A STUDY ON ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE OPTIONAL

FLEXIBLE YEAR PROGRAM: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORT IN A RURAL

TEXAS SCHOOL DISTRICT

A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine how administrators from a single, rural school district in southeast Texas experienced the implementation of a reform policy, the Optional Flexible Year Program (OFYP), during 2007 through 2012. Detailed interviews were conducted with six district administrators responsible for OFYP implementation in both the elementary and junior-senior high schools, as well as the central office within the district.

The research was guided by a single question: what were the perceptions and recollections of the Springhill ISD school leaders responsible for implementation of the Optional Flexible Year Program (OFYP)? Through purposeful selection, participants completed in-depth interviews aimed at studying the real-life contexts of their experiences. Analysis of participant responses revealed four major themes: (a) engagement, (b) communication, (c) collaboration, and (d) relationships.

The findings of this study suggest that effective education reform implementation requires a data-driven approach taking into consideration the unique needs of the local district and accompanying stakeholders. Implications for leadership, policy, and additional research are discussed as state and national leaders continue to improve policy aimed at reforming our nation's schools.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"People do not resist change; people resist being changed" – Richard Beckhard, 1999

Today, more than ever, a quality education is a prerequisite for success. At the same time, the population of the United States is increasingly diverse, and the composition of American classrooms reflects these changes. Schools are becoming more complex in every dimension: ethnicity, race, immigrant status, class, gender, and ability (Armstrong, Henson, & Savage, 2009). Consequently, in response to ever-increasing accountability standards, educators are under tremendous pressure to ensure all students become high achievers (Sleeter, 2005). The challenge of providing high-quality education for all students has generated a plethora of reform efforts, such that school reform has become integral to schooling itself (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Recently, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 prompted renewed national attention to school accountability and challenged states to better address the needs of all students. In response to the mandate of NCLB (2001) to close achievement gaps, the Optional Flexible Year Program (OFYP) was authorized in 2003 by the 78th Texas Legislature (Texas Education Code, **§**29.0821). The OFYP was designed for at-risk students—those who have not performed satisfactorily on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) or are unlikely to be promoted to the next grade level (see Appendix A for a complete list of at-risk criteria for Texas). This program provides the opportunity for a reduced number of school days for students who satisfactorily meet

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all core courses (i.e., math, science, reading, and social studies), TAKS, and attendance requirements.

Many educational reforms are implemented each year, yet local administrators often lack understanding of policy implementation. Without clear guidance on how to bridge the divide between policy and practice, educational reforms founder and students suffer. This study was designed to further understanding of the implementation process at the local level by gathering data from school district administrators responsible for implementing reform. Schram (2003) contends qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive. This qualitative study is not an endeavor intended to reach a definitive answer. Rather, it is a search to explore the multiple interpretations of information provided by the participants. Therefore, the use of an exploratory study was selected to examine how local administrators experienced OFYP implementation in a single Texas public school district during 2007 through 2012. To understand the details of this process, this study specifically focused on the recollections and perceptions of the administrators involved in implementation. This exploratory study was conducted within a theoretical framework that utilized systems theory, especially the concept of learning organizations, capacity building theory, and policy implementation theory.

Statement of the Problem

Over the years, public schools have been subject to several large-scale reform efforts legislated by federal and state policymakers in response to public demand for improved student achievement. Several of these reform efforts have been brought about by education professionals and researchers while others have been legislated in response

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to public perception and calls for reform. Within the last several decades, public schools have weathered numerous reform efforts legislated by federal and state policymakers in response to public sentiment calling for changes in education that would lead to increased student achievement. For this reason, this study focused on the challenges school leaders face when implementing policies created to enhance test performance for historically underachieving students by examining their perceptions and recollections of that time period.

Taking an in-depth approach to examining perceptions of a school reform idea after decades of highly politicized school improvement agendas is both appropriate and timely. In 1983, reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (1983) pointed out inequities in and among groups of students that brought about political and parental demands for reform of public schools. The *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* of 1994 attempted to provide resources for state and local efforts to implement systemic reform. The ambitious reforms called for by NCLB (2001) increased the rigor of required assessments, yet failed to provide a clear, realistic path for implementing the necessary changes. NCLB (2001) focused on individual student performance but neglected the fundamental role of teachers in successful implementation (Fullan, 2003). Additionally, in spite of the urgency of reform policies passed to meet the goals of NCLB, a reduction in at-risk student numbers has not been achieved; in fact, at-risk numbers have increased (Balfanz & Legters, 2004).

Consequently, school leaders continue to struggle with closing the achievement gap while complying with the stringent accountability standards created by NCLB

(2001). The results of these reform efforts have raised emotions both in and out of the public education arena. As the world has become smaller, more and more focus has been cast on America's ability to remain competitive in a precarious international environment. Elmore (2000) argued that the key to America's educational disparities is large scale educational improvement, yet also acknowledged that public education has been unable to effectively accomplish this through the last twenty-five years of standards-based reform, which was considered the solution to America's educational woes. Instead, a major overhaul is required in the way that school leadership is defined and practiced, as current leaders lack the capacity to implement the systemic changes that are required by standards-based reform.

Well-intentioned efforts to reform American education have included several research-based comprehensive plans to reorganize entire schools, including such models as the New American Schools, Core Knowledge Schools, Accelerated Schools, Success for All, the Edison Project, and Goals 2000 (Fuhrman, Elmore, & Massell, 1993; Sizer, 1984; Slavin & Madden, 1998). Millions of federal dollars have been allocated to states to develop school improvement plans to ensure that all students attain high levels of success (Fuhrman et al., 1993). Unfortunately, these goals have not been realized, public skepticism has continued to grow, and the pendulum of education reform continues to swing.

Tyack and Cuban (1995) argue that reform initiatives have promised to reinvent schooling's methods and structures, "but in practice their reforms have often resembled shooting stars that spurted across the pedagogical heavens, leaving a meteoric trail in the

media but burning up and disappearing in the everyday atmosphere of schools" (p. 11). More recent education reform has neglected to spotlight the local school district as an agent of reform (Marsh, 2000). McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) suggest that this oversight is due to "districts' dismal track record in carrying out or sustaining school reform which leads some policymakers and reformers to conclude that while the district is part of the reform problem it should not be part of the solution" (p. 4).

Implementation of reform policy at the local level may result in intentional or unintentional change in the intent of the legislation. On the other hand, the local district can be a very active agent of change, adept at implementing new policy initiatives and using them to their advantage. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) argue that the local school district is the most important unit of change in the reform process. Alternatively, research by Fullan (2003) found that classroom teachers are the true agents of educational change.

The Optional Flexible Year Program (OFYP) is a reform policy that allows Texas school districts a route to rearrange the traditional school schedule and reallocate resources based on the needs of individual students. Although many reform efforts are undertaken at the state and federal levels, OFYP is unique in that it does not provide direction in curricula but, instead, opens the door for Texas districts to redesign the structure of the school calendar. Knowing that successful educational reform requires a multifaceted approach shared among all stakeholders, this study was guided by the following question: What are the recollections and perceptions of the school leaders who were involved in the implementation process of OFYP?

Description of the Optional Flexible School Year Program

The Optional Flexible Year Program (OFYP) was passed by the Texas Legislature in 2003 as Senate Bill 346. Senator Steve Ogden authored the bill. As part of Education Code, **§**29.0821, this program targets students who did not or who are likely not to perform satisfactorily on the state assessment (TAKS), or who are likely not to be promoted to the next grade level. This group of students is labeled "at-risk." A complete list of at-risk criteria for Texas can be found in Appendix A. The Optional Flexible Year Program has grown from 17 participating districts in 2004 through 2005 to a high of 217 in 2010 through 2011. In the last year of the study (2012-2013), 107 school districts were approved to implement OFYP.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this exploratory study was to gather administrators' insights into the five-year implementation process of a school reform (i.e., OFYP) designed to help at-risk students within a single rural Texas school district. A single research question guided this research: What were the perceptions and recollections of the school leaders who were involved in the implementation of the Optional Flexible Year Program (OFYP)? This exploratory study investigated how one local school district's unique circumstances influenced implementation of policy. The intent of this study was to explore the implementation process as experienced by school leaders within a specific context during an implementation event. Successful reform implementation depends on teacher and administrator cooperation and commitment. Embedded in the multitude of

reform efforts are the individual experiences of local school leaders and staff who contemplate and interpret information.

Therefore, the perceptions and recollections of school leaders responsible for implementation were carefully collected and analyzed. Specifically, the dynamic and continuous processes of learning, reflecting, and reorganizing were the focus of this study (Brookfield, 1995; Hall & Hord, 2006; Schön, 1983, 1987). Chapter II will present a review of the current literature regarding school reform. Chapter III describes the methodology employed. Chapter IV presents the findings of the study and analyses of the data collected. Chapter V discusses the implications of this research on future policy implementation in the context of school reform.

Significance of Study

Texas has invested heavily in school reforms aimed at improving state-assessment test scores among racial and ethnic minorities. Although test scores among Hispanic and black students have risen, substantial gaps remain between minorities and white students (Marzano, 2003; Reeves, 2003; Schmoker, 2004). State legislators created the OFYP policy to address at-risk student achievement. Prior studies have not identified how school leaders at the local level take top-down reform policy and implement if effectively into their organization. Day (2002) identified some challenges that school leaders face when implementing school reform, but fails to address proactive steps that administrators as they consider local district characteristics that will influence implementation.

Additionally, research on top-down reforms suggests the need for capacity-building efforts at the local level but does not go far enough in providing guidance for local administrators on how to strategically plan for the multifaceted endeavor of implementing change in a school district (Schuttloffel, 2000; Kolderie, 2008). As no formal process exists to examine the ground-level experiences of individual educators charged with implementing OFYP and other reforms, this study adds to the existing literature by closely analyzing the detailed recollections of school administrators personally involved with OFYP implementation. These school leaders' insights provide useful information for optimizing similar school reform efforts.

The results of this study will be widely beneficial. Texas legislators advocating for educational reform will gain increased understanding of the challenges associated with implementing policy changes at the school district level. Teachers and administrators may use the insights gleaned from this research to optimize the implementation of OFYP and other reform policies. Districts that chose not to participate in the OFYP can benefit from the results of this study as it can reveal a look at the inner workings of how this reform policy was received, interpreted, and implemented. It can give educational leaders in non-participating districts valuable information on which to base future decisions when considering the possibility of applying to the OFYP, or other optional reform policies.

Theoretical Framework

This exploratory study was conducted within a theoretical framework utilizing systems theory, especially the concept of learning organizations, capacity building

theory, and policy implementation theory. Systems theory describes interactions that take place between an organization and its environment, specifically a learning organization. This theory allowed consideration of the multiple variables that influence policy implementation within a school. Likewise, capacity building theory, which examines the ability of the people within an organization to accrue new knowledge and skills was determined to be a good fit for this study since it explored how the school leaders experienced the process of implementation. The impact of school leadership on policy implementation is noted in existing literature as critical to successful school reform (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005; Hall & Hord, 1984; Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Sailor, 2009). Therefore, implementation theory provides a solid foundation for this study since the process administrators were asked to recall was their lived experiences of the implementation process.

Operational Definitions

Exploratory Study: A method of qualitative research that intends to explore the research question(s), determine the nature of the problem, and does not intend to offer final and conclusive solutions to existing problems (Saunders, 2007).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001: Standards-based education reform legislation that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). This legislation made federal school funding dependent upon satisfactory student performance on statewide academic assessment tests.

Optional Flexible Year Program (OFYP): Students who attend schools that participate in OFYP may be approved for early dismissal at the end of the school year, provided they meet the following criteria: 1) pass all core classes with 70% or better, 2) receive satisfactory scores on TAKS Texas Education Code, §29.0821.

Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS): Texas state standardized tests used in grades 3-11 to assess reading, writing, math, science, and social studies skills required under Texas education standards during years 2003 through 2011.

At-risk Students: Under §29.081d of the Texas Education Code, this includes all students under 26 years of age who are "at risk of dropping out of school" and meet the criteria found in Appendix A.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background and context for studying the recollections and perceptions of administrators in the study district during the implementation process of the Optional Flexible Year Program. Since this study investigates the perceptions and recollections of school leaders implementing a reform policy, this chapter will explore the history of school reform efforts in order to contextualize the era of high-stakes accountability that characterizes current reform efforts both in Texas and across the United States. Obstacles to reform and a discussion of failed reform efforts will add to the review of the literature in order to demonstrate where the Optional Flexible Year Program fits into the broad picture of school reform. Finally, several gaps in existing literature will be identified related to the role of local administrators in implementing educational reform policies.

Many politicians, citizens, and stakeholders expect American public schools to correct perceived social and educational problems. Some see school reform strictly in terms of higher standardized test scores, others define reform as restructuring efforts, and still others think that successful reform is about improving fundamental student cognitive skills (Brooks, 2005). Day (2002) reported that although the particular content, direction, and pace differ regionally, all school reforms share five common factors:

1) They are proposed because governments believe that by intervening to change the conditions under which students learn, they can accelerate improvements, raise standards of achievement, and somehow increase economic competitiveness

2) They address implicit worries of governments concerning a perceived fragmentation of personal and social values in society

3) They challenge teachers' existing practices, resulting in periods of at least temporary destabilization

4) They result in an increased workload for teachers

5) They do not always pay attention to teachers' identities—arguably central to motivation efficacy, commitment, job satisfaction and effectiveness. (p. 679)

School reform is a perennial issue in American civil discourse, and each new reform effort promises equity, high achievement, and greater opportunity for students. However, much of the educational system has failed to adapt to the changing world characterized by technological innovation, leaving students inadequately prepared to compete in the new global society (Elmore, 2002; Fullan, 2003; Friedman, 2006; DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Schmoker, 2004). Therefore, school reform remains an issue that needs further exploration.

Theoretical Framework

This exploratory study was conducted within a theoretical framework utilizing systems theory, especially the concept of learning organizations, capacity building theory, and policy implementation theory. Systems theory framed the analysis of the

school district as a single open system. Organizational learning concepts guided the data collection an interpretation of participants' experiences using ongoing feedback from parents, teachers, students, and fellow administrators to optimize the OFYP implementation process. Capacity building efforts were also explored in the interviews as key components of reform. The most important aspect of the theoretical framework was policy implementation theory, which guided interpretation of data gathered regarding administrators' experiences with OFYP implementation. These theories were selected for the framework of this study because they address the multiple variables that may influence that complex and often ambiguous process of reform policy implementation. Furthermore, these theories provide a solid foundation for exploring the nuances of participants' experiences.

Systems Theory

Systems theory describes intra-organizational interactions and interactions between an organization and its environment (Von Bertalanffy, 1950, 1968). According to Shafritz, Ott, and Jang (2005), "systems theory views an organization as a complex set of dynamically intertwined and interconnected elements, including its inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback loops, and the environment in which it operates and with which it continuously interacts" (p. 476). Although systems theory was originally developed to explain biological phenomena, it has successfully been applied to social science problems as well (Luhmann, 2013). The central notion of systems theory regarding social sciences is the holistic rather than atomistic view of society. Luhmann (2013) has even asserted that communities instead of individuals are the building blocks of society.

Although a small part of a much larger bureaucracy, each local school is a complete system and its organizational culture determines the success of policy implementation. Schools are open systems, interdependent with their larger environments (Lunenberg, 2010). Schools are not closed systems because they are not autonomous and self-regulating. Open systems consist of five elements: inputs, transformation processes, outputs, feedback, and the environment (Scott, 2008). This study specifically explored the transformation process of implementing reform in an open system.

Learning Organizations

Senge (2006) asserted that five disciplines are essential for learning organizations: (a) team learning, (b) shared organizational vision, (c) individual mastery, (d) mental modeling, and (e) systems thinking. Senge suggests that systems thinking is the ability to see interrelationships rather than isolated parts of an organization, calling this the "fifth discipline." Senge identifies the learning organization as a place "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (Senge, 2006, p. 3). This "dynamic complexity" is utilized in this study as the understandings, relationships, and decision-making processes that occur within a group during policy implementation are examined.

Organizational learning is crucial for the success of system-wide reform efforts (Fullan, 2011; Honig, 2007; Resnick & Hall, 1998). Organizational learning can be

simply defined as the process that individuals within an organization go through to learn, grow, and change that ultimately transforms the organization as a whole. It is not only the learning of individuals, but also the transformational process that takes place within the organization as a result of the experiences and actions of the individuals. By developing a shared set of goals, individuals within an organization take an active role in building the capacity for change (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). For educational organizations, staff must work together to make the organization more effective, such as aligning the curriculum, implementing policy, and evaluating resources as a team. System-wide improvement is the result of pursuing organizational goals within the norms of the existing social structure of a given school district (Copland, 2003). School reform must work within the confines of this social structure, where innumerable factors exist which may limit the feasibility of some reform efforts. Organizational culture continues to be recognized as a significant contributor to organizational improvement efforts (Schein, 2004). An open systems approach to organizational improvement combines the elements of human resources, structure, politics, and culture. In this study, organizational learning concepts guided interview questions about the relationships among participants and stakeholders, as well as the decision-making processes that occurred among administrators during OFYP implementation.

Improvement in classroom instruction has historically been the most difficult type of reform to accomplish, in part because, meaningful reform is most likely to occur as a result of internal changes rather than changes imposed from outside policymakers (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Teachers learn best from one another, and may motivate each

other to sustain positive reform efforts (Schmoker, 2004). Therefore, professional learning communities are the most promising strategy for lasting, sustainable school reform efforts Schmoker, 2004). Other researchers have suggested that organizational learning may be the key for successful system-wide reform efforts (Fullan, 2003; Honig, 2007; Resnick & Hall, 1998; Supovitz, 2006).

Organizational learning theory, "asserts that organizations improve when leaders gain expertise, share knowledge, plan actions, conduct evaluations, gather evidence, make sense of data, and identify best practices" (Huber, 1991; Senge, 2006; Supovitz, 2006). Likewise, Wenger (1998) argued that "within organizations, as participants engage in the pursuit of shared enterprises, learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of the enterprise, as well as the attendant social relations" (Copland, 2003, p. 379). School reform must work within the confines of the organizational hierarchy, which can lead to additional challenges.

Learning organizations can be defined as, "organizations capable of improving their performance by creating new ways of working and developing the new capabilities needed for that work" (Resnick & Hall, 1998, p. 101). In schools, learning organizations are comprised of teachers and administrators who work together to improve teaching and learning within their local school. Multiple "nested" learning communities at the local and state levels should be "built around the core belief that ability is learnable through effort and that an active, self-regulated approach to professional growth produces high levels of achievement over time" (Resnick & Hall, 1998, p. 102). School reform must

work within the confines of the organizational hierarchy, which can lead to additional challenges.

Borrowing core aspects of a systems theory approach, learning organizations utilize the human relation and group interaction aspects to building a strong organizational culture and climate. Sustainable reform must change the daily routines of schools to the extent that they become the "new normal" for schools instead of another fad of educational reform. By empowering teachers and administrators to work autonomously as well as together to practice continuous improvement and change, learning organizations may also lead to balancing top-down command with bottom-up independence. To achieve this balance, schools can use learning communities to create a supportive, capacity building role.

How local school districts interpret and implement reform policies aimed at school improvement can vary greatly. Some warn that too much attention is focused on broad, systemic reform at the expense of actual change takes place at the classroom level (Kolderie, 2008). Kolderie suggested that forcing reform through political avenues is why so little measurable change occurs. Instead, bottom-up approaches that focus on building the capacity of the organization are more likely to bring about meaningful change (Schmoker, 2004). Therefore, reform efforts that are top-down in their approach using predetermined standards of success may be set up for failure due to lack of capacity.

Capacity Building Theory

Capacity, as it relates to schools, can be defined as "the collective power of the full staff to improve student achievement school-wide" (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000, p. 261). Building capacity in schools involves the integration of teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions, professional community, program coherence, technical resources; and principal leadership (Newman, et al., 2000). School capacity building greatly depends upon the existence of common goals clearly communicated among teachers and staff (Newmann et al., 2000). Conversely, lack of a shared vision, caused by frequent educator turnover or underemphasized professional development, limits school capacity building.

Multiple characteristics of individuals within the school can influence school capacity, such as commitment to policy implementation, knowledge base, instructional skill, and planning efficacy (Cohen et al., 2007; Fullan, 2011). Since the main goal of capacity building within schools is improvement in student achievement, the process nearly always involves capital investment and accruement of new knowledge and skills. By expanding the conditions and opportunities for collaborative learning efforts, schools can build capacity that will lead to empowerment and inclusion for stakeholders (Harris, 2001, p. 261).

Assessment of staff knowledge and skills is essential for successful implementation (Clark & Estes, 2002). Educational leaders must create a culture that values continual improvement and that holds individuals accountable for performance (Elmore, 2002; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). An analysis of the policy

implementation research indicates individual interpretations of a policy as well as the capacity of the organization are especially important in how the policy is carried out.

Policies directed at educational reform have provided momentum and legal precedence in attempts to correct deficits, inequities, and problems that continue to plague today's public schools. Structural reform may not always produce changes in teaching practice, or student achievement (Elmore, 1995). Factors such as shared norms and teachers' knowledge and skills influence the success of reform, and these factors, can be heavily influenced by capacity.

Many experts argue that the root problem with the current public educational system has not yet been addressed by previous reform efforts (Wolk, 2011). While the current organization of schools remains mostly static, increasing accountability standards, changing student demographics, and demanding global standards have led to a situation in which the current capacity of public schools is woefully unprepared (DuFour et al., 2004; Elmore, 2002, 2004; Friedman, 2005; Fullan, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Reeves, 2003; Reigeluth & Garfinkle, 1994; Schmoker, 2004; Simmons, 2007; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

"Capacity-building requires different tools and different approaches to producing, sharing, and using knowledge than those traditionally used throughout this century" (Darling-Hammond, 1993, p. 752). Although capacity-building can look different for every school, the intent is that positive, tangible results will occur. In terms of policy implementation, capacity refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities available to those responsible for implementing policies (Spillane, 1999; Firestone, 1989). School

capacity is influenced by various factors. School size, practitioners' will, knowledge base, instructional skill, and planning efficacy all influence the effective implementation of policy (Bardach, 1977; Cohen et al., 2007; Yin, 2009).

It is difficult to take a policy from the national level to the state level to the local level. When a policy is implemented at the local level, policy makers at the national and state level cannot mandate that local level constituents will carry out the vision effectively (Spillane & Thompson, 1997). Therefore, it is vital that all stakeholders be involved in the planning process for implementing reform policies. Involvement increases stakeholders' confidence in themselves, their colleagues, and the school to promote professional development (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Local capacity in schools needs to be developed and led by trusted, committed leaders within the schools.

It is important to understand the nature of policy implementation, especially from the perspective of those charged with carrying it out within an organization. According to research, successful implementation is crucial to obtaining the desired results as well structuring the ability to sustain the reform over time (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Lambert, 2003; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2011). Policy implementation requires that the actors possess some background knowledge of the policy, an understanding of the rationale for implementation, and access to specific implementation resources.

As such, policy implementation is not a defined process, but instead, one that is influenced by perspective of the individual or organization implementing the policy (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973, 1984). Reforms requiring major changes in existing

patterns of individual and organizational behavior should be implemented slowly and through a process of mutual adaptation, or capacity building (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973, 1984). Since reform efforts are critical to effectively moving organizations forward, it is important that research continues to search for and analyze the processes involved in this phenomenon.

Policy Implementation Theory

The study of policy implementation provides the crux of the theoretical framework for this study. While systems theory, organizational learning theory, and capacity building theory provide support for this study, theory from the field of policy implementation lends insight into how this study of administrators' perceptions and recollections is relevant in advancing research on implementing reform policies like OFYP. Policy change takes place in increments, sometimes slight change at a time, and other times dramatic shifts, all continuously influenced by the power of the status quo (Hall, 1993). First-order change consists of routine adjustments to existing policies. Second-order change is characterized by policy change driven by a shared goal. Finally, third-order change is driven by transformation of the goals themselves (Hall, 1993).

Organizations generally select first-, second-, or third-order policy changes given their organizational capacity and understanding of the problems faced. Policy instrument selection is dependent on maintaining or challenging the status quo (Hall, 1993). An organization's understanding of the structure of a policy also influences the level of policy undertaken. Most policies are chosen by bureaucrats on behalf of society, and therefore bureaucratic professional norms and paradigms constitute the language and

culture of policy making (Hall, 1993). Given the fact that many public policies have a multitude of effects on society, change can be risky.

Additional literature on policy implementation falls into contrasting perspectives: bottom-up approaches and top-down approaches (Garn, 1999; Matland, 1995; McLaughlin, 1987; Schofield, 2004). A third perspective has also emerged that focuses on a sociocultural approach to policy implementation (Sutton & Levinson, 2001). This third perspective considers the negotiations and relationships at the micro-level of the organization's culture in order to analyze policy more effectively.

The process of carrying out the intentions of policy makers characterizes top-down approaches to policy implementation (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). Regarding educational reform policy, school leadership is a critical factor in successfully implementing change (Hall & Hord, 1984). This finding developed from earlier research they conducted in the 1970's on the value of innovation in schools, which led to the development of the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). Reforms are frequently introduced in schools but inadequately tested, leading administrators to believe the reforms were ineffective (Hall & Hord, 1984). This conclusion may be mistaken because implementation rather than the reform itself may be the problem (Hall & Hord, 1984). The process of change is critical to reform success, not just the design and protocol of the new policy. A change facilitator who leads the change effort may improve reform success. In the case of schools, the change facilitator could be a principal, superintendent, director, or any staff member who is tasked with leading a change initiative. Twelve principles of change that can help school

administrators implement reform (Table 1) guided data collection, analysis, and interpretation in this study.

Table 1 Twelve Principles of Change

Principles of Change (Hall & Hord, 2011)
1. Change is a process, not an event
2. There are significant differences in what is entailed in development and implementation of an innovation
3. An organization does not change until the individuals within it change
4. Innovations come in different sizes
5. Interventions are the actions and events that are key to the success of the change process
6. There will be no change in outcomes until new practices are implemented
7. Administrator leadership is essential to long-term change success
8. Mandates can work
9. The school is the primary unit for change
10. Facilitating change is a team effort
11. Appropriate interventions reduce resistance to change
12. The context for the school influences the process of change

In summary, the theoretical framework of this research is built upon a combination of systems theory, particularly the concept of learning organizations, as well as capacity building and policy implementation theories. This study focused on a single local school district as an open system and explored the transformation processes undergone during a five-year reform implementation. Organizational learning concepts were utilized to explain how the school district practiced ongoing stakeholder feedback regarding implementation success. Capacity building efforts were also examined as key

components of reform. The most important aspect of the theoretical framework was policy implementation theory, which guided interpretation of data gathered regarding administrators' experiences with implementing the district-wide reform. In the following section, a brief outline of school reform history will be presented and current challenges of reform efforts will be discussed.

Brief History of School Reform

Since its inception in the 19th century, the American public school system has struggled with educational iniquities. Many reform movements have sought to close the achievement gap and provide equal access to educational opportunity for all students. Current school reform is the culmination of decades of school improvement policy efforts beginning with the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), which abolished the practice of race-segregated public schools. After the ruling, individual states were responsible for implementing desegregation, a slow process that only gained momentum after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

First Wave of Reform

Under the Johnson administration, federal involvement in education policy dramatically increased. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed, an important and groundbreaking piece of legislation that poured millions of federal dollars into public education, yet also created a larger bureaucracy more beholden to political interests (Wong, 2008). Before the passage of the ESEA (1965), state and local governments controlled public education. To comply with the ESEA's

directive to address achievement gaps, many states mandated basic skills instruction and minimum competency testing (Cohen, et al., 2007). These mandates "acknowledged and attempted to address differences in abilities, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds" (Bennett & Hansel, 2008, p. 225). Another important piece of legislation that was passed during this first wave of reform was the Education for All Handicapped Children, now called the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1975. This act put safeguards in place to ensure that children with disabilities receive educational and other related services.

Towards the end of this period, public school funding inequities were argued and decided in a federal court decision. In 1971, *Rodriguez v. San Antonio Independent School District* found that public school funding in Texas discriminated against students living in poor school districts. In 1973, the courts reversed the *Rodriguez* decision in order to allow the Texas legislature to address the funding inequities (Funkhouser, 1990). An attempt was made to address these inequities when The Equal Educational Opportunity Act was passed by the Texas legislature in 1979. This act established the first state mandated testing program for students called the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS), which was in place from 1980 through 1985.

This first wave of reform paved the way for future reform efforts. Politics was already a key ingredient in the mix as attempts continued to make the educational system more equitable and effective. The creation of the plethora of federal programs aimed at improving education fully incorporated special interest groups and bureaucratic involvement into the states' job of providing educational services to children. Public

awareness about education was also increased due to media attention as Americans were beginning to compare existing educational standards of U.S. students to those around the world.

Second Wave of Reform

As time went on, reform focused more on student achievement and began to emphasize the need for accountability. Although federal money increasingly financed public education, states were still primarily responsible for addressing achievement gaps and providing high-quality education to all students. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) published *A Nation at Risk,* considered the origin of today's standards-based education reforms (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003). This report revealed a steep decline of American student achievement on national and international scales and called for the creation of a core curriculum and standardized testing (NCEE, 1983). The consequent public outcry prompted policy makers to pass the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, which reauthorized ESEA and put school reform back in the national spotlight.

In Texas, this standards-based movement in Texas was spearheaded by Ross Perot, an influential businessman at the time. Perot was called upon by then Texas Governor Clements, and then by Governor White, to help develop educational policy reforms for Texas. He suggested basing school reform on a business model saying, "…nuke the [Texas] system and rebuild it from the ground up, teaching all students the same material at the same pace" (Rutkowsky & McNeil, 2001, p.75). Heavily influenced by Perot's involvement, Texas legislators implemented major changes.

A statewide curriculum was written and adopted in 1984 called the Essential Elements. Other sweeping changes, some very controversial, were also put into place, which included: (a) the requirement that high school students had to make a 70 or better in high school courses, (b) the "no pass, no play" rule, (c) the requirement for teachers to pass a proficiency test, (d) changes to the statewide testing program that included basic skills testing at odd-numbered grade levels with the Texas Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS), and (e) the requirement for high school students to pass an "exit level" test.

Then, in 1990, policy makers began revising testing requirements. The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was introduced to replace TEAMS. The TAAS test was intended to focus on higher order skills and problem solving, rather than just basic skills. In addition, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 allocated federal funds for all students, not just those at-risk and disadvantaged. When states failed to meet the student achievement objectives outlined in this legislation, federal accountability standards were subsequently created with the passage of NCLB (2001).

The second wave of reform began focusing more on student achievement. Accountability was part of the new formula for success. Politically, the second wave reforms alienated many teachers, sending the message that they were not competent based on their credentials alone. The "no pass, no play" rule led to loopholes being created within the system (e.g. special education placements). Again, in comparing the U.S. educational standards to the rest of the world, America was still playing catch up. As the interactions of power players, stakeholders, and authority figures interacted

within the multiple layers of the educational bureaucracy, control for decisions and access to resources drove the policy-making machine to continue creating programs and reform legislation aimed at improving education. However, states alone could not produce desired results. This led to the next and current wave of reform – federal accountability.

School Reform Today

The third wave of reform was marked by the introduction of the TAKS test (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) in 1999 and the STAAR (State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness) in 2012. The new cornerstones for education became accountability, local control, parental involvement, and funding what works. Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education at the time said, "[The stated focus of NCLB] is to see every child in America – regardless of ethnicity, income, or background – achieve high standards" (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

The introduction of NCLB (2001), recently reauthorized in 2013, marked a massive transfer of power from local school districts and states to the federal government. No longer tangentially involved, mostly in the form of funding, NCLB (2001) put the federal government in charge of the details of public education. Schools across the country have developed standards for student achievement in response to NCLB (2001). Intended to better address students' learning needs and inequalities within the educational system, results have offered little in the way of exactly how schools can ensure that all students meet these standards.

According to Wong, (2008), this ambitious legislation "elevated performance-accountability to the nationwide agenda that applied to all students and all schools" (p. 24). Although still heavily reliant on local districts and states for program implementation, NCLB (2001) radically constrained teachers and administrators by altering the school system from process-oriented to output-oriented. Teachers and administrators are under tremendous pressure to improve test scores. Many teachers are frustrated as they are forced to teach content that will appear on tests and the teaching of "standards" instead of "kids".

Top-down reforms such as NCLB (2001) create uniform accountability standards but, unlike bottom-up or grassroots reforms, do not generate much stakeholder buy-in and commitment. Local grassroots reforms are idiosyncratic as program changes vary from school to school, and these reforms lack the uniformity of top-down efforts. Incongruence between federal policy and the realities of the local school environment have hindered many potentially successful reforms (Schuttloffel, 2000). Kolderie (2008) suggested that politicians focus too much on systemic reform at the expense of actual change at the classroom level. To correct this, Kolderie (2008) encouraged more capacity building bottom-up approaches. As the results of top-down reforms continue to be analyzed and evaluated to determine their success, a brief discussion of Texas assessments follows to provide additional context for the role of OFYP in the study district.

Review of Texas State Assessment Tests

In 1979, the Texas state legislature passed the Equal Educational Opportunity Act to address educational inequities and established the first state mandated testing program for students, Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS; Funkhouser, 1990). TABS exams tested reading, writing, and math abilities of third-, fifth-, and ninth-grade students. Texas Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) replaced TABS in 1985, when the Essential Elements statewide curriculum was adopted (Kuehlem, 2004).

Throughout the 1980s, several controversial reforms were implemented including the "no pass, no play" rule, proficiency test requirements for teachers, and exit exam requirements for high school students. In 1990, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) replaced TEAMS. The TAAS test focused on higher-order skills and problem solving, rather than just basic skills (Kuehlem, 2004). The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) replaced the TAAS in 1999, and TAKS was recently replaced by State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) in 2012.

Reform Results

The process of school reform has become a political game. There is now greater involvement of non-traditional stakeholders, those outside the school and legislative walls, with greater access to information about the business of schooling. Educational leaders must now be skilled politicians in order to manage a school. "Educational reformers may have wanted to wipe the institutional slate clean and start again, but that has rarely happened. Instead, reforms have tended to layer, one on top of another." (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The political interactions that drive policy making are

accomplished through power. And although policy can create conditions for effective practices, it has limited control over how implementation decisions are made, particularly at the local level.

Federal initiatives such as the *No Child Left Behind* legislation have attempted to force reform through implementing accountability measures. Reports such as *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 prompted political and parental demands for reform in public schools. Initiatives at the federal level such as these tended to result in top-down reforms. Around the same time, there were also reform efforts initiated through education professionals and through professional organizations that led to bottom-up reform efforts such as site-based management and professional learning communities. The 1990's brought attempts to correct the resulting fragmentation with the development of systemic reform approaches.

The *Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994* offered funding to states who had plans in place that addressed the act's goals which were aimed at initiating systemic reform in local schools. In essence, this type of top-down legislation attempted to provide support for bottom-up reform initiatives (O'Day, Goetz, & Floden, 1995). This created a "leadership dilemma" according to Supovitz (2006) as the two approaches had to reach a compromise. Top-down reforms bring forced uniform accountability standards but questionable commitment from stakeholders while bottom-up reforms generate greater buy-in and commitment but suffer from a lack of uniformity as resulting program changes vary from school to school.

Policies with no evaluative criteria built in may be well-intentioned, but if there is no evidence of positive or negative effects, they are useless. Hess (2004) argues that status quo reformers run our nation's schools and only support reform if it does not require any significant changes. Through a constant recycling of various reform ideas, nothing ever really changes, serving only as momentary distractions from a broken system.

Schuttloffel (2000) argues that predictions of failure can be made in school reform efforts because of a "lack of congruence" between individual school circumstances and policies. If the "congruence" between individual schools (capacity) and policy is not established, instruction will not improve and achievement will not increase. Berliner and Biddle (1995) argue that "many programs intended to 'improve' our schools turn out to have little detectable effect, or worse, end up creating serious problems for educators and students" (p. 173).

Importance of Local School Districts

Several authors consider the local school district the central unit of change in educational reform and school improvement (Elmore, 1995; Hightower, 2002; Leithwood et al., 2004; Snyder, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). All school district staff—school board members, central office staff, superintendents, campus leadership, and campus staff—are responsible for receiving, interpreting, and implementing federal and state policies in the interest of the district's students (Massell, 2000). Specifically, district leaders are the key players in interpreting and implementing reform efforts, especially in schools with low-performing at-risk student groups (Elmore & Burney,

1999; Fullan, 1993; Supovitz, 2006). Therefore, the local district should be examined when evaluating reform efforts.

<div align="center">**Obstacles to School Reform**</div>

Fundamental change is difficult to sustain in any large organization, and school reform continues to face formidable internal and external obstacles. Three such obstacles will be discussed to illustrate the difficulty in implementing school reform.

Classroom Realities Limit Reform

Perplexed by the endless criticism of many highly educated and dedicated teachers, Kennedy (2005) examined how the realities of classroom management limit meaningful reform. Teachers work within the relatively rigid structure of the school day, "simultaneously orchestrating time, materials, students, and ideas" (p. 2). Due to the immaturity of the student body, schools are inherently noisier and characterized by more disruptions than many other work environments. These distractions limit teachers' ability to think deeply about and thoughtfully implement best practices (Kennedy, 2005).

In their thorough review of public school reform, Tyack and Cuban (1995) concluded that improvement of classroom instruction has been the most intransigent problem for reformers. They predicted that meaningful reform most often occurred because of internal changes rather than changes imposed from outside policymakers (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Teachers learn best from one another, and therefore professional learning communities have been the most promising strategy for lasting, sustainable school reform efforts (Schmoker, 2004).

Political Climate Limits Reform

Reform can only occur with public support, but unfortunately many reforms are "largely symbolic activities engaged in to demonstrate visible concern for student performance" (Elmore, 2002, p. 24). That is, the "public relations value" of a given reform may overshadow the purported student benefits (Hess, 1999). Accordingly, school leaders often prefer to implement high visibility reform with low relative controversy—even if student benefits are minimal—rather than a low-visibility high-controversy reform. The goal of such low-impact policies is not improved student achievement but to "reassure the community and enhance their professional reputations" (Hess, 1999, p. 107). Unfortunately, such a controversy-adverse political climate leads to implementation of "many programs intended to 'improve' our schools [which] turn out to have little detectable effect, or worse, end up creating serious problems for educators and students" (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 173).

Teachers' Experiences Can Limit Reform

The accountability system created by NCLB (2001) holds individual schools accountable for student performance, yet offers few practical strategies for how schools can help all students meet the new standards. Under intense pressure to improve test scores, teachers and administrators have lost much autonomy, as curricula are increasingly rigid and prescribe daily minute requirements for many subjects. The loss of classroom control frustrates many teachers (Day, 2002).

Standards imposed from external sources such as federal mandates like NCLB (2001) have led to a degree of disenchantment and loss of morale among teachers and

other education professionals (Day, 2002). The increasingly severe limits on teacher autonomy have challenged teachers' personal and professional identities. Day (2002) stipulated that the results-driven education model creates conflict between "entrepreneurial" identity, concerned with meeting externally created standards, and "activist" identity, concerned with improving student learning. Day (2002) argued that the overwhelming emphasis on accountability measures and high-stakes testing "may in the long term diminish teachers' capacity to raise standards" (p.686).

In a two-year study of professional development models of urban schools, Newmann et al. (2000) found that the five elements of school capacity were teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions, professional community, program coherence, technical resources, and principal leadership. School capacity building greatly depends upon the existence of common goals clearly communicated among teachers and staff (Newmann et al., 2000). Conversely, lack of such a shared vision, caused by frequent educator turnover or underemphasized professional development, limits school capacity building (Newmann et al., 2000). Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of teacher involvement in reform creation, establishment, and implementation.

Strategies for Reducing School Dropouts

Students who dropout of school share one of four characteristics: disrupt school, chronically struggle academically, are bored with the process, and quietly dropout (Bowers & Sprott, 2012a, 2012b). The majority of dropouts are quiet dropouts, those students who are uninvolved either in academic or extracurricular activities. (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013). Existing research supports the use of fifteen strategies for

preventing students from dropping out of school: 1) Active learning; 2) after-school opportunities; 3) alternative schooling; 4) career and technology education; 5) early childhood education; 6) early literacy development; 7) educational technology; 8) family engagement; 9) individualized instruction; 10) mentoring/tutoring; 11) professional development; 12) safe learning environments; 13) school-community collaboration; 14) service-learning; and 15) systemic renewal (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2014).

Effective reform efforts share several commonalities. The most effective programs target individual students or small groups of students, rather than whole classes or grades, and were implemented in high schools (Freeman & Simonsen, 2014). Ineffective interventions included high school exit exams and isolating high risk high school students (Freeman & Simonsen, 2014). However, most literature on this topic to date has not been empirical (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003; Prevatt & Kelly, 2003).

Evidence of early identification of drop-out risk factors was not found in the empirical literature. "Further guidance is needed to guide schools and policymakers in the integration of these practices in the most efficient and effective manner" (Freeman & Simonsen, 2014, p. 46) and the present study addresses this gap in the literature by gathering in-depth information regarding the experiences of school administrators who implemented the success initiative OFYP, discussed below.

Optional Flexible Year Program

Over the years, especially following the passage of NCLB (2001), the Texas state legislature has created several compensatory educational programs aimed at minimizing

the achievement gaps among racial and socioeconomic groups and reducing dropout rates. Schools could use these tools to help at-risk students in more focused ways. These include tutorial and mentoring services, life skills programs for student parents, after-school and summer intensive mathematics and science instruction programs, the optional extended year program, the optional flexible school day program, and the optional flexible year program (Texas Education Code, §§ 29.0821-29.099).

The Optional Flexible Year Program (OFYP) is one of the most recent additions to the Texas Education Code, but has already been implemented in 78 school districts (Texas Education Agency, 2014). School districts participating in OFYP may modify their instructional calendars by up to ten days, shortening the school year to 170 days for all students except those with failing TAKS scores or ineligible for promotion to the next grade level. This allows the school district to provide intensive services to at-risk students, who must be given at least 180 instructional days per year. This is a cost-effective way to provide individualized instruction, because tutoring can be prohibitively expensive and therefore strategies that can make use of in-school instruction time are ideal (Heinrich et al., 2014). Many school districts use OFYP strictly as an incentive program, permitting early dismissal at the end of the school year for students who pass their classes and TAKS tests. However, OFYP is also considered a success initiative because it can also be used to provide struggling students with more individualized instructional opportunities that are otherwise unavailable during a regular school day. OFYP boosts school involvement and therefore targets the largest group of potential dropouts, the so-called "quiet" dropouts (Bowers & Sprott, 2013).

OFYP could be categorized as an academic-only intervention, as opposed to a programs that also incorporate behavioral, attendance, study still, and/or school organizational strategies (Freeman & Simonsen, 2014; Lever et al., 2004). Although not multi-dimensional, academic-only strategies have been found effective for lowering dropout rates (Meyer, 1984, Mezuk, 2009; Ramirez, Perez, Valdez, & Hall, 2009; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). One successful multi-component intervention was similar to OFYP in several respects, emphasizing student-teacher relationships, individualized instruction, and provided attendance incentives (Furstenberg & Neumark, 2007). A limited amount of research has been conducted to ascertain the success of OFYP, but informal feedback from educators is overall quite positive. In a recent analysis of TAKS scores of 300 fifth graders, students in an OFYP district outperformed those in a 180-day instructional year school district in mathematics, reading and science (Longbotham, 2012). Commenting on the improvement in TAKS scores after implementing OFYP in her school district, one teacher noted that, "Having teachers and administrators have high expectations and really focusing on individual needs … has paid off. The teachers worked extremely hard this year and it showed in student performance" (Kelly, 2010, p. 1).

Numerous research studies have examined districts that successfully implemented reforms that improved at-risk student achievement (Hightower, 2002; Massell & Goertz, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Snyder, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Most dropout prevention guides do not address integration of practices or discuss comprehensive implementation strategies (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010). Few

exploratory studies have been conducted using administrator perceptions and recollections focused on the implementation process they experienced when implementing a reform policy aimed at improving at-risk student achievement.

Summary

With the passage of No Child Left Behind (2001), a new era of accountability and high-stakes testing began. Implementing the reforms mandated by this legislation has been fraught with political and logistical challenges. In Texas, local school districts have experimented with a number of scheduling changes to help at-risk students pass their standardized tests and core subject tests. One such reform is the Optional Flexible Year Program (OFYP), which provides intensive instructional opportunities to struggling students. While OFYP has been adopted by several school districts, the implementation process is poorly understood at the local level. Chapter III will discuss how this implementation process will be examined in the study district.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This exploratory study was designed to examine the recollections and perceptions of school leaders who were involved in the implementation of the Optional Flexible Year Program (OFYP) within a single school district during the years 2007 through 2012. Since this exploration of events took place within the context of a school district, this endeavor was fraught with ambiguity since human recollection and experience provided the defining structure. In-depth interviews were conducted individually with school leaders in Springhill ISD. Interview data were subsequently analyzed and major themes were identified.

The exploratory method of inquiry was selected because of the lack of research on rural school administrators' experiences when implementing reform policies aimed at raising at-risk student achievement. Exploratory research provides a valuable tool because it allows the researcher to offer insights to the processes that occur within an organization based on the data. Since educational reform is an ongoing process involving multiple powers and agencies, it is important for researchers to understand the human aspect that drives policies affecting students and qualitative research is beneficial when exploring how people construct meaning of the world (Merriam, 1998). For these reasons, the present investigation selected the exploratory study method as the most appropriate analytical model.

Research Design

Qualitative research seeks to understand process rather than to explain results, and exploratory studies are particularly well-suited for analyzing organizational processes, exploring bounded systems, and studying the phenomena that occur within real-life contexts (Creswell, 2009; Berg & Lune, 2004; Shields & Rangarajan, 2013). This exploratory study attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the implementation process of the OFYP reform within the Springhill Independent School District (ISD) in Texas. Springhill ISD was selected as a pseudonym in order to protect the confidentiality of the actual district. All Springhill ISD school leadership responsible for OFYP implementation during 2007-2012 were interviewed to discover their perceptions and recollections with the five-year implementation process. Springhill ISD school leadership comprised six administrators—superintendents, principals, and assistant principals. This study focused on these participants' personal experiences with the challenges and successes of OFYP implementation to provide insight into the implementation process at the local level. Since administrators were tasked with overseeing the implementation process, they possessed expert knowledge on how reform policy is practically implemented.

Interviews were used since they are an efficient method for collecting large amounts of data (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Additionally, interviews are the best technique for capturing subtle differences in meaning and emotion, and for gaining knowledge of participants' perspectives. School reform is an ongoing process involving multiple powers and agencies, and learning about the individual experiences of

administrators is important for understanding how reform policy implementation occurs and affects student achievement. Interview data were supplemented by district documents related to OFYP and researcher observations.

<p align="center">**Data Collection**</p>

Context Description

Springhill ISD is a rural district located in southeast Texas. It covers 263-square miles and serves approximately 735 students in grades PK through 12 (The Texas Tribune, 2010). Two campuses comprise the district, an elementary campus with grades PK-5 and a junior-senior high school campus. with grades 6-12. The school serves as a community hub in this area, which is dominated by farming and ranching.

Springhill ISD was one of the first districts to creatively use OFYP to provide in-depth support and attention to struggling students. Instead of an early summer break like many other participating districts implemented, Springhill ISD designated one Friday per month as a "Fantastic Friday" dedicated solely to at-risk students—ineligible students were not permitted to go to school on these days, akin to the situation on professional development days.

Table 2 presents Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) Scores for the years of this study, 2007 through 2012, for Springhill ISD (Texas Education Agency, 2014). Data are presented for grades 3-10 for all years except the school year ending in 2012, when the STAAR test replaced the TAKS for grades 3-9. This data is presented to give a more clear picture of what the administration of Springhill ISD was addressing in the reform implementation. However, the purpose of this research was not to evaluate

OFYP effectiveness. These data are combined scores of students who attended Fantastic
Fridays and those who did not. Therefore, the effect of OFYP on TAKS scores cannot be
evaluated based on these data.

Table 2 TAKS Scores for Springhill ISD

Year	Grades	Reading/ ELA	Math	Writing	Science	Social studies	All tests
2007-08	3-10	92%	86%	91%	81%	96%	77%
2008-09	3-10	93%	88%	88%	83%	95%	81%
2009-10	3-10	95%	94%	88%	89%	99%	87%
2010-11	3-10	94%	90%	96%	85%	96%	83%
2011-12	10-11	96%	88%	N/A	89%	99%	80%

Table 3 Student Demographics for Springhill ISD

	African American	Hispanic	White	Native American	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Two or more races	At-risk
2007-08	11.8%	11.3%	74.7%	1.6%	0.5%	N/A	27.9%
2008-09	12.1%	10.8%	76.1%	0.9%	0.2%	N/A	34.9%
2009-10	9.9%	13.3%	75.8%	0.7%	0.3%	N/A	35.6%
2010-11	7.7%	15.9%	74.0%	0.5%	0.4%	1.4%	28.1%
2011-12	8.6%	15.2%	73.9%	0.6%	0.4%	1.4%	23.7%

The student population of Springhill ISD is predominantly white with
approximately one-third of the total student population classified as at-risk. Detailed
demographic information about the student population of Springhill ISD is presented in

Table 3 (Texas Education Agency, 2014). Prior to OFYP implementation, approximately 30.3% of students were at-risk of dropping out of school (The Texas Tribune, 2010). Table 2.During the years of OFYP implementation, TAKS scores rose in all subjects tested, although scores in math peaked in the 2009-2010 school year. Concerning student demographics, scores for Hispanic students appeared to make the most gain during the years of OYFP implementation.

Participant Selection

Total population sampling was used to select participants for this study. All Springhill ISD administrators—superintendents, principals, and assistant principals—employed between 2007-2012 were selected to participate in this study. These individuals were purposefully selected for this study because their deep knowledge of OFYP qualified them as "information-rich" with knowledge of the context (Gall et al., 2007). Three key administrators were involved initially in the implementation of this reform initiative in 2007 and were anticipated to contribute to the qualitative component of this study. This key district leadership, along with three subsequent administrators who were employed by Springhill ISD between the years 2008 and 2012 were anticipated to be good informants. The final sample consisted of six administrators who all worked in some administrative capacity with Springhill ISD as a campus-level or district-level leader during the years 2007 to 2012. These participants were purposefully selected because they were especially knowledgeable about the implementation of OFYP in Springhill ISD between the years 2007 and 2012.

Although the sample size was small, the information gathered was nevertheless valuable (Patton, 2002). Good informants can be described as having "the necessary knowledge and experience of the issue or object at their disposal" (Flick, 1998, p. 70). Sample size tends to be smaller and non-random in qualitative studies which allows the researcher to examine the contexts of those subjects studied more thoroughly (Lichtman, 2010). Additionally, interviewing elite individuals is valuable because they "contribute insight and meaning to the interview process because they are intelligent and quick-thinking people, at home in the realm of ideas, policies, and generalizations" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 84).

Participant Characteristics

All participants were Caucasian, between the ages of 35 and 55 years old, and had between 13 to 32 years of experience in education. See for summary of participant characteristics.

- Austin, the Junior-Senior High School principal during the study years 2007 through 2009, is a white male in his thirties. After working as a high school science teacher, he worked as an assistant principal and a curriculum coordinator prior to becoming a building principal. After serving as the Junior-Senior High School Principal in Springhill ISD, Austin was the district superintendent from 2010 to 2011. This was his first superintendency. Austin completed his Ph.D. in Educational Administration during the years of this study.

- Philip is a white male in his forties. He was the superintendent of Springhill ISD during the years 2007 to 2009 of the study. Philip was a former high school

coach, assistant principal, and building principal prior to becoming a superintendent. Springhill ISD was his first superintendency.

- Janice, the district curriculum director, is a white female in her thirties. She worked as a math teacher and math curriculum specialist prior to taking the position of district curriculum director with Springhill ISD. Janice served as the curriculum director from 2007 through 2011. She then served as interim superintendent for Springhill ISD from 2011 to 2012.

- Tom is a white male in his forties. Prior to taking the position as the junior-senior high school assistant principal, Tom worked as a high school coach and English teacher. Tom served as the junior-senior high assistant principal from 2007 through 2009. He then served as the principal for the junior-senior high school in Springhill ISD from 2009 through 2011.

- Tracy, the elementary school principal during the first four years (2007-2011) of the study, is a white female in her fifties. Tracy's background in education includes experience as a coach, teacher, and campus administrator.

- Ellen, the elementary school principal during the last year of the study, 2011-2012, is a white female in her forties. Ellen's experience in education includes classroom teaching and serving as an instructional specialist at an educational service center.

Table 4 Participant Characteristics

Name	Position	Educational history	Past experience	Years worked
Austin	Jr/Sr high school Principal;	PhD Educational Administration	Junior high/high school teaching; elementary/ Secondary administration;	2007-2009
	District superintendent		District/state leadership	2010-2011
Phillip	District superintendent	EdD Educational Leadership	High school teaching and administration; district leadership	2007-2009
Janice	District curriculum director;	MEd Educational Administration	Junior high school teaching; high school administration; district leadership	2007-2011
	Interim district superintendent			2011-2012
Tom	Jr/Sr. high school assistant principal;	MEd Educational Administration	Junior high; high school principal; assistant elementary school principal;	2007-2009
	Jr/Sr. high school Principal		high school coach	2009-2011
Tracy	Elementary school Principal	MEd Health Education, Biology and Educational Leadership	Elementary/junior-high/ high school teaching and administration	2007-2011
Ellen	Elementary school Principal	MEd Educational Administration	Elementary school teaching and administration; service Center specialist	2011-2012

Note: All names have been changed to maintain participant confidentiality.

Interviews

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher. Prior to conducting each interview, each participant received an informed consent form that provided the following information: (a) statement of the purpose of the research, (b) name of interviewer, (c) outline of interview process, (d) potential risks, (e) participant rights and benefits, (f) measures to ensure participant confidentiality, (g) plans for dissemination of the research results, and (h) researcher contact information. A copy of the informed consent can be found in Appendix B. Participants were also informed that they could cease participation at any time. The single interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in the offices of the district-level administration or in the offices of former administrators. During each interview, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions that explored participant perceptions and recollections about OFYP policy creation and implementation at Springhill ISD (Appendix C). Each participant was asked the same interview questions. In addition, observational field notes were taken by the researcher to provide contextual details for data interpretation and analysis.

Participants were interviewed once due to constraints of time and availability. At the time of data collection, several participants had moved to other districts and positions. Philip was a superintendent at another Texas district and his schedule did not allow for multiple interviews. Likewise, Austin had taken a leadership position with a state-level educational organization and access was limited due to time constraints. Two other participants, Tom and Tracy, had left Springhill ISD at the time of data collection

so a single interview was used to ensure consistency and reliability in the data collection phase. Only Janice and Ellen were still with Springhill ISD at the time of data collection.

Five types of questions are useful for conducting semi-structured interviews: grand tour questions, specific example questions, comparison and contrast questions, new elements or topics questions, and closing questions (Lichtman, 2006). In this exploratory study, each interview began with a grand tour question about the implementation process. Subsequent questions were designed to gather information about specific examples of the implementation process. The penultimate question introduced a new element or topic, and was followed by a closing question. Four primary questions were asked, each associated with at least two follow-up questions. No more than six general questions are recommended in one interview, lest the participants become exhausted (Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2006). Interview questions are located in Appendix C.

Documents regarding Springhill ISD policies, meeting agendas and minutes, program planning notes, personal correspondence among district leadership, school calendars, and faculty planning sessions were used to supplement and clarify data obtained via interviews. Any supplemental documents related to Springhill ISD's decision to implement and those relating to the implementation process were examined as a data source for this study. Documents can be used to "furnish descriptive information, verify emerging hypothesis, advance new categories and hypothesis, offer historical understanding, and track change and development" (Merriam, 1988, p. 108). While grounding the study in the context of the process being studied, documents can

also be used for comparative purposes and they are stable. "Unlike interviewing and observations, the presence of the investigator does not alter what is being studied. Documentary data are objective sources of data compared to other forms" (Merriam, 1998, p. 126). As such, district documents in the form of policies, meeting agendas and minutes, program planning notes, personal correspondence among district leadership, school calendars, and faculty planning sessions were examined. State documents (i.e., AEIS reports, state assessment reports) pertaining to the Optional Flexible Year Program were also examined.

Data Analysis

A constructivist approach was used as the foundational piece of the analysis process because constructivism assumes that the meaning of experiences and events are constructed by individuals, and therefore people construct the realities in which they participate (Charmaz, 2006). A constructivist approach can be useful in qualitative research because it acknowledges that humans interact with their environments and construct meaning based on their experiences. Since the individuals who were the school leaders tasked with orchestrating the policy implementation process of OFYP, their experiences, perceptions, and reflections construct the social reality of that time (Gall et al., 2007). The perceptions and recollections that Springhill ISD leaders recalled about their experiences can provide insight and guidance for other school leaders who are charged with implementing new policy. This epistemological approach to research acknowledges that there are multiple social realities that are constructed by individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data analysis began with the data collection process (Merriam, 1998) and included the use of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Miles & Huberman, 1994) in which the sources of data were continuously examined in relation to both the purpose of the research study and the research question (Merriam, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The analysis of interviews, documents, and observation notes allowed the researcher to identify key themes and issues as implementation practices were examined for their meaning and complexity within the context (Payne & Payne, 2004; Stake, 1994). Categories, patterns, and themes emerged out of the data without preconceived restrictions following the inductive analysis process (Patton, 2002). A thick description of the data is presented here to allow the reader to understand the results and draw conclusions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Data Coding and Interpretation Procedure

Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed manually by the researcher. The interviews were transcribed within three days of the interviews. A three step qualitative data analysis method described by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used: data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. First, transcripts were read line by line for the purpose of identifying meaning units, defined as segments of text that contain one main idea (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Meaning units were clustered into nodes that reflected recurrent phrases, expressions, and ideas expressed by participants. Nodes were organized into categories and subcategories, which were numerically coded and compared with observational notes to verify category accuracy and observation position within the categories.

To discover major themes, categories were collapsed and integrated. Core analysis variables emerged through observation comparison, which continued until similarities and differences became apparent, and new relationships and categories were created. This categorization process was repeated many times until small patterns matched other similar patterns, at which point major themes emerged. Importantly, themes are not comparable to "average" or "mean" responses in quantitative studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Rather, themes are large patterns that are reflected in many sources. Themes identified in exploratory studies may be strongly suggestive, although the small sample sizes preclude generalization.

Data were analyzed until "category saturation" occurred, defined as the point at which "no new or relevant data seem to emerge regarding a category; the category development is dense, insofar as all of the paradigm elements are accounted for, along with variation and process; and the relationship between categories are well established and validated" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 188). A matrix was developed based on the inductive analysis to check for correlation between the interview questions and the study's guiding research question. The analysis process was inductive given that categories, patterns, and themes emerged out of the data without preconceived restrictions (Patton, 2002). An example matrix is shown in Figure 1. The example matrix shows one of the patterns that emerged based on initial coding during the data reduction phase of analysis. In order to develop a manageable system, the complete matrix of initial codes, patterns, and classification categories were maintained in an electronic spreadsheet was used to manage the data analysis process. Coding categories were

revised as needed throughout the analysis process. Pseudonyms were used to maintain participant confidentiality.
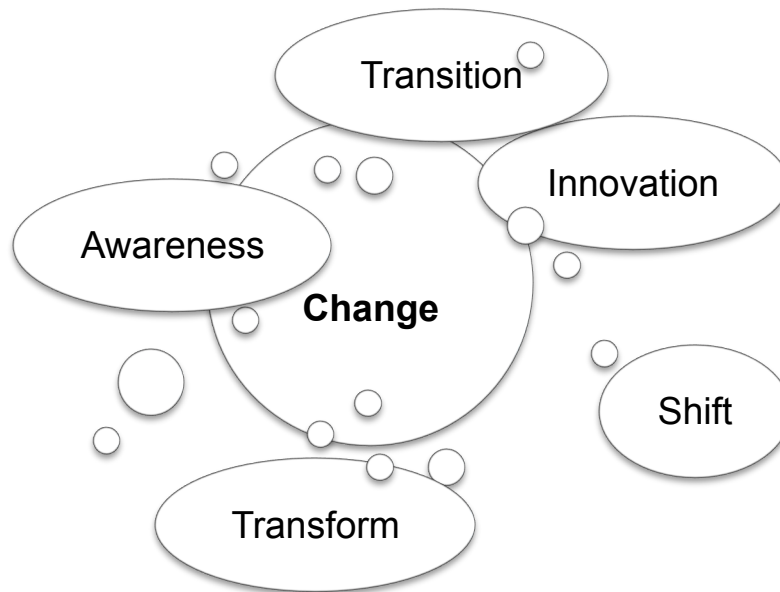
Figure 1. Example matrix. This figure illustrates how patterns were identified from meaning units extracted from the interview data.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established by triangulation, which involves using multiple data sources in an investigation to produce understanding. This technique is often used in qualitative research to ensure that a study is rich, robust, and comprehensive (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The data were triangulated using the audiotaped interviews, district documents, state documents, and member checks. Member checks were completed by asking study participants to review and judge the researcher's interpretations for accuracy and completeness (Gall, et. al., 2007). Trustworthiness in qualitative studies is essential for ensuring that the study meets validity and reliability research standards

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of multiple sources of data (interviews, documents, and observations) supports the findings (Merriam, 1998).

Several strategies may be used to address the validity of qualitative research: (a) triangulation, (b) member-checking, (c) use of thick descriptions, (d) clarify bias of the researcher, (e) include any information that is contrary to the presented themes, (f) ensure enough time is spent in the field, (g) debrief with a peer, and (h) include an external audit for review purposes (Creswell, 2003). In this study, all interviews were recorded and transcribed to maintain construct validity (Creswell, 2003; Spradley, 1979). Construct validity can be defined as whether the measures used to gather data in a study correlate to the research question(s) or intent of the research (Gall et. al., 2007). For the purposes of this exploratory study, construct validity was maintained by ensuring that each participant was asked the same interview questions which were aligned with the research question. Audiotaping the interviews allowed for multiple reviews and clarification of what each participant contributed to the study. The audiotapes allowed the researcher to ensure that the transcripts accurately followed what each participant said in response to the interview questions. Following each interview, the researcher also recorded written field notes about personal reflections and observations, noting verbal as well as nonverbal behavior. Interview questions were varied in the hope that theoretical saturation would occur. Saturation occurs when "no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61).

The research question was closely related to the interview questions used in this study (Appendix C). A matrix was developed to check for correlation between the interview questions and the guiding research question (see Figure 1 for example matrix).. This matrix guided the interviewer to elicit responses relevant to the research question. Data collected in this study were compared with findings from similar studies. This ensured that the results are applicable to other circumstances outside the confines of this study setting.

Interview recordings, field notes, and categorizations were compared for consistency. The researcher also consistently prompted participants to clarify their statements through member checks. Member checks are the key tool for establishing reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks were performed by providing each participant with a copy of the researcher's analysis and interpretations and soliciting their feedback (Gall et al., 2007). Participants also received an analysis and interpretation of the researcher's findings and were invited to give feedback to ensure the researcher's understandings.

Limitations and Assumptions

The study was limited to one rural Texas school district that utilized the OFYP during 2007 through 2012. The study included six school personnel with a variety of administrative and leadership backgrounds, purposely chosen due to their direct involvement in OFYP implementation. All participants served in a leadership role at the campus or district level during all or part of the period from 2007 to 2012. The study collected exclusively qualitative data obtained through interviews regarding the

experiences of participants with OFYP implementation. All data collected during interviews were assumed to represent the honest opinions of participants. All interviews were conducted in 2014, several years after Springhill ISD employment for some participants. Thus, the data collected in this study were subject to natural limitations of participant memories. As previously acknowledged, data collection of interviews was limited to a single in-depth interview with each participant. Given the circumstances of specific and limited opportunities to schedule face-to-face interviews with four of the six participants, one interview was completed with of the participants. Researcher subjectivity is also acknowledged as a potential limitation of the study although intentional steps were taken to ensure objectivity as described above.

Background and Role of the Researcher

The researcher is a doctoral-level graduate student with 25 years of experience as a public school teacher, school counselor, and administrator. The researcher was continuously employed full-time by Springhill ISD from 1997 to January 2014, first as a special education teacher, then as a school counselor, in addition to being a full-time doctoral student part of that time. The researcher was supervised by junior-senior high school principal Austin from 2005 through 2012, and was a part of the leadership team during part of OFYP implementation process.

As an employee of Springhill ISD, the researcher would be considered an "insider." This membership role in qualitative research allows the researcher to have a sense of legitimacy, which may lead to a greater sense of acceptance by the participants (Adler & Adler, 1987). In turn, a greater sense of acceptance by the participants may

lead to greater depth in the data that is gathered in the course of the research. However, a researcher acting in the dual role of researcher and "insider" may struggle with role conflict (Adler & Adler, 1990). Other research argues that role confusion may occur in any research study but there is a greater risk when the researcher is a familiar part of the research setting or with the research participants (Asselin, 2003). In the case of Springhill ISD, this researcher acted in this dual role as identified in the research. To reduce the chance of role confusion, the researcher conducted the interviews outside of her school role by meeting in the offices of the participants and focusing the conversation on the prepared interview questions and research procedures. The benefit of being as "insider" in this research was acceptance. Since the researcher was already established as a part of the school community, a certain level of trust and openness existed which may not have been present if the researcher were an "outsider" (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). However, it was very important for the researcher to remain neutral in order to hear what the participants had to say about their perceptions and recollections of OFYP.

Summary

Chapter III outlined the methodology used to collect data for this study. Interviews were conducted with six purposefully selected administrators involved in the OFYP implementation process at Springhill ISD. Observations from these interviews were analyzed manually, and organized into categories and themes based upon the data collected and guided by the research question.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

To ensure long-term success of standards-based educational reforms, school leaders implementing policies like OFYP must closely examine their school site- and circumstance-specific experiences to gain valuable insights regarding the generalizability of their experiences. In fact, some educational reform researchers suggest that only highly specific plans for implementing change tailored to local needs are likely to be successful (Cook & Payne, 2002). Therefore, this study examined the detailed recollections and perceptions of individuals involved in reform implementation at the local school district level. This chapter describes the study context, participant characteristics, and interview data categorized by themes. Data analysis was supplemented by district documents and researcher observations.

Major Themes

This exploratory study examined the recollections and perceptions of district leaders in a rural school district in Texas. Seeking to explore the nuances of the human experience during implementation of a school reform policy, the data led to identification of ten themes that emerged from the interview data. These themes are supported by field notes and self-memos. The four general interview questions and ten corresponding themes are presented in Table 5. Each theme connected to the guiding research question of this study: What were the recollections and perceptions of the

school leaders who were involved in the implementation process of the Optional Flexible Year Program.

Table 5 Interview Questions and Corresponding Themes

Interview question	Theme
What steps led to your district's involvement with OFYP	1. Recognizing considerable achievement gaps as a serious issue motivated OFYP implementation
	2. Recognizing that achievement gaps may indicate deeper problems motivated OFYP implementation
	3. Recognizing significant site- and circumstance-specific obstacles to closing achievement gaps motivated OFYP implementation
Describe the process you went through in preparing teachers for this change	4. Creating and maintaining high levels of student motivation guided teacher preparation for OFYP implementation
	5. Using frequent and timely feedback for student benchmarking guided teacher preparation for OFYP implementation
	6. Continuous observation and engagement of students and teachers guided teacher preparation for OFYP implementation
How did other factors affect implementation of OFYP such as professional development, capacity, leadership, teachers, community	7. Determination to succeed increased the amount of available resources affected OFYP implementation
	8. Proactive communication between parents, teachers, students and community stakeholders enhanced engagement among all parties and affected OFYP implementation
In what ways did the implementation experience influence your professional philosophies and decisions regarding effective strategies for raising at-risk student achievement	9. Engaging teachers and students by building positive relationships through trust, collaboration, and empowerment was important for helping at-risk students achieve
	10. Data-driven decision making was important for helping at-risk students achieve

Three Key Factors Led to OFYP Implementation

Three themes regarding the key motivating factors of OFYP implementation emerged in response to interview question one: "What steps led to your district's involvement with Optional Flexible Year Program (OFYP)?" This question was not asked directly but instead formed the context of three probing questions: a) In order to gain some historical perspective on the situation, please describe what factors led your district to implement OFYP; b) What did your district hope to achieve by participating in OFYP? c) How did you overcome any obstacles that arose, if any?

Recognizing achievement gaps as a serious issue motivated OFYP implementation. Participants described achievement gaps with various keywords, including accountability, student achievement, student performance, academics, grades, expectations, TAKS test, and standards. For example, Janice said, "The district was looking at student data and determining that our students had a lot of achievement gaps." Austin recalled, "The following year, 06 to 07… I remember we were having conversations, very early on, about how we had significant gaps in student performance." Ellen asserted, "TAKS scores that were coming about at the junior-senior high campus at that point where the current administration felt like they weren't where they wanted them to be." Tracy added, "They were trying to improve scores, they were trying to improve the gaps between minorities and low SES students because there always seems to be success with certain groups of students and not others." Clearly, noticing the achievement gaps among racial minorities and students with low socioeconomic statuses was vital for reform. Data suggests that the administration based

the plans for implementation on these facts as they worked as a team learning how Springhill ISD's unique characteristics shaped decision on implementing OFYP (Senge, 2006). Janice was particularly influential in this process as director of curriculum and instruction, she worked with teachers daily on how to implement OFYP effectively..

Recognizing achievement gaps may indicate deeper problems motivated OFYP implementation. Participants who worked in the central office (Philip and Janice) worked closely with Austin, the Junior-Senior High School Principal. Philip explained that he, Austin, Janice "were wrestling with professional learning, where we were going to go, how do we get our teachers to dive a little deeper into instruction…We felt like a lot of our kids, our students really weren't very serious." The search for appropriate remediation "was an attempt to get deeper learning opportunities for kids that needed our help." Philip took the lead on getting the message out to teachers that Springhill ISD had to move beyond the known and comfortable if they hoped to make a positive change in at-risk student achievement. Austin added:

> I remember us talking about that we need to do something different, what we were doing wasn't working, we needed to think outside the box…We were basically in the fall time, looking at data and saying like you know things aren't looking right here, something's not working, we've got to do something more or different…I remember that [Philip] was pretty adamant that if we're going to do something like this that we had to make sure it was positive for the kids, that they can't see it as punitive, they can't see it as a punishment.

Concerning school board oversight, Austin recalled, "I think [OFYP implementation] was probably one of their first kind of large bites that they kind of bit off and said 'Ok, we're going to do this, we're going to embrace innovation.'…That February of 2007 is when the board adopted a vision and adopted goals and the number one was student academic performance on all TAKS assessed disciplines."

Austin recalled, "Philip was … pushing us, and enabling and empowering I think all of us in the district to think outside the box … if there's a different way of doing things, let's … see if we can make it work." He further explained the overall goal of OFYP implementation was not simply higher TAKS scores, but truly improving at-risk student achievement:

> We were looking to narrow or eliminate the achievement gap. I don't think we were looking for a recognized rating or an exemplary rating, weren't necessarily looking for…. I don't mean to say like quote, unquote, good scores on TAKS tests, but at the point in time, that is all we had to measure student success. We had kids' report card grades, we had their standardized, state high-stakes testing numbers, you and I both know that there was a disconnect, there was a discrepancy between that when you have kids making A's and B's and then failing TAKS, you've got kids that are failing courses and then getting commended on every one of their TAKS.

Philip perhaps best described the deeper problems addressed by reform:

> We were trying to design higher levels of student engagement that
> allowed kids to really…it was more applicable learning. Not like right
> now we talk about, in our district now, about a learning platform versus a
> teaching platform. Not knowing that terminology at the time, that's what
> our intent was.

Not only did the leadership team identify achievement gaps within the district data, they also indicated that involving the school board in decisions about OFYP was important to reform. They also recognized the need to change what instruction looked like during the OFYP days. The leadership of Springhill ISD appeared to recognize that implementing change would require them to involve all participants within the system as they worked to identify the challenges of reform (Shafritz, Ott, and Jang, 2005).

Recognizing significant site- and circumstance-specific obstacles to closing achievement gaps motivated OFYP implementation. Consistent with assertions by Borman, Hewes, Overman, and Brown (2003) that only highly specific change strategies can lead to intended desired outcomes, study participants described their perceptions of significant site- and circumstance-specific obstacles to closing student achievement gaps. Philip recalled, "We felt like there was really no time for true learning [for students]." Teachers also experienced limited time availability, as Tracy noted, "One of the greatest things about the approach that we took was that we [administrators and teachers] were finally going to get time to really work with the students who needed our help the most." Although Tracy was not involved in all of the years of OFYP

implementation, she readily adopted the vision established at the Junior-Senior High School and worked to implement OYFP at the Elementary School.

Philip expanded on the teachers' concerns about time to include the entire school calendar, in addition to daily time limitations. He remembered "the calendar was a big obstacle." School calendars establish a common structure for parents, students, teachers, and administrators. Hess (1999) found that school day and school year reforms, such as OFYP, are often short-lived because they alter the routines of parents, teachers, and other stakeholders.

Changing the agreed-upon school calendar is especially difficult in rural areas due to transportation challenges over long distances. Philip explained, "[Springhill ISD] tried tutoring before and the kids didn't come. They didn't have transportation." Janice elaborated, "It was difficult for students to attend before or after school tutoring because of this being a very rural area and a lot of our students ride buses."

Parents also depend on public schools as a safe, supervised place for their children during the weekday. OFYP implementation at Springhill ISD involved one Friday each month during which only at-risk students were allowed on the junior-senior high campus during the first two years of implementation, and this created additional stress for parents who had to find other arrangements for their children. This obstacle was somewhat mitigated by the requirement of all elementary school students to attend school on Fantastic Fridays. As the Junior-Senior High School principal for the first three years of OFYP implementation, Austin took an active role in addressing obstacles that arose during implementation. Austin recalled these challenges:

We notified the parents early, it might have been through the district

calendar with a letter explaining the program and if we didn't receive a

hundred calls that first spring and summer, we didn't receive a single call.

There were some questions like, "What if my kid has to go? What if my

kid doesn't have to go?" I feel like the number one main concern was, of

parents, was what were they going to do with their kid if they were at

home.

Austin described the decision-making process regarding the weekday to dedicate

to individualized instruction for at-risk students:

I remember there were conversations about, "We can do it on Friday, we

can do it on Monday." I remember that we didn't want to break up the

instructional week, so there was the Friday idea, the Monday idea. So I

know that we kind of pitched it to the staff, we pitched it to the kids, and

then over that springtime we worked on the details of what it would look

like. I remember Philip, if I'm not mistaken, laughing loud, calling it

Fantastic Fridays or Marvelous Mondays and we referred to that at the

meetings and I honestly didn't think it would stick, but it stuck.

Ten Fantastic Fridays were dedicated to at-risk student remediation. Janice

described the careful process of OFYP implementation:

We divided those ten days up on the school calendar into three different

cohorts. So, we did strategically place those days where we had three

days for the first cohort of students and that was really based on the

students who did not show mastery on the TAKS test from the previous

year. Then we had our next three days, which was based on the first

benchmark, and then we had four days right at the very end, right before

the test, and that was based on the second benchmark in the spring.

In addition to logistical obstacles, communication and coordination challenges

existed as well. Philip remarked, "The biggest obstacle was communication with

community members, teachers, kiddos—helping them understand the intent of the

program." Tracy underscored this:

Communication. Communication. Communication. We really had to tell the

parents the same thing we told the children, that we were not punishing them, we

were helping them and giving them individualized opportunities to see growth.

Philip emphasized, "For this program to work, people had to want to do it." To gain the

commitment of parents and students, Springhill ISD had to solve transportation

problems, address timing issues, and provide incentives. Philip knew that school

administrators needed to give students "some sort of incentive to be at school more often

and give it a little better effort there as well," and Austin described these incentives as,

"Pizza reward lunches…giving pencils away and dog tags and whatever else." Tracy

added, "Throughout the day we would have prizes. We would honor kids at the end of

the day that gave it their 150% effort."

This section highlighted the specific actions that the Springhill ISD

administration team took to address the unique characteristics of the students, district,

and community. This step appears to have made the implementation of change more

effective and exemplify the "dynamic complexities" associated with implementing change (Senge, 2006). Springhill ISD appeared to utilize the "fifth discipline" as they constructed their individualized pathway to change by addressing the unique characteristics and needs of the stakeholders (Senge, 2006).

Three Principles Guided Teacher Preparation for OFYP Implementation

Three themes regarding the main principles that guided teacher preparation for OFYP implementation emerged in response to interview question two: "Describe the process you went through in preparing teachers for this change?" This question was not asked directly but instead formed the context of five probing questions: (a) What structures, policies, or programs existed to help teacher implement OFYP? (b) How was implementation monitored? (c) How was time structured to support professional development for teachers and school leaders? (d) Were any symbolic measures incorporated in the implementation process such as vision, culture, or ceremonies? (e) Describe how was teacher collaboration fostered and encouraged?

Creating and maintaining high levels of student motivation guided teacher preparation for OFYP implementation. Administrators and teachers recognized the importance of student motivation. The implementation team stressed that the Fantastic Friday program was not punitive. Tracy explained, "Everything had to be fun and make a real connection with those kiddos because doing it the same way that it was done in the classroom just went kind of against that." Creative math teachers, spelling teachers, art teachers, and physical education teachers were all recruited to help make assignments fun. Austin described the motivating tactics as, "Balloons and hula hoops and all of that

type of stuff in that old gym…It was cheerleading, and Philip's words, beat that drum…just kind of motivating and encouraging." Philip summarized:

My role, more than anything else, was just a cheerleader to encourage people, we want to be the best we are capable of becoming, we saw something about building champions, getting to the next level, commitment to excellence, sort of just beating that drum, if you will, of high expectations for ourselves, individually speaking and for our district as an organization.

Creating and maintaining high levels of student motivation were identified as an integral part of the process of change that the teachers experienced during the study time period. Since the leadership team at Springhill ISD recognized this, they were able to communicate the needs of the students among all stakeholders and building the capacity for change within the staff. (Clark & Estes, 2002; Elmore, 2002; and DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). The administrators worked tirelessly and as a united team to set the bar high for teachers and students.

Using frequent, timely feedback for student benchmarking guided teacher preparation for OFYP implementation. Collecting student data frequently helped teachers measure the effectiveness of remediation. Accurate benchmarking allowed for careful grouping of students by ability and need, making it easier to provide appropriate help. Intensive faculty consultation facilitated this process. Janice elaborated:

We were looking at data really three times a year to determine our Fantastic Friday groups…That led to the policy of doing those two benchmarks throughout

the school year…Yes, and the teachers were also very involved in saying based

on this, this kid really needs to come for math and science, or this kid needs to

come for all four [math, science, social studies, or English language arts].

Tom recalled, "I know we did a lot of identifying of students. I remember sitting in our professional learning room and really looking at the data and determining which kids needed to be there." Janice said that elective teachers joined in the partnering efforts to focus on "closing those achievement gaps within the tested areas." This active process of examining data appears to have been an important component of teacher preparation. As teachers learned and practiced these new skills, the data suggests that their confidence increased to implement OFYP as suggested by Mitchell and Sackney (2000).

Continuous observation and engagement of students guided teacher preparation for OFYP implementation. Rather than conducting a one-time planning session, Tracy explained that the implementation team continuously observed students and colleagues. Tracy said, "Number one, we planned and we planned and we planned. There was so much planning to these days." Days usually began with cheerleading that Philip described as "feel good assemblies." Austin recalled that the goal of observation was to ensure that OFYP was being implemented correctly. He said, "We visited every single classroom, every single session. It was critical. We set expectations with the faculty of what those days were going to look like and it was imperative that we held people accountable for that." Tracy described the essence this close observation:

I spent the entire day walking around, looking at what they were doing,

making sure that students were engaged, and teachers were engaged and

not teaching like they did every single day. By far, those were my busiest

days at school, but they were fun….We would do all kinds of stuff and

the kids didn't want to go home…We allowed the students to talk about

what they had learned that day and I would ask them and go around and I

am not kidding you, they would say things, and they were all

educationally sound, "I learned to multiply today." I would look at the

teachers and tears would be rolling down their cheeks because we were

able to see those little successes. It was really cool. I supported the

program 100%.

Janice confirmed, "We were very hands on to know what was going on…classroom

walk-throughs…video footage, we talked with the kids." Tom shared, "Really the

organization of the day was my focus. Initially my role was to make sure that we had

everyone in attendance… If the kids weren't there, we called them, went and picked

them up."

Philip said, "Implementation depended heavily on Janice and her communicating

instructional expectations and going around and seeing what was happening in the

classrooms." Ellen described how detailed observation resulted in accurate student

benchmarking:

We gave benchmarks, we looked at assessments, we looked at grades to

see if they improved, we looked at TPRI [Texas Primary Reading

Inventory] results in the middle of the year because it's given at the

beginning, middle and end of the year. And if there was improvement,

then students did move fluidly in and out of the program but it was based

on their grades and progress on these different indicators.

Perhaps this represents second-order change, as described by Hall (1993), since the data suggests that Springhill ISD engaged in building a shared vision of increasing at-risk student achievement via the implementation of OFYP. Through continual observation, data collection, and engagement of students, the Springhill ISD team was able to change old routines and norms that had previously driven instruction.

Professional development enhanced teacher engagement. Adequate professional development time was crucial for facilitating the intensive planning discussed above. Professional development at Springhill ISD emphasized innovative engagement strategies and tactics. As Janice explained, "Meetings with teachers… were really structured to be very hands on, engaging…Teachers didn't have a whole lot of training on how to engage students or instructional strategies."

Tracy recalled negativism and resentment among teachers who struggled with the new instructional methods as well as the time spent on implementation. Some teachers felt deprived of their regular planning time and teaching responsibilities. Tracy shared some of these feelings, saying, "Now there was so much prep to this because they [school leaders] dictated some really goofy things that we [teachers] then had to severely modify in order to have them effective."

Teacher training was vital for successful OFYP implementation. Tom recalled, "We really spent a lot of time training teachers…to come up with innovative practices to help make the instruction on those days more engaging for students." Some teachers were uncomfortable with the new instructional methods and Austin described how teacher noncompliance was handled:

When people were doing silent reading and packets of worksheets…I don't want to say they were called on the carpet but they were very gently reminded that's not what these days are for…on this one day a month we're expecting you to do something different.

Ellen could not recall formal professional development sessions and reported that, "We [teachers] decided what was best to help meet the needs of those students." Tracy and Austin did not recall formal professional development beyond being given planning time. Only Janice reported receiving formal instruction on optimizing lesson plan preparation to engage students.

Janice found that OFYP implementation renewed many teachers' interest in professional development to enhance their teaching skills. She said:

We saw that through our walk-throughs on Fantastic Fridays, and just general walk-throughs, that teachers needed professional development on how to engage, actively engage, every student in their classroom. So, after the first year of implementing OFYP, our August professional development, not only were teachers analyzing data, but it was really centered around Marzano's nine instructional strategies. We had

members, teachers, that would actually teach that to the rest of the teachers. Those were all research-based strategies and then throughout that year, they were touched on during professional learning periods.

The data suggests that by incorporating more focused and regular professional development, the Springhill ISD teachers were more engaged in the reform process.

   Collaboration among teachers enhanced teacher engagement. Creative collaboration among teachers was a novel benefit of OFYP implementation. Enthusiasm quickly overcame skepticism as teachers shared their experiences. Philip reported, "I did see teacher collaboration, more than I would normally see during a regular school week or day." He continued, "At first, I think there was a lot of trepidation, if you will, of whether or not this was going to work. And I think some of the teachers started partnering up and they started having fun." Janice agreed the culture of collaboration enhanced teacher engagement, saying, "The teachers got pumped up about it, they were excited and it was a time for them to collaborate and work together and to prepare something motivational for the students to get them pumped up." Ellen described how teachers worked together to benefit student learning:

   On Fantastic Fridays, we didn't necessarily just have our children. We worked in grade levels and we divided the kids up into three equal groups at third grade because at that time we had a three-way split in third grade. We didn't break them up by home room, we broke them up by these are our lowest of the low and

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these are, for lack of a better term, our bubble kids, and these are the ones in the

middle…so we knew where we needed to focus our efforts….One of those

groups would work on reading, one of those groups would work on math, and

one would take them to the computer lab where they would work on whichever

subject they were having the most problems… We rotated them between those

three groups the year we had a lot of kids.

Tom explained how greater teacher engagement benefited the entire

school, not just at-risk students who participated in Fantastic Fridays:

Once we started collaborating on best teaching practices and…especially

the last year that I was there…when we started looking at engagement

and we redid our classroom walk-through and we set aside time every day

for teachers to have professional learning. I think that kind of bled over

into the Fantastic Fridays. Actually, we took what we were doing on

Fantastic Fridays and tried to incorporate that into the regular

classroom…I think that kind of exposed us to, okay we can do this on

these days, then why can't we do it on a regular day?

The skills and collaborative spirit gained during OFYP implementation helped

teachers address students as individuals with unique academic needs. Tom concluded, "I

think relationships were strengthened as well. We really got to know our kids, especially

the ones that were there."

Positive incentives enhanced student engagement. Games and rewards were

important tactics for engaging at-risk students who participated in Fantastic Fridays.

Tracy explained, "Always positive, always positive. We had fun things for lunch, we had popsicles, we had rewards during the day, anything to keep those kids feeling good about themselves." She maintained that exuberant positivity was necessary to counter the potential stigma of Fantastic Fridays being "dummy days."

Abundant positive incentives were given to at-risk students who may have felt embarrassed about needing remediation on Fantastic Fridays. Janice recalled the many types of incentives, from T-shirts for satisfactory attendance to pizza lunches for outstanding students. Janice explained:

> We also did end of the day incentives too so if students were there for the whole day, and we had different businesses who donated, like Sonic would give us free cherry limeades or we as a district went and bought like movie gift cards and things like that. So students who were there all day….and we would draw ten names of students who were here all day.

The positive incentives successfully overcame the potential stigma. Tom reported that many students commented, "'I love coming to school on Fantastic Fridays, I wish everyday was like this…why can't it be like this all the time?'"

Team building among students enhanced student engagement. To minimize the potential stigma of individualized instruction on Fantastic Fridays, teachers worked extremely hard. Tracy said, "We had to make sure that we overrode [the potential stigma]. We stayed extremely positive and then put every lesson into a fun-like game. That's hard to do." This intensive engagement was

indeed taxing for many teachers. Therefore, peer-to-peer mentoring was also used in OFYP implementation, as Tracy explained:

> [Students] would be working with teachers they had never worked with before. We had a group so that every teacher, aide, custodian, lunch lady had a group of like five students—first grader, second grader, third grader, fourth grader, fifth grader. They were mixed level groups so they had all this peer-coaching going on. You really saw fourth grade teachers really attach to second graders and those kind of things. Really that bond and that relationship became very important.

Ellen effusively described similar team building:

> We started out the day with a team building exercise where they had teams at different grade levels. It was kind of like the amazing race. They had to do different amazing race type activities just to make it something fun and different that we didn't normally do when they came to school so that they would not be so defeated about being here.

Tom admitted, "It was hard on those Fridays, but I think we did as well as we could in designing activities for them to be engaged on those days and to make it more team-focused and competition-focused."

Tom recalled that team building activities helped engage students, saying, "We moved more into having different groups of teachers find some engaging activities to motivate the kids…so I think that…Fantastic Friday, really started to get…more engaging for our students."

Two General Principles Guided General OFYP Implementation

Two themes emerged in response to interview question three: "What other factors affected implementation of OFYP such as professional development, capacity, leadership, teachers, community?" While this question was not asked directly, it formed the context of four probing questions: (a) Describe what resources teachers had access to in order to increase at-risk student achievement? (b) Were changes made to organizational structure such as school design, use of facilities, master schedule design? (c) How did you navigate any political aspects associated with the implementation process? (d) What steps were taken to prepare parents and students for this change?

Determination to succeed increased available resources and affected OFYP implementation. Commitment to the success of OFYP motivated teachers and administrators to work hard to provide the necessary resources for implementation. Tom emphasized the widespread dedication to OFYP success, "I know it was a school-wide effort on Fantastic Fridays, to make sure we had everything we needed. I guess everything shut down when we got ready for Fantastic Fridays." Because of this dedication, many previously unavailable resources were made available, as Philip explained:

> Our determination as a leadership team was that we could not… we weren't going to be the reason they failed. In other words, failure wasn't an option. It just was not an option. If they needed something to make this effective and they were going to meet us in the middle and try, we better make sure they had access to the resources they needed.

Careful budgetary decisions were made to maximize all school money. Philip continued, "We had to get very creative in how we spent our money. We got some different funds from the state that we were able to target that money specifically to make sure they had supplies and materials."

Tracy added, "We truly had a Fantastic Friday fund. Was it ever enough to cover everything? No, teachers did a lot of stuff and I found things other ways." Money was not the only resource stretched during this time. Teachers and administrators also invested more of their personal time into OFYP implementation. Philip specifically recalled, "On multiple occasions, the staff being out till all hours of the night buying stuff—Walmart card, everything else, going crazy."

The professional development sessions discussed previously inspired teachers to use new training materials and update their curricula. Janice said that, "Once teachers had received training on how to engage their students, there were additional supplies that we had to buy or other curriculum resources." She shared one example of new materials purchased specifically for Fantastic Fridays, "KAMICO [education materials], it was very rigorous, all the activities were cards…just very hands on for the students and engaging, so we did go out and purchase those for every grade level, every subject area."

Proactive communication between parents, teachers, students and community stakeholders enhanced engagement among all parties and affected OFYP implementation. All stakeholders had to be engaged and committed to closing achievement gaps using OFYP, not just students and teachers. Due to the deviation from typical school day protocols, administrators and teachers had to clearly communicate the

unique benefits of Fantastic Fridays to parents and other stakeholders. OFYP implementation initially generated confusion among parents who needed to know how the terms "optional" and "flexible" applied to their children. OFYP was optional for each school district, and allocation of the ten individual instruction days was flexible. For at-risk students, however, participation was mandatory at OFYP- approved school districts. Janice admitted:

> We did learn from that first year that we had to move away from whether
> it was an option if the students came or not. It, we really needed it to be
> cut and dry— whether they had to come or they didn't have to come. For
> the parents, it was just a little too confusing—"Well why is it an option?"
> And we had it coming from both ends, either they should have to come
> and their kid didn't want to because it was an option so that created a
> little bit of confusion.

To minimize confusion and frustration, Tom advised teachers and administrators to have "lots of conversations and be proactive in your communication." He added, "When you wait until something's happened to communicate it, then you run the risk of having some upset people." Austin found that proactive, continuous, and open communication allowed "students and staff and teachers and parents and board members and community to see the value of the program."

Organizations develop new capabilities to achieve their goals, which Springhill ISD engaged in throughout the implementation process (Resnick, 1998). Springhill ISD consciously prepared students for the upcoming changes attendant with OFYP, and

sensitively communicated with both parents and students during implementation. Janice shared the care taken during the first year of implementation:

> We hand-delivered the letters to the classes. Every student got a letter regardless of whether they had to come or not because we didn't want to single out any of the students. They all got the letter, the exact same letter that their parents got so that we sent it out both ways, students and parents.

Communication did not simply emphasize initial buy-in but also encouraged parents of students who improved academically due to Fantastic Fridays. Ellen shared, "At the end of each cycle, we would send a letter out saying your child has done well, they are exited from the program."

OFYP was so successful that some parents were disappointed when their children exited the program due to satisfactory academic achievement. Janice noted that when skeptical parents realized how OFYP helped their children, they responded, "'Hey, why isn't my child having to come anymore?'"

Clear, ongoing communication from the school to parents led the way for parental engagement in reform efforts. However, the most compelling factor for parent and community engagement was the success of OFYP itself. Philip summarized the evolution of parental attitudes from initial doubt to support of Fantastic Fridays:

> I did get a lot of feedback of doubting, they were doubting whether this was a good move, but once they started seeing the fact that their kid wanted to be at school, they wanted to qualify for those Fridays off, I

think we saw a significant number of kids do better… So every time we

did something new, there was a little political communication piece but I

think people could see it falling together and so we didn't get much kick

back after the first year.

Two Factors Significantly Influenced Staff Opinions Regarding Effective Strategies for Raising At-Risk Student Achievement

Two themes emerged in response to interview question four: "In what ways did the experiences of the school leaders influence their subsequent professional philosophies and decisions related to effective strategies for raising at-risk student achievement?" While this question was not asked directly, it formed the context of two probing questions: (a) As a school leader, how has your experience with implementing OFYP changed the way you do business today? (b) Reflecting on one at-risk student who was affected by this process, describe your recollections.

Engaging teachers and students by building positive relationships through trust, collaboration, and empowerment was important for helping at-risk students achieve. Relationship building was the most effective strategy for enhancing engagement among students and teachers, which was key throughout the OFYP implementation process. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that successful bottom-up approaches to reform focus on building capacity for meaningful change (Schmoker, 2004). Tracy asserted, "The relationship with the individual student was very important in building up their self-esteem." Fantastic Fridays encouraged unique student-teacher relationships that facilitated learning in new ways.

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As an administrator, Janice found that trusting, respectful, and collaborative relationships with teachers enhanced their engagement. She said, "One thing that really stands out and changed how I do business is really getting input and feedback from the teachers." She admitted that seeking input was sometimes difficult but, "What made the program successful was listening to them [teachers] and making the right changes."

Philip also realized the necessity of engaging teachers who may have become apathetic over time and stuck in routines. He found that energizing teachers required "empowerment and inspiration and opportunity." Philip explained his philosophy of how teacher learning influences student learning:

I never really did really understand the value in quality professional learning before this process and now, what I see is that it is paramount; it is critical. It is at the core of all we do. We have to model learning because that's what we are—we are a learning organization.

Tom gained important insights from his experience with OFYP implementation, which made him "more morally committed to the notion of engagement and ensuring that we communicate that— it's the point of what we do as educators."

Philip summarized how Fantastic Fridays enhanced student engagement through relationship building:

[Students] got to see their teachers in a different light, the staff in a different light, they got to have a neat day, so to speak. But then it was a day for them, designed for them. Everything was for them. So I felt like it improved some teacher-student relationships and if that relationship gets

better, the kid cares about what the teacher thinks more than normal and once they care about what the teacher thinks then they don't want to disappoint them.

Data-driven decision making was important for helping at-risk students achieve. Although standards-based education reform and high-stakes testing have significant drawbacks, data collected via assessment tests was valuable for measuring the success of OFYP implementation at Springhill ISD. This district did not have an established history of using research-based educational techniques and OFYP helped introduce this concept to teachers reluctant to make data-driven decisions. By equipping Springhill ISD staff with the knowledge and skills to analyze data, school leaders utilized techniques to assist implementation (Clark & Estes, 2002). Ellen personally admitted that OFYP altered her attitude regarding data-driven decision making, saying, "Before [OFYP] I don't think that I utilized data as much to drive my decisions." She contrasted this with the fact that, "All Fantastic Friday was about was the use of data to determine which kids, what we needed to be doing with them." Austin described the attitude shift that occurred over the course of implementation:

> [An important change was] getting people to look at data, to recognize and accept achievement gaps. We moved from that in 06-07, 07-08 to the point where you've got people that are citing research when they question why something is done the way it's done on campus. You've got key teachers saying, "But Marzano says whatever and we're doing whatever." To think that we've got teachers citing research, and it's no more are we

or are we not going to disaggregate data, you know what I'm saying? It

was, "We've got to embrace these philosophies, we've got to embrace

these instructional best practices to meet the needs of every single kid."

Austin concluded that the new culture of data-driven decision making "gave me the

validation to feel like I can do this, to feel confident in the innovation."

Summary

In-depth interviews with six key administrators involved in OFYP

implementation at Springhill ISD revealed ten major themes of reform. Three

themes emerged regarding the steps that led to reform: (a) recognizing that

achievement gaps were a serious issue, (b) understanding that these gaps

indicated deeper problems, (c) and acknowledging the existence of significant

site- and circumstance-specific obstacles to closing achievement gaps motivated

OFYP implementation.

Four themes emerged regarding the guiding principles of teacher

preparation:. (a) encouraging high levels of student motivation, (b) using

frequent and timely feedback for student benchmarking, (c) continually

observing and engaging students, and (d) continually observing and engaging

teachers.

Two themes emerged regarding overall principles of reform: (a) .

determination to succeed increased the amount of available resources, and (b)

proactive communication between parents, teachers, students and community

stakeholders enhanced engagement among all parties.

Two themes were identified regarding how the implementation experience influenced teachers' and administrators' professional philosophies and decisions regarding effective strategies for raising at-risk student achievement: (a) engaging teachers and students by building positive relationships through trust, collaboration, and empowerment, and (b) adopting data-driven decision making were important for helping at-risk students achieve.

Chapter V describes the implications of these themes, offers recommendations for other reform implementation, discusses potential directions for future research, and describes the study limitations.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This exploratory study examined the perceptions and recollections of administrators in a single, rural public school district to gain understanding of how school leaders implement reform policy at the local level. Educational reform remains a complex issue with competing political, societal, and global implications. School leaders are faced with contrasting dilemmas of legislative reforms and individual student needs, unique local factors, and building the capacity for success within individual campuses. Legislative reforms are well documented at the federal, state, and local level. They appear in a variety of mandates and approaches, all intended to raise student achievement (Day, 2002). The dilemma ensues when individual circumstances of local districts are considered in conjunction with the mandates of federal accountability.

Top-down reforms such as NCLB (2001) mandate school districts to meet certain accountability standards but fail to generate much stakeholder buy-in and commitment. This incongruence between federal policy and local realities hinder may reform efforts (Schuttloffel, 2000). Although research studies have been conducted examining school districts implementing reform, more research is needed that explores how school leaders attempt to raise at-risk student achievement within the complexities of local, state, and federal politics (Hightower, 2002; Massell & Goertz, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert,

2006; Snyder, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). This is particularly crucial for small, rural districts, like Springhill ISD, with limited resources and access to funding.

The experiences of the Springhill ISD school leaders during the OFYP implementation process were framed within the perspectives of systems theory, organizational learning theory, capacity building theory, and policy implementation theory. These theoretical perspectives were identified as a framework for analysis because this allowed the data to be examined in its natural context, leading to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The nature of qualitative research explores the nuances of individual realities instead of leading to broad generalizations across a population which, although considered a limitation from a quantitative perspective, allows for a deeper investigation of situation or phenomenon of interest.

Learning organizations that promote a systems theory approach acknowledge the "dynamic complexities" associated with implementing change (Senge, 2006). Springhill ISD's leadership appeared to think holistically about the problem of at-risk students and policy implementation—utilizing the "fifth discipline" of systems thinking in Senge's terminology—when implementing OFYP within the norms of the existing social structure of the learning organization (Copland, 2003). This approach, based on systems thinking, examines the whole system, instead of focusing on one small part of the system that may be the cause of the perceived problem or a consequence of the problem. Most importantly, the "fifth discipline" sees the people in the organization, teachers and students of Springhill ISD, as active participants who have the potential capacity to enact change that will impact the outcome of the reform effort (at-risk student achievement).

By developing the capacity of the Springhill ISD staff, school leaders were successful in promoting collaboration, empowerment, and inclusion (Harris, 2001). Thus, the data revealed that the natural contextual parameters of the case were supported by this theoretical framework.

By examining the perceptions and recollections of the school leaders of Springhill ISD, the complex set of individual experiences and interactions they experienced during the implementation process were able to be explored (Shafritz et al., 2005). The six participants in this study constituted the total population of administrators responsible for OFYP implementation, and therefore this study examined the system of a single local school district. When organizations experience change through outside or inside influences, they usually go through some type of implementation process or route to change as existing structures, systems, routines, habits, and patterns of behavior are subject to altered states. Other researchers have explored the concept of organizational learning as it relates to implementing reform efforts (Fullan, 2011; Honig, 2007; Resnick & Hall, 1998; Senge, 2006). We also know through the history of school reform efforts that at-risk students are still not achieving compared to other student groups. While it could also be argued that failed educational reform efforts of the past could be blamed on indicators such as poor buy-in with stakeholders, mandated reform from outside of the organization, and inability to sustain change over time, Springhill ISD represents one case of an implementation process that utilized what research has indicated as best practices.

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By developing leadership throughout the organization utilizing capacity building efforts of collaboration and open communication, as in the case of Springhill ISD, stakeholders developed a sense of ownership and motivation for sustained reform (Harris, 2001; Newman et al., 2000; Senge, 2006). Senge (2006) goes on to argue that real change is difficult, if not impossible to maintain if it is mandated from outside of the organization through compliance. In spite of what history has shown about the lack of sustained and meaningful school reform, federal and state mandates continue to be passed which are aimed at eliminating achievement gaps and raising levels of achievement for all students. Schools are expected to adapt to the changing national and global environments finding paths to implement reforms that include how to engage teachers and students in the process. Springhill ISD demonstrated adaptability through concerted efforts to build the capacity of their organization in order to be ready for reform. The leadership took deliberate steps to build a culture that included continual improvement and accountability during the implementation process for OFYP. This process included all stakeholders as they worked to effect positive change for their at-risk students (DuFour et al., 2005; Elmore, 2002).

The findings of this study support existing literature regarding the importance of capacity building and school reform (Odom, 2011). In a study of failing schools in Washington state, Borko, Wolf, Simone, and Uchiyama (2003) found that principal leadership component of capacity building for determining the success of a school reform. Furthermore, Cosner (2009) found that collegial trust was a key factor for building capacity in the context of school reform.

Educational reforms that restructure the school year such as OFYP are recent additions to the many reform tools available to school districts. Due to the newness of OFYP, little is understood about the challenges and realities of implementation. Since research has shown that successful policy implementation is critical to achieving the desired results as well as sustaining the reform over time, the findings of this study provide additional insight into how top-down mandates truly function at the school district level. This exploratory study revealed four over-arching themes regarding OFYP implementation in the small, rural school district in southeast Texas.

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

The concept of accountability is multidimensional and encompasses political, legal, bureaucratic, professional, and market accountability (Darling-Hammond, 2004). All these aspects of accountability, which attempt to address unsatisfactory student achievement with incentives and penalties largely based on standardized assessment test results, structure modern public schools. Research on school reform has established that the static organization of public schools has led to a lack of capacity characterized by changing student demographics, demanding global standards, and increasing demands for positive outputs (DuFour et al., 2004; Elmore, 2002; Friedman, 2005; Fullan, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Reeves, 2003; Reigeluth & Garfinkle, 1994; Schmoker, 2004; Simmons, 2007; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

The local school district has been identified as the central unit of change in educational reform and school improvement (Elmore, 1995; Hightower, 2002; Leithwood et al., 2004; Snyder, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). The findings from

this exploratory study highlight the importance of how examining how one local district implemented a reform policy. While acknowledging and addressing the loss of autonomy that many school leaders and teachers experience as a result of federal mandates like NCLB (2001), some researchers suggest that taking steps forward to evaluate and improve local capacity may improve the success of future reform efforts (Day, 2002; Newmann et al., 2000). Working within this reality, school leaders must continue working to create a culture that values continual improvement and that holds individuals accountable for performance (DuFour et al., 2005; Elmore, 2002).

Implementing educational change is a prickly, tangled endeavor. Individual school characteristics greatly influence student performance, but other key factors such as local capacity, access to resources, engagement, and individual commitment also play a role in implementing reform policy (Bardach, 1977; Cohen et al., 2007; Firestone, 1989; Spillane, 1999; Yin, 2009). Schools continue to have a clear responsibility for addressing these considerations and closing student achievement gaps. This was the context of OFYP implementation at Springhill ISD, where 30.3% of the student body was considered at-risk in 2007—the first year of OFYP (The Texas Tribune, 2010). To address student learning inadequacies, school administrators implemented the OFYP reform. Called "Fantastic Fridays," this program dedicated one Friday per month exclusively to remedial instruction for at-risk students. This exploratory study identified four over-arching themes that characterized the implementation of this reform. These themes are presented as the major findings of this research.

Clear, Open, and Frequent Communication among All Stakeholders Promoted and

Maintained Successful OFYP Implementation

When Springhill ISD began looking at options for how to address achievement gaps in student performance, they did so with transparency and open communication. By informing all stakeholders about what the accountability data showed and what it meant, they were able to make an informed decision to implement OFYP with the support of all stakeholders. Imposing a change mandated from the outside (i.e., Texas state legislature) via internal reform enabled Springhill ISD to build the capacity for and to make meaningful change (Fullan, 2011; Newmann et al., 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Due to the uniqueness of the reform policy, teachers and administrators had to work to communicate the benefits of OFYP to parents and other stakeholders. All six leaders interviewed talked about the importance of communication in implementing OFYP. Springhill ISD leaders found that proactive, continuous communication allowed all stakeholders to see the value of the reform program. Proactive communication was also embedded in the professional learning community established by Springhill ISD as part of the OFYP implementation which has been shown to be a promising strategy for lasting, sustainable reform efforts (Schmoker, 2004).

As noted by Supovitz (2006), Springhill ISD leaders utilized a bottom-up approach to implementation of OFYP. They took this approach to address site- and circumstance- specific obstacles in order to avoid the "lack of congruence" which can predict failure for reform efforts for many top-down reforms (Schuttloffel, 2000). Specific obstacles at Springhill ISD, which included the realities of classroom

management, constructing individualized curricula plans and materials, and school calendars, were brought into the conversation of implementing OFYP (Hess, 1999; Kennedy, 2005). Springhill ISD leaders were able to identify and overcome these obstacles with transparency and by bringing all stakeholders into the conversations about OFYP (Schmoker, 2004; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Wolk, 2011).

Springhill ISD staff had not previously engaged in in-depth data disaggregation prior to OFYP, so the leadership took steps to build the capacity for making this transition. Research suggests that organizational learning is crucial for the success of system-wide reform efforts (Fullan, 2011; Honig; 2007; Resnick & Hall, 1998). Therefore, professional development efforts at Springhill ISD provided the platform to support ongoing teacher learning emphasizing innovative engagement strategies and tactics, which guided OFYP preparation and implementation. By customizing these efforts to fit the needs of Springhill students and staff, school leaders were able to create a "best fit" model of learning within the norms of the existing social structure and culture (Copland, 2003; Schein, 2004).

Springhill ISD leaders took deliberate steps to collaborate with teachers in researching and planning on best practices to motivate and engage at-risk students in the classroom. This collaboration resulted in challenging teachers' existing practices as well as an increased teacher workload, consistent with findings by Day, 2002. The data from Springhill ISD supports this previous research. The individualized instruction time allotted on Fantastic Fridays, as well as the professional learning that was ongoing, allowed teachers to more deeply understand their students' strengths and weaknesses.

With this knowledge, teachers could customize their teaching to better meet individual student needs.

Teacher and Student Engagement Increased Motivation during the OFYP Implementation Process

The data suggests that high levels of motivation were established and maintained through efforts of the Springhill ISD leaders who were continuously observing and refining implementation efforts for OFYP to provide feedback for ongoing planning. Previous research has identified this practice as a key factor for success when implementing a new policy (Clark & Estes, 2002). Although this practice was effective for holding teachers accountable and for fostering engagement, it also appeared to provide the support structure needed to prevent possible loss of morale that many teachers experience as a result of external standards imposed such as federal accountability (Day, 2002). This is evident in reflections shared about motivational Fantastic Friday assemblies as well as opportunities for teachers to take active roles in leading professional development. Teacher ownership of the implementation process helped foster high levels of engagement.

Data revealed the importance of adult learning in the process of educational reform through the professional learning community that was established as well as opportunities for teachers to lead and support other teachers. Energizing and engaging apathetic teachers required involving them in the transition to reform, which appeared to strengthen relationships among administrators and teachers. This empowered them and changed the future practices of Springhill ISD administrators, who suggested that

receiving input and feedback from teachers was invaluable to customizing reform implementation (Elmore & Burney, 1999; Fullan, 1993; Supovitz, 2006).

The theme of engagement is also evident in teacher training, which was seen as vital for successful OFYP implementation. This on-going training for teachers was determined and customized based on the observations and student data. Changing teaching methods and strategies was difficult for some of the Springhill ISD teachers. This change was also difficult for two of the six administrators as revealed in the data. Ellen and Tracy, who were administrators at the elementary school at different times during the OFYP implementation period pointed out problems getting high levels of engagement with their teachers as they struggled to adapt the OFYP to the elementary structure that was in place. This problem was tackled by using a multi-faceted approach that included: research based practices, collaboration among teachers, team building activities, and positive incentives. By arming teachers with the right tools, building a community of collaboration and trust, and maintaining high levels of engagement among stakeholders, Springhill ISD leaders were able to build the capacity of the organization to bring about meaningful change (Schmoker, 2004).

Healthy Teacher-Student Relationships Positively Influenced District Climate and Culture

Springhill ISD's decision to implement the OFYP reform policy was an effort to address achievement gaps that existed as well as to positively influence at-risk student achievement. This problem is not unique to Springhill ISD, nor is it unique to current time and place. Since the birth of American public education, school leaders and policy

makers have struggled with conquering gaps in achievement among student populations (DuFour et al., 2004; Elmore, 2002; Friedman, 2006; Fullan, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Schmoker, 2004; Simmons, 2007).

What is significant is that Springhill ISD leaders made a concerted effort to include all stakeholders in conversations that defined in detail what achievement gaps were for Springhill ISD and mapped the connections to individual students who comprised these so-called gaps. The data revealed that all six administrators pointed to the importance of building positive relationships to implement change. These conversations helped create the foundational layer of capacity that would move Springhill ISD forward in implementing change. In addition, having frank conversations about identifying weaknesses in Springhill ISD that created the conditions for existing achievement gaps required relational capacity. The data suggests that the positive relationships that existed, were created, or were strengthened by this process enabled Springhill ISD to bring about reform and to positively influence at-risk student achievement.

The theme of relationship-building was identified as a vital component of enhancing student engagement and success throughout the OFYP implementation process. The positive student-teachers relationships that were fostered during Fantastic Fridays became critical in facilitating learning and raising levels of achievement and student self-esteem (Copland, 2003; Kennedy, 2005; Wenger, 1998). The data indicates that these positive student-teacher relationships influenced not only OFYP implementation, but impacted daily routines and structures as well. Fostering such

beneficial relationships required clear, open, and frequent communication, and the data repeatedly suggested the importance of communication in this process. Teachers and administrators were quite conscious of this fact, and worked hard to maintain an ongoing dialogue with parents and other stakeholders regarding the OFYP implementation process. Extensive communication reinforced positive, collaborative relationships, which helped foster even greater engagement for learning.

Building positive relationships building was key to the success of OFYP implementation, and the data highlighted the importance of collaboration, trust, and communication among teachers and students – all important components of building positive relationships. These findings are consistent with existing evidence that high quality interpersonal relationships between students and teachers can help counter at-risk students' negative attitudes concerning academics (Davis & Dupper, 2004). These relationships are crucial for fostering student achievement because "teachers cannot educate students in whom they have no confidence and students cannot learn from teachers in whom they have no trust" (Willie, 2000, p. 256). Many high-school dropouts reported feeling disconnected and disengaged, suggesting that engagement via close student-teacher relationships may encourage at-risk students to remain in school (Davis & Dupper, 2004).

Teacher-Administrator Collaboration Provided Necessary Flexibility for OFYP Implementation

Taking into account the history of failed reform efforts, Springhill ISD leaders initiated an approach to change that was based on a bottom-up approach, utilizing

collaborative efforts to implement change and address incongruences between federal accountability requirements and the realities of local school environments (Kolderie, 2008; Rutkowky, 2001; Schuttloffel, 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The data suggests that they took this approach with support from the local school board and recognizing the need to include all stakeholders in crafting what OFYP would look like for Springhill ISD. Considering the impact of political interactions implicit when implementing change, Springhill ISD leadership engaged in efforts to disseminate information about the academic needs of their at-risk students to stakeholders. Springhill ISD leaders also acknowledged that raising levels of student engagement, particularly for at-risk students, was an issue that ultimately determined success in meeting accountability requirements.

Although progress has been made to address availability of resources to implement federal mandates like NCLB (2001), funding inequities still exist (Funkhouser, 1990). Funding at the local level has also been helped by systemic reform efforts that provide support for bottom-up reform initiatives (O'Day et al., 1995). Through careful budgetary planning and commitment to success, Springhill ISD provided the resources to make OFYP implementation happen. As noted by one leader, "Failure was not an option." So, by targeting monies specifically to support OFYP implementation, teachers were inspired to use new materials and curricula. School leaders encouraged teachers to step out and try new strategies. Access to resources was seen as key to the successful implementation of OFYP and collaboration was key to accessing resources.

It is well documented that the public education system has failed to adapt to changing student populations, technological innovations, and global competition (DuFour et al., 2004; Elmore, 2002; Friedman, 2006; Fullan, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Schmoker, 2004; Simmons, 2007). Today's learning organizations, like Springhill ISD, must move toward creating new ways of working to develop the capabilities required to help all students experience success (Resnick & Hall, 1998). Part of the new way of working is to utilize data-driven decision making and organizational collaboration which Springhill ISD effectively demonstrated.

Student data drove the OFYP reform efforts at Springhill ISD, which was new for many teachers and some administrators. One administrator referred to an attitude shift that occurred in Springhill during this implementation process once staff understood and recognized the power of data All participants discussed the vital role of collaboration in the OFYP implementation process. Since many of Springhill ISD teachers had no experience in disaggregating data, the collaborative efforts included in the implementation process appeared to positively influence engagement, collaboration, relationships, and communication. As teachers and school leaders worked together examining data and adjusting the implementation process, it gave all stakeholders the confidence and validation to move forward with the innovative reform (Schmoker, 2004). Figure 2 illustrates the four components of successful implementation of OFYP.
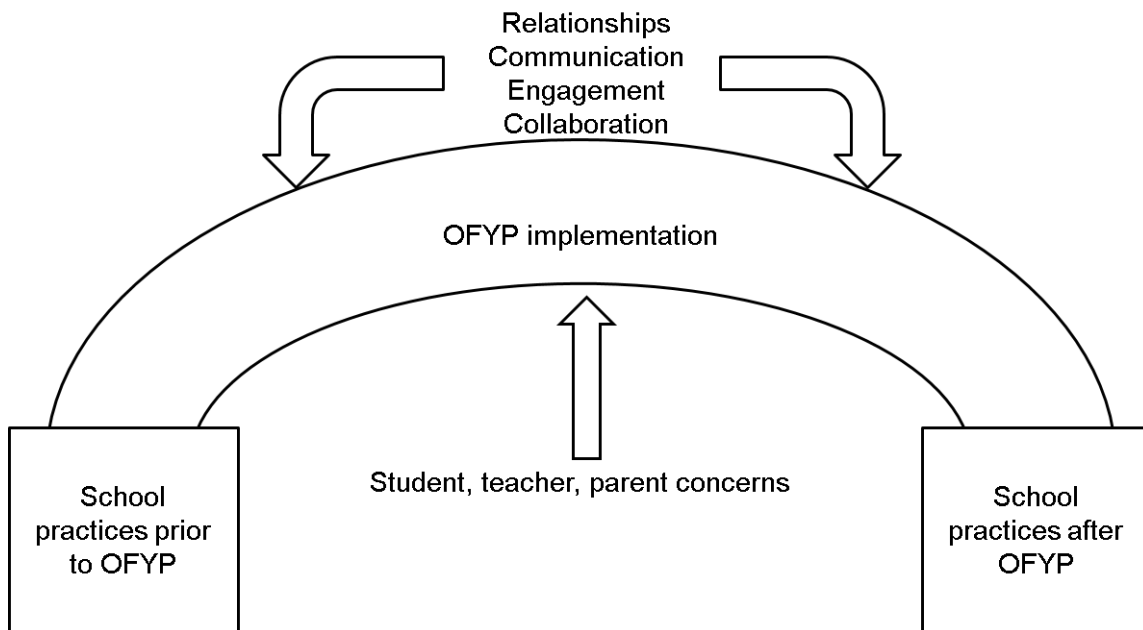
Figure 2. Four key components of successful reform implementation. Communication, collaboration, engagement, and relationships were the most important factors in helping make OFYP implementation successful.

Recommendations and Implications for Future Research and Practice

The interconnected fields of education reform and policy implementation are constantly changing, and many questions remain unanswered. More, broader qualitative studies are necessary to confirm these findings regarding implementation of a variety of reforms. There will always be a need for educational reform since our world and our students are constantly changing. Furthermore, politics and controversy will most certainly be a mainstay in the reform process since the public educational system is a social creation and has evolved into a bureaucratic web of entanglement.

This research focused only on the perceptions and recollections of school administrators since they are critical in leading the process of policy implementation at the local level. However, the perceptions and recollections and teachers, students, and

parents could lead to additional understanding of the process of implementing reform policy at the local level. In addition, further research examining the perceptions and recollections of school leaders from other districts that implemented OFYP could broaden the scope of these findings.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

The finding of this study benefit school leaders who seek to implement successful educational reforms. Using Springhill ISD's experience with implementing reform can be a useful starting point for other administrators who are faced with the multiple challenges that accompany change. Every school district is unique based on student, community, and staff characteristics. Springhill ISD traced a path through the reform challenges by utilizing their uniqueness as a strength when creating a blueprint of OFYP reform. The common elements identified for Springhill ISD's success were: (a) engagement, (b) building positive relationships, (c) collaboration, and (d) frequent, open, and clear communication.

First, engagement was a vital factor in successfully implementing OFYP. Students naturally were the focus of this reform, and intense efforts were made to motivate at-risk students through rewards, positive incentives, and frequent feedback. Teachers also had to be engaged in the reform effort, and although some were initially reluctant to change their teaching methods, virtually all teachers eventually became enthusiastic about closing the achievement gaps by making learning a fun, positive experience.

Second, the data suggested that successful reform implementation required building positive relationships between students and teachers. The individualized instruction time and smaller student numbers provided during Fantastic Fridays allowed teachers to truly get to know students on a personal level and better address their needs. Teachers and students appeared to benefit from these positive relationships based on the data.

Third, collaboration among teachers regardless of specialty also increased morale and enhanced engagement. The active process on ongoing professional development aimed at building the capacity for implementing change was viewed as a key ingredient for bridging gaps between instructional theory and practice. Additionally, by utilizing teachers as leaders in relaying information about innovative engagement practices, collaborative efforts were solidified among the team.

Finally, clear, open, and frequent communication from the school staff helped engage parents and other community members. By providing proactive, ongoing communication to all stakeholders, school leaders were able establish trust and support in efforts to reform. The data suggests they were also successful in making connections for stakeholders about the "why" and "how" of implementing change, which helped gain support for buy-in.

In addition, these data also revealed the importance of ongoing teacher education in the process of implementing reform. By ensuring that novice teachers are equipped with the skills and capacity to build positive relationships with students and to create engaging classrooms, achievement gaps could be eliminated. Likewise, if proper funding

were provided along with federal mandates for increasing accountability, achievement gaps could be eliminated. Top-down reforms such as NCLB (2001) may create forced accountability standards, but it does not equate stakeholder buy-in and commitment. Research by the Center for Education Policy suggests that reform efforts over the last 50 years have fallen short due to improvement being forced into the school system from the outside rather than generated from the inside; hence, credence added to the feasibility of bottom-up reform efforts (Jennings, 2012). Other districts may look to Springhill ISD's example on implementing reform in conjunction with building the capacity for a bottom-up transformation.

Recommendations for Future Research

The implications of the study findings are necessarily limited by the research design, yet suggest relevant areas to be explored for other reform implementation situations. The importance of positive relationships that connect students to the educational process and academic success should be explored further. The similarities and differences of elementary school and junior-senior high school reform implementation remain to be determined. Student perspectives on reform effectiveness must also be explored, in addition to further investigation of the role of student engagement. Quantitative studies should also be conducted to measure the effects of reform policies on at-risk student achievement. In the 2012-2013 school year, OFYP ceased at Springhill ISD due to the transition from TAKS to STAAR testing statewide. Future research could explore ways in which reforms could be structured to serve at-risk students regardless of accountability standards.

One aspect of reform implementation not explored in this study was the decision-making process that resulted in OFYP as the reform of choice for Springhill ISD. Many possible interventions exist to help at-risk students. Some are multi-faceted, targeting academic, behavioral, attendance, study still, or school organizational strategies, while other reforms address a single problem area (Freeman & Simonsen, 2014). How school leaders determined that OFYP would best address the particular issues facing Springhill ISD remains unknown, as well as the other potential reforms considered. This information could be useful for guiding school leaders who have identified a problem area but are unsure of the exact reform to implement.

Study Limitations

As a qualitative exploratory study, this research was concerned with understanding rather than explaining the personal experiences of six school leaders responsible for implementing educational reform to assist at-risk students. These participants constituted the total population of superintendents, principals, and assistant principals working in the school district during implementation of OFYP during the years 2007-2012. Of these participants, only two were involved with the elementary school, which skewed the findings to emphasize issues regarding reform implementation in the junior-senior high school. These participants repeatedly noted significant differences between elementary and junior-senior high school at-risk students, as well as differences in teaching styles and methods. The study was principally focused on gaining a deeper understanding of how administrators experienced the process of reform

implementation. Student perspectives were not collected directly from students and only inferred through participant responses.

Although many Texas school districts have implemented OFYP reform policies, this research concerned only a single, rural school district in southeast Texas. Further, this study did not capture the experiences of Springhill ISD administrators employed prior to OFYP implementation to provide historical perspective. Therefore, these findings may not be generalizable to larger, urban schools which face different challenges to reform efforts.

Importantly, this was not a quantitative study designed to measure objective effectiveness of the OFYP reform itself. Data were not collected nor discussed regarding TAKS scores, dropout rates, or other assessments. Anecdotal evidence of reform was incidentally collected during interviews, yet this alone cannot be interpreted as a reliable measure of how OFYP affected the achievement gaps at Springhill ISD. In a related study, Longbotham (2012) found that fifth-grade students who attended an OFYP-approved district scored higher on TAKS tests than those who attended traditional 180-day school districts specific. However, school district data such as standardized-test scores and dropout rates do not necessarily reflect the school's ability to promote student achievement (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Finally, the author of this study was employed by Springhill ISD during the entire duration of the OFYP implementation period, and maintained professional ties with all participants in this study. Although every effort was made to maintain neutrality

during all interviews, these preexisting relationships may have colored the interview responses. Member checks were used to ensure trustworthiness and reliability.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the individual perceptions and recollections of Springhill ISD administrators regarding implementation of OFYP school reform policy during the years 2007-2012. Ten major themes were included in the study findings that resulted in four implications of these findings. First, engagement among students, teachers, parents, and community members was identified as an important factor in successful OFYP implementation. Second, OFYP facilitated meaningful connections through relationship building between students and teachers, which led to and encouraged the third implication of productive collaboration among teachers and school leaders. Finally, frequent, open and clear communication among stakeholders provided the ongoing support to successfully implement OFYP.

The findings of this exploratory study helped clarify the detailed process of implementing top-down educational reform policies at the school district level. Springhill ISD was able to build the capacity to implement reform aimed at increasing at-risk student achievement. They accomplished this, in part, by utilizing bottom-up strategies to establish a collaborative network of stakeholders focused on the individual needs of Springhill ISD students. This study contributes to the body of policy implementation research by presenting the experiences and perceptions of administrators responsible for implementing a reform policy throughout an entire school district. The

results of this study may encourage and guide future reform efforts aimed at closing achievement gaps and helping all students succeed personally and academically.

This study provides valuable information to other districts seeking to implement reform policy as well as for policy makers in considering future reform policies. Although this case study represented a small number of participants, the data revealed some universal applications for organizations to replicate. School leaders should look to examining the needs of their stakeholders as they build the capacity for change. As policy makers work on future policies for educational reform, including the findings from this study can aid other administrators when given the flexibility to customize reform policy to fit the needs of their students.

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APPENDIX A

At-Risk Criteria for the State of Texas

(The Texas Education Agency, 2014)

A student at risk of dropping out of school includes each student who is under 21 years of age and who:

1. is in prekindergarten, kindergarten or grade 1, 2, or 3 and did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year;
2. is in grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12 and did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year or is not maintaining such an average in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum in the current semester;
3. was not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more school years;
4. did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student under Subchapter B, Chapter 39, **and** who has not in the previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or another appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110 percent of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument;
5. is pregnant or is a parent;
6. has been placed in an alternative education program in accordance with Section 37.006 during the preceding or current school year;
7. has been expelled in accordance with Section 37.007 during the preceding or current school year;
8. is currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or other conditional release;
9. was previously reported through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) to have dropped out of school;
10. is a student of limited English proficiency, as defined by Section 29.052;
11. is in the custody or care of the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services or has, during the current school year, been referred to the department by a school official, officer of the juvenile court, or law enforcement official;
12. is homeless, as defined by 42 U.S. C. Section 11302, and its subsequent amendments; or
13. resided in the preceding school year or resides in the current school year in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility, substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway house, or foster group home.

Informed Consent

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION PROGRAM
CONSENT FORM

Project Title: A study on administrators' perceptions of the Optional Flexible Year
Program: School improvement effort in one Texas school district

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Melanie Rogers, a
researcher from Texas A&M University. The information in this form is provided to
help you decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part in the study, you
will be asked to sign this consent form. If you decide you do not want to participate,
there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits you normally would
have.

Why Is This Study Being Done?

The purpose of this study is to examine the process that occurs when a policy is
implemented in a school.

Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you were involved in the implementation
process during the period 2007-2012.

How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?

8 people (participants) will be invited to participate in this study locally. Overall, a total
of 8 people will be invited at 3 study centers including ~~ASCISD, Alvin ISD, and The
Texas Center for Educator Effectiveness.~~

What Are the Alternatives to being in this study?

The alternative to being in the study is not to participate.

What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?

You will be asked to discuss your recollections, perceptions, and memories surrounding
the implementation of the policy titled, "Optional Flexible Year Program." You will also
be asked to give consent for the researcher to record her observations about your non-
verbal behavior during the interview. Your participation in this study will last up to 2
hours and includes 1-2 visits.

Visit 1 (Week ONE) This visit will last about 1 hour. During this visit you will discuss your recollections, perceptions, and memories surrounding the implementation of the policy titled, "Optional Flexible Year Program."

Will Photos, Video or Audio Recordings Be Made Of Me during the Study?

Yes, audio recordings will be made during the study.

The researchers will make an audio recording during the study so that the data gathered can be transcribed and analyzed. If you do not give permission for the audio recording to be obtained, you cannot participate in this study.

Version _____
 Date:_____

I give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me and observations to be made of my non-verbal behavior during my participation in this research study.

I do not give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me and observations to be made of my non-verbal behavior during my participation in this research study.

Are There Any Risks To Me?

The things that you will be doing are no more/greater than risks than you would come across in everyday life.

Although the researchers have tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions/procedures that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

Will There Be Any Costs To Me?

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?

You will not be paid for being in this study.

Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Melanie Rogers and Dr. Mario S. Torres will have access to the records.

Information about you will be stored in locked file cabinet; computer files protected with

a password. This consent form will be filed securely in an official area.

People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

Information about you and related to this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

Who may I Contact for More Information?

~~You may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Mario Torres, to tell him about a concern or complaint about this research at 979-458-3016 or mstorres@tamu.edu. You may also contact the student researcher , Melanie Rogers at 979-777-4696 or marogers64@tamu.edu.~~

For questions about your rights as a research participant; or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you may call the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program office at (979) 458-4067; 855-795-8636; or irb@tamu.edu.

What if I Change My Mind About Participating?

This research is voluntary and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide to not begin or to stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or stop being in the study, there will be no effect on your student status, medical care, employment, evaluation, relationship with Texas A&M University, etc.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. I can ask more questions if I want. A copy of this entire consent form will be given to me.

_____   _____

Participant's Signature   Date

_____   _____

Printed Name   Date

I CHOOSE NOT TO PARTICIPATE: by signing below, you are indicating that you choose not to participate in the study. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits you normally would have.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

_____   _____

Printed Name   Date

INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT: Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

_____   _____

Signature of Presenter   Date

_____   _____

Printed Name   Date

IRB NUMBER: IRB2013-0750 IRB APPROVAL DATE: 11/26/2013 IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 11/15/2014

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

1. What steps led to your district's involvement with OFYP?

   a. In order to gain some historical perspective on the situation, please describe what factors led your district to implement OFYP.
   b. What did your district hope to achieve by participating in OFYP?
   c. How did you overcome any obstacles that arose, if any?

2. Describe the process you went through in preparing teachers for this change.

   a. What structures, policies, or programs existed to help teachers implement OFYP, if any?
   b. How was implementation monitored?
   c. How was time structured to support professional development for teachers and school leaders, if any?
   d. Were any symbolic measures incorporated in the implementation process such as vision, culture, climate, ceremonies, etc.? Please describe.
   e. Describe how was teacher collaboration fostered and encouraged?

3. How did/what other factors affect(ed) implementation of OFYP? Such as: professional development, capacity, leadership, teachers, community, etc.

   a. Describe what resources you and your teachers had access to in order to increase at-risk student achievement?
   b. Were changes made to organizational structure such as school design, leadership design, use of facilities, master schedule design, etc.? Describe.
   c. How did you navigate any political aspects associated with the implementation process?
   d. What steps, if any, were taken to prepare parents and students for this change?

4. In what ways did the experiences of the school leaders influence their subsequent professional philosophies and decisions related to effective strategies for raising at-risk student achievement?

   a. As a school leader, how has your experience with implementing OFYP changed "the way you do business" today?
   b. Reflecting on one at-risk student who was affected by this process, describe your recollections.