impact of the superintendent, "Being an administrator who believes in the collaborative process, and when it comes top down, it can become challenging to accept and to buy into. But, I am also going to do my best to be a team player." He further spoke about the community and how his role has changed:

In terms of leadership, one of the things we try to do and continue to do is to reach out to the community. One of the things I talked to the board about early on was we would have neighborhood meetings, and we did it primarily during the budget season. I would get up and talk about a little bit about the programs, the school. I'd talk about our visioning process. We've got some 55 and over communities, so we'd do it in their central building, and we'd get 20 people who would show up and some of the local little cul-de-sacs, you'd get 25 people who would show up, and we did quite a bit of that for a number of years early on, and that got back to the superintendent. People liked that. People felt like they were

part of something and included in the process, particularly the seniors who had a negative experience in the town.

He further spoke about the age 55 and over community and the efforts made to connect with this group of citizens in town:

They built on Sunnybrook Farm [pseudonym for the development] a 55 and over community, pretty big, pretty extensive, but the town denied trash pick-up for them. So these people are paying good money to be part of the community, and they got to take care of their own trash. The rest of the town is getting trash pick-up. So bottom line, these people are not feeling great about the town and their tax dollars and then to have the school come and be very welcoming. We offered them the use of the gym, ‘You want group meetings? You want...’ You know, this is your community school. It’s available to you.

He described the relationship further:

We want you to know what’s happening with the budget. We want you to be a part. Come to our winter plays, to our concerts, making connections with the community. That was early on, probably five years. That was a big piece of that reaching out piece. We don’t do as much. We don’t do it anymore.

Changes in the town’s organizations, led to changes in the relationship with the school, “When we switched to SB2 the whole process changed.” [In 1995, the New Hampshire Legislature passed Senate Bill 2, which became part of the Revised Statutes Annotated, RSA 40:12-15. This allows any local political subdivision of the State whose legislative body raises and appropriates funds through any annual meeting to adopt voting by official ballot on all warrant articles

{Retrieved from: <http://revenue.nh.gov/faq/municipal-property.htm#sb2>}. However, at that point, Principal B felt they had built “collateral” with the town and some of that was lost.

Principal B had also implemented a Parent Advisory Council (PAC) in his 5th year as principal so the community would have a “voice in the process of growing the school in initiatives.” He strongly felt that because it was a “community school” it should have a “community voice.” Principal B stated, “We should be doing what the community wants.” To that end, he described how the school sought out the community’s feedback:

We held a day-long meeting where we collected, we basically surveyed people. We basically filled the gymnasium with a bunch of people and fired an open survey conversation with them about what they valued, what they wanted as a community. And things like... ‘We want a foreign language program. We would like to see the school moving towards alternative energy sources to heat and light the building.’ It was a pretty extensive list. That was another outreach piece that we did, again myself and the school board working collaboratively collecting this data and information. And, through that process, PAC [Parent Advisory Council] studied foreign language and brought a foreign language to our school. The community wanted us to look at full day kindergarten and we ended up doing extended day kindergarten. And all of these came from the community meeting and the school board hanging on to those ideas and saying the community asked for these things. And one by one... People were pleased.

To that end, they applied for a grant and build the fourth largest solar array in the state that had enough kilowatts to light the building. In fact, the school is profiting from this array because

they are now able to sell it back to a prominent business in the community, a local energy supplier.

However, this is not the case today. Principal B stated, “A change of administration came in and it’s more centralized, top-down.” Whereas he was “pretty independent doing his own thing” and now he is told, “No. You’re not doing that.” He described himself as being a “cog.” In spite of that, he is optimistic. “I value the school. I value being here, but, it’s changed a lot.” They still have PAC, and they are currently looking at developing a Universal Preschool. He specifically speaks to how the change has affected him as a leader:

So it’s been an adjustment for me, where I ran my own show and had an assistant superintendent who supported that and was more hands off. Not that we didn’t talk. We talked all the time. He provided lots of different supports, but it was my show. Am I a team player? I’m trying to be. But it’s been a change for me. It’s been a difficult change.

In a multi-district School Administrative Unit (SAU), over time changes in leadership at the superintendent’s level have impacted Principal B and how he “interfaces” with the school board and community.

On the other hand, Principal C, is a principal in a single district School Administrative Unit where the superintendent has longevity in the district with many years of experience. She spoke about her role as a district player as it related to district committees. “All of the administrators are on district committees. That’s an expectation. My big committee has been service learning projects. A couple of years ago, I was co-chair of the 504 [Section 504 is a federal law designed to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities in programs and activities that receive Federal financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education. The

Section 504 regulations require a school district to provide a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) to each qualified student with a disability who is in the school district's jurisdiction, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability. Under Section 504, FAPE consists of the provision of regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet the student's individual educational needs as adequately as the needs of nondisabled students are met. {Retrieved from: <http://education.nh.gov/instruction/integrated/504.htm>}] district plan, and I'm on the district safety committee." Our conversation continued and Principal C also spoke about the committees in her building. She stated, "I'm on a lot of committees and then we have committees in our building like crazy, and at some point it's like let's step back and take a look and see if some of these committees can go away." Principal C felt that in some cases, goals had been met, but the committee was still meeting:

We have an attendance committee, which I think is hugely valuable, and we've made some great strides in reducing our attendance. And I just read an article on a specific study about first graders who don't have regular attendance, which we all know but this was documented research, and I'm like, 'Hey, so it's validated...hey, get your kid to school.' But, we have committees for everything.

Although district work is in place, focusing on the right work is what is most important.

All three principals spoke about the relationship between the school and the district which was largely contingent upon the role of the superintendent. The superintendent drives district initiatives including committee work which impacts the principal. The relationship between the principals and the superintendent impacts the school community. The participants compared being a district player to being a team player. Their role as a district player can either

support or hinder their performance as a school leader. This is in large part, due to the superintendent.

System player

Fullan (2014) also stated that the principal must also act a system player. Systems include not only the district, but the larger system of education including the state and even national level. Although this is challenging, it is necessary for the school. Principals must leverage their position with stakeholders inside and outside of their district in order to maximize their impact. Two of the principals spoke about the role of superintendent and the impact it has.

Principal A admittedly stated that this is challenging for her, and her geographic location made it that much more difficult:

I must admit, I am doing a lot less of that now than I did in my previous position. I don't know if it's my stage of life, or the fact that I am teaching, running the community center, and being the principal, and being so far away from everything. I don't get down to the regional meetings. We were in Concord all the time, it was easier to do.

However, she did elaborate on her position in a multi-district SAU (School Administrative Unit), and how this impacted student achievement and high-stakes testing:

The math committee is making some noise about Everyday Math. And so what they're doing is putting all the data on all the children in the SAU together to assess their strengths and weaknesses. And for us, we are in the 97-100 proficiency levels, but when we get mixed up with rest of the district we are included as a School in Need of Improvement (SINI). But our 50 or 40 students

are going to get lost in the 200 to 3000 students, however many there are in the rest of the district. So what they target in needs may not fit what our needs are.

Principal A suggested that the district needs may not meet the individual needs of the schools.

She continued with explaining how important it is that their voices are heard:

I've been percolating a lot about this in the last six or seven weeks. Like for instance, the strategic planning committee meeting they've scheduled on the night of my budget hearing. And I said, 'Wait a minute, that's our budget hearing.

That means I can't go, and none of my staff can go, and the board members who have been participating can't go.' And they went ahead and held it anyway. So, if we are this collaborative group of people who are working so well together and you want us to participate as equals, then don't shut us out of these important processes.

Principal A further stated, "We have been working hard to unite ourselves as a district, and if that's our goal, then we have to be sure that when we schedule important meetings that everybody's got an opportunity to be at that table." Being a district and system player is complex.

In fact, Principal A also mentioned that they are currently looking for a superintendent for the third year in a row. Currently their retired superintendent is filling this role on a part-time basis. The assistant superintendent has been driving many of the curriculum efforts and district work, which could be in jeopardy depending on the change in leadership at the superintendent's level. Principal A stated, "Finding good quality individuals who are willing to take on the role of the superintendent in this phase has been challenging." Indeed it is, as it is a state and national concern.

Principal B also addressed how the superintendent has impacted him as a district and system leader, and again referred to the word, “interfacing.” He further elaborated:

There’s a lot of things that aren’t communicated well. For example, whose role is it to support the school board? Well it was very clear it was my role to support the school board and then there was a very different approach to how the school board was managed. I’ve had five or six different assistant superintendents. They change about every two or three years.

Principal B continued with an example to support this:

One assistant superintendent comes in and takes over the whole board piece and takes the budget piece away from me. I do my little piece of it, and I work with the school board chair to support them in their presentation and that’s just how it was. And then, the next assistant superintendent comes and they don’t do it that way at all. And this happened last year, and it got to the presentation, and I hadn’t worked with them, I wasn’t involved.

Principal B continued to describe what happened after the meeting. He felt that because he was left out of the process, a lot of what he could have shared was lost.

So, I just took it upon myself this year. So, I went up to her after that meeting. I went up to the board chair and I said, ‘I am so sorry. You weren’t prepared. I didn’t realize.’ She didn’t realize. ‘Next year, you and I will do this together, kind of like the old days.’ So, she and I met after school three times. We developed the PowerPoint, and I walked her through it. She was ready to go. To me that’s the perfect example of flowing... You got to be on your toes.

As a result, Principal B felt it was most important to have a plan with some understanding.

He further stressed the importance of “collaboration” at district leadership team meetings, and described how they are typically run. A colleague and fellow principal made suggestions to the superintendent about ways they could open up dialogue including team time. The discussions were around topics that Principal B considered irrelevant or not meaningful. Although it was suggested that they go for breakfast and build community with each other, Principal B felt their time could have been better spent if they were dealing with things that mattered and were more pertinent like transition. He did describe the team as being “caring, mean-well, and hard working.” However, Principal B posits, “I just don’t think we always communicate real effectively because it’s big, that’s the problem.”

Principal C spoke about being a system player in terms of “networking” with local municipalities including the police and fire departments. She further explained her relationship with a local university that consisted of placing interns in classrooms and having a cohort of teachers attain their master’s degrees. She is also involved with the state principals’ association. This is how she viewed herself as being a system player.

System Player Sets Priorities

Principals spoke about the competing demands of their time and attention, which led to our discussion about setting priorities within the system. Some of these mandates were imposed by superintendents, school boards, or the Department of Education while others represented needs of the school, students, and staff. Principal A articulated this:

It’s kind of a mixed bag. The reading initiative was kind of we’re going this way as a district, and so the decision was basically made. We worked hard in the last couple of years to get district-wide curriculum committees. We know math is

coming next year. We are starting to look at math programs and implementation.

So some of the decision-making is made at the administrative level.

Principal A explained the role of curriculum leaders:

As far as what we need here in this school because we are different, I always bring that back to them, and also part of the PLC time. I have a representative from the school on every curriculum team and the expectation is for them to not just be part of the team; they're leaders in the school in that area. So right now Bob is my literacy expert. I encourage him to come and talk with the teachers as well because I think there's some real value to them sharing with each other instead of them just hearing it from me. So, I try hard to work with that curriculum leader.

She further clarified how staff sets priorities or goals:

As it gets to the beginning of the year, we have three workshop days before school. And one of those is always - here are the district goals, expectations, what do we then focus on for our PD (professional development) plan for the year? And one of those goals is always about the district – what are we going to do and then the other goals are generally personal. We've done a lot with drive – autonomy, self-directed learning and how important that is for everybody, especially the adult learner.

Principal A acknowledged the commitment to the district goals but balances this with allowing staff choice to be more self-directed and to allow for autonomy. She recognized how important this is for her staff as adult learners.

Principal B also supported the notion that setting priorities is a collaborative process. He stated this:

It's collaborative work between the SAU (School Administrative Unit), which clearly sets goals, the school board, and our leadership team of the school. It's kind of an interface between all of those groups and obviously the leadership team is more influenced by the direction coming from the school board and SAU.

He further clarified this with an example of this "interfacing" of all three groups:

The school board's goal has been around literacy, continuing to understand the Common Core and implementing that in the classroom. And we had our discussions with the coaching team and classroom visits, and what came out is a focus on vocabulary development, spelling, and fiction writing components. So we went back to the leadership team with those big pieces and then said to them, here are some of the pieces and we are limited, what do you think? We are going to look at these areas and we recognize as a team that these are the areas that need to be addressed. What do you think is the most need? And they felt there was the most need to address the spelling piece, then the vocabulary piece, and working with words piece, so we took that on as a project. And now we are in the process of adopting *Words their Way* as a tool, an instructional tool.

He continued to explain the process and his role as the principal:

So basically the ship's pointed in the direction, and my goal is to empower the professionals to look at the direction the ships pointed in and say okay... we'll look in that direction at what our greatest needs are. So it's kind of a scaffolded process that supports itself, of course strong communication happens across the

process. My part is to make sure that everyone sees and understands the work that we are looking to accomplish.

Principals balance school goals and priorities with district initiatives and directives.

Change Agent

The third key that Fullan (2014) identified is the principal serves as a change agent. The principal challenges the status quo by building trust and creating a commonly owned plan for success. He contends that this is necessary as principals maximize their impact and continue to strive for improving their organization. Change is necessary, and the principal is instrumental in this process. All three principals spoke about being a change agent and the challenges associated with this role.

Principal A reflected back and spoke about change as it related to changing teachers' views, and how this helped to change the culture in the school:

I think of how I changed the teachers, their opinions towards the parents. They used to see the parents as a threat rather than an opportunity to work together and collaborate. That in itself has made a difference for kids. They learn a lot from each other. They trust each other and that's so good for everybody. It's changed the culture of the building in a big way. Trust...

She continued with discussing how this happened:

I've done things kind of naturally, just trying to do things in the same way consistently, nonthreatening, staying the course, asking for help from my colleagues, my friends, my superintendent, the people on the staff that I was tighter with – using them sometimes to stand with me. I will admit, it wasn't in a planful way. But, just realizing that things needed to be different and being okay

with being unpopular, and trying to grow a really thick skin so you can hear people criticize you, not that I would say that they were absolutely wrong in some cases, there was some truth in what they were saying and realizing that and making some changes in myself. It was a give and take process.

In the process of learning to be a change agent, Principal A changed.

We further discussed the challenges associated with being a change agent, which included being “unpopular” and “feeling uncomfortable” even when it was difficult:

You walk into a place where people are talking behind your back about what you’ve done, or the awful things they perceived you’ve done. It has helped me become stronger. Our superintendent, although he had not a very good fuzzy way, just kept telling me, ‘Don’t let them see you. Don’t let them see you’re upset. Keep going forward. Believe in what you’re saying. Don’t let it get to you.’ Or Joe who was my mentor, would say, ‘Go work out. Go have a run. Don’t take it personally. It happens to everybody. It’s part of the job. It comes with the job.’

Mentors and supervisors became necessary for support. However, in spite of the support of a mentor Principal A admitted, “There were time times when I went home and cried, why am I doing this?” The answer lied in her students, families, and even her school board:

Whenever things were getting testy around here, I would go to kindergarten or first grade, have them read to me, laugh with me, and try to remind myself that this is why I am doing that. And I was lucky that I had some really good parents in this community that continued to tell me what a difference I was making. I got letters from the board and they said, ‘We don’t know what’s going on...’ they

could feel it, but they continued to tell me that I was valued as part of their community and that I was doing good things for the kids and they really valued that and appreciated that. So that was kind of helpful, real helpful.

Changing the status quo is challenging, and having support from the community helped.

Principal B addressed the different types of change including “required change” that comes from the state or federal government and then “change as it relates to better practice, stronger community, towards things you believe in.”

Required change, mandated change, is the better term, is what good leaders do, or at least what I try to do, whether I am a good leader or not, I don’t know, but I try to keep it manageable so that people aren’t overwhelmed. I might feel overwhelmed, but I try not to show that. I take things one piece at a time as mandated change and sell that piece the best that I can, whether I agree with that or not.

On the other hand, mandated change that comes from outside of the organization is different.

He described, “There are four lenses in terms of what it means for students, what it means for teachers, what it means for families, and what it means for implementation and practice.” This is addressed through morning meetings and professional development with staff. He further provided elaboration:

I pose questions that would address those different areas and slowly implement and provide teachers with training, reading materials, opportunities for discussion, supports, and what we’re doing right now with the coaches. Talk about a mandate. We are right in the middle of the ultimate mandate right now. We are

taking it piece by piece, carefully selecting the right staff who have those leadership capacities to go to specialized training.

Principal B further explained how he developed capacity in his organization through teacher leadership:

So, for example, our tech teacher, I went and talked to her and we talked about the role she would take as the coordinator for the upcoming Smarter Balanced Assessment. And how she's embraced her role working with the six different classrooms that are going to be taking the assessments, helping the teachers understand the different components in their roles, becoming an expert herself and working with me to develop a plan for implementing this and carrying it out. Surrounding yourself with quality people who will support you, but all of its interwoven because that would never happen unless you created trust and relationships with people that they'll step forward to do it.

Principal B, like Principal A, spoke about the importance of trust. He stated, "They have to believe in you to take on this mandate. If they don't believe in you, then you are just shoving it down their throat saying, 'Take this. It's not my fault.' So that's one kind of change."

When it comes to mandated change from above, Principal B contended that trust is important in the organization to build leadership capacity with staff. Fullan (2014) would support the notion that it is essential to build trust through clear communication and expectations.

Principal B expressed his thoughts about the other kind of change which is, "The change you or your staff believes needs to happen in your school." He further stated his thoughts around intellectual intelligence (IQ) and emotional intelligence (EQ):

My IQ is slightly about average. My EQ is high. And I feel blessed by that because it's through your understanding of relationships and how to get people to come together and how to bring people together for change and not be afraid of change.

As a former guidance counselor, Principal B referenced the work of Dan Goleman and further commented on this:

It's that whole idea that people with those strong EQ qualities are those people open to change. And that's the kind of person I am. I am always promoting change. And of course, I got a lot of people around me who are afraid of change. But, you create a culture where people aren't always fully comfortable with it, they just get comfortable with it because that's the culture you create. So, I think that's huge in the process of change.

Like Principal A, Principal B spoke about the culture in his school, and described it in detail. "It involves collaboration. Those key foundational terms – collaborating, cooperating, communicating, and being respectful, promoting respect and ultimately building trust. And that's how you promote change." He also stated that it takes time, and that it is a process.

Finally, Principal B makes an analogy for the process of change, comparing it growing grass:

Change does not happen the way the federal government say it's going to happen or the way some think tank say it's going to happen. It happens the way people need it to happen, which is typically slow. It's like water slowly sinking into the soil, but once it's in there, it helps nourish everything, as opposed to rushing across the top and you have a flash flood but no water actually sets in. That's

how I feel we've become as a society. We're a flash flood, rather than a quiet rain, a settling rain that sinks in slowly and quietly. You just want a light drizzle as opposed to a torrent of water racing down and nothing ever sinks in. That's real change. But it's slow. Guess what? You sit and watch grass grow. It's slow. But when it takes off, it's thick and rich and it's beautiful, and you have to mow it once it's growing because it's growing on it's own at that point. You have to come by with your fertilizer once in a while and that's encouragement, encouraging people, being positive with people and recognizing and celebrating. It's the most important part. And that doesn't mean you have to look at the calendar and celebrate all the little events and that event. I mean if you do, that's fine. I don't have an issue with that, but celebrating is more personal and it's more what's happening in your school that's more meaningful. The key is how you chose to celebrate what's happening that supports change and keeps the grass growing.

In summary, according to Principal B, change is slow and it happens the way people need it to happen. But once it starts, it should be attended to, nourished, recognized, encouraged, and even celebrated.

Principal C spoke about her role as a change agent, specifically as it related to the changes that have taken place in her building around safety which included the installation of cameras and protocols. Then as she reflected further, she too recognized that some changes were mandated, like Smarter Balanced Assessments while other changes were self-imposed. Trust again becomes essential to change as Principal C shared an example of change:

RTI [Response to Instruction] has been huge for us. That was a lot of hard work and it was a lot of convincing people to give it a try and we are looking at focusing on math as we did with literacy. I think people trust that now because we've been doing this for so long. We have meetings where we talk about all of the students. The fact that we now have a refined process for talking about students' difficulties or successes and between those meetings we're talking about benchmarks. Having worked with a consultant has really helped us refine the process.

Principal C stated that their RTI model has become an example for the district:

Principal C spoke about the challenges with being a change agent. "The buy-in and the trust and trying to keep a positive face on it and then having the support and continuing to bring it up. If people feel like it's falling off the rails then that's their way out." The school has had some changes in leadership, which has proved to be challenging.

Principal C explained that for the second year in a row, she has a new assistant principal. Fortunately, the assistant principal was the former language arts coordinator so there is familiarity with the school. Additionally, there has been eleven new staff in the building this year. She stated, "Change, what change? I am just maintaining..." In light of the changes in curriculum, teacher effectiveness plans, and Smarter Balanced Assessments, change is just embedded in daily practice and part of what happens in schools.

Given the changes being thrust upon schools regarding the Common Core State Standards and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, change has become embedded in principal practice for school leaders. Trust and relationships were central to the change process.

Crossover of Keys

Leading the Learning, System Player, and Change Agent

All three participants agreed that their primary role was to lead the learning, as they worked alongside staff and analyzed student data in their professional learning teams in the quest for continued student growth and achievement. Collaboratively they discussed best practices of teaching as they relate to curriculum and instruction. They worked with different systems including the district and consultants as they prioritized their professional development needs. Finally, they served as a change agent while challenging the status quo and monitoring overall progress and making adjustments. The work was not always as neat and aligned as it might appear. There were times when one role was in conflict with another.

Principal A discussed Fullan's (2014) three keys of leadership, and poignantly stated, "There are times when being a system's player put me at odds with leading the learning because of the way the community wants the school led." Being part of a multi-district School Administrative Unit presented some unique challenges. She strongly felt that she was "charged" to lead the learning, however, conversations at the district level have brought about systemic changes that were not in line with her district. Given the "multiage small groups, demographics, and the support for the budget," Principal A feels that they are a "different animal." Therefore, she has to make decisions that are right for her district as she continues to lead the learning.

Principal A reflected on how important it was to build trust with the community and stakeholders in her district at the onset of her tenure:

As I sat at my budget meeting last night, I would like to think that the reason the budget passes and there's not a lot of conflict at my parent meetings and board meetings is because the people have come to trust me. I try to keep it open where they're able to participate in decisions before they get to be controversial and

communicate. They know where we're going and why we're going there so I don't have to be mopping it up afterwards.

Principal A has built trust with stakeholders, which has resulted in support for the school. This has happened through open and transparent communication.

As she further thought about Fullan's three keys (2014), she stated the importance of being able to "differentiate and build relationships." She clarified, "Whether they are the children, or the staff, the parents, the district players, you really have to be able to shift your abilities to be in very different relationships with all of these different people." She also emphasized the ability for a leader to be "empathetic." She explained:

You have to understand where people are coming from. There are people who are trying to be change agents or system players but by barging forward, and saying, 'It doesn't matter how they feel. We're going to implement this because this is what the district says we're doing.' As opposed to hearing what people are feeling and thinking. You may still have to charge forward, but if you don't have the ability to understand the feelings, fears, concerns, of the other person, than you don't really know how to help them to be able to achieve it.

By having empathy for people, Principal A is better able to achieve goals.

Principal B felt that all three keys were equally important, although some were easier than others. He compared this to "three sturdy legs on a chair." He didn't feel that any one was more important than another. He recognized the importance of leading the learning because that is what principals are supposed to do, while he also considered district leadership to be the most at "at risk." He further elaborated:

We're told what the learning is and there's a lot of things that are not in our control but there's a lot of room to still be creative. Being a district and system player is really dependent on the quality of the administrative leadership team that you work with and what they allow you to do and what they support. So that's pretty critical and a little scary because nobody wants these jobs. I would say that's the one that is most at risk.

He also stated that principals were charged to be change agents, and he has always considered himself an "early adopter." He stated:

I was fortunate enough to work with people who supported change and allowed those people who were early adopters to run with it, and that's what I am trying to do here. One of our strengths here is we have a lot of early adopters. We got volume. It helps. But, you got to know people. But I think the biggest thing I've done is for them to see shared leadership. It's all of us as leaders.

Principal B spoke about the many leaders in his building and the importance of allowing staff to chair committee work and serve on teams. It's important for staff to be managing, modeling, and leading. He concluded by saying, "The more top down it is, the most it's a spotlight school.

And what I mean by that is the principal is the spotlight, and the more unhealthy the school is."

To summarize, shared leadership leads to shared ownership.

Principal C feels that leading the learning is most important and is her area of strength. She provided examples in her district where this was encouraged. This included having a cohort of teachers attain their master's degrees and staying on top of reading journals, articles, and best practices. She feels it was very important to keep up with what is relevant and to plan professional development to support learning. Principal C recognized that all three keys are

important. She also feels that communication is essential with all of the keys, and the community involvement is important, as part of being a system player.

To summarize, all three keys are essential to school leadership. However, all three principals agreed that they're primary responsibility is to lead the learning. There are times when one key seems to be in conflict with another key. Communication is central to all three.

The Keys as They Relate to Decision-Making

Decision-making crossed over all three keys. Principals make decisions based on district and system mandates and directives. As they engage professional staff in the change process, they enlist the support and feedback of the staff around decision-making. Finally, as they lead the learning, it was incumbent on the principal to work with staff on decision-making as it relates to curriculum and instruction. Therefore, decision-making is central to all three keys.

Decision making is an essential part of the leader's role in the school. However, there are times when being a district player is in conflict with leading the learning. The participants offered insight into the complexities of leadership, recognizing decisions making as it relates to these keys. Principal A began:

It depends on who the decision is impacting. There are some decisions that come down from above and I just have to convince people that it's a good idea. Mostly, I try to make decisions that are going to be great for kiddos, next the staff and families. That it's going to be good for all of us as a whole, not just one person with an agenda.

She further spoke about decision making as it relates to being part of a multi-district school administrative unit (SAU):

One of the biggest issues I have had with my bigger SAU team is the drive towards more consistency in methodologies. And we have our own core methodologies that have been working very effectively for us. At the moment, Everyday Math, is an example. Our kiddos are 97-100 percent proficient in math. The math team, at the district, is talking about moving away from Everyday Math and going in another direction. So... I am trying very hard to be politically correct but still not have to come back to telling them that we are no longer using Everyday Math, especially when they are so committed to it and getting excellent results. I see no reason for considering changing my math program, but there's going to come a place where I am going to have to draw a line, make a decision, as you say.

We spoke further about the challenges of being part of a larger SAU with regard to decision making. Principal A continued:

That's been one of the hard things because our board supports this School A00 percent even if we do part ways with the SAU. We had an example at the beginning of the year where I contracted a speech therapist. She had a disagreement with the Special Education Director, who decided she was not going to be working in our district any longer. She has been working in our district eight years. The teachers love her, and the kids are doing great. I see no reason for us not to hire her and I did stand up and say to the superintendent I won't support that, which is a really difficult place to be.

This brings to light the fact that principals are often middle managers, caught between their school board and their superintendent. Principal A recognized that:

I did say to him, you are my boss, you obviously – you and the special ed director make the ultimate decision, but when people come to me, and they will, I won't be able to stand up and say I think this is best for our school because I don't (Principal A laughs). So anyway, they decided to bring that to the board and ask them. The board said, 'no, we are going to keep the person our staff and our principal is happy with so...' phew!

These are the bold decisions that principals sometimes need to make, and Principal A realizes this is at times necessary:

I don't want them worrying about someone getting fired. We don't need that. It's all good. It's not good for kids. It's not good for staff. And it's not good for them to be feeling like the SAU people are not behind them either. That's a dynamic that I don't want. We had enough of that early on.

Principal A has an understanding of the progress made towards building a climate of trust and respect. Wanting to maintain that, she is willing to make difficult decisions.

All three principals value working together with the teachers, and this impacts how decisions are made. Principal C described decision making:

There are some decisions that you just have to make and others that are made for you. Those are the ones I really don't like. But, the thing that's great is that I really respect the people that are telling me that this is the way that it has to be. It may annoy me a little bit, but I trust them.

Principal C continued and described how she worked with her staff to make decisions:

But I think I make decisions most of the time, a lot of the time, through my core team. I have my language arts coordinator, special ed coordinator, school

counselor, and assistant principal, and we meet every week and I set the agendas for all of those if there's anything coming up and what not, it's on there and we talk about and it. So the shared leadership piece is really huge for me. And I really want to, it's important to get opinions of the way people are feeling in the building.

Decision making is central to the principal's role in the school. All three principals have developed systems and processes for make decisions keeping the students and staff central.

Conclusion

All three keys are instrumental to maximizing the principal's impact on the organization. However, there are times when one key was in conflict with another key as previously mentioned. What is clear from all three participants is that the relationships they form, the trust they create, and their ability to make decisions were in the best interest of the organization.

National School Climate Framework

The National School Climate Council (2009) identified five standards that support school improvement efforts and they include: *a shared vision* for promoting a positive school climate, *policies* aimed at promoting the development of social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills and a comprehensive system that addresses barriers to learning and teaching, school *practices* that promote learning while enhancing engagement and address barriers to learning through the development of infrastructures for meeting this standard, an *environment* where all members are welcomed, supported and feel safe, and finally practices that promote *social emotional learning* and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justices (p. 3). The dialogue shared focused on these aspects of school climate as they relate to leadership. They are

further broken down by the following five categories: shared vision, policies, practices, environment, and social emotional learning.

Shared Vision

The school community must create a shared vision and a plan for promoting and sustaining a positive school climate (National School Climate Council, 2009).

Principal A referred to her school motto, which was posted in the foyer, “The little school with a big heart.” The shared vision is posted on the website and emphasized experiential learning, differentiated instruction, and keeping the child at the center of everything. In the principal’s second year, they developed a mission where, as a community, they promoted respect for all people. This mission is recited after the pledge of allegiance each day and at the weekly school meeting. It reads, “We take responsibility. We help each other out. We try hard. We play fair, and we try to include everybody.” This mission statement was developed by the staff and imparted on the children. Although it was written over six years ago, the principal felt it was still appropriate and effective.

Principal B spoke about a close relationship he had with a college professor at a local university. Together they led the school through a visioning process to help create a vision statement for the school. They called the vision their “Three Lines” from Project Zero. Together as a school community the staff discussed their philosophy of reading, effective instruction, and mathematics. The process took three years to complete and during that time they discussed curriculum and reporting as it related to student progress. But it was during that visioning process that they came to trust one another through collaboration and cooperation.

They currently have a mission statement in the lobby that reads, “Learning empowers all people.” This statement is used to guide their work as they discuss teaching. It was used to

bring the staff together and facilitate understanding of one another. Principal B further clarified that the root of their work is their “strong core values that as a school community, we strive to make decisions based on what is in the best interest of our students.” The driving piece is the students, not the content. He further explained:

The connective three lines we use to promote these habits of mind. It’s contained in the following four questions. When we make a decision, interact with a child, bond with a colleague, or plan an activity, or set up a schedule, we ask ourselves, how does this affect the learning potential of each child? How will this affect the growth and development of each child? And how does this acknowledge and honor the individuality of each child? And how does this show that I am being responsive to the words and actions of those around me?

Principal B acknowledges that most schools have a lot of this, but what is different is how their vision was constructed.

It took them almost five years, but by doing it together, it strengthened their understanding of each other. And ultimately, it “binds” them together as a staff. There were times when Principal B almost quit because of the “contrarians” and “negativity.” There were staff members who didn’t buy into the process:

Those people who needed to leave left because they could see they weren’t going to move me along. And over time people came to trust the process. The key questions are, ‘How do you build collaboration and how do you build collegiality where there is true meaningful interaction among the professionals, not just congenial, feel-good agreement?’

Principal B acknowledged that it was probably time to revisit their mission and vision given the changes in curriculum with the Common Core.

Principal C relates the development of the mission and vision with the work they did with their Response to Instruction (RTI) work. This was an off-shoot from their work with New Hampshire Responds, which was professional development aimed at working with school districts teams in helping them as they developed their RTI models. The group of teacher leaders then brought this back to their school and shared it at a staff meeting. Principal C described the process:

So we have a Universal Team that for three years did the work focused on each tier in the RTI model. And that team worked on writing a definition and then brought it back to the staff. But, you know, when I think about how that was born, it wasn't collective...everybody in the building. It was those, it was the teacher leaders that set that. That's one of those things I have been thinking about and how that got rolled out here several years ago.

Upon reflection, Principal C stated, "If we're not all on the same page, or feel like there is some specific purpose that we're here for, then you can lose your way." She recognized that they need to revisit the mission and vision, specifically as it relates to how they systematically look at teaching practices and student progress.

All three principals had a mission and vision statement, although each participant developed them differently. Two of the participants felt that it was time to review the existing statement and to work with the staff on rewriting it to be more collective, timely, and relevant. All three recognized that developing a mission and vision is a process that takes time and should be inclusive of the staff it impacts.

Policies and Environment

The school sets policies specifically aimed at developing and sustaining a positive school climate. Although there are many policies that principals could have focused on, all three specifically discussed safety.

The principal's greatest responsibility is keeping all students and staff safe. Given the violence reported in today's school, principals and stakeholders have taken drastic measures and precautions to ensure that policies, protocols, and procedures are in place to mitigate any potential threats to the school community. Schools have developed relationships with local police and fire departments as they work to comply with Safe Schools Act, Bully Prevention, and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Association).

All principals interviewed shared how they have put safeguards in place to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their students and staff. Principal A described how they balanced being welcoming with the public while taking safety precautions. Protocols have been developed for keeping the front door locked, which was not always the case in Participant A's time there as principal. The school is located in the heart of a tourist town, and many people would come wandering in off the Main Street to look around and see the school. However, there was one incident where it forced the school to take a harsh look at their protocols. Principal A described the situation:

We had this one incident when we had a woman on the playground get into it with one of my staff members. That led us to developing the whole reverse evacuation procedures. It's now on paper. Before that, it just wasn't something we thought about. We just developed these protocols. But, that was the first time we needed it. It went fine. All the kids came in and the PE teacher and I engaged this person

until everyone was safely back in the building. So everything worked out. You do have to be much more vigilant today.

Since that time there are more frequent drills, there's a watchful eye on the sex offender registry, and there's regular communication with the district about any safety concerns that might threaten the schools or community.

Principal A concluded her thoughts and stated, "There's this mentality that we live here in the mountains. It's an idyllic community. We look out for one another. But as the one incident showed us, it's not impossible to have safety concerns." Threats to students' and staff safety happen everywhere and being proactive in planning ensures a level of preparedness that schools are obligated to uphold.

Principal B spoke to how they addressed safety measures in his school, which included an assembled safety committee at the district and school level that meets quarterly. State recommended protocols have been adopted along with a comprehensive guide that provided teachers with specific information on handling different situations.

Principal B also mentioned how the physical building has changed in his time as principal. Like Principal A, when he first came to the school, the doors were unlocked. Since then, there are new doors with a pass card system and bullet-proof glass has been added to his office window, which came as a result of the incident at Sandy Hook, Connecticut. He described this:

Quite frankly after the shooting down in Connecticut, it was decided there was too easy access in the building just by blowing out that window (points behind him).

Here's that window, they blow it out, and they're right into the principal's office.

So, we put bullet-proof, heavy duty glass. It will break with a couple of shot gun blasts, but it's enough time that you can get out.

Incidents like Sandy Hook have caused schools to rethink their safety plans, physical structures, and brought to light the need for preparedness when it comes to safety measures.

Principal B further described his safety team, which is chaired by the school nurse. But, Principal B also spoke of not just the physical safety of his school, but also the emotional safety of his students. Programs like Responsive Classroom and Open Circle are proactive means that have been put in place to address pro-social behaviors. He further described practices that support this which included morning meetings, community building, and being a positive, welcoming, friendly place where everyone can feel safe. And finally, Principal B spoke about the Bully Policy, which was handed down from the SAU (School Administrative Unit).

Although there were few cases of reported bullying, the policy is in place to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all the students.

Finally, Principal B admittedly stated, "There are so many what ifs... They are endless. And we don't have all of the answers. We do have a very good relationship with the local police." He further described this relationship specifying their regular presence in the building, their monitoring of morning and afternoon bus times, and their walk-throughs in the building. And, although he's not an official Student Resource Officer, he is a caring individual who includes the school in his daily routine around town. The relationship between the police department and the school is very important to him, and it is evident based on the strong relationships he has built with the school and children. The relationship with the local police department and local town officials help to secure the necessary resources needed to procure the safety of the school.

Principal C, like the other two principals, also spoke about how the safety plans had developed in her time as an administrator. This was an area that needed work, and required some systematic changes. Principal C worked collaboratively with the fire department on safety drills. Together with the safety team, they have worked to create evacuation plans that account for all students. They have also practiced other safety drills including mock drills and lockdowns, which are overseen by local officials including the fire department.

Principal C described how her district had the opportunity to practice drills where one school was absorbed into another school, given students the opportunity to practice an evacuation and release at an alternative location. She stated, “We are constantly looking at different ways where we would assembly differently.” Police and fire officials are involved, and different drills are practiced. Last year, it was an active shooter drill that was practiced after school with staff. Principal C admittedly shared, “Although it was great conversation, it was really alarming in a lot of ways. They just came in with their fake guns and stuff...” She further shared that it was great preparation because just last December, they had to go into a real lockdown. She described the situation:

We did not know who it was, but the duty teacher saw the person on the playground and she called in and we did not have any record that there was anyone visiting that should have been there and they saw him walking around with his sunglasses and backpack. It was really weird. So, someone went out to find him and he was gone. So we thought he must have gotten into the building and so we ended up going into lockdown. We called the police and they just happen to be assembling to go on an undercover drug bust. So we had like one million police officers here and they just took over in a split second with real

assault rifles. We just had everyone in lock down, and the assistant principal and I just walked around the building with them. They had on their flak jackets and everything and I am in my blue suit. It was unsettling.

Fortunately, it turned out to be a maintenance worker from Honeywell. But he never signed in and in the process created a disruption to the learning environment. This is how important and strict the protocols are for schools. It was a very scary day for the students and staff.

Fortunately, a great relationship had already been established with the local police and fire department. So when they arrived, they knew the physical layout of the school and were able to act swiftly.

The safety and well-being of students and staff is taken seriously by principals, as best illustrated in School C. All threats or violations of protocols are acted upon quickly, often involving local officials. Developing a good relationship with local municipalities, including police and fire, are to the school's advantage. Establishing procedures and protocols that are practiced and reviewed regularly, elevates the schools readiness to handle any threats that might compromise the safety of the school. This allows students and staff to focus on learning.

Practices that Promote Learning

All three schools schools have identified practices to promote learning which are prioritized to support the learning of all students. Barriers to learning have been addressed through systemic approaches.

This is further addressed in the previous section where participants described in details the ways in which they lead the learning. This included developing processes that promoted learning and enhanced engagement in a systematic way. Through the development of system-wide practices including Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) and Response to

Instruction (RTI) models, schools have developed teaching practices that addressed barriers to learning and processes that reengaged students who have become disengaged. However, supervision and evaluation of staff and professional development emerged as two additional areas that principals focused their attention.

Supervision and Evaluation

Under the New Hampshire Task Force for Effective Teaching [Retrieved from: <http://education.nh.gov/teaching/>], districts are now being required to develop supervision and evaluation plans that measure teacher effectiveness based in part on student performance. In fact, schools are now being asked to annually report to the State's Department of Education how many of their teaching staff falls into each of the four categories; highly effective, effective, developing, or needs improvement. As a result, schools across the state of New Hampshire are required to revise their current supervision and evaluation models to include student performance, which must be weighted at twenty percent or higher.

Principal A recognized that her district is “behind the eight ball” in that they have not revised their current plan to reflect the student achievement piece. In her district, teachers are still awarded merit pay even though the district decided to “do away with it.” Her teachers decided to keep it. It is always interesting to note that this school does not have a union and the teachers “interface directly with the school board.” In fact, two teachers are on the board:

They sit down and talk about personnel policies and what they want to see. The board made a move to do away with the performance plan because another district in the School Administrative Unit did. Our teachers said, ‘no because we like it.’ Of course, all of them are on what they call the ‘distinguished track,’ which means they get a pretty good increase as well as a \$500.00 bonus. So, the thought

was the money was an incentive to improve. I think their desire to keep it could be true. I don't believe that at my core. I don't believe that people work for money. I don't believe that's what motivates people in this field in particular.

Principal A questioned how motivating the merit pay was, but it was in place in her district.

She further described the supervision and evaluations plan as a "modified Charlotte Danielson rubric." It's designed to be a collaborative, reflective process where teacher and the principal compare rankings and discuss areas for improvement. As teachers gain years of experience, there are fewer evaluations with more of an emphasis on staff development goals and self-evaluation. Principal A also spoke about the size of her school and paid mentoring in place that assists with the process. There have been occasions when Principal A had non-renewed staff and had to place staff on improvement plans. She is most concerned that staff "takes hold of their professional growth" and strive to improve their teaching.

Principal B also stated that his district is currently in the process of revising the supervision and evaluation plan. The plan currently in place was developed in 2002 and was described as "archaic" and a "dog and pony show." It included a preconference, an observation of a lesson, and a post-conference, which is also based on Charlotte Danielson's work. Principal B stated that he asks a lot of questions about their teaching. He felt that ideally there should be more "informal walk-throughs" and a "portfolio format" where teachers would be able to share their teaching ideas with their colleagues:

It's just making it more professional. The old model is very top down, like 'I am in charge and I am telling you what to do.' Rather than, trying to move towards a more collaborative model, it's evaluative. There's no doubt it's evaluative. If you're not cutting the mustard...

He does share that being connected with a University allows him to bring in talented interns as teachers, and fortunately he has rarely had to remove underperforming teachers.

Principal B has had to put underperforming staff on “growth plans.” He does believe that if a staff member is not doing well, than it is necessary to work with them:

And if they continue to not do well, you keep working with them because they wouldn't be here if they didn't have the talent because the people we're hiring, we know, most of the time. For example, I have a teacher, a very talented teacher, great intern. But she had this other side of her life that we didn't know about and she got herself into some emotional challenges and issues and it was impacting her professionalism. So those are the things. You develop a plan about how are you going to help her get her head screwed on right, rather than the nuts and bolts of teaching. She's a good teacher and she could be an exemplary teacher over time. But, she's got some hurdles because of her own life. And so those become the challenges.

Principal B insisted that he's just not willing to give up on people. He continued, “They're here because we believe in them, just like we believe in the kids. And there are some people who would disagree with me, but I think it's just as important that we differentiate for teachers as we differentiate for kids.” In conclusion, he felt that everyone moves at their own pace, and it was most important to continue to make progress.

Principal C, like the other districts, has not moved to a model that takes into account student achievement. Currently, her district followed the Madeline Hunter model, which has been in the district for over 32 years. However, recently the plan has been modified to include walk-throughs, which was recently piloted and will be implemented next year. This involves the

principal going into a classroom and recording everything that is seen. Then the teacher and supervisor review the data to determine where the teacher falls on a rubric, looking for evidence and indicators. Principal C stated that the teacher and supervisor do not always agree. “One teacher ranked herself so much higher, and I had to bring her back, asking her to show me the evidence.” Speaking to the data collected helps to bring understanding and dialogue between the teacher and principal.

With the new plan, there are a lot more observations and conversations, and there were concerns shared by Principal C regarding the time involved. “I am really concerned about how we’re going to manage that because there’s a lot more observations and then we still have a summative at the end of the school year.” New teachers received five walk-throughs and the amount of walk-throughs decreased as teachers gained more experience.

At any given time you can go right in and do more if you feel like you need to, but I think it’s going to really be valuable. The rubric is so rich with really great examples of what good teaching should look like including what types of questions they should be asking.

Principal C thought the plan offered a better model for improving instruction. Her concern stemmed around the management and time involved. She was also able to delegate the observations to her assistant principal and reading specialist. However, ultimately, she was responsible for making summative evaluations about renewals.

As districts move towards models that consider student achievement, walk-throughs are becoming an essential part of the supervision and evaluation model. This allows for more frequent observations at shorter durations, which would provide more opportunities for conversations and feedback. Two of the schools were utilizing Charlotte Danielson’s (2007),

Framework for Teaching, while one was using Madeline Hunter's (1994), Mastery of Teaching. None of the schools shared how they would determine what measures they would consider regarding the required twenty percent growth required by the state. Two of the principals shared that they have worked with under-performing teachers who required improvement plans.

Professional Development

Through professional development, professional staff is better able to meet the needs of their students' and address barriers to learning and teaching. This includes ways in which the leader encourages, supports, and assists the staff in their personal and professional growth as part of the continuous process of self-improvement. In many districts, professional development is embedded in the school calendar through release days and school goals. It is often part of a larger strategic plan aimed at improving the organization, district, or school.

All three participants spoke about goal setting as it relates to the staffs' professional development plans. Budget considerations were also mentioned as it relates to funding coursework, workshops, consultants, and conferences. Principal A tried to support the growth of her staff by keeping the professional library updated and accessible. She has allocated resources to allow staff to attend national conferences. Principal A stated, "I respect you and I think you are going to bring something great back for us." She also recognizes the importance of learning and sharing with each other, including herself and support staff. She described how she keeps stakeholder apprised:

I talked to the parents and the PTO. I even put it in my newsletter when people have gone to different conferences. I want them to know too, that our money is being used wisely for the development of our teachers for the good of our children, that connection for them. Those days that we are off, they're just not

off. We have a workshop day Friday and on Thursday, part of the newsletter will be about ‘what a great workshop we had with our SAU colleagues. We worked on this and we worked on that. We’re really excited about reading...’ Just to make sure the public knows that professional development is being valued by me and by the school, hopefully it shows them why they should value it as well. It’s not just another day off for teachers.

Principal A recognized the importance of communicating the value of professional development to the community.

Principal B also spoke of professional development as it relates to the budget and contract. Although teachers are allowed to take one course a semester, the budgeted money does not go very far. He stated that they “set aside about \$10,000.00 a year for professional development and workshops, but when you divide that by the seventeen professional staff, it doesn’t go very far.” Grant money is also used to offset costs for staff professional development.

Principal B also spoke about the University partnership, coaching model, and also “tapping into the in-house expertise.” He further explained:

I am very excited about working with both the SAU and UNH on the instructional rounds components because there’s basically two different models. One’s the instructional rounds and the other one involves teachers and administrators from all over the SAU coming to our school. We’ll have a focus question and then they’ll walk through classrooms and observe all morning long spending like twenty minutes at a time in classroom. Then they’ll come together and basically work to respond to that primary question.

He described the model with the University:

And then the model we're doing with UNH is the model where we are actually going into individual teachers' classroom and they're posing a question and providing an individual teacher feedback. Right now we're doing that with interns and the University. I would really like to see that expand when we are doing that with interns and teachers, and it's just a collaborative effort.

This is the embedded professional development model, where teachers are getting feedback about their instruction so they can continue growing.

Principal B also described the professional development as being focused around the goals that are set at the beginning of the year, which are typically connected to school or district goals. However, there have been times when he has asked staff to rethink their decision-making around their professional development choices when the workshop didn't align, but this wasn't typical.

Principal C also spoke of professional development as it relates to the budget, and supported their professional goals. She described, "Three years ago, we had to get a grip on the substitute line because there seemed to be a bottomless pit of money." As a result, their individual professional development plans (IPDP) changed:

So staff has individual professional development plans where they set goals at the beginning of the year. So basically it's a three year plan and at the beginning in the first year, it's educator as a learner, then year two you're an implementer, and then year three, you're a refiner. So basically what we were told is the people who were in their first year of the IPDP plan could attend workshops and then the second and third year not so much. But the thing that was really difficult was that there are some people that if they were in their second or third year of their plan

and they wanted to go to the workshop, we had to have some really tough conversations with staff and they were really angry, but we had to draw the line somewhere and stop spending.

As a result, it caused the district to rethink this plan for spending with regard to professional development:

So in the first year we allowed staff to attend workshops and then in the second year, we gave them that opportunity if they didn't do anything in their first year. We would allow it in the second year when we rolled it out. So it's not easy. If it's a general service provider, we pretty much allowed them to attend. If it's someone like our special education coordinator, they bring it back to the building then that's okay because we don't need to get subs for them. I've been able to support them and approve their opportunities but not as much for the teachers.

Principal C explained that the professional development has been tied to the school goals and focuses. She stated, "As a professional community, education at large, is more focused." Like right now, they are currently working on language arts so workshops in district and professional learning team time was tied to reading and writing.

Professional learning for all three schools was closely linked to individual professional development plans which included staff goal setting and district plans. There was a strong connection to the budget, as there were limited resources. Sharing the value of professional development with the community helped to bring understanding and support for continuous learning and growth.

Environment

All three schools work towards creating an environment where members feel welcomed, supported, and safe. In the previous section under policy, principals described in detail the practices and protocols in place to ensure the physical safety of its members. Principals addressed the emotional safety of the members, specifically trust and empowerment.

Principal A described the lack of trust between the community and the school that existed when she was first hired:

There had been a lawsuit a couple of years before I came when the parents had sued the school. When I walked in, unbeknownst to me, I got handed a multipage report by someone from another place who had all of these recommendations that needed to be implement to kind of ‘fix us.’ Which is what we started with in year one, to try and work with the school board and staff around those issues. We didn’t include parents at that point. And we got some things off the ground but they didn’t really gel. They didn’t really fly very well. And, we were most fortunate to find another facilitator that was much more helpful.

This made for a difficult transition into a new school and new position for Principal A. She further describes this:

Just the whole feeling when you walked into the building in that second year, we were all in turmoil. You could just feel the tension everywhere, everywhere you went. People would smile and say hello, but you could feel this underlying fear and resentment that things were just brewing here.”

When further questioned about how they moved on from that place of mistrust and turmoil, Principal A spoke about their “Action Plan.” There were monthly meetings, and ‘deliberate’ intentions. She explained, “There was a whole lot of give and take then. We would look at the

plan every six months and ask how we were doing and consistently asking for input and feedback.” Those were challenging times then, however, these behaviors are now “engrained in the culture” and “assumed to be who we are at this point.” Principal A further stated that this allowed the school to move from working on the climate to focusing on student learning.

Principal B also spoke about how it was important to shift the climate from one filled with discipline issues, punitive behaviors, and intimidation to one of empowerment. Although he was criticized for being ‘soft’ and ‘weak,’ there were some informal leaders who began the shift, which gained more ‘momentum’ as the building took on a more ‘positive tone.’

Principal C described her school environment and the importance of having members feel welcome:

When people walk into our school, they feel welcome. I don’t know – there’s good vibes here. I give a lot of credit to PBIS and that we’ve maintained a universal team with a parent representative. We still are following that structure and it has served us so well. Every year we choose a theme. We meet at ‘Camp Smith’ over the summer. We do have a cookout and we plan the whole year out. We choose a theme based around a book. We have a school assembly and introduce the book. Typically we have things that are in the hallway and the kids are excited, looking around, waiting for it.

Establishing an environment where there was empowerment, trust, and where members feel welcome, allows for focus on learning as supported in previous sections.

Social Emotional Learning

An essential part of school climate, is the leader’s ability to build community in the school. This includes the development of practices that promote social and civic responsibilities

and a commitment to social justice including pro-social behaviors. Many districts and schools have adopted approaches and programs as a systematic way to bring about positive change. These include Responsive Classroom and Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS). These programs provide a framework with common language that is aimed at improving the school climate, therefore impacting student achievement. However, when principals were asked about how they built community in their school, many spoke about how they built relationships with their students and staff, as opposed to elaborating on the programs and systems that were put in place to build community.

For example, Principal A mentioned the different events and ways that she tried to bring the staff together which included teacher appreciation luncheons, positive emails, notes to staff, publically acknowledging and thanking staff, and recognizing efforts. She also mentioned how she made a conscious effort to conduct herself in a positive manner. She stated, “I try to be smiling and positive, even when I don’t feel that way (and she laughs).” She mentioned the importance of being visible, supportive, as well as accessible, and explained:

I am out on the front porch every morning that I am able to, greeting people and wishing them a good day, generally jumping to people’s assistance whenever and however I can to make their jobs easier or to give them a hug when they’re upset.

She went so far as to say that there were times when she felt bothered when she was hugging a parent, wondering what people would think about this. But she emphasized, “I felt so deeply their pain. It just seemed like a natural thing to give them a hug, even if I was going to deliver really bad news and with firm authority I’d say, I get that this hard.” Principal A had struggled with her own sons’ schooling and clearly had empathy for parents’ perspectives. As a result, she was able to forge some good relationships with parents who were struggling as well. She

continued, “I was really trying to see and understand where they’re coming from. The parents are not coming here all the time to make trouble for us. They’re coming here because they are concerned, or upset, or angry about their most precious possessions.” Principal A admittedly stated that as a result, it made her more compassionate with her staff.

Principal A continued describing how this impacted her relationship with staff. She clarified:

Most of my staff has families, children, and they need to take time to be with them to go to school events. I spend a lot of time covering classes (she laughs). But, we don’t have any other bodies to do that. I want them to feel I have their backs, and they get what they need as well.

Building relationships with parents and staff is important, but also giving people what they need is a priority. This carried into Principal A’s relationship with her students as well.

Principal A builds community with her students through their weekly community meetings, skiing together as a school, and also getting to know them as individuals through her interactions with them as part of their Responsive Classroom approach. Although she is responsible for disciplining students when it comes to protocols and expectations, the focus is on treating students with respect and teaching them. She emphasized the importance of “listening to her students and trying to understand where they are coming from.” Since this is a small school, Principal A has a good relationship with all of the students. She described how she developed and cultivated these relationships:

I try to be in their classrooms all the time, asking the students questions about what they’re doing and know a little bit about what they’re doing outside of

school. I try to get to know them and let them know I value their work.

Sometimes, it's just the little things that show I care about them as individuals.

The principal works on building relationships with the members of her school community. This includes the students, the staff, and the parents.

When I spoke with Principal B about building school community, he stated that it is inherent in how he operated his school. Given his background in school counseling and his commitment to Responsive Classroom, he felt it would be redundant to repeat all that was previously stated. He recognized the need to communicate and collaborate with all members of the school community. Additionally, as important as it was to differentiate for the students, it was equally important to honor all the adults as learners and to differentiate for them as well. Working together as a community is the hallmark of his mission and vision statements.

On the other hand, Principal C is working towards building community in their school through committee work, and it has become a standing agenda item on core team meetings. It is also a focus of the advisory committee, where teachers have a voice and problems are solved through shared decision making. Principal C stated, "I try to have staff have a voice and be part of making decisions. I think this helps people feel like they're valued and part of the community." She also encourages cooperative group work and described this further:

I don't ever just want to be that administrator that just comes in and says this is my vision and you can love it or leave it. I want people to be with me because I never will assume that I have all of the answers or know what's right because depending on how the wind is blowing, it can change people's opinions.

Being visible and working together allows Principal C to have a better understanding of her staff.

Additionally, Principal C's school organizes gatherings like celebrations, coffee chats, wellness offerings including tai chi, potluck luncheons, and other activities that bring staff together with similar interests. In Principal C's words, "Sometimes it's the little things. Sometimes it's the big things." For example, when they administered the Smarter Balanced Assessment for the first time, the staff gathered to discuss schedules and how it would impact the whole school, which was not only helpful, but insightful to learn about this new assessment. Face time with staff is very important to this principal, although challenging at times.

Building community with students is also important to Principal C. This is accomplished through student led announcements, student council, student appreciation week, school store, and Bingo Nights. All of these events, activities, and traditions help to give students a voice while instilling traditions and unifying the school.

All three participants have intentionally focused efforts on building community in their schools through practices that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice including pro-social behaviors. All three schools have adopted approaches and programs as evidenced in their Responsive Classroom practices and Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS). These programs provide a framework with common language that is aimed at improving the school climate.

Crossover of School Climate Standards

The National School Climate Standards (2009) presents a framework for schools for promoting and sustaining a positive school climate. The purpose of the framework is to support effective teaching, learning, and school improvement. Principals discussed the ways in which they led and encouraged efforts. These include the five standards previously identified.

Promoting a Positive School Climate

In light of these challenges that were expressed, I asked the principals to explain how they promote a positive school climate. Principal A had much to say about this:

Oh, lots of different things from standing out in front, smiling, and saying good morning to everyone when they get to school. I attend all of the PTO meetings, all of the student performances and most of the after school activities. We do lots of performances where kids come and parents come and join us to see what they have been learning. We have Morning Meeting every Wednesdays. It's one of those traditions that parents and community members are invited to come. We share the community center so that has our community members and kiddos rubbing elbows frequently. Some of the things we do for staff. Like right now it's cold, so we do soup Wednesdays. Everyone brings in a soup so we can have a nice meal together. We have a weekly staff meeting where we rotate jobs and bring food to those things as well. We try to do some social activities, at least two to three times a year to get us all together as a faculty. We have the Nordic Ski Program that meets half days one day a week where we all ski with our parent volunteers. We have recognition ceremonies where we present parents with thank you cards, banners, and gifts. We are trying hard to keep our PTO together. It's getting harder and harder to do. We present things to them. This is our new reading workshop. Talk to us about evaluations. What do you think about report cards? We have forums where they can come in and share. I do presentations at the school board. Next week teachers are coming to talk about robotics. To just try and keep putting out the good things that we are doing.

Principal A was asked what mattered most and she responded with, “being a part of everything and trying to be positive and welcoming.”

When Principal B, a former guidance counselor, was asked how he promotes a positive school climate, he commented on the programs that were in place. Specifically, he stated the following:

Coming to school and feeling valued. I had lots of training about the concept of school climate. I had a week-long Responsive Classroom training. I was trained using an eclectic approach like the three B’s – be safe, be respectful and be responsible. Then the Core Values or the Super Seven, which is whole school. We have a weekly meeting where we celebrate community. We talk about values and have student groups model them like our stand up, speak up, be a friend group. This month, we are working on skits around the value of being peaceful, which coincides with Martin Luther King Day. This sets the tone. Also Responsive Classroom strategies. I also see this in my walk throughs. I am very visible, reinforcing and supporting these. My counseling background allows me to be able to see this and jump in. Our programs are values driven and they are part of an eclectic mix of PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies) and RC (Responsive Classroom). We also have K-4 Open Circle. Open Circle is taught by our counselor in grades kindergarten through four. They teach the students explicit skills which involve explicit social skill development. Our test scores are good, but fluctuate because of our small population. We look at the big picture and patterns with assessments. Unfortunately, it is looked at punitively. You plan and lead with your team, and then they’re made to feel inadequate.

Principal B was asked what matter most:

The kids... They have to be learning and engaged. Learning is powerful. It shouldn't be routine. You have to be dedicated like running a marathon. My philosophy is similar to Finland's. I believe in people. You need to work together. People need to feel appreciated not threatened. You have everyone closing the doors when those doors need to be open.

Principal C was also asked how she promotes a positive school climate. She went into great descriptive detail explaining:

If you have a positive school climate then you can make anything else happen. It's true and I have drunk the Kool-Aid because I believe that with all of my heart. For example, our PBIS team decides to do a student appreciation week. And each of the grade levels is going to be recognized with our student council. We decided to show them, model what it looks like to appreciate people in our school. Sometimes I get carried away, but it's always with good intentions.

She concludes by discussing how she kept school climate present in their daily work:

We have the standing items on our agenda – school climate, teacher welfare and student welfare. I think if we can stay focused on those three things, we can really help keep the positive, keep moving in a positive direction. I guess the one thing I learned from my prior experience is - am I valued here? Do people care that I have an opinion or what's going on with me? It's hugely important to me.

As we concluded the interview, Principal C was asked what mattered most. To which she responded, "Safety and happiness of the students and staff. I just know that the sign of

healthiness is when people can have positive relationships, respect one another, and we teach our children those skills by living them every day.”

Building a positive school climate began with building relationships with students, staff, and the community. Although there were many programs and initiatives that can help facilitate this, it is sustained through rituals, traditions, and procedures that become embedded in the school culture. What was central in all three schools was the intentionality of the principal to work with the individuals in the schools to create a collaborative, caring culture that honored the members of the community while supporting student learning and professional growth of staff.

Conclusion

All three principals are very clear that what mattered most and what consumed their day, are often in opposition of one another. What matters most is the students, staff, and parents. The people matter most. They speak about building relationships, and the importance of trust. One principal spoke about the importance of differentiating for the adults, just as they do for their students. That as a principal, it was important to meet the adult learner where they were and to nurture his/her growth. What consumed the principal’s day were things like correspondence, district committee work, and facilities upkeep.

It is very clear that the safety of the school community is of utmost concern given the present concerns in today’s schools around bullying, violence, and drugs. At the elementary school level, practice of drills and developing relations with the local municipalities is a focus. Developed procedures, policies, and plans are essential to the safe and orderly operation of today’s school. Many schools have adopted programs including Responsive Classroom, and PBIS as a way of proactively addressing pro-social behaviors.

In conclusion, the specific areas that seem to be a focus for all three schools are ensuring the safety of the school community, while keeping the students central to all decision making and building trust with the staff.

Overlap of Two Theories: School Climate and Fullan's (2014) Keys

It is difficult to isolate the two constructs given the complexity of the keys and standards in each framework. Based on the data collected, it was apparent that there are many overlapping aspects of the two theoretical frameworks. The following examples indicate overlap where the two frameworks intersect.

System Player Intersects Policies, Practices, and Environment

Principal C started in one district as an educator, but moved to a different district for an assistant principal for just two years, only to move back to the prior district because she felt that it was a better fit. She had a different experience that involved a conflict with a colleague. This was over a difference in practice which was rooted in her beliefs and prior experiences, which was based on policy. She explains this:

It was my first year there, and we had a special ed. coordinator, and we used to tell parents if we were dismissing them (students) or discharging from special education, that they could just have a 504 plan and I learned that it's not a consolation prize. And I brought that mindset and belief with me. That's not how I rock and roll. So, I put this in writing in a memo, and because of it, I am called to the superintendent's office and told to 'play nice in the sandbox.' There was nobody in support of what I was saying.

Upon further reflection, Principal C recognizes her error in putting something in writing. However, she feels she had previously addressed this issue with the coordinator and her

principal, who supported her. She describes these initial experiences as an administrator in this district:

I didn't feel supported there. We had to at one point evacuate the school because there was a gas leak and the central office was right across the street. So we're trying to get the kids out, the fire department comes, and nobody from central office came over to see if there was anything they could do. And I am just like... this is very different here. I didn't think this is how people should work together or not together. And if you are going to put together a really great education for kids, and a community for parents and the staff, that's not the way to go about it. So I really couldn't see myself lasting very long in that environment.

The differences in practice, rooted in policy, were in conflict. This impacted how the principal felt about the environment and organization. Principal C left this district shortly thereafter recognizing this was not a place where she could see herself long-term. She was hired back as an assistant principal in her current district, where she had trained to become a teacher and administrator. She left to pursue administration only to realize everything this district ultimately offered.

Leading the Learning and System Player Intersects Policies and Practices

As principals lead the learning, they are confronted with mandates that impact their policies and practices. Principal A also shared her frustrations with the shifts in curriculum:

I kind of wish there was some, a little more, guidance from above, like at the state and federal level, if they want us to implement this. Tell us exactly what that is, instead of us having to figure this out on our own, although we may not agree with it, or want to follow it.

Finally, Principal A expressed her concerns that have impacted the community:

Our parents are really confused as much as we try to hold forums and explain it to them. We have also revamped our report cards to a standards-based report card. We didn't get a lot of feedback. We went to trimesters as well. And when I did bring it up at a PTO meeting so... what's the feedback about the new report card folks? 'Oh yeah...it's great. No complaints.' Which I thought was interesting. I think when we no longer give A's and B's, we might get more pushback.

Leading the Learning Intersects Learning Practices

Principal B also shared how the adoption of the Common Core led to curriculum shifts in his school, as well as his concerns with the new Smarter Balanced Assessment:

We now have a science consultant... and we practice, coach. Students participate in daily problems. There has been use of journals, aps... We use DRA's (Diagnostic Reading Assessments) and side by side testing versus a NWEA (Northwest Educational Assessment) or online assessment. We use benchmark assessments for interim scores which help teachers become assimilated. There is tech time, web-based foreign language for fourth and fifth graders, transparent language practice, connections to learning so that students become comfortable with the questions. We weave in performance tasks that promote depth of knowledge. Unfortunately, the Smarter Balanced performance tasks appear so developmentally inappropriate... but we will do the best we can.

Leading the Learning Intersects Environment

Principal A was not the only principal who voiced concern about the stress of high stakes assessment. Principal C spoke about her school being designated a School in Need of Improvement (SINI) and the “frustrations” associated with this:

We became a SINI School in math. It was maybe three years ago. That really hurt and then we were in safe harbor for reading. And then NECAP (New England Common Assessment Program) went away so we never got into the position where we a SINI in reading but yeah... we were close and I think that the frustrating thing for me was that we work so hard, so deliberately, and so hard to improve our literacy instruction and honestly not so much with our math, but still you know, chugging along it was just really frustrating to not do better than we did. And I think we did well, but we landed into a SINI plan and it rankled me to no end.

She further continued to explain how being named a School in Need of Improvement impacted her school community:

The tone is that we’re all in this together. So, we’re going to figure it out together. We definitely have set some goals for ourselves but the test is not going to dictate, at least immediately, what choices I make because I’m basically looking to improve our basic systems.

This naturally led to conversations about the adoption of the Common Core Curriculum, and principals continued the dialogue with regard to these shifts in the curriculum. Principal A noted that there was a change in leadership at the superintendent’s office, which coincided with changes in the district. She explained:

He has worked very hard to bring teams of teachers together and allowing them to communicate with one another. So I think that's been positive to have them really looking at standards, and looking at student work and trying to come to some agreement about the rubrics they might use to assess students' work.

Principal A also discusses how her staff has had the opportunity to collaborate with other colleagues as part of a multi-district school administrative unit (SAU):

So in terms of involving this small staff with a bigger staff in our SAU, it's been very helpful. It's given us a real reason to sit down and talk about curriculum again which hadn't happened until early on when I was here. I think there is some struggle with the levels, particularly with the younger kids in terms of the expectations with reading and writing and that.

Change Agent Intersects Practices and Environment

Principal B shares his concern for his teachers:

We will have a professional development meeting as part of our prep for the test. There will be a parent information night. I am concerned that the school will not meet the 95% participation rate. I am not going to worry about it, but it's too bad. The teachers are overwhelmed, although I tell them to relax. Still they are hard on themselves when kids struggle. I told them we are in a good place.

Principal C also shares how her staff has changed since the adoption of the Common Core, and many of the same themes emerged. She spoke about how the current program, Everyday Math, did not align with the Common Core and the challenges associated with it:

We are digging into those math skills more and I don't know where that will end but I'm not happy. It upsets me when I have to see the teachers having to work so

hard to fit programs in. With our literacy, we ditched the basal and we don't have an anthology in the school district. It's all standards-based and we home grew those standards and we chose the power standards for every grade level. The Common Core came along and we let go of the GLE's (grade level expectations). So why wouldn't we do that with math? I'd like to find a math program. It's just so much work with what we did with our literacy.

She continues:

It's so uncomfortable and last night we had a meeting and I said, 'I don't want anybody to stress out. We are going to get there.' What we did over the summer is set up a framework for instruction with the math book. And so we're really trying to get them from walking around with the Everyday Math book in their hand. We want to see groupings, small group instruction, and then centers that are focused on skills that are needed for the kids. So we're really trying to change that but it's an uncomfortable fit with the Everyday Math. The fear around the Common Core is just astounding.

These are the types of challenges that principals and districts face as they move from the state frameworks to the Common Core Curriculum.

Additional Information Worth Considering

Although Fullan's (2014) keys and the National School Climate Framework (2009) have offered two lenses to look at school climate and leadership, other factors emerged that must be considered. The background of the principals, along with their early experiences influence who they are as leaders and impact their leadership. Additionally, there are challenges and adversity to overcome, which lead to personal growth and learning. These factors help to shape these

leaders and inform their practice. Finally, what can we learn from these leaders whose schools have been identified as Schools of Excellence?

Background, Early Influences, and Preparedness to Lead

The three principals involved in this qualitative study have a range of experience from 23 to 33 years in education, while 7 through 12 years have been spent in their current schools as administrators. All three principals have background experiences in education including roles as teachers, special educators, counselors, assistant principals, Title I project managers, reading specialists, and even as paraprofessionals. All principals spoke in-depth about their early experiences and what led them to choose a career in education. For example, Principal A stated:

My mother was a teacher. I had done a lot of babysitting and work with kiddos and enjoyed that. In high school, they had a high school and a kind of program where there were preschoolers that I was involved with and I enjoyed that... but I noticed that I was really drawn to the needier kids of the group. That was what moved me in the special ed direction. I think of my mother's influence.

In fact, the decision to pursue education, led Principal A to attend the same college as her mother.

On the other hand, although Principal B's father was a superintendent, it was his brother's influence that prompted his decision to become an educator. He explained:

My brother was severely learning disabled. He was placed in a private school and then a public school. It was a horrific, non-categorical placement. He came home crying... It was such a nasty situation. He couldn't read. He couldn't write, and, he was a high school student. My dad was a local superintendent. My brother told him..."I am sick of this Dad. I want to learn to read and write." My Dad said

he would get him a tutor, if he would make the effort. It was a great success story.

The paths were as individual as the principals themselves. Principal C was unique in that she admittedly stated that she did not take the “traditional path” in becoming an educator. She described:

I didn't go through my life in the traditional sense. I ended up going to a junior college and got my associates degree in business administration. And then I got married. And I had four children. So I have four kids and then I found myself in this situation (divorce) so now I have to figure out my life and what it is I want to do.

Principal C was hired as a paraprofessional while she was taking night classes to become an educator. She was eventually hired as a special education teacher. These three principals all had different journeys that led them to their positions. However many of their early experiences helped to shape and influence them as leaders.

Principal A was working as a special education teacher when she was asked to replace the reading specialist when she became ill. She stated, “I am not sure exactly when or what the years were but at some point a new principal asked me if I would take over as the Title I Project Manager. And that was my first foray into leadership.” She reported being “thrown” into this position which prompted her to complete her Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies (CAGS) program in school administration. She went on to explain that this principal had encouraged her to apply for a principal position:

There was never an interest in elementary principalship. Principal X saw my ability to lead, and I had never considered that in myself...that I had any

leadership ability or qualities and doubted that I would be able to manage. He was like ‘you can do this. I know you can do this’ and got me hooked into this and encouraged and supported me. Then he left, and there I was (She laughs.).

Principal B spoke about his early experiences where he learned to develop empathy for students of poverty:

I was hired as the special education coordinator/counselor for the two elementary schools and this shaped my understanding of elementary schools. The students were extremely poor and needy. We ran things like shower clubs because we had students who did not have running water at home. I still have this vision of this student running his hand through the water having never had a hot shower.

Principal B spoke about his students when he was a counselor and stated, “I would go on home visits, and they would offer me a chair to sit down. I would say no, that’s okay. I would prefer to stand. These were scary places. These experiences really helped to shape me.” All three principals had different experiences that helped to shape and develop them as leaders.

Principal C spoke about her prior experiences in the field of education which led to her attaining her appointment and stated:

So I’ve held a lot of positions which has really been so beneficial to being an administrator. I was a special ed. teacher for a total of four years and then I was a classroom teacher for five and then an assistant principal for those two years in another district plus five years here, so seven years, and then three years as a principal.

The participants spoke about the experiences that led them to where they currently are as principals. The responses varied when they were asked how prepared they felt they were to step into a leadership role.

Principal A reflected back when she was assigned to be the Title I Project Manager, “I didn’t feel like I was prepared at all. It was kind of on the job, handed to me, take it over kind of thing. I learned by the seat of my pants.” Fortunately, her natural curiosity for learning and researching combined with the assistance of caring colleagues, led her to success.

Principal B was working as a counselor in what he deemed a “very progressive school.” He spoke about learning from many “talented” people which helped to “ground him.” He described the school as being a “magnet school,” where there was lots of opportunity for inquiry based learning. He further stated that it was a “culture of learning and empowerment.” When a colleague asked him to join him as an assistant principal he described his initial experience as a school administrator:

When I got there, I noticed there were a line of chairs outside my office and every day by 9:00 AM, the chairs were filled with students sent to me because of discipline issues. They had this green card system for discipline that was very primitive. I asked myself... What am I doing here? The principal and I took a lot of criticism as we tried to change things. We were told we were weak. We were told we were soft. Too many teachers tried to use intimidation to teach versus empowering their students. There were some role models who were informal leaders in the building and we started to see a steady shift and gain momentum because of these folks. Over time, the building began to take on a more positive

role. Discipline issues diminished and teachers began exploring research based teaching practices.

At the same time, Principal B worked towards obtaining his administrative certificate, having no formal education in the area of school administration.

On the other hand, Principal C was working as a special education teacher when there was some restructuring happening in the district that resulted in a change in position. She moved from being a classroom teacher to being a special educator which allowed her the opportunity to work with a principal mentor for a full year. She described this as being a “great internship” where she was able to “roll up her sleeves and learn as much as I can.” So when she stepped into the assistant principal’s role she felt very prepared. Her biggest challenge was the evaluation piece. She stated:

So that was my biggest learning curve, and they used the Danielson model so that was pretty self-explanatory with rubrics and that was just so spelled out. So I think that was probably the biggest learning curve because I had so many other experiences. And the other thing, I feel like it was my maturity too. I had children and I had some life, right? And so that can really make a difference.

Two of the participants spoke about how being a parent helped to shape their understanding of being a school principal. Principal C further explained:

I did have the level of understanding of what it’s like to be a parent and how parents feel when certain things happen. I have a lot of empathy towards that and then having worn the different hats of being a para educators, special education teacher, and classroom teacher that I can relate to every group of people.

But it is Principal A that really makes a connection between her prior experience as a Title I specialist and being a school principal when she first stepped into her role. She described this in detail:

There was a dynamic between parents and teachers here – they were on different sides of the fence. One of the first things one of my staff said to me in that first year was ‘we need you to protect them from us’ which was really different for me because in my prior school we really wanted the parents in the worst way to be involved. We were always trying to drag them in and we’d send letters and make personal phone calls and you know really try to encourage them to be in the school. So when I came here, it’s like these parents want to be here volunteering in the classroom. What is bad about that? That is awesome that they want to be here.

It was her role as a parent that really helped to shape her empathy and understanding of how critical it was for the school and the parents to work together. This was only revealed to me at the very end of our first interview together, which was profound and enlightening:

Neither of my children were traditional learners. And my oldest son, has... I don’t even know what to call it, but he has a disability and struggled throughout school and ended up going to a technical school and was successful there. And if his elementary and middle school teachers had predicted where he would be they would not have predicted where he was and yet because I was an educator I didn’t always challenge them until that eighth grade when I said ‘if he wants to go to a technical school....’ and they were going to send him to a living skills academy and or someplace where he could learn living life skills. I had teachers look at me

and say, 'I don't know what you expect me to teach your child.' I had to move him from a team in middle school who didn't feel they could offer him anything (to a technical school). So hopefully things have evolved since then.

Principal C continues to explain her other son's educational situation:

Then my youngest son, he only had some mild disability and ADHD (attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder) but he became a behavioral issue in that same middle school that had such an issue with my older son and I ended up sending him to a private school. So I've always felt like my school system let my children down, and I let my kids down, in the sense that I didn't go to bat for them as much as I might have had I not been an educator.

She further clarified:

I could see where my oldest had an aide teaching him all year long because they couldn't find an appropriate teacher for him. And I think he lost that whole year and I didn't scream to the high hills because I understood that they couldn't find a qualified teacher. I got that because I worked in education but it shouldn't have mattered. I always felt...that made me feel very strongly about listening to the voice of the parents and allowing them to come in and share their fears and concerns for the kids with me. I'd like to think that all of the years of struggle were for not.

These very different educators came into the principalship with different backgrounds, different experiences, and varying levels of education. However, who they are as people helps to shape and influence them as educational leaders.

On their roads to becoming school leaders, their journeys were filled with trials and triumphs. Along the way, there were challenges, roadblocks and barriers. These were opportunities to learn and grow that moved their organization forward. Decision-making became crucial to their role as they explained how high stakes assessments and the adoption of the Common Core Standards became central to the school community. It was important to balance adversity, change, and challenge, with school climate.

What Can We Learn from These Leaders?

All three of these schools have been named Schools of Excellence, by the EDies, a program that recognized schools as meeting rigorous criteria including: Personalization and Relationships, Rigor and High Standards, Relevance, Engagement and Whole Community Involvement, Data and Results, and Empowered Educators. Was there anything we could learn from these leaders?

It is important to understand the strengths of these leaders as they have all led their schools to being named Schools of Excellence. Principal A spoke about not only her strengths but how she had changed, evolved, and had grown over time as an administrator. She reflected:

My ability to listen to people, to not always go after my agenda, but to think about the bigger picture and making sure that everyone gets some skin in the game or some kind of feedback or input even if we don't always go in the direction that you would want, you would at least feel like you had the opportunity to chime in and share, be heard, and be considered equally with everyone else.

Principal A was asked to think back over her eight years and to consider how she had changed as a leader and she described this:

I am more confident in making decisions. I can go back and look at those first few years where I waffled a little, thinking I don't want to make those people unhappy but there was that which made things worse in a couple of things.

Where if I just came down and said, 'no,' this is the way it's going to be, you need to deal with it, this is what we're going to do with a couple of individuals...

Things would not have grown so much. I have learned that this is a skill that I didn't have at the beginning. The teaching part of it, although it's burdensome, it helps me to be a part of what's happening as well. I am sitting down and talking with teachers, about the abilities of students rather than telling them what I think they should be doing in their classrooms.

Principal C spoke about her strengths as a leader, reflecting back to her prior experiences:

I love working with groups of people in committees and to pull the collective strength of the team. It doesn't get much better than that because I don't pretend to know everything and have the answers for everything because I don't. I'm really honest... and I value honesty. So when teachers come to me and they share, I so appreciate that because then you can work to get to a better place from that or if I've made a mistake, I own it. I totally own it and move on and maybe some people will move on with me and may they won't and they'll stayed annoyed with me but that's just me. I think the other thing is my perspective, the different perspectives that I have, haven been in so many different positions.

Principal C is a new principal with just three years of experience, and seven years as an assistant principal.

These three principals spoke of the challenges they had encountered as leaders, and how they balanced priorities in light of the “competing demands and pressures.” Principal B explained:

I think the biggest challenge is the SAU is trying to accomplish SAU wide initiatives and they essentially have a committee going for every content area and I think at times that the pressure we’re feeling are the times when they dictate our implementation phase, which is very concerning practice. You can’t implement everything at once. You have to do it thoughtfully. We are trying to do one or two things well, not lots of things poorly. And so that’s kind of a sticking point and creates bumps in the road sometimes with relationships with my superiors.

The conversation continued because the impact on the school could be significant in light of what was stated. He continued to talk about the ‘pushback.’

So far I’ve survived it but you know my teachers, one of the things that the teachers in the school say to me is ... ‘One of the things you do a really nice job, Bill, is you kind of keep us sheltered from all the things whizzing through the air. You have to stay focused on the things we need to do by keeping all the other things blocked out.’ And I do... And sometimes I lose a little skin, but I think it’s an important role that I play in helping to focus on just a couple of things at a time and prioritizing. But there are so many things on the plate that it can get a little tricky.

Principal B is an experienced principal, who candidly acknowledges the competing demands and the pressures his school feels.

On the other hand, Principal C, who is newer to the role of the principal, speaks about setting priorities in a different way:

I have to stop and take a breath and say, ‘what has to be done right now?’ It’s as basic as that and I’m typically a person that really likes to plan out and know exactly what’s coming. And that’s the part of the job that doesn’t happen all the time in this position. Its dealing with people that’s always comes first. So that’s sort of an easy cut off point for me. If it’s an issue with a child or parents or staff member, then obviously that rises to the top and other stuff just falls away. And once you get to the junk, then it’s like what do I have to get in order for me to get through today and then what I’ve started to do was just sort of look at the week and make a list. And that’s just sort of how I manage it.

These are different participants in different schools with different perspectives on how they set priorities. In order to better understand this, participants were asked what mattered most and what consumed their day.

Principal A was quick to point out that what mattered most and what consumed her day didn’t always “jive.” She further explained this:

In a perfect world what matters most to me personally is the relationships in the building, with each other, the children are number one, with the families and that we are addressing the needs of our kiddos. And to that end, all of the scheduling and the enrichment, and the ski program, and all of those things – the kind of nuts and bolts. I kind of run around trying to make everyone else’s jobs easier by seeing the glitches coming.

Then she describes what consumes her day:

But what consumes my time is correspondences. Communicating with my colleagues, communicating with my families, communicating with my administrative assistant... My tech people. I have so many part time people.

We're trying to use the Google format. We are trying to make sure to get things on agendas that we need to talk about. We're trying to keep it all of it straight.

Principal A also has the added responsibilities of being the reading specialist and she offers this perspective, "You know because I am the reading specialist, I have assessments, meetings with families, special education and the whole thing." She also inferred to the flexibility inherent with the position:

And then you have to be ready at the drop of the hat, when an upset parent, child, or staff shows up at your door and you have to throw your whole plan for the day right out the window. So they are the priority. The people... to me. The research and the paper work, and all of that really come second to all of that, for me.

For Principal A what matters most to her are the people and the relationships. They are the priority in her school.

What consumes Principal B's day is trying to prioritize responsibilities so that he can maximize his time in the classroom. He described the distractions that interfered:

Today is a perfect example of distraction, distraction, distraction! I got guys here with front loaders, backhoes, and shoveling snow. I got a budget presentation tonight for the PTO, so I got to be prepared for that and somehow the Smarter Balanced folks didn't get me my user name so I had to inquire about that. So I had to figure out that out... and I had a couple of other administrivia things that I had to take care. Well all of those things kind of added up to a good half of my

day and so I could spend my whole day doing those things five days a week. But, I really try to make sure that I get into classrooms for at least a third of my day, or two hours anyway as a target. I try to be in every classroom at least three times a week. Now remember we only have eleven classrooms... but even that's hard sometimes.

Principal C stated that what matters most to her is what is happening in the classrooms. She stated, "What matters most to me is what's going in the classroom. Are the children learning? Are they happy? Do they have what they need to get from here to there?" But like the other participants, what consumes her day is in conflict with what matters most:

At times it can be difficult parent issues. But, I was put on a district committee and asked to co-chair it, and it was a complete drainer. It required tremendous amount of time. I had no clue it was going to involve as much as it has. It's just awful. They had this pay for performance money. This pot of money that needed to be spent and we've been grieved, and we've been questioned. People want to be paid for blowing their noses, I guess. I hate to be so cynical, but this committee has crunched me in ways I've never been crunched. I've learned a lot from it but it's been really tough. I never, never dealt with a union at all and it's caused a lot of unrest in the district. This one committee... So it's been two years, and that's been the kicker for me.

Principal C speaks about the district committee work that is time-consuming. She admits to enjoying the challenges, but confesses they kept her out of the building. She stated, "So I didn't feel I was in this building at all last year, like it went by so fast and then oh my goodness... I felt disconnected. So the things that consume my day, keep me away from the classroom." All three

of the principal recognize the need to visible and in the classrooms. However, what matters most and what consumes the day had competing demands, pulling the principal in different directions.

State Assessments and Student Achievement

School climate impacts student achievement (Bryk and Schnieder, 2002). Therefore, it is essential to consider state assessments. Principals are eager to discuss high stakes assessments and the impact it has on their school. The following table shows the state mean scaled scores for the past three years in language arts, mathematics, science, and writing.

New England Common Assessment Program (NECAPS)
State Mean Scaled Scores

Language Arts	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	348	348	349
Grade 4	447	448	448
Grade 5	548	548	548

Gr. 3: Prof. w/distinction – 357-380; Prof. 340-356. Partially Prof. 331-339, Substantially below 300-339

Gr. 4: Prof. w/distinction 456-480, Prof. 440-455, Partially Prof. 431-439, Substantially below 400-430

Gr. 5: Prof. w/distinction 556-580, Prof. 540-555, Partially Prof., 530 – 539, Substantially below 500-529

Mathematics	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	345	346	347
Grade 4	447	448	448
Grade 5	546	547	547

Gr. 3: Prof. w/distinction 353-380, Prof. 340-352, Partially Prof. 332-339, Substantially below 300-331

Gr. 4: Prof. w/distinction 455-480, Prof. 440-454, Partially Prof. 431-439, Substantially below 400-430

Gr. 5: Prof. w/distinction 554-580, Prof. 540-553, Partially Prof. 533-539, Substantially below 500-532

Science/Writing	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Science – Grade 4	439	440	440
Writing – Grade 5	542	542	541

Writing Scale: Prof. w/distinction 555-580, Prof. 540-554, Partially Prof. 527-539, Substantially below 500-526

Science Scale: Prof. w/distinction 463-480, Prof. 440-462, Partially Prof. 427-439, Substantially below 400-426

- Language Arts and Math Tests are administered in the fall and based on the previous teaching year.
- Science tests are administered to elementary grade four students only in the spring.
- Writing tests are administered to elementary grade five students only in the fall and based on previous teaching years.
- Language arts and math assessments were replaced by the Smarter Balanced Assessment and administered in the spring of 2015.

Table 13: NECAP State Mean Scaled Scores

Principal A explained how this has affected her school and the community, including the parents:

We have been very fortunate and we have done very well. There have been a few parents and their kids are performing at the 98 percentile and they think they should be at 99 instead of going down to 97 or 96 percent and you have to explain that not every child goes up to 100 percent every year. There's give and take. It took a lot of educating the parents. So in that sense, the high stakes have hurt a little.

She further explained how her staff has reacted to high stakes assessment:

The teachers get stressed about it. One of my teachers in particular is pretty opposed to any formal testing at all and so we have to kind of carry him along and

support him a lot more than the others. And you have to do your best to implement and administer properly and encourage your kiddos to do their best no matter how you feel... and he does that. But I think the anxiety amongst the staff would be a factor and the amount of time it takes away from their instruction.

Principal A admits that although they take the state assessments very seriously, they do not spend enough time with student goal setting and attainment of those goals, but rather their focus is around staff goal setting and attainment:

We spend a lot of time thinking about standardized testing and using scientifically based instructional models and assessments. But, that student involvement piece is something that we could work harder on and get more involvement with the youngsters in that.

She further explained that portfolio assessments with rubrics would be helpful with students as it was with staff. She stated, “You set your goals and you think about what you’re going to collect to prove that you’ve done it. The accountability... I find the students who do best are the ones who understand their learning style.” She described this to being similar to staff and their learning.

When asked what the last three years of New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) scores reveled about their school and staff, she flat out stated, “Not much.” Due to the demographics of their population combined with the size of the school and subgroups, there was not a lot to discern from the data. Considering the patterns and trends, her response was similar (to what?). Students scored in the “90th percentile or higher” and in some cases created more problems:

Parents whose third grader might in the first task scored in the 99th percentile to the 96th percentile looked at that as a regression in the child’s academic abilities.

So we don’t rely on those scores as much as we try to use more authentic data.

The data was helpful in the sense that it allowed Principal A to communicate to the community and the school board in a very positive way, “Look how well we’re doing. Yes, we’re still one of the top performing schools in the state.” She felt this led to “trust and believing in the school because of these great results.” Principal A attributed this to the “privilege of having a really well-educated parent base and students who have a lot.” In her opinion, social economic status and parents’ background impacted student achievement.

Upon review of the NECAP scores, of the reportable groups, all students’ median scores in all areas were in the proficient or highly proficient range and well above the state mean scaled scores in many areas by over six points. This did not take into account subgroups, which were too small to report. The following tables show the median scale scores for School A.

New England Common Assessment Program (NECAPS)

School A Median Scores

Language Arts	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	*	*	*
Grade 4	*	*	460
Grade 5	*	552	*
Grade 6	653	*	*

Mathematics	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	*	*	*
Grade 4	*	*	456
Grade 5	*	552	*
Grade 6	651	*	*

Science/Writing	2014	2013	2012
Science – Grade 4	448	448	448
Writing – Grade 5	*	541	*

*Due to class size, grade level median scores were not reported.

Table 14: School A NECAP Median Scores

Principal B spoke in length about the need to triangulate data using formative data, benchmark, or interim data that was collected in the fall, winter, and spring. He also spoke about the standardized data coming from NECAP and SBAC. He stated that these assessments were used to track trends, as opposed to informing instruction. Simply stated, “The data is just not good enough.” When we were deemed a School in Need of Improvement (SINI), changes in practices resulted:

We were taking some of the formative data and the benchmark data each trimester and doing pretests and post-tests each trimester for literacy and math. We’d do the pretest and then the teachers would be required to sit in there, for lack of a better term, in PLCs, we just called them grade level teams. We never adopted the PLC model. We called them PLC’s because they are professional learning communities. So, they completed forms that would identify the types of skills

they would need to focus on for those particular kids. And that would inform their instruction.

At this time, the forms are being collected and tracked longitudinally to monitor student progress.

Principal B spoke about the changes in curriculum as they moved from the New Hampshire frameworks and NECAPS to Common Core and SBAC. He described the school as being in an “interim place right now” with collecting data:

Since the Common Core, we adopted the Lucy Calkin’s model, but we backed off mainly because it was so overwhelming to just adopting a whole new curriculum, to be filling out forms and worrying about those pieces. So it’s a back-burnered item at this point. The day will come when once I am feeling more secure about where we are with the full adoption of the curriculum, that we will get back to formally collecting data. Right now we’re in the middle of change.

He further spoke about the manageability, “I want my teachers to be able to manage their workload and I am not just going to pile on.” He further described how they would move from this point:

And we’ll do it together. It won’t be me deciding. It will be the leadership team that will make a decision about what data, what data we need as a whole-school? It will be presented as, ‘Listen guys, we need to have data. You need to be using data to inform your instruction. And, I know you are, but we also need to be collecting it. We need to form a formal way of how we want to look at it. This is how it looked for the last four years and then we backed off with the adoption of

the Common Core, but how that we're getting settled, we need to get back to a model.

He further described a process he saw at another school that involved a consultancy model, whereby they came into the school every three weeks. "That's exactly what I want to do. I loved that idea. God, why didn't I think of that?" Having someone come in from the outside is "nonthreatening." He further stated, "No matter how nice I am, teachers still feel evaluated even with a coaching model." In fact, he stated, this is where the coaching model breaks down. Teachers get defensive when an employee from the district starts bringing in data, even a curriculum coach. He described this as "that's when the defense of cackles arises" versus someone who is independent of the district. The problem is the money required to employ sustainable outside consultants. But overall, there would be trust, safety, and sharing. Teachers could open up about teaching and learning without fear of being evaluated.

We then discussed NECAP scores and what they revealed about the school and staff. Principal B spoke about "competent teaching" and the movement of the "at-risk students." Students had moved from the bottom two categories of partially proficient and insufficient progress to proficient and proficient with distinction, which has been a goal of the school. The trends also revealed the need to address the higher performing students. He also stated, "Our boys are not nearly as engaged as our girls." This was in the areas of language arts and mathematics. He described this as "subtle trending but steady." This was an area worthy of future focused work.

Upon review of the 2012-2014 NECAP scores, all median scores for School B were within three points or above the state mean scaled scores in language arts and math. All median science scores for grade four students were at or above the state mean scaled scores. All median

writing scores for grade five students were above the state mean scaled scores. All median scores reported for School B were proficient. The report did not take into account subgroups, which is protected, confidential information. The following tables show the median scaled scores for School B.

New England Common Assessment Program (NECAPS)
School B Median Scores

Language Arts	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	347	350	349
Grade 4	448	450	445
Grade 5	550	548	549

Mathematics	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	344	348	349
Grade 4	447	448	446
Grade 5	548	547	550

Science and Writing	2014	2013	2012
Science - Grade 4	441	443	441
Writing – Grade 5	543	542	544

Table 15: School B NECAP Median Scores

Principal C described how her school kept track of instructional improvements and success of students. She specifically spoke about professional learning teams and how teachers

reviewed data through two systems currently in place. She discussed the RTI (Response to Instruction) model and how the universal teams reviewed data and student achievement. Then she described the PBIS (Positive Behaviors, Interventions and Supports) model and the collection of SWIS (School-Wide Information System) data, and how they were able to track and monitor student progress and behaviors. These two systems assisted with data collection, monitoring, and informing practice. She provided this example:

So we can look at the data and then the team would determine if there's a rise in behavior like on the playground at eleven o'clock, then we know that's fourth grade. So we're going to meet with the teachers and we'll provide reinforcements and maybe set up some sort of plan to address it.

With the academics, it would be different. Literacy data was reviewed along with benchmark assessments that were given three times a year. If a student is having difficulties, then a specific case study could be arranged to have the team look at the progress to determine next steps and an action plan:

In some cases we found that we were giving the students so many supports, that it was like 'Oh my gosh. No wonder the child's confused.' We pull things back and then try to find out where the specific areas of need are with math or reading. This allows me to really know the students on a different level so that when I talk with a parent, I have some background about the child.

She further stated that this allowed her the opportunity to really know who her students were on a different, deeper level.

Through the PBIS Team and the Universal Team, they were able to identify the at-risk students. These children often had difficulty making connections in school. Principal C

emphasized the need to look at the social-emotional piece since it was directly related to student achievement. Through focused-monitoring, they had been able to identify specific needs of the students with the assistance of special education staff. She further described this districtwide process:

The first piece was to look at the identified students and go through the files to make sure the paperwork and all of that stuff is in sync. The second piece or the ultimate goal is to come up with an action plan to ensure that all chronically underperforming students, identified and unidentified students are addressed. There's also the leadership piece that consists of principals and special ed coordinators. So there's leadership throughout this process that asks where we are? And of course, like any other district, people are all over the place. As a district, we are trying to come up with a focus question. And from the question, each of the levels or each of the buildings will create an action off of that.

As a district, they are creating an action plan aimed at addressing "chronically underperforming students." Right now they are considering two questions, "How might we reimagine tier one instruction for chronically underperforming students that closely aligns with and supports tier two and tier three interventions?" The second option being considered is "How might we reimagine tier three instruction for chronically underperforming students identified and not identified to narrow the achievement gap between them and the their typically performing peers." Principal C stated that by going through this process as a district, there have been benefits in hearing what others are doing. Ultimately, they must decide as a district how they address these students who were "chronically underperforming."

We then discussed NECAPs and what these scores revealed about the school and the staff. Principal C pointed out that they had been named a school in need of improvement (SINI) in math for the past two years, and the reading scores had placed the school in safe harbor given their growth. She described this as being “disappointing” and feeling like “we tanked” and yet, did not understand why since they had been so focused on looking at data. She explained:

We are trying to set up a system that is responsive to that. And I feel like the amount of effort and work that we put in, hasn’t netted us the results. And I think it was two years ago that we started this process.

She noted that the trends revealed that the scores had declined in the last two years, and that is had been very “frustrating,” in fact, “infuriating” and she really didn’t understand why the trend was going this way:

I think we’re really looking for root causes. It’s a system. So we have to look at our instruction, our instructional practices, how we’re assessing students, and how we’re progress monitoring. So the focus has been on building a more effective tier one system and then focusing on our identified students that we just can’t seem to get up to par. So, I guess the data is necessary. I can appreciate it, but I don’t love the way it’s displayed. There’s a number and everyone’s looking at how they’re ranking. And if you’re looking like a failure when you know how hard we work, but if nothing else, it definitely gives me pause for thought.

She concludes by saying that the work that they were doing, they needed to do “together.” It’s not something she could personally fix on her own, because if she could have, she would have. The work they had been doing in preparation for Common Core had been in the area of language arts and literacy. She acknowledged the need to focus on mathematics.

Upon review of the 2012-2014 NECAP scores, all median scores for School C for grades three and four were above the state mean scaled scores in language arts and math except for one area, grade four language arts. All median science scores for grade four students were above the state mean scaled scores except for the 2014 scores, which was one point below the mean scaled score. There were no median writing scores for grade five students since they attend a different school. All median scores reported for School C were proficient. The report did not take into account subgroups, which is protected, confidential information. The following tables show the median scores for School C.

New England Common Assessment Program (NECAPS)

School C Median Scores

*Grades K-4 School

Language Arts	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	351	349	351
Grade 4	446	451	450

Mathematics	2014 (2013-2014)	2013 (2012-2013)	2012 (2011-2012)
Grade 3	350	349	352
Grade 4	448	452	451
Science and Writing	2014	2013	2012
Science - Grade 4	438	443	443

Table 16: School C NECAP Median Scores

Upon review of New England Common Assessment Program scores of all three schools, it is important to note that overall these are high-performing schools and have been identified as Schools of Excellence in the state. The scores support this as most are above the state averages and are proficient. It is of interest to note that in smaller schools the subgroups are so small that they are not reportable. Although the scores are overall high, principals clearly need to ensure that all subgroups including identified students and students with social economic disadvantages are making progress. Having systemic processes and policies in place to address this is a proactive solution which is included in the National School Climate (2009) framework. How the principal maximizes their impact through leading the learning, being a district and system player, and serving as a change agent (Fullan, 2014) is instrumental to student achievement. Our conversations continued as we considered these aspects of school climate and leadership.

Principals, as leaders, must lead the learning. This includes monitoring and sharing effective instructional practices. Professional development and common planning time is helpful to the professional staff's growth, according to Principal A. During this time, teachers met to review student work across the district and with each other in their individual schools. She described this, saying "They learn a lot from each other about different strategies to employ or sharing common successes, failures, and struggles." She also described how this related to reporting, "It helps to look at where the strengths and weaknesses of the whole district are and where to get support and common decision-making about where to go next. The whole team approach seems to be working really well here." It is a strength to be able to draw from the staffs in their multi-districts, which are part of their School Administrative Unit (SAU) since there are many challenges with being located in the northern part of the state.

Principal A spoke about feeling isolated and discussed the barriers to being so far away from State Department of Education. “I’d love to be able to participate in the wonderful professional development opportunities or the networking that the Principal’s Association does for us, but the distance creates some barriers.” She did participate in the northerner’s principal’s group, which has been helpful. However, given the conflicts in scheduling, it has been difficult for her to participate on a regular basis.

When asked about the principal’s role in helping teachers to improve, Principal A referred back to the assessments which helped to identify strengths and weaknesses. She also stressed the importance of being in the classroom so that her opinions were valued and accurate. Relationships with the teachers were equally important to her. She stated, “Life impacts the performance of people in many ways.” She described this further:

Whether they’re busy working parents with three kiddos or an aging person, it depends on where they are, but really candid conversations, frequent walk-throughs, pointing out the good things and the contributions they’re making on a regular basis gives you a little more credibility.

She further provided different examples:

I noticed that you’re having a little bit of trouble managing these couple of kiddos. How can I help you with that? Or, if there are specific areas where they might need a mentor or some reading materials or videos. Providing them with the tools they can use to improve. Sending them on a visitation to another school or trying to get another relationship with another colleague that’s not as threatening as the principal might be, to kind of help them bounce ideas off someone else, or have them visit another colleague’s classroom.

The solutions and the issues varied depending on the staff member and what was needed. By having built a relationship, being visible to provide feedback, and then to offer solutions were all ways that Principal A would help her teachers improve.

Principal B spoke about data and how his staff used data to monitor and share effective instructional practices. He described his system as being “bottom up” versus being “top down.” He shared that systems were put in place to assist with helping teachers improve, but it really started with the principal being visible. This included classroom visits and team meetings. There were challenges with schedules that made this difficult at times. He further shared examples:

Whenever I am in classes I’m talking to teachers about looking at the work students are doing, learning from this work, and it works in this school. I know the kids as learners. I can talk about Henry in kindergarten. I can talk about Aubrey in first grade. I know them as learners, and I know what they’re working on because I go in the classroom. I read with them. I watch them write. I have them read their stories to me. I talk to them about their math.

Because of Principal B’s interactions with students, he can talk with teachers about students and learning.

Principal B also discussed the Response to Instruction (RTI) model, which is the system used in his school to address student learning concerns:

We meet weekly with a grade level and we sit in here and it’s packed. We have our tutors, special education team, and anyone who has connections with the grade level. And we sit with the teachers, and we run through the list of kids. And we talk about where the kids are. And we’re still figuring it out. But we do

it three times a year, every year, and we have conversations about every single one of them. How things are going to happen and what needs to happen.

The students are tracked longitudinally so there is a history of each child's progress recorded. Principal B described it as being "personalized to every child" and "individualized." The individualized intervention allowed each student to receive the instruction that he/she needs.

Principal B explained that there was initially some resistance to this model given the amount of time it involved to review every student. He explained:

I had to get the special education team on board and the tutors on board, and the coaches on board, and at first people were like, 'I don't know... We don't have time to meet. We don't have time.' And I'm like, 'We don't have time to talk about kids? About their learning? And what their needs are? What are we doing here?' Right?

Although they only met once a trimester, he is hopeful that there will eventually be pre and post-tests each trimester that will help with data collection and inform instruction.

Principal B also stated that they continually look at improving professional development, mentioning teaching writing specifically. The teachers were offered summer professional development aimed at improving students' writing. He spoke about an outside professional from the University who had complimented him on his ability to "get everybody on board" and to bring the "community together around a common vision." He admitted that it was the best compliment he received in a decade.

Principal C discussed how schools should monitor and share effective instructional practices. She created opportunities during staff meetings for staff to share successful practices, as well as team time during their professional learning team time (PLT's). This is where

assessment data is reviewed. She also mentioned the benefit of grade level conversations during professional development days during their August Academy days. Cross-district conversations about curriculum standards are also helpful to staff. Principal C also explained the importance of the Principal Association Network meetings where conversations about leadership and management occur. These collegial conversations were important, but often limited due to the structure of the calendar and conflicting schedules.

Principal C shared the importance of administrators' attendance at professional learning team time. She explained that she and her assistants share this task. Either way, there was administrator presence to provide input, guidance, and support. She explained the challenge of getting into classrooms, but recognized the importance of being in them as much as possible.

Like Principal B, she felt that principals can help teachers improve, but it started at the "grassroots." He further explained:

I encourage teachers to go in and observe a lesson of their peer. If I know I have a fourth grade teacher that is doing some really great stuff, and a second grade teacher who is hitting the wall, then I'll have someone cover her room so she can go see the fourth grade teacher. We have been moving away from whole classroom instruction in math and more guided math groups and differentiated instruction similar to literacy. We have this one teacher who's doing it really well, so I encouraged others to visit her classroom.

Having the teachers assist one another was one of the ways to bring about improvement at a "grass roots" level.

On the other hand, Principal B speaks about helping teachers improve through coaching and supervision. He stated:

I am excited about the new evaluation system because they have expectations for these different area in instruction all laid out. I think we will be able to have some really good dialogues and that's an expectation. So after we do the observation and I have them go over my notes, we can sit down, and dialogue about it. We talk about what was present, what wasn't, and looking to the future. We also get PD (professional development) opportunities in the mail, and I'll send it their way. And also just promoting them more as teacher leaders' helps teachers to rise to the occasion.

Setting high expectations and cultivating the growth of all professionals helped the entire organization to improve instructional practices.

To summarize, there are three different schools with different ideas about how they can monitor and share instructional practices. What is common with all three principals is the importance of being visible, having conversations, and providing feedback to staff. Principals can help teachers improve through professional development opportunities either within the school day during common planning time and team time, or outside of the district with other professionals. Perhaps, Principal B stated it best, "Just as we need to differentiate with our students, it is also important to differentiate with staff." Staff has different needs, and it is up to the principal to know what they are and to be able to address it using whatever means are available.

Conversations with the principals continued as we discussed their concerns about education. We further conversed about present and future implications regarding the present state of education while they also spoke about what is truly worth fighting for in these challenging and shifting times.

Principal A spoke about the rigors of the standards while being considerate of the developmental appropriateness for the students. She was concerned that there was a “high priority” on assessment without regard for allowing students the “time to develop, time to struggle, and time to figure things out.” All the while, the “external pressures” at the younger grades were taking away the time needed for students to mature and grow at their own pace. Finally, she expressed her interest in “authentic learning” versus directed instruction with outcomes.

What was truly worth fighting for was the arts and opportunities for students to have “multi-sensory learning opportunities and self-directed time.” Principal A feels it is important for students to have the time needed to talk and collaborate with each other. It is essential to “keep the joy of learning” central to the students. Principal A spoke about the outside consultant who is currently working with her staff on professional development:

What I’ve enjoyed most about the work we’ve been doing with the consultant is that it incorporates student choice and developmental levels while ramping up the cognitive demands in a way that feels more comfortable to me. I see the kids excited about moving forward and interpreting a book that is really simple or writing about it. It allows them to read more about what they’re interested in.

However, she was concerned about the time involved and the impact it had on her staff:

I do find that if you are really doing the reading workshop piece, specifically with an hour for reading and an hour for writing, twenty minutes of word work, then you’re supposed to have your RTI block. You have art, music, lunch, and recess, and all of those good things. I think we’re getting time crunched. How on earth

do you fit everything in your day? Which creates some stress on the teaching staff for sure.

This has caused Principal A to restructure her day. There has been more integration and cooperative learning across grade levels which have led to more districtwide conversations.

What was most important to Principal B was to grow things from the “bottom up” instead of “top down.” He provided this example:

So we’ve done that with technology, and the reading workshop model. I did not come in here and say we are a reading workshop school. We are this. We are that. And you will do this. It’s just this... We’re brewing it over here, and we really like that. And, we got it brewing over here, and what can we add to the mix to get it stimulated a little bit more? And hey you know if you’re willing to do that, we’re willing to buy you \$500.00 worth of books because you got to have that. Richard Allington says you’ve got to have at least 3000 volumes in your classroom. And the next thing you know, people are saying, “Gosh, how can I get \$500.00 worth of books?” Well you know what; classrooms that are using models that are text driven are getting them. Then all of a sudden there’s that great interest and it wasn’t top down.

“Bottom up” is Principal B’s motto, which is why he has been so conflicted by the Common Core Curriculum and the Competency Movement around the state because everything is “mandated” and “top down.” In his mind, this is completely backwards.

When initiatives come from the staff, they are much more “organic,” according to Principal B:

It's like building a house. If you don't build it on a secure foundation, it's just going to fall over. And it's just in this little school. I wouldn't have any idea how to translate that to a bigger place and I really don't care to. I'm here because this is what I wanted. I wanted to be an administrator at a place where I knew every kid's name. I wanted to be at a place where I could bubble it up, and I knew that I couldn't bubble it up in a school with 800 or 1,000 students or 1,200 kids, and win those battles. I know this with sports because I've done a lot of coaching. Just because one model works in one place does not mean it's going to work in another place with a different group of people because I've tried lots of strategies as a coach and had some really successful years with groups of kids. I've found the secret and applied it to another group and it just blows up in my face.

Principal B recognized that what works in his school may not work in every school. Just as what works one year for a teacher, may not work the next, or what worked for one student, may not work for another because of different dynamics.

He stressed the importance of teaching the class sitting in front of you. The importance of getting to know students as "individuals." It is important to meet students where they are and move them forward and build their confidence. It is also important to "empower people." This includes students and staff.

This is why what matters most to Principal B is the kids, the staff, and quality learning. As he faces declining enrollment in his school, he has to reimagine what "quality learning" might look like in the future. He explained:

We're going down to two teachers in certain grade levels and we're having serious classroom alignment issues. Do we have multi-ages over here? Can we

carry that for two years? It's a freaking nightmare, but it's not those pieces that drive it, it's the quality. It's just the quality. How do you maintain quality learning, quality teaching in a school? Every place is going to look different.

He further emphasized that the "kids have to come first, not the adults." He stated that it is important to, "honor the past, embrace the future, and just build on the here and now." It is most important to meet the students' needs given the resources available.

Principal B also restated that what works in one school doesn't necessarily work in another school. It is important for the principal to know the history of the school. "In order to know where they are going, you need to know where they came from." It is important for a leader to become "encultured" in the school so there's trust, and then the principal needs to weigh their options for choosing the correct path.

On the other hand, Principal C is most concerned about the "breakdown of the home" and the impact it has on the student. She, too, questions the readiness of the students to take on the rigors of the assessments given the students' needs. She stated, "I don't know how we can expect children to achieve without the support of a stable family home life." Principal C wishes there was more support and assistance with these challenging situations:

I wish somebody had the answers to helping children achieve. I feel like sometimes we're grasping at straws. What is the best thing to do? Because I am there, and it's not for lack of trying I'm grateful that I'm working in a district that is all about trying to make the best decisions for kids because I know that is where my heart lies. So I'm grateful to be in this place. I think with that support we can overcome a lot of stuff that we have to slog through.

Principal C was clearly seeking answers to difficult questions that are as individual as the individual children themselves.

What is most important to Principal C is the students and the staff. She also stresses the need to educate the parents so they understand that the school wants what is best for the child. She also mentions the impact of technology. “The staff can get pretty beat up pretty quickly with Facebook and social media,” she stated. This is something that she has personally addressed with parents, and asked them to retract posts that have been offensive to the school.

The concern from all three participants is around the ratcheting up of standards and the impact this has on the school. There is a need for collaboration as staff work through these curriculum shifts in an “organic” and “grass roots” way that empowers them as educators. Ultimately, what is most important to all of three participants are the children and the staff. It is important that students’ needs are being met in an authentic way that supports cooperative, integrated, engaged learning opportunities that are meaningful while there is also student choice.

School Climate Assessment Instrument (2011)

We then discussed the School Climate Assessment Instrument (2011) that was administered to the different professional staff members in each of the three schools. It is important to understand which aspect offers the most hope, what is most challenging to attain, and which is easiest to obtain given the different perspectives of the three principals.

Principal A acknowledges that different schools with different communities would focus on different aspects of school climate. However, she has been focused on the community and parents since the onset of her tenure in her district, followed by working with the faculty and building relationships with them. She recognizes that this has “created some issues for her” but

she bases this on her assessment that the “community did not trust the school” and until they did, it was going to be difficult. Participant A clarified:

Because I had been spending all of my time trying to clear the roadblocks of these parents, they had been talking about how horrible, how terrible our staff was, bashing our staff. So that’s what I did first, and then I tried to build that faculty relationship. Discipline and environment was never really as much of an issue here, as it might have been in a different school. Physical appearance itself wasn’t that important to me. And learning is in the middle of everything. That’s what we’re here for, and that’s what our charge is.

The physical appearance of the school is the least important aspect of school climate because it is “just sticks and stones.” What is most important to Principal A is the people, the “students first, families, and faculty... and then moving the learning forward so the students feel safe, secure, loved, and care for.” Principal A is most concerned about the relationships. This supports that the staff perceptions and faculty relations is ranked second highest followed by attitude and culture. Learning and assessment is ranked third by the staff.

The aspect that is most challenging to her as a leader is the decision-making aspect because of her dual role as principal and reading specialist. Her personal style is one in which she likes to “assemble lots of data, talk to people, and take some time, bounce ideas and opinions off of people.” This admittedly, has made her appear “wishy-washy.” Principal A stated that because of her “empathetic” nature, she is often thinking about the repercussions of decisions:

Some decisions are going to make somebody really unhappy or even maybe losing your job, your livelihood. I had a custodian that was adopting a child and I

had to tell him that he was going to be reduced to a half-time position and he said, 'But I might not be able to get my child' and he was crying. It broke my heart. But, it was something that the board had decided and I'm the person who had to deliver that whack to this person who was not doing a great job. The building was clean, but it was still very, very hard.

These decisions are most difficult for leaders, even if they are the right decisions. Her staff agrees, and leadership and decision making is ranked lowest by her staff.

What Principal A finds easiest to attain of the aspects addressed in the school climate survey is the ability to work with the community and the students. This comes "naturally" to her. She was able to "sit and listen to a parent, to be able to hug someone who is crying in my office, and then to try to rebuild failed relationships." Perhaps this is why her staff ranked attitude and culture highest in the survey.

Principal B reflected on the eight aspects of school climate surveyed by the staff. He feels that all eight aspects are important and play a role in building school climate. Although school appearance is the least important to him, taking pride in how the school appears is important since it is a reflection of the school. He feels having a disciplined environment is important and it is based on trust with a clear vision, shared leadership, and decision making. He stated:

Shared leadership is what we work on here. You've got to have a healthy student body that likes interacting with one another, that knows how to get along, that knows how to problem solve, that knows they're learning leadership skills and developing good executive functioning skills and faculty relations. So we've got

to learn to work together, to have good student interactions. So you have to have faculty relations. So they're all connected. So, all eight are important.

Principal B found it difficult to select one aspect that was most important to him. However, his staff ranked student interactions highest followed by community relations. Faculty relations was ranked lowest while leadership and decision making was second from the bottom.

Principal B stated that physical appearance is the most challenging to him as a leader, while student interactions are a strength. He stated, "I love kids. I love working with kids. I love being with kids." He emphasized his work around building relationships with people and building trust. Admittedly, his weakest area is the discipline piece because of his personal style. He offered this:

When I first came here, the school was pretty traditional. Traditional values and punitive in some ways. And it just wasn't my style. And there was a lot of conflict with that and that's probably an area that can blow up in your face pretty quickly, if you haven't read the culture right. And it's not that I didn't read it right, it's just that I wasn't going to bend on who I am. I can't change...

The prior principal was "stern" and intimidating to some. There was a cartoon character drawn on the wall depicting her, Principal B described this:

The two principals before who had been here for like thirty years, and I am not exaggerating, was like out of some cartoon. She's on the wall, right by the lockers by the library, unfolding and she would look at you with a stern look, and it was a tribute to her. But it was scary and every time you turned around, she was like watching you like big brother's watching. I took it down. I just thought it sent the wrong tone. I want a light tone. But some people felt like I was weak.

That you have to have a strong hand, you got to earn that, you know with the kids.

Iron fist, intimidation... that's a good word.

However, Principal B was looking to build relationships with students and instill self-discipline rather than controlling them. Students need to learn to “control themselves.” Student interaction was rated highest by the staff in the survey while faculty relations were ranked lowest.

Principal B described learning and assessment as a challenge given all of the changes. His goal is to promote a “teaching culture not a testing culture.” He spoke of how hard the school has worked with the community to build trust. The school has been involved with a lot of outreach with the community. As a result, the seniors have become the schools “biggest advocate because they have been able to build a strong bond with them.” Community relations was ranked second highest by the staff in the survey.

Finally, Principal B expressed concern about the relations with the School Administrative Unit (SAU), and his sentiments closely aligned with Principal A. Although he has worked hard at trying to be a district player, this is often at odds with leading the learning. He has worked hard to personalize learning and celebrate diversity while he feels he is being held to standardized learning with sweeping broad statements to all the schools in this multi-district:

The relation with the SAU is not easy. They make sweeping board statements for all schools, all elementary schools, 800 kids! I have 150. Why would I put layers on things I don't need to do? I can talk about kids as individuals. All elementary schools will.... We're working so hard to personalize, to figure out who we are and how it works for us. There this sense of fidelity that everyone's doing the same thing, on the same day, with the same group, with the same book, going on

the same field trips, doing the same thing at the same time and they'll be prepared. I don't get it.

Principal B is frustrated because he believes in celebrating and honoring diversity and yet he feels that there is pressure to "create a system where we're all the same." This is an interesting paradox that warrants further exploration and attention.

Principal C places attitude and culture as a priority area because of its relationship to trust, although she feels that student interactions and faculty relations are also of importance. She feels that physical appearance is least important because people are more of a priority. Community relations is most challenging to Principal C because of the added time it takes to reach out to the media, local paper, or cable station. She acknowledges that her school doesn't celebrate and share enough with the community. Faculty relations come easiest to her, along with student interactions. However, this is tied to attitude and culture. She described this:

It's at the core of what we do here. It's a really great place to build a community that honors the professionals in the building by taking wonderful care of our children and then also building relationships with families. And if you have those things in place, I think anything is possible.

Principal C recognizes that the children and staff come first because after all, it's a "people profession." Staff ranked physical appearance highest on the survey followed by community relations. They ranked learning and assessment on the bottom while leadership and decision making was ranked the lowest.

Leading Schools of Excellence

Our interviews concluded with discussion about their designation of being named a School of Excellence, also known as an EDies School. Participants were asked what the title

meant to them as a school community and how it has impacted them. All three schools have been named a School of Excellence in the past five years. Two of the three principals were acting principals at that time. Principal C was the assistant principal but was promoted when her principal moved to the central office approximately three years ago.

Principal A stated that being named a School of Excellence meant that she is a “better leader” than she thought she was. The process of going through the “self-reflection” allowed her to examine what they were doing well and where they still need to grow. As for her staff, she reminded me of when she first arrived to the school and how the staff was feeling “pretty beaten-down.” The staff thought they were doing a good job, but they were constantly at odds with the community. So to move from that place to a School of Excellence in just seven years was the “proof” to the outside group that they really were good at what they do. Principal A stated, “It was a feather in their cap. It really boosted their self-esteem and made them feel much stronger in everything that they did.” The outside validation was sometimes needed for people to actually believe it. She described a recent board meeting:

Last night at our budget meeting, I had the flag draped across the front of the table, and I had the EDies bell right out in the front there. And of the biggest champions is a teacher from another district who has three boys who go to school here. And he made a point to stand up and say, ‘I just want to thank the principal and her staff, you can see that award there. We knew we were a finalist last year and having gone through the process at the high school, I know it’s a rigorous process and that this is a really valuable award.’ And they all stood up and gave us a cheer. So it makes a huge difference. The feather in the cap. Something to really be proud of.

The outside recognition and validation was not only valuable to the principal, but also her staff.

Principal A further expounded on the impact this had on her staff, and the impact on school climate:

This allowed us the ability to celebrate together and pat each other on the back. We thanked the kids and the families. We ring the bell time and time again. It definitely made everybody feel really good about being a part of the school. And when people feel good, they learn more and can support each other more. It just was something the staff could share together.

This has also changed Principal A's relationship with her staff. She further elaborated:

In the beginning, there was real distrust and people spoke about feeling unsafe. I did establish some boundaries that made some people feel uncomfortable, but I also learned to be more easy about talking to people face to face about my concerns so they aren't surprised by what's coming. I think we all understand each other better. As long as students' needs are being met and we're listening to our parents and valuing the opinions of our community, which was important to me, and important to our community. They've accepted that that's just part of how we operate. I think it's become part of our culture.

During Principal A's time as principal over the past seven years, she has changed the culture to where there is mutual trust and community support.

Principal A also expressed that she has become more confident. She clarified:

As I look, I think gee...maybe I've done a better job than I think I'm doing. But that's something with me. I'm always thinking I'm not as good as I should be or

could be. It's just part of my self-esteem, I think. But it was definitely a boost to me in that area.

Principal A recognizes that of all the areas of school climate she could have focused on, the one that was most important was building community relations. As a result, this transformed her organization to one of mutual respect and trust between the school and community, which eventually led to being named a School of Excellence.

Principal B also stated that being named a School of Excellence was a "nice feather in our cap." He further commented on this:

It was a nice way to acknowledge the pride that we feel for what we're doing as a community and to be able to reflect that pride publically. And it lets me know, because I don't get any feedback. There's meaningful feedback and conversation about our school, which is something I don't always get.

Again, the outside validation from a state organization that recognized the school for their work is all the feedback Principal B, like most principals, was seeking. He further elaborated:

It's just validating to have a group come in stating, 'We like what you're doing in your school. And you know what? We want to honor you for that.' That's what it meant to me. Just validating. We're not total idiots and what we're doing is okay. And that people want to learn from you. And you can inspire others.

This was a meaningful confirmation that the school was doing the right work, and that others supported their efforts.

We further discussed how this recognition impacted the climate of the school. Principal B spoke about the banner on the side of the building and the staff pride. He also stated that although the population has decreased, the number of identified special education students has

stayed the same. “Our population was 205 kids three years ago, and we’re now at 170. But our special education population is still the same. Our percent of identified students was ten percent and now we are at fifteen to sixteen percent.” Principal B feels that the Response to Instruction (RTI) model has been helpful, but with rigorous Common Core Standards, the grade level expectations have increased. Admittedly, he does question whether these standards are developmentally appropriate.

At the end of our time together, Principal B shared the following about himself:

I am a kid person. I’ve come to figure out how schools work and how people work. I think that is my strength. I started as a special educator because I had a soft spot for tough kids, but really what it was, was the emotional issues that kids struggle with. I really found that I am more of a people person. I think I found a role that I can play in school. I understand learning. I understand teaching. I get all of those pieces. I wouldn’t say that’s my greatest strength. My greatest strength is I understand people. I understand what people need, and how to help them take risks and how to feel a part of a community, and celebrate, and want to be together.

Principal B is a reflective practitioner. He knows himself as teacher, counselor, principal, and person.

And finally, Principal B shared his thoughts about learning, which is nested in a culture of caring:

What’s most important is sustained quality learning. It’s sustained through an environment of caring, of caring for one another, of supporting one another, celebrating our successes, or learning from our failures together, holding each

other in tough times and crying together, and laughing together, and doing what people do. And honoring them. I work in schools because I wanted something different. I see kids who cried because the summer was coming and they don't want that. They want to keep coming to school. I see kids who are upset that it's a vacation because they want to keep coming to school. I say, 'Go home. Have a good time.' Those are the markers that this is a place kids want to come to.

Principal B leads a school where quality learning is sustained through a caring culture.

Principal C stated how "proud" she was of her school and staff for being named a School of Excellence:

The staff takes great pride in the school. It's everybody pitching in and doing it together. Anybody who works here or comes in here is valued. I certainly hope not diminished for any reason. There's definitely a ranking in some schools. I don't have any tolerance for that. It's just not how I do business. And it's probably my nature, but it could be because I was a para educator too. I came up through the ranks. So I just admire what everybody does in this school.

Principal C acknowledged that having a "cohesive system" is beneficial to everyone.

She further commented on how the designation of being named a School of Excellence impacted the school climate:

The parents were very proud. Having children here from preschool to fourth grade, we have longevity given the period of time we capture. What was helpful was the work that we did together for being recognized, and what an honor that was. Going through the process was an amazing self-study.

The process allowed the school to reflect on their work together.

Principal C further elaborated on how this impacted her personally. She stated, “It was a personal self-study as a leader. It allowed us to dig into the nooks and crannies that we haven’t necessarily looked at before or in a while.” As a result of her learning, she was better able to serve the school as a leader.

She concluded our time together with this statement:

After you ride the pink cloud for a while, you roll up your sleeves and get back to work. So, the work never really stopped. We just continue to blaze as best we can and make the best decisions we can for the school and the kids.

When all is said and done, the hard work of leading a school continued for this participant, keeping the students central to decision-making.

Being named a School of Excellence for these three schools was a proud moment that validated the hard work being accomplished in their building. The process allowed the school to reflect and self-assess their current work. The outside recognition allowed the school to celebrate in meaningful ways that elevated their status in the community and around the state. Finally, it provided the school with feedback or a nod of approval to continue their hard work.

Research Question 3: Which aspects of school climate emerged as most significant to members of the school community?

In order to answer this question, an in-depth review of staff surveys and principals’ interviews was conducted to determine what common factors emerged as most significant to the members of the school community. The combined data from all three schools’ surveys was displayed in rank order as illustrated previously. Data collected from the principal interviews was also previously described in detail. Therefore, a Venn diagram best illustrates the findings to this question.

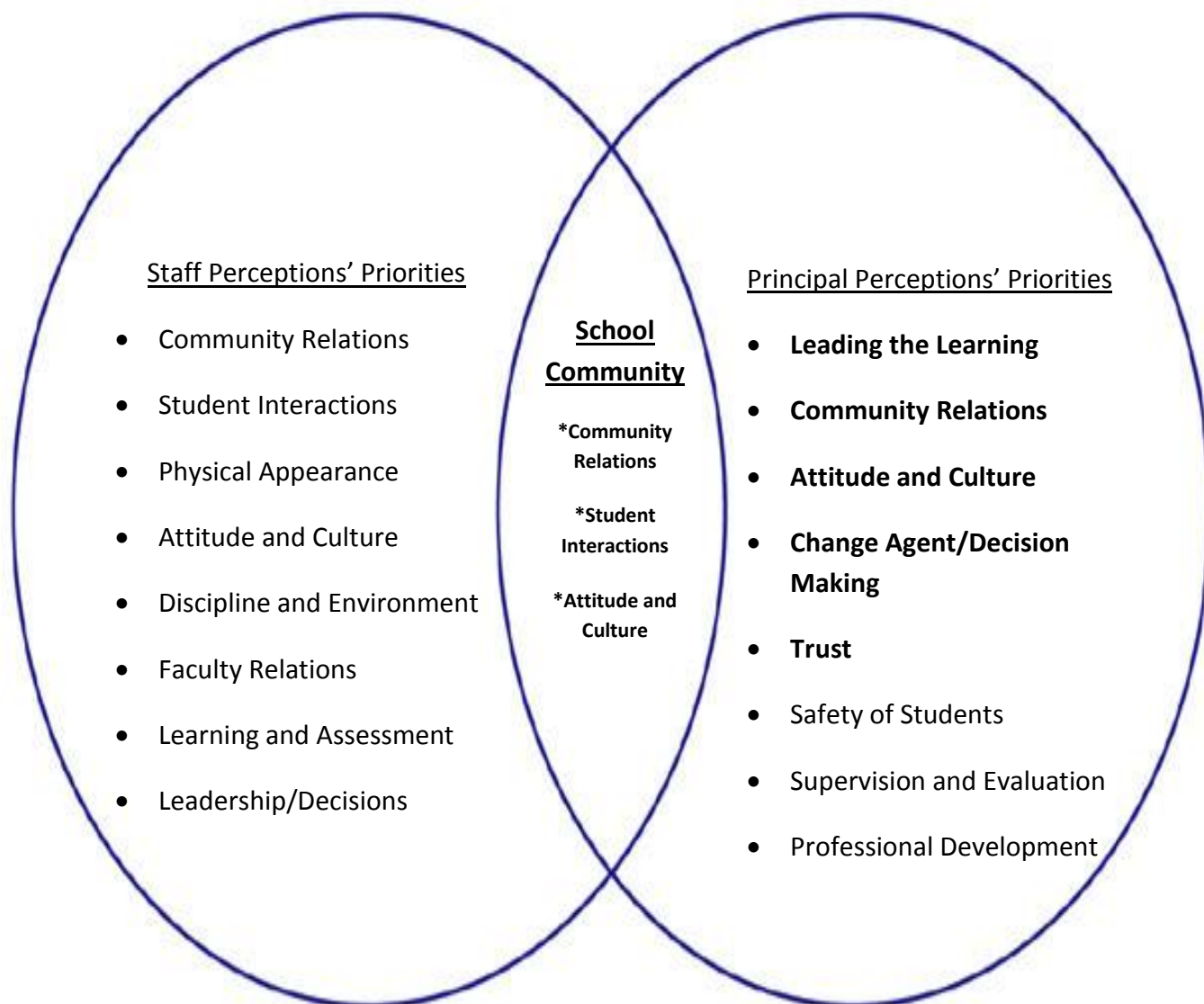


Figure 2: Aspects that Emerged as Most Significant to the School Community

The aspects presented in the Venn diagram are supported by the data previously discussed in the chapter. Staff perceptions emerged from the surveys conducted from all three schools. The principals' interviews revealed these aspects of school climate as being most significant in their work. The three areas that emerged as being significant to both groups or the school community included community relations, student interactions, and attitude and culture.

Although there are significant differences between both groups, these three areas are common to both staff and principals.

Two of the principals described in great detail their relationships with their community as described previously by Principal A and Principal B. Students are central to the work that principals in schools do on a daily basis. In fact, when all three principals were asked what mattered most to them, all three agreed it was the people in the organization which included the students, staff, families, and the community members. Finally, attitude and culture is significant to both groups. This is described by the principals as building trust, shared decision-making, ensuring the safety and well-being of the members of the school, and most importantly, building and cultivating relationships. These three aspects are most significant to the school community.

It is of interest to note that leadership and decision making was ranked last by the staff. The principals also spoke about the challenges involved in making decisions. It is important to all three principals to engage in shared decision making. They openly admitted to “not knowing all of the answers” and even struggled in the beginning of their careers with making decisions. It was only as they became more experienced, that they became more confident in their abilities as leaders to make difficult decisions.

In conclusion, the people matter most in an organization. The purpose of a school is to educate the students; however, staff perceptions and principal perceptions vary. Each school has many variables that can impact student achievement. The National School Climate Framework (2009) and Michael Fullan’s Keys (2014) have given us places to begin our work as we contemplate levers that can lead to increased student achievement.

Chapter 5: Findings and Conclusions

Purpose of the Study

On January 8, 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act signed by President George W. Bush called for greater accountability of student performance by requiring states to issue annual report cards on school performance and statewide results. Included in this act was the promotion of stronger programs and the push for improved teacher quality in an effort to increase student performance.

Up until 2014, the State of New Hampshire had been using the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, which was part of the reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act of 1965. Since then, there has been a shift to a federal initiative, known as Common Core State Standards or the College and Career Ready Standards [Retrieved from: <http://www.corestandards.org/2014>]. The two most common assessment programs are Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). As of the spring of 2015, districts in New Hampshire implemented the SBAC. Given the transition from NECAP in 2014 to SBAC in 2015, districts have been realigning curriculum given the shift to College and Career Ready Standards.

Many districts around the nation are not only transitioning to new curriculums, but are also implementing new evaluation systems. Teacher and principal evaluations are being linked to student performance. Assessment data is being used to determine the success or failure of the schools and districts. Districts are under pressure to show growth and achievement, while transitioning to a new curriculum and assessment program. According to Fullan (2003), schools should promote collaborative cultures based on powerful close relationships. He further states

“if you want to challenge people to change, you need to develop a relationship with them first” (Fullan, 2011, p. 64). That said, this study addresses the assumption that school climate is one of levers that can transform schools into positive learning environments that support all members of the organization towards improvement and success. Therefore, leaders must have clarity in their purpose and focus on students, teaching, and learning.

This qualitative study considered aspects of school climate that support or inhibits student achievement as each aspect relates to school reform efforts. Given the increased responsibility and accountability schools face during these challenging times, school climate and the role of the school principal formed the basis of this study. It is important to determine what successful schools are doing in order to address the achievement gap. This will help to inform practice and serve as models of what effective schools do to promote student success.

Conclusions

Research Question 1: Which aspects of school climate did professional staff perceive as promoting or inhibiting student achievement?

When reviewing the responses from all three schools, it was noted that most of the participants ranked all subareas under the eight headings in the high-middle range and middle range of agreement. Very few scores were ranked in the low or middle-low area or were answered by participants as “not sure” or “disagreed” with the statements. These rankings were used to inform the interview protocols used with the principals for the qualitative research.

Unlike quantitative data gleaned from a Likert scale, the researcher made no claims in this survey regarding the generalizable validity or reliability. A much larger sample would be required. Furthermore, the purposeful sample in this study served the researcher well in this

dominant qualitative paradigm. The rankings listed below did, however, serve as a start in establishing a research design that yielded rich data that participants shared in the interviews.

School A scores ranged between 3.37 and 3.69, which was in the high and highest rankings on the Likert scale used to evaluate agreement of the statements in the eight areas. Attitude and Culture were scored the highest by staff, while leadership and decision making was scored the lowest by staff. Overall, School A had the highest scores when compared to School B and School C. This school was also the smallest of the three schools with approximately 50 students. Return rate for completed staff surveys was 60 percent.

School B scores ranged between 3.24 and 3.69, which was in the high and highest rankings on the Likert scale used to evaluate agreement of the statements in the eight areas. Student Interaction was scored the highest by staff, while Faculty Relations was scored the lowest by staff. Overall, School B did not have the highest scores, nor did they have the lowest scores. This school has approximately 170 students. Return rate for completed staff surveys was 76 percent.

School C scores ranged between 3.24 and 3.54, which was in the high and highest rankings on the Likert scale used to evaluate agreement of the statements in the eight areas. Physical Appearance was scored the highest by staff, while Leadership and Decision Making was scored the lowest by staff. Overall, School C had the lowest scores when compared to School B and School C. This school is the largest of the three schools with approximately 440 students. Return rate for completed staff surveys was 74 percent.

All three schools' scores combined ranged between 3.29 and 3.58. All mean scores fell within the high middle range. However, the top scores leaned closer to the highest ranking while the lowest score was leaning towards the middle-high point. Based on the combined data from

all three schools, Community Relations and Student Interactions were the aspects of school climate that staff scored the highest on the Likert scale based on the behaviors in their schools. According to the Alliance to the Association of School Climate (AASC), community relations refer to the relationship between the ways the school is perceived externally (2014). This includes how welcoming the school is and how they utilize resources in the community which include parents; in other words, it is the extent to which the school serves as the center of the community. Additionally, ASSC defines student interactions as consideration of student expectations, peer interactions, and the way these exchanges exist within the context of the school climate. It also includes the intentionality versus the accidental qualities of the students' behaviors and how the school is governed.

One of the lowest scores, Learning, Assessment, and Instruction, examines the relationship between the management and discipline approaches within the school and the climate that is created as a result (ASSC, 2014). This category includes the degree to which management strategies promote higher levels of responsibility and motivation within the teacher-student interactions. Leadership and Decision-Making, which received the lowest score, examines the relationships within decision-making processes and the climate that is created as a result. This category includes the degree to which decisions are made collectively by a group with shared values that are part of the school's vision. Additionally, leadership and decision-making also consider how the leader in his/her role impacts the school. As stated above, the results of the professional staff surveys were used to inform the questioning protocols for the principals.

Research Question 2: Which aspects of school climate did principals perceive as having the greatest impact on student achievement?

Based on the research conducted, it is evident that Fullan's (2014) keys co-exist and do not always stand in isolation. There is crossover, as leadership is complex, multi-layered, and multi-faceted. Given the extensive analysis conducted on the data obtained from the interviews, the participants clearly see their primary role as leading the learning, although they also recognize the need to serve as a change agent as they move their organization forward in a continuous process towards improvement. Finally, given the complexities of their organization, they recognized the need to work within the system, whether that was within their district, within their school administrative unit, within their community, or within the educational system at large. This includes the state level and beyond. This supports Fullan's (2014) notion that in order to maximize the principal's effectiveness, these three keys are essential. The principal must lead the learning, serve as a change agent, and work as a system's leader.

Fullan's (2014) Three Keys

In an effort to lead the learning, all three principals have creatively constructed schedules that allow teachers time during the day to collaborate around professional development initiatives. They have created Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) which has allowed professional staff to communicate and share best practices around curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These are the ways the principals 'lead the learning' in their schools.

Fullan (2014) provides detailed information regarding how principals can support and facilitate this work as leading the learning. Teachers who work together to improve instruction can have a greater impact on student learning. The principal is central to this purposeful work and must lead the efforts in the process of setting goals for students, reviewing data for the individual students, establishing instructional practices to address learning needs, and providing opportunities for teachers to meet and collaborate.

All three principals spoke about the relationship between the school and the district, which is largely contingent upon the role of the superintendent. The superintendent drives district initiatives including committee work which impacts the principal. The relationship between the principals and the superintendent impacts the school community. The participants compare being a district player to being a team player. Their role as a district player can either support or hinder their performance as a school leader, which is in large part due to the superintendent. Principals are challenged with balancing school goals and priorities with district initiatives and directives. These are the ways that the principals act as a system and district player.

Fullan (2014) provides detailed information about how the principal serves as a district and system player. Principals must be able to work with colleagues at the district level and with those within the system. This includes other principals, specialists, superintendents, school board members, community members, and anyone else who may be able to elevate the principal's position within the organization.

All three participants agree that their primary role is to lead the learning, as they work alongside staff and analyze student data in their professional learning teams in the quest for continued student growth and achievement. Collaboratively they discussed best practices of teaching as they relate to curriculum and instruction. They work with different systems including the district and consultants as they prioritize their professional development needs. And finally, they serve as a change agent while challenging the status quo and monitoring overall progress and making adjustments. The work is not always as neat and aligned as it might appear. There are times when one role is in conflict with another.

Fullan (2014) describes principals as serving as change agents. The principal challenges the status quo by building trust and creating a commonly owned plan for success. Fullan contends that this is necessary as principals maximize their impact and continue to strive for improving their organization. Change is necessary, and the principal is instrumental in this process. All three principals spoke about being a change agent and the challenges associated with this role. Given the changes being thrust upon schools regarding the Common Core State Standards and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, change has become embedded in principal practice for school leaders. Trust and relationships are central to the change process.

Crossover of the Keys

All three keys are essential to school leadership. However, all three principals agree that their primary responsibility is to lead the learning. There are times when one key seems to be in conflict with another key. Communication is central to all three keys.

Decision-making crosses over all three keys. Principals make decisions based on district and system mandates and directives. As they engage professional staff in the change process, they enlist the support and feedback of the staff around decision-making. Finally, as they lead the learning, it is incumbent on the principal to work with staff on decision-making as it relates to curriculum and instruction. Therefore, decision-making is central to all three keys.

All three keys are instrumental to maximizing the principal's impact on the organization. However, there are times when one key is in conflict with another key. What is clear from all three participants, is that relationships, building trust, and the ability to make decisions that are in the best interest of the organization, help to maximize the principal's impact on school climate.

National School Climate Framework (2009)

The National School Climate Council (2009) identified five standards that support school improvement efforts, and they include: *a shared vision* for promoting a positive school climate, *policies* aimed at promoting the development of social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills and a comprehensive system that addresses barriers to learning and teaching, school *practices* that promote learning while enhancing engagement and address barriers to learning through the development of infrastructures for meeting this standard, an *environment* where all members are welcomed, supported and feel safe; and finally implementing practices that promote *social emotional learning* and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justices (p. 3). The dialogue shared focuses on these aspects of school climate as they relate to leadership. They are further broken down by the following five categories: shared vision, policies, practices, environment, and social emotional learning.

The school community must create a shared vision and a plan for promoting and sustaining a positive school climate. All three principals had a mission and vision statement, although each participant developed theirs differently. Two of the participants felt that it was time to review the existing statement and to work with the staff on rewriting it to be more collective, timely, and relevant. All three recognize that developing a mission and vision is a process that takes time and should be inclusive of the staff it impacts.

The school sets policies specifically aimed at developing and sustaining a positive school climate. Although there are many policies that principals could focus on, all three specifically discuss safety as it relates to the school environment.

The principal's greatest responsibility is keeping all students and staff safe. Given the violence reported in today's school, principals and stakeholders have taken drastic measures and precautions to ensure that policies, protocols, and procedures are in place to mitigate any

potential threats to the school community. Schools have developed relationships with local police and fire departments as they work to comply with Safe Schools Act, Bully Prevention, and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Association).

As reported by all three participants, the safety and well-being of students and staff is taken seriously by principals. All threats or violations of protocols are acted on swiftly, often involving local officials. Developing a good relationship with local municipalities, including police and fire, are to the school's advantage. It is important to have established procedures and protocols that are practiced and reviewed regularly. This elevates the school's preparedness to handle any threats that might compromise the safety of the school. This allows students and staff to focus on learning,

All three schools have identified practices to promote learning which are identified and prioritized to support the learning of all students. Barriers to learning have been addressed through systemic approaches. Through the development of system-wide practices including Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) and Response to Instruction (RTI) models, schools have developed teaching practices that address barriers to learning and processes that reengage students who have become disengaged. However, supervision and evaluation of staff and professional development emerged as two additional areas that principals focus their attention on.

All three schools work towards creating an environment where members feel welcome, supported, and safe. Participants stressed the importance of establishing an environment where there is empowerment and trust. It is equally important that all members feel welcome, which allows for focus on learning.

An essential part of school climate, is the leader's ability to build community in the school. This includes the development of practices that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice. Many districts and schools have adopted approaches and programs as a systematic way to bring about positive change. These include Responsive Classroom and Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS). All of these programs provide a framework with common language that is aimed at improving the school climate, therefore, impacting student achievement. However, when principals were asked about how they built community in their school, many spoke about how they built relationships with their students and staff as opposed to elaborating on the programs and systems that were put in place to build community.

Crossover of School Climate Standards

The National School Climate Standards (2009) presented a framework for schools for promoting and sustaining a positive school climate. The purpose of the framework is to support effective teaching, learning, and school improvement. Principals discussed the ways in which they led and encouraged supported efforts.

Building a positive school climate begins with building relationships with students, staff, and the community. Although there are many programs and initiatives that can help facilitate this, it is sustained through rituals, traditions, and procedures that become embedded in the school culture. What is central in all three schools is the intentionality of the principal to work with the individuals in the schools to create a collaborative, caring culture that honors the members of the community while supporting student learning and professional growth of staff.

Conclusion

All three principals were very clear that what matters most and what consumes their day, are often in opposition of one another. What matters most are the students, staff, and parents. The people matter most. They spoke about building relationships and the importance of trust. One principal spoke about the importance of differentiating for the adults as they do for their students - that as a principal, it is important to meet the adult learner where they are and to nurture his/her growth. What consumes the principal's day are things like correspondence, district committee work, and facilities upkeep.

It is very clear that the safety of the school community is of utmost concern given the present concerns in today's schools around bullying, violence, and drugs. At the elementary school level, practice of drills and developing relations with the local municipalities is a focus. Developed procedures, policies, and plans are essential to the safety and orderly operation of today's school. Many schools have adopted programs including Responsive Classroom, and PBIS as a way of proactively addressing pro-social behaviors.

It is difficult to isolate the two theoretical frameworks given the complexity of the variables in each framework. Based on the data collected, it is apparent that there are many overlapping aspects of the two constructs.

Although Fullan's (2014) keys and the National School Climate Framework (2009) have offered two lenses through which to look at school climate and leadership, other factors emerged that must be considered. The background of the principals, along with their early experiences influence who they are as leaders which impacts their leadership. Additionally, the challenges and adversity they overcame, led to personal growth and learning for these leaders. These factors help to shape and inform their practice.

State Assessments and Student Achievement

School climate impacts student achievement (Bryk and Schnieder, 2002). Therefore, it is essential to consider state assessments.

The New England Common Assessment Scores (NECAP) for 2012-2014 were reviewed for School A. Upon review of the scores of the reportable groups, all students' median scores in all areas were in the proficient or highly proficient range and were well above the state mean scaled scores in many areas by over six points. This did not take into account subgroups, which were too small to report.

The New England Common Assessment Scores (NECAP) for 2012-2014 was reviewed for School B. All median scores for School B were within three points or were above the state mean scaled scores in language arts and math. All median science scores for grade four students were at or above the state mean scaled scores. All median writing scores for grade five students were above the state mean scaled scores. All median scores reported for School B were proficient. The report did not take into account subgroups, which is protected, confidential information.

The New England Common Assessment Scores (NECAP) for 2012-2014 were reviewed for School C. All median scores for School C for grades three and four were above the state mean scaled scores in language arts and math with the exception of one area, grade four language arts. All median science scores for grade four students were above the state mean scaled scores except for the 2014 scores, which was one point below the mean scaled score. There were no median writing scores for grade five students since they attend a different school. All median scores reported for School C were proficient. The report did not take into account subgroups, which is protected, confidential information.

Upon review of New England Common Assessment Program scores of all three schools, it is important to note, that overall these are high-performing schools that have been identified as Schools of Excellence in the state. The scores support this, as most were above the state averages and were proficient. It is of interest to note, that in smaller schools the subgroups were too small and that they were not reportable. Although the scores are overall high, it is the principals' responsibility to ensure that all subgroups make adequate yearly progress, including those that are identified as special education, Title I, and socio-economically disadvantaged.

Leading Schools of Excellence

All three schools have been named a School of Excellence in the past five years. Two of the three principals were acting principals at that time. Principal C was the assistant principal but was promoted when the former principal moved to central office position approximately three years ago. Being named a School of Excellence for these three schools was a proud moment that validated the hard work being accomplished in each school. The process allowed the professional staff to reflect and self-assess their current work. The outside recognition allowed the school to celebrate in meaningful ways that elevated their status in the community and around the state. Finally, it provided the school with feedback or a 'nod of approval' to continue their hard work.

Research Question 3: Which aspects of school climate emerged as most significant to members of the school community?

In order to answer this question, an in-depth review of principals' interviews, supplemented with the ranking of staff surveys, was conducted to determine what common factors emerged as most significant to the members of the school community. The results from the data collected from the principal interviews, which were described earlier in detail, and staff

perceptions, emerged from the surveys conducted from all three schools. The principals' interviews revealed aspects of school climate as being most significant in their work. The three areas that emerge as being significant to both groups and the school community include community relations, student interactions, and attitude and culture. Although there are significant differences between both groups, these three areas are common to both staff and principals.

Two of the principals spoke in great detail about their relationships with their community, as described previously by Principal A and Principal B. Students are central to the work that principals do in their schools on a daily basis. In fact, when all three principals were asked what mattered most to them, all three agreed it is the people in the organization which includes the students, staff, families, and the community members. Finally, attitude and culture was significant to both groups. This was described by the principals as building trust, shared decision-making, ensuring the safety and well-being of the members of the school, and most importantly, building and cultivating relationships. These three aspects were most significant to the school community.

It is of interest to note that leadership and decision making was ranked last by the staff. The principals also spoke about the challenges involved in making decisions. It is important to all three principals to engage their staff in shared decision making. They openly admit to "not knowing all of the answers" and even struggled in the beginning of their careers with making decisions. It was only as they became more experienced, that they became more confident in their abilities as leaders to make difficult decisions.

In conclusion, the people matter most in an organization. The purpose of a school is to educate the students; however, staff perceptions and principal perceptions vary. Each school has

many variables that can impact student achievement. The National School Climate Framework (2009) and Michael Fullan's Keys (2014) have given us places to begin our work as we contemplate levers that can lead to increased student achievement.

Recommendations

The study of leadership and school climate, as it relates to student achievement, is complex given all of the variables. The National School Climate Standards (2009) and Fullan's (2014) keys have given us two frameworks for developing a deeper understanding of three high performing schools. However, it is recommended that further consideration be given to the role of the superintendent. It is evident based on the data collected that this impacts not only the principal's role as a system player, but also the school and the community.

Additionally, the principals' backgrounds, preparedness, and early influences impact these leaders in their roles. A principal's background and disposition warrants further attention as it relates to leadership and efficacy.

The research in this qualitative study was limited to three elementary schools. It is recommended that this research be conducted with middle and high schools to determine whether these findings compare and/or contrast.

Schools change, as do the leaders and staff. Although the research was conducted within five years of the schools being named Schools of Excellent, Principal C was in the role of the Assistant Principal. It is important that research be conducted in a timely manner due to the fact that roles change as organizations change.

Finally, in order to further understand the professional staffs' perceptions, it is recommended that there be follow-up focus group research upon completion and analysis of the staff surveys. This would allow for richer, more in-depth understanding of staff perceptions.

According to Larry Cuban (2014), professor emeritus of education at Stanford, "Elliot Eisner's eloquence in writing and speech gave heart to and bolstered many educators who felt that the humanities, qualitative approaches to evaluation and artistic criticism had been hijacked by those who wanted only numbers as a sign of effectiveness" (Donald, p. 15). It is not enough to look at the numbers on an assessment or the numbers in a survey. More importantly, we must seek to understand the complexities behind the numbers so that we can better understand the people they represent.

Implications

The timing of this qualitative research project made for enlightening conversation with school leaders. As schools are transitioning from the state frameworks and assessments to Common Core State Standards and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), there are many initiatives warranting the school community's time and attention.

School staff is working on curriculum shifts, report card changes, supervision and evaluation plans, safety plans, and professional development plans. Although many supporting documents were collected for review and analysis, principals had cautioned that they were in the state of revision as they were responding to district changes. Therefore, they offered very little about the inner workings of the climates of the schools. Moreover, the lack of clearly defined documentation says much about the depth of the community's concern over accountability. It is only when something goes wrong that people have to scramble to see what is in writing. Perhaps climate does not appear to be as affected by what is written down as it does by the activities and actions of the principals and staff which are more definitional.

Finally, although these districts had performed above the state medians on their state assessments, they were still questioning how they would perform on the newly implemented state assessment.

Further Studies

After considering this study, it is evident there is a need to continue researching what levers offer the most promise and hope for schools, as schools are held accountable for student achievement. The National School Climate Standards (2009) and Fullan's (2014) keys offer frameworks for analyzing and prioritizing variables that impact student achievement.

It is recommended that this research be conducted again over time once schools have had the opportunity to adapt to the mandated changes required. Blue Ribbon Schools and other identified exemplary schools provide beacons of hope of what could be for all schools and students. Surely, there is something that can be learned from these leaders and these systems as we balance the demands of required change and change for the sake of improving practice.

Discussion

It is of interest to note that leadership and decision making was ranked last by the staffs, although the principals spoke deeply about decision-making. They specifically detailed the challenges involved in making decisions. It is important to all three principals to engage in shared decision making. They openly admit to "not knowing all of the answers" and even struggled in the beginning of their careers with making decisions. It was only as they became more experienced, that they became more confident in their abilities as leaders to make difficult decisions. Although all scores were in the high-end of agreement, and this was ranked last, it leaves a lingering question. When high performing schools get recognized, to whom do we credit the achievement?

Closing Summary

This qualitative study considers leadership and which aspects of school climate support or inhibit student achievement as each aspect relates to school reform efforts. Given the increased responsibility and accountability schools face during these challenging times, school climate and the role of the school principal, formed the basis of this study. It is important to determine what successful schools are doing in order to address achievement gaps. What we have come to learn in this study is that the people matter most in an organization. The purpose of a school is to educate the students, however, staff perceptions and principal perceptions can vary. Each school has many variables that can impact student achievement. Perhaps we have found a starting place by considering community relations, student interactions, and attitude and culture. The National School Climate Framework (2009) and Michael Fullan's Keys (2014) have given us places to begin our work as we consider levers that lead to increased student achievement and success.

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Appendix A

Invitation to Participate for School Principals

Dear _____,

I am a graduate student in the Southern New Hampshire University Educational Leadership Doctoral Program. I am currently in the process of completing my dissertation under the direction of Dr. Margaret Ford. I am writing to ask you if you and your school would be willing to take part in my case study. Your involvement will include a series of three interviews.

The purpose of this qualitative research project is to better understand school climate and leadership as it relates to school improvement efforts. If you agree to participate, I will contact you by phone so you know when to expect it. Each interview will take approximately sixty minutes to complete. During our phone conversation, we can discuss more details about the types of questions as well as our assurances to you. However, there is a list of these assurances at the end of this message for your review.

We hope that this will be a useful piece of research that will inform our work as we research and study school culture and leadership. Your help is greatly appreciated.

Regards,

Lois Costa lois.costa@snhu.edu

Assurances to survey participants:

If you agree to complete a survey, any information you share with us will be treated in confidence.

In all instances:

- * We will respect your right to decide not to answer any questions without explanation.
- * We respect your right to withdraw from the survey at any time.
- * We may wish to use quotes, but would only quote you under a pseudonym and with your expressed permission.

Appendix B

Informed Consent for No or Very Minimal-Risk Procedure

Project Title: School Climate: A Focus on Leadership as a Lever for School Improvement Efforts

Informed Consent Agreement for Participants

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this qualitative research is to better understand school climate and leadership as it relates to school improvement efforts.

What you will do in the study: As a participant in the study, you will be contacted by phone prior to receiving a survey in your email. The survey will be used to look at school climate; including physical appearance, faculty relations, student interactions, leadership/decisions, discipline environment, learning/assessment, attitude and culture, and community relations. The results will be used to analyze school leadership and school climate.

Time required: The surveys will require approximately minutes of your time.

Risks: There are no anticipated risks in this study.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The report from this study will be made available to you.

Confidentiality: Participant's information will be kept private and confidential. The data will be collected and is limited to a collection of responses from thirty principals in New Hampshire. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data has been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

IRB-SBS Office Use Only		
Protocol #		
Approved	from:	to:
SBS Staff		

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

How to withdraw from the study: To withdraw from the study, simply notify Lois Costa at lois.costa@snhu.edu.

Payment: There is no compensation and your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. There is no obligation and you may opt out at any time.

If you have questions about the study, please contact me:

Lois Costa lois.costa@snhu.edu

If you have questions about your rights in the study, contact:

Dr. Margaret Ford, Associate Dean

Southern New Hampshire University

2500 North River Rd.

Manchester, NH 03106

Phone (800) 626-9100

Agreement:

I agree to participate in the research study described above.

Participant's Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

IRB-SBS Office Use Only		
Protocol #		
Approved	from:	to:
SBS Staff		

Appendix C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL- Principals

Date of Interview _____

Name of Participant _____

Organization _____

Date Interviewed _____

Interviewed by __Lois B. Costa_____

I am interviewing school principals who hold administrative leadership positions. My focus is to find out more information about school climate as it relates to student achievement. I hope to learn from your experiences, about leadership in schools and how it impacts the school climate.

The information you provide in this interview will be used in the research I am conducting at Southern New Hampshire University. The collected comments, experience, and suggestions from all of the participants interviewed will be reviewed and saved by the supervising faculty member.

Interview Question Samples

Interview 1:

1. How did you become interested in education?
2. How is it that you became an elementary principal?
3. How do you make decisions as the leader of the school?
4. How do you promote a positive school climate?
5. How has your school been affected by high stakes assessment?

6. How has your school changed since the adoption of the Common Core?

Interview 2:

1. As the principal, how do you lead the learning in your school?
2. How do you set priorities?
3. What matters most and consumes your day?
4. How have you developed a mission and vision for leading your school?
5. How do you ensure the safety of your students and staff?
6. Does your teacher evaluation plan meet your needs? Explain...
7. How do you build community in your school?
8. How do you support professional development?

Interview 3:

1. How does your district work as a team?
2. Aside from district requirements, how should principals and teachers measure and keep track of instructional improvements and success?
3. What should your district be doing to move your school forward?
4. How should schools monitor and share effective instructional practices?
5. How should principals help teachers improve?
6. Looking ahead, what concerns you most about education?
7. What is worth fighting for?

Appendix D

Instrument: School Climate Quality Analytic Assessment Instrument and School-based Evaluation/Leadership Team Assessment Protocol

The Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC) - School Climate Assessment Instruments (SCAI) for Elementary Schools (ES)

Acronyms: ASSC –SCAI - ES

Authors: J. Shindler

Publication Date: 2011

Publisher Information: The Alliance for the Study of School Climate

Purpose: This instrument is designed to act as reliable user-friendly windows into school life, shedding light on every aspect of the school environment.

Introduction to the ASSC Assessment System

The most critical part of any school's effort to improve the quality of their climate is that of the assessment component. To know where one is going, one must know where one currently is. The Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC) offers a series of comprehensive School Climate Assessment Instruments (SCAI) and support services to assist schools in achieving a clear sense of where they are and where they can go.

Because our belief is that schools [change from within](#) we feel that the most beneficial assessment system is one that provides a school with a clear picture of where they are in a very concrete and specific manner. One could compare our SCAIs to powerful mirrors for self-reflection. It is also important that the assessment process lead to clear targets for which to aim in the process of growth. One of the unique features of the ASSC SCAIs is that they act to steer a school in a more functional and effective direction.

We feel the primary users of a good assessment system are those most involved in the renewal effort. In most cases, that would be a team of teachers and administrators that have made a commitment to doing what it takes to provide a vision and to facilitate the educational process for their peers. Our assessment instruments provide clear procedural protocols so that they can be used independent of any external support. Yet we also offer the perspective only an "objective outsider" can provide. ASSC has developed a series of SCAI tools, each suited to specific members of the school community. These SCAI include:

School Climate Assessment Instruments - SCAI

- **Secondary School Climate Assessment Instrument - General (SCAI-S-G).** Available online to provide schools with an example of the design and content used by ASSC.
- This instrument should be used with secondary teachers, parents, staff, administrators and external assessment consultants.
- Secondary School Climate Assessment Instrument - Student (SCAI-S-S)

- This instrument is intended as a compliment to the data from the SCAI-S-G and should be used with 6-12th grade level student participants.
- Elementary School Climate Assessment Instrument - General (SCAI-E-G)
- This instrument should be used with elementary teachers, parents, staff, administrators and external assessment consultants.
- Elementary School Climate Assessment Instrument - Student (SCAI-E-S)
- This instrument is intended as a compliment to the data from the SCAI-S-G and should be used with 2-6th grade student participants.
- Parent and Community School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI-P)

» Examining the Reliability and Validity of the ASSC/WASSC School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI)

All Climate Assessment Instruments from ASSC are copyrighted. Permission is required for use. For all schools undertaking formal school climate assessment efforts using the ASSC SCAIs the purchase of a site license is required.

School Climate Assessment System Comparison

School Climate bears a significant relationship with student achievement, teacher retention and satisfaction, school violence and the ability for schools to sustain reform. While efforts made by schools to assess the quality of their climate appear to be worth the investment in general, systems for assessing and improving school climate and their efficacy vary substantially. The following comparison demonstrates the difference between traditional systems of climate assessment and those developed by the Alliance for School Climate.

Traditional forms of school climate assessment are typically characterized by:

- A process controlled largely by outsiders
- An opaque definition of school climate
- Prescriptions for change that stem from assumptions made by outsiders
- An objective survey type inventory (as seen below)

Objective type Survey Item Example1:

Teachers at my school help us children with our school problems

Agree

Not Sure

Disagree

The Alliance for School Climate Assessment System is characterized by:

- A process driven by the school's own steering/vision team
- A transparent definition of school climate
- Prescriptions for change generated by the participants who work in the school.
- An analytic-scale based instrument (example item shown below)

Analytic Trait Scale Instrument Item Example:

High	Middle	Low
Teacher-student interactions could be typically described as supportive and respectful.	Teacher-student interactions could be typically described as fair but teacher-dominated.	Teacher-student interactions are mostly teacher-dominated and reactive.
◀ ● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ●	● ● ● ● ● ● ▶

Comparison Research

In a study of the efficacy of the ASSC system in an urban setting (Shindler, Taylor, Jones & Cadenas, 2003), significant advantages for a participant-driven, analytic-scale system were observed. The analytic-scale (i.e., rubric) instrument demonstrated greater soundness (i.e., validity, reliability, efficiency and benefit) than traditional inventories. The analytic instrument also proved more practical because it provided users with an educational tool for understanding climate, a venue for constructing a meaningful definition for "quality school climate" aligned with the school's goals, and language that helped participants move from the diagnosis of problems to prescriptions for the cures. Traditional surveys are not designed to provide these benefits. The use of an analytic instrument in the hands of committed faculty and staff creates both ownership and transparency to the assessment process. These findings confirmed previous research that suggests meaningful reform is not possible without both of these conditions being present. Moreover, the ASSC system demonstrated the capacity to provide continuity to school personnel as they attempted to move from assessment to planning to action without losing momentum or vision.

Sub-Scales of the School Climate Assessment Instrument

In the ASSC SCAI overall school climate is divided into 8 sub-factors. These 8 dimensions comprise a comprehensive definition of school climate and function. Each of these 8 factors is described in the table below.

Sub-Scale	Description
Physical Appearance	Examines the relationship between the physical characteristics and environment of a school and the climate that it promotes. This dimension includes the degree to which intentional efforts have been made related to the consideration of the perceptions outsiders and expectations and treatment of custodial staff.
Faculty Relations	Examines the relationship between how members of the faculty relate to one another its effects on the climate of the school. This dimension includes the degree to which collaboration, respect, capacity to interact, and a sense of collective purpose exist among the members of the faculty. It also includes the explicit and explicit expectations among faculty members as to how decisions are made and duties are delegated and performed.
Student Interactions	Examines the relationships among student expectations, peer interactions, and their place in the school and the climate that is exists. This dimension includes the degree to which students' interactions are governed by intention vs. accidental qualities.
Leadership and Decision-Making	Examines the relationships among decision-making mechanisms, how administrative authority is manifested and the climate that is created as a result. This dimension includes the degree to which the collective possesses a shared sense of values and an operational vision. It also explores the ways in which the quality of leadership affects school life.
Discipline and Management Environment	Examines the relationship between the management and discipline approaches used within the school and the climate that is created as a result. This dimension includes the degree to which management strategies promote higher levels of responsibility and motivation. It also examines teacher-student interactions as a source of management and motivation.
Learning, Instruction and Assessment	Examines the relationships among the instructional strategies and the assessment methods used in the school and the climate that is created. Instruction is explored as it relates to its level of engagement, student empowerment and authenticity. Higher quality instruction and assessment methods are contrasted to less effective methods by the degree to which they promote a psychology of success rather than a

	psychology of failure.
Attitude and Culture	Examines the pervasive attitudes and cultures that operate within the school and their relationship to the climate. This dimension explores the degree to which social and/or communal bonds are present within the school, the attitudes that the members of the school possess, and the level of pride and ownership they feel. It includes the degree to which efforts in this area are made intentionally or left to chance.
Community Relations	Examines the relationship between the way that the school is perceived externally and its climate. This dimension includes the degree to which the school is welcoming, takes advantage of the resources in the local community including parents, and acts intentionally as a center of community life.

Characterization of Each of the 3 School Climate Levels as Measured in the ASSC SCAI

Each item in the ASSC SCAIs depict 3 levels of performance. Items characterize specific aspects of school performance, but taken in aggregate demonstrate an overall level of performance. These levels of performance could be classified by the following descriptive categories.

System	Level 3 Intentional	Level 2 Semi-intentional	Level 1 Accidental
Ethos	Sound vision translated into effective practice	Good Intentions translated into practices that "work."	Practices defined by the relative self-interest of faculty and staff
Effect on Students	Experience changes students for the better	Experience has a mixed effect on students	Experience has a net negative effect on students
Staff relations	Collaborative	Collegial	Competitive
General Characterization	Encouraging and Empowering	Opportunities for those who seek them out	Discouraging and limiting
Teachers' Orientation toward students and learning	Operate as lead learners in which the learning community encourages a reciprocal validating learning relationship between teacher and student	Operate as teachers in which the school encourages a hierarchal supportive learning relationship of teacher to student	Operate as employees of an institution in which there exist a very limited hostile relationship of teacher over student
Students' view of the classroom dynamic	Empowered to see themselves as the most significant element of the learning environment responsible for collective success	Willing to see the teacher as the most significant element of the learning environment worthy of student respect and support	Unable to see any person as a significant element in the classroom. All participants are expendable.
Process for school Improvement	Internally derived by all stakeholders through praxis, best practices	Externally derived by school leadership by acquiring existing models	Externally implemented by outside groups and implicitly or explicitly opposed by the stakeholders
Evaluation of performance	School identifies and creates benchmarks for success aligned to the mission and vision of school and creates assessments to measure attainment	School adheres to the defined benchmarks of external forces and aligns assessments to measure attainment	School sees evaluation as a punitive approach to motivate non-compliant participants

Note: The ASSC SCAIs has been used in hundreds of schools. They have shown themselves to be a highly valid assessment instruments. However, reporting the data that is generated and using it to make change is a rather relative matter. Reporting the data can be done in many ways. It is best to consult with the ASSC

provider and determine a format that best suits the needs and purposes of your school. ASSC offers sample reports that have been generated by other schools to those who enter into a site license agreement as a means of further assistance.

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Permission to use assessment obtained from J. Shindler on May 24, 2014

Appendix E

EDies Rubric

NEW HAMPSHIRE EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION AWARDS

The "ED"ies

53 Regional Dr., Suite 1 • Concord, New Hampshire 03301

Tel: 603.228.1231 Fax: 603.228.2118

Email: info@edies.org • www.edies.org



School Selection Rubric

Personalization and Relationships

Indicator	Exemplary	Fully Evident	Partially or Not Yet Evident
The school engages parents and families as partners in each student's education and encourages their participation in school programs and parent support groups.			
The climate of the school is safe, positive, respectful and supportive, resulting in a sense of pride and ownership.			
There is a system for effective and ongoing communication with students, parents/guardians, and school personnel, designed to keep them informed about the types of available support services and identified student needs.			
The school has a formal, ongoing program through which each student has an adult member of the school community, in addition to the school guidance counselor, who personalizes each student's educational experience, knows the student well, and assists the student in achieving the school-wide expectations for student learning.			

Rigor and High Standards

Indicator	Exemplary	Fully Evident	Partially or Not Yet Evident
The curriculum is aligned with the school-wide academic expectations and shall ensure that all students have sufficient opportunity to practice and achieve each of those expectations.			
All school staff are involved in promoting the well-being and learning of students.			
There are sufficient certified/licensed personnel and support staff to provide effective counseling, health, special education, and library media services.			
The school's mission statement represents the school community's fundamental values and beliefs about student learning.			
Student grouping patterns reflect the diversity of the student body, foster heterogeneity, reflect current research and best practices, and support the achievement of the school's mission and expectations for student learning.			
The curriculum is appropriately integrated and emphasizes depth of understanding over breadth of coverage.			
A wide range of materials, technologies, and other library/information services that are responsive to the school's student population are available to students and faculty, and utilized to improve teaching and learning.			
Policies are in place for the selection and removal of information resources and the use of technologies and the internet.			

Rigor and High Standards

Indicator	Exemplary	Fully Evident	Partially or Not Yet Evident
Policies are in place for the selection and removal of information resources and the use of technologies and the internet.			
Rigorous standards are in place which address the whole child and clearly identify what students are expected to know and be able to do across the curriculum.			
Standards are contained within local curriculum competencies, national standards, the NH Grade Level/Grade Span Expectations, and the NH K-12 Curriculum Frameworks.			

Relevance, Engagement, and Whole Community Involvement

Indicator	Exemplary	Fully Evident	Partially or Not Yet Evident
The school fosters productive business/community /higher education partnerships that support student learning.			
The schedule is driven by the school's mission and expectations for student learning and supports the effective implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.			
Student support personnel enhance student learning by interacting and working cooperatively with professional and other staff and by maximizing community resources to address the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of students.			
The curriculum engages all students in inquiry, problem-solving, and higher-order thinking as well as providing opportunities for the authentic application of knowledge and skills.			
There is effective curricular coordination and articulation between and among all academic areas within the school as well as with sending-schools in the district.			

The school provides opportunities for all students to extend learning beyond the traditional offerings and settings.			
Teachers use feedback from a variety of sources, including other teachers, students, supervisors, and parents, as a means of improving instruction.			
Students are provided with formal and informal opportunities to assess their own learning.			
Technology is integrated into and supportive of teaching and learning.			
The mission statement and expectations for student learning are developed by the school community and approved and supported by the professional staff and school board and any other school-wide governing organizations.			

RESULTS

Indicator	Exemplary	Fully Evident	Partially or Not Yet Evident
Instructional strategies personalize instruction; make connections across disciplines; engage students as active and self-directed learners; involve all students in higher order thinking to promote depth of understanding; provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge or skills; and promote student self-assessment and self-reflection.			
Students are informed of the learning goals for each learning activity.			
A variety of assessment strategies are used to determine student knowledge, skills, and competencies and to assess student growth over time.			
School-wide academic, civic, and social learning expectations are defined, measurable, and reflect the school's mission.			
The school has indicators by which it assesses the school's progress in achieving school-wide civic and social expectations.			

EMPOWERED EDUCATORS

Indicator	Exemplary	Fully Evident	Partially or Not Yet Evident
Teachers as well as administrators provide leadership essential to the improvement of the school.			
Teachers meet collaboratively to discuss and share student work and the results of student assessment for the purpose of revising the curriculum and improving instructional strategies.			
Professional development activities support the development and implementation of the curriculum.			
The school's professional development program is guided by identified instructional needs and provides opportunities for teachers to develop and improve their instructional strategies.			
The school's professional development program provides opportunities for teachers to collaborate in developing a broad range of student assessment strategies.			
Teachers are knowledgeable about current research or effective instructional approaches and reflective about their own practice.			
The teacher: student ratio allows teachers to meet the learning needs of individual learners.			
Teachers are experts in the content areas they teach.			

Rubric adapted from *New Hampshire's Vision for Redesign: Moving from High Schools to Learning Communities*.
NH Department of Education, 2007.

Approved September 2008