

**HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR SUPPORT FOR  
PLANNING, COORDINATING, AND EVALUATING  
TEACHING AND THE CURRICULUM**

A Dissertation

by

**KIMBERLY KELLEHER LAWSON**

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A & M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

August 2011

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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**ABSTRACT**

High School Principals' Perceptions of Central Office  
Administrator Support for Planning, Coordinating, and  
Evaluating Teaching and the Curriculum. (August 2011)  
Kimberly Kelleher Lawson, B. S., Texas A&M University;  
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This dissertation was designed to gain insight in the area of central office instructional leadership support from the perception of the high school principal. With increasing standards and high student performance expectations coupled with strict federal and state accountability measures, it is impossible for the high school principal to bear the sole responsibility of meeting the needs of their students, staff, and community without further support. Central office is a critical factor in school improvement. The primary aim of this study was to provide insight and a deep understanding how successful high school principals feel supported as the instructional leader specifically in the area of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum.

The research was guided by a single overarching question: What are high school principal perceptions of support given to them by district central office administrators in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum?

Qualitative research was selected for this study to allow for deep and thorough investigation of a small group of high school principals' beliefs regarding the central office administrator instructional leadership support. Interviews were conducted with six successful high school principals from three large school districts. The findings that emerged from the interviews were categorized into eight themes including: the school district focus; instructional leader toolbox; effective use of data; deployment of curriculum and instruction; quality professional development; collaboration; connections; and communication.

A synthesis of participants' responses and prior research lead to three overall conclusions: setting high learning expectations; focusing on curriculum and instruction; and establishing district-campus partnerships. Campus principals need assistance in meeting the high standards and challenges they face today. District central office administrators can assist principals become the instructional leader all schools need. This study begins to fill the gap in the literature on how high school principals can be supported by district central office administrators in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating of teaching and the curriculum.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Christopher Lawson, who made it possible for me to complete the doctoral program. His continuous support and encouragement inspired me to achieve this accomplishment. I think of the numerous “mommyless” days and nights when he parented our two children while I was at class, studying, or writing. He always listened to me recount the events from school, filled my car up with gas prior to the frequent drives to College Station for class, spent multiple holidays at grandmas with the kids leaving me alone to study/write, and must have allowed me to bounce at least twenty different dissertation topics off of him. Anything I needed during this doctoral journey, he was there for me relentlessly.

Also, I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, Tom and Mimi Kelleher who taught me I could accomplish anything I desired in life. From an early age, they instilled in me the importance of education. I wanted to do well, learn more, and grow. I believed I could be anything I wanted thanks to them.

I am grateful for my understanding and supportive family. This work is also dedicated to my two children, Kacey and Logan, both whom I hope also believe in themselves and know they can accomplish their personal dreams.

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I would also like to express my gratitude to the members of my doctoral advisory committee for their tremendous support. Dr. Lynn Burlbaw, Associate Professor, Dr. Bryan Cole, Professor, Dr. Virginia Collier, Clinical Associate Professor, and my chair, Dr. Linda Skrla, Professor. All of them provided me guidance and support the past few years. Whether during class, through emails, or during the doctoral steps, each one of them provided aid and was willing to help me however needed. I would also like to mention Dr. Dennie Smith, Professor and Head Dean of Education, who willingly provided support in the final stages of this dissertation. Specifically, Dr. Skrla, my chair, served as a role model and inspiration to me.

In addition to my committee, professional colleagues gave me support, encouraged me, and gave me confidence that I could achieve my doctorate. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Clark for strongly encouraging me to return to school and Dr. Darrell Brown, one of my supervisors who allowed me to have flexibility in my job in order to accommodate class schedules. During the progression of

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Last but not least, thank my family and friends who support me unremittingly over the past six years. You all have been understanding and accepting as I have often times had to skip out holidays or special events for school. You graciously stopped asking me if I was finished yet and allowed me to have the time needed. Thank you all.

**NOMENCLATURE**

AASA	American Association of School Administrators
AEIS	Academic Excellence Indicator System
AYP	Adequate Yearly Progress
IL	Instructional Leader(ship)
IRB	Institution Review Board
ISD	Independent School District
ISLLC	Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium
NCES	National Center for Educational Statistics
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
SASS	Schools and Staffing Survey
TAKS	Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills
TPM	Texas Projection Measure



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Educators across the nation face the daunting challenge of educating the youth of today. Schools are constantly scrutinized and often harshly criticized. Michael Fullan (2000), describes schools as functioning under a microscope where student performance is examined and made public. Education constantly is transforming, making it a challenge to meet increasing high standards. For the past few decades, legislation requiring these additional standards and intense accountability measures has posed a paramount task for schools. Through educational reform measures like No Child Left Behind (NCLB), 2001, our education system is forced to truly be accountable for student learning. In 2012-13, NCLB will require all students to become proficient in reading and mathematics as well as schools to be responsible for closing the achievement gap that exists in our country (NCLB, 2002). However, in response to the NCLB law, many administrators would argue NCLB is an unfunded mandate (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffet, 2003).

To meet these directives, educational initiatives continue to be at the forefront of school improvement efforts. Campus principals are directly responsible for these efforts as they are ultimately in charge of student learning (Smith & Andrews, 1989) and therefore are working under extreme pressure. Today, schools and districts are dealing

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This dissertation follows the style of *Educational Administration Quarterly*.

with complex issues and challenges that their predecessors did not face (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). The district central office is a key source of support. Principals now more than ever before are in search for additional help. This study will examine in depth how high school campus principals perceive support by central office administrators as the instructional leader especially in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluation of teaching and the curriculum (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

Schools, and their principals, are under massive pressure to increase performance for all student populations. The importance of the school leader, the principal, is widely accepted in the literature. Effective schools research by Ron Edmonds, (1979a) identified correlates of effective schools that include strong educational leadership on the part of the school principal. Sewell (1999) concurred that behind successful schools resides an effective leader, the campus principal.

By the same token, principals wear numerous hats, sometimes several at one time. Both state and federal requirements are demanding and taxing on our leaders. It seems, with every good intention of improving student achievement that the work load of a principal has enlarged tenfold. School leaders have a myriad of responsibilities, mainly to ensure student learning (Pierce, 2001). A recent meta-analysis conducted by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2003), included sixty-nine studies on school leadership. The study yielded twenty-one responsibilities of the campus principal that correlated the task to the effect on student academic achievement. Key responsibilities included: being visible, a change agent, monitoring and evaluating, providing resources, having

knowledge of and being involved in curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as effective communicator.

Similarly, research by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins in 2008 categorized the core practices of a school leader into four categories: building vision and setting directions; understanding and developing people; redesigning the organization; and managing the teaching and learning program. Then additional subsets of specific practices were included totaling fourteen practices for principals (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). The job of a principal is so demanding that one person cannot do it all (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001). Principals are torn between managing the building, instructional tasks, and other miscellaneous tasks (Cuban, 1984). Principals are in need of assistance in order to achieve their primary goal of student learning. With the core business of schools being student learning, how can principals obtain additional instructional assistance? Where can additional support be found to aid the campus instructional leader? The district central office is one likely source of such support. This study will help define the district office support needed for principals and demonstrate how it can affect those people in these crucial roles.

### **Overview of the Literature**

Leadership in general and, specifically, leadership in schools have widely been researched. “Leadership is the guidance and direction of instructional improvement” (Elmore, 2000, p. 14) or, as Leithwood and Riehl in 2003 said, leadership has two functions: providing direction and exercising influence. They went on to say leadership is more a function than a role. Leaders assist in creating a shared sense of purpose,



supplying direction, and actually working through other people (Leithwood & Riehl, 2004). Numerous studies have identified the importance of leadership in schools. For example, Warren Bennis (2003) framed effective leadership for the future using four critical characteristics: engage others in a shared vision, have a clear voice to constituents, operate from a strong moral code, and demonstrate the ability to adapt to relentless pressure to change. Strong leadership at the campus level is necessary for student success at all schools.

### *The Role of the Principal*

Campus principals are under an inordinate amount of pressure to ensure student learning. Responsibilities continue to increase and sometimes are unrealistic. (Cooley & Shen, 2003) No matter how effective the principal and campus staff is, challenges that schools face today are difficult for everyone. State and federal requirements have influenced educational decisions from district administrators to principals and then to classroom teachers. Principals are under high stress and often struggle to complete what they feel needs to be accomplished for children and staff. Principals spend their time on a variety of responsibilities including instruction; supervision; budget; professional development; student discipline; improving community relations; communication; being visible; attending district meetings/obligations; building professional community within faculty and staff; assuring student safety; and managing school facilities, providing resources, and/or implementing procedures. The literature on the role or responsibilities of principals refers to exuding qualities such as working closely with the school community, mastering human relations, attending to the disagreements between and

among students and staff as well as anyone else having conflict in the school, honoring district guidelines, respecting district administrators, deflecting any matter that takes away from teaching and learning, keeping a safe and orderly environment, and more (Elmore, 2000). The list is never-ending. Principals often feel they are caught in the middle of many situations, some of which they cannot control. The media has placed public education in particular, under scrutiny, while our students have never been more at risk. As Raisch and Rogus (1995) describe, the demanded day-to-day tasks of principals can monopolize their precious time. New administrators, especially, struggle balancing the strain of the job. With the high levels of stress present, the role of campus principals continues to become more complex and increasing in responsibility. Cottrell (2002) explains that one of the largest feats for principals is addressing the academic performance of students. As noted in the literature by Blase & Blase (1999), DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran (2003), Krug (1992), and Firestone & Wilson (1985), the role of the principal is critical to student success. Fullan (2001), also confirmed that quality leadership enhances teaching and learning.

According to a survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) in 1999-2000 using the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) secondary principals describe themselves as being in the “eye of the storm” on a regular basis and spend an average of sixty-two hours a week at work (Cooley & Shen, 2003). This survey revealed that less than thirty-three percent of principals’ time is spent on curriculum and instructional tasks due the responsibilities needed to maintain physical security of staff and students as well as managing school facilities, resources and

procedures. However, most principals surveyed reported that curriculum and instruction responsibilities are addressed at least for some time every day. Supervising staff and attending district-level meetings and carrying out responsibilities averaged once or twice a week for forty percent of the respondents. Supervision is a monumental task alone. It encompasses communication, instructional program, motivating and organizing, curriculum, service to teachers, community relations, staff development, planning and change, observation and conferences, problem solving and decision-making, personal development, and research and program evaluation, according to Pajak (1989). Eisner (2002) stated that at least one-third of principals' time should be spent in classrooms and working on developing teachers as leaders. Other responsibilities appear to prohibit principals from reaching that amount of time on instructional tasks.

In particular, principals make decisions daily that impact the teaching and learning process in hopes of increasing student achievement. Is enough time being spent on issues instructionally related? One way principals have handled this challenge is to make a shift in their leadership. Principals have been forced to move from focusing on the managerial and administrative tasks to focusing on tasks of a true instructional leader. According to Cuban (1988), in the past, managerial tasks have overshadowed those of the instructional role of the principal. The emphasis should be on learning; therefore, time must be dedicated to instruction. Effective principals know effective instruction and how to improve student achievement (Cotton, 2003). In other words, the best way to advance schools is to improve the delivered curriculum and instructional practices used (Sewell, 1999). In 2002, a committee formed by the Southwestern

Regional Education Board (SREB), created a list of twelve supercilious goals they call Challenge to Lead Goals. One of them specifically states every school has leadership that results in increased student performance. The school leader needs to be effective. Another goal worthy of noting is about all students having qualified teachers (SREB, 2002). The principal is critical in the education system.

To illustrate this point of the principal, a look at a study conducted by Leithwood and Jantzi in 1999 is in order. This was a study that examined the leadership of the principal and the effects on student engagement and feeling of connectedness with school. The researchers discovered the leadership of the principal has significant effects on both student engagement and connectedness. These instructional responsibilities are the primary undertaking for instructional leader on the campus, the principal (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). The principal's leadership has a significant effect on student engagement, which ultimately can translate to student achievement (Blase & Blase, 1998; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; and Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999;).

### *Instructional Leadership*

Current research emphasizes the instructional role principals play on their campuses. Instructional leadership is widely accepted by researchers and practitioners as noted by Smylie and Brownlee-Conyers (1992), yet no clear definition exists (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach 1999). Sheppard (1996) said it entails all leadership activities that affect student learning. Others have said that instructional leadership includes developing and promoting an instructional vision, having norms of trust,

collaboration, supporting teacher growth, and monitoring classroom instruction (Purkey & Smith, 1983; Rossman, Corbett, & Firestone, 1988; and Sheppard, 1996).

Furthermore, principals are the instructional leaders, and they must ensure learning for all students. As the standards continue to rise, this environment will increase stress level of campus administrators. Currently principals are preparing for national goals like in 2012-2013, when one hundred percent of the students must be proficient on state exams according to NCLB. The principals are held accountable for this extremely high standard. In order to seek improvement, it takes a courageous leader who knows curriculum and instruction to respond in an effective manner and be successful (Rallis & Goldring, 1993). Goodwin, Cunningham, and Childress (2003) offer that principals need to understand what specifically improves student achievement and know how to work with teachers to bring about a positive change. They themselves need to model research-based instructional strategies that work with all learners, and prepare the teachers to be leaders. Quality instruction and emphasis on meaningful learning begins with the instructional leadership of the principal.

In particular to instructional leadership, Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008), discovered that instructional leadership had a larger effect on student outcomes than transformational leadership after analyzing twenty-seven published studies on the relationship between leadership and student outcomes. This study looked deeply at twelve of the twenty-seven studies and revealed five dimensions or leadership practices:

- a) establishing goals and expectations;
- b) resourcing strategically;

- c) planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum;
- d) promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and
- e) ensuring an orderly and supportive environment. (p. 635)

Due to the moderate impact (0.42 effect size according to the Robinson et al. study) one of these dimensions has on student outcomes and the strong connection to the work of the instructional leader, this dimension was selected to frame this study: planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (Robinson et al., 2008). This dimension includes the principals involved in professional discussions about how instruction impacts student achievement as well as being active in the oversight and coordination of instructional programs. The principals, as the building leaders, need a strong involvement in classroom observation and providing subsequent feedback. Throughout their study, comparisons were made using this dimension including the research and findings. Also included in this dimension is that the leader ensures his or her staff systemically monitors student progress. This leadership dimension was used to design and analyze this dissertation on high school principals' perception of instructional support. Comparisons and conclusions were made with this grounding work of Robinson et al., (2008).

Other research studies have also found instructional leadership to be an integral function on the part of the campus leader. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) note ten functions of instructional leadership, five of which align with Robinson's leadership practices: supervise and evaluate instruction, coordinate the curriculum, monitor student progress, protect instructional time, and promote professional development. Peterson

(1999) again in his work makes comparable connections. He defines instructional leadership with six behavior sets. All of those identified behavior sets are in direct support of the leadership dimension three from Robinson et al., (2008). To no surprise, they include regularly observing teachers and providing feedback, monitoring student progress by reviewing test results with teachers, working with teachers to build a coordinated instructional program, promoting staff development by securing resources and finding opportunities for growth communicating to teachers their responsibility in student achievement, and acting as an information resource person by regularly discussing matters of instruction with teachers. Likewise, the Blase and Blase (1998) definition of instructional leadership summarizes the essence of the principal. They depicted instructional leadership as a combination of curriculum development, supervision, and professional learning. Approximately seventy percent of the acknowledged effective practices that Smith and Andrews (1989) found in an instructional leader also directly relate to Robinson's third dimension. Additionally, the recent meta-analysis conducted by Cotton (2003) identifies twenty six essential traits of principal behavior that are associated with increased student achievement. These behaviors affirmatively influence dependent variables of student achievement, student and teacher attitudes, student and teacher behavior, and dropout rates. Almost half of the identified principal behaviors parallel with the Robinson's leadership dimension. The same year, yet another meta-analysis conducted this time by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2003), discovered similar findings. When examining the sixty-nine studies on school leadership, their work yielded twenty-one responsibilities of the campus principal

correlating the task to the effect on student academic achievement. Seven responsibilities directly align with the Robinson et al. (2008) leadership dimension: planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. These include

- a) involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
- b) knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
- c) communication;
- d) monitoring/evaluating;
- e) relationships;
- f) resources; and
- g) visibility. (p. 42-43)

Interestingly, since 2003, Marzano and Waters (2009) have extrapolated these twenty-one principal responsibilities to the district level creating a total of five in another study. This connection to the district central office shows the support role of district central office can play instructionally. Three of the five district responsibilities show a relationship to the Robinson et al., (2008) leadership dimension.

Unmistakably, the role of the instructional leader is significant. How do effective principals attain this? Even high-caliber, experienced principals admit the job is becoming more intricate. What do principals need help with in order for them to be more effective? The American Association of School Administrators, (AASA), interviewed eighty school administrators who had a minimum of five years experience and were current principals, assistant superintendents or superintendents. They used an open-ended survey designed to measure how current professional preparation programs



were actually training new administrators. These veterans revealed that principals need help with following state and federal guidelines, instructional supports, and delivering leadership professional development for their campus (Michael, 2006). They remarked that they would like fewer mandates, special education relief, mid-course connections with NCLB requirements, better ways to remove failing teachers from classrooms, and additional exemplary teachers.

How do all these aspects connect to support student achievement? Where does the relief lie for principals? According to Richardson (1990), the principal seems to bear the sole responsibility for instruction. It is known that “a school’s leadership is likely to have more positive impacts on student achievement and well-being when it is able to focus on the quality of learning, teaching, and teacher learning” (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 668). With the increase in expectations from the state and federal level, the question to be answered is who is helping the campus principal, the instructional leader of the campus? One of the answers to this question could be seeking out the knowledgeable and informed district central office staff school districts employ. How could central office administrators support the principal’s instructional matters, specifically planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum? No matter how large or small the school district is, principals need assistance and the central office personnel exists for that purpose. In other words, “Central office staff might well be the linchpins of school improvement efforts, linking the external assisters and the building level administrators and teachers. They appear to be the most appropriate local sources of assistance” (Cox, 1983).

### *The Role of Central Office*

The role of central office staff varies across the nation and is not widely researched (Foley, 2001; Fullan, 1985; Harris, 1998). It is noted by Grove (2002) that “the contributions of central office staff members are crucial to the strength of a school system” (p. 46). With the increase in expectations and standards at all levels, it is even more critical the role central office plays in supporting schools. Substantial evidence shows that school districts do have a positive impact on schools by influencing instruction, teacher professional community, reform implementation, and other factors relating to teaching and learning (Goldring & Hallinger, 1992; McLaughlin, 1992; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Rosenholtz, 1989, Spillane, 1996). Fullan (1985) addressed two compelling issues in his article about school level change. He explored the role of central office in developing and maintaining successful schools and how should the central office administration carry out their role in supporting schools. He articulated:

the role of central office staff play are scanners, adapters, and advocates of promising new practices, direct implementation assisters to teachers, teaming with facilitators external to the district by providing implementation assistance after an external facilitator has conducted front-end training of principals and/or resource teachers who provide direct support to teachers. (p. 400)

In contrast, this view greatly differs from the traditional role associated with central office. Unmistakably, the district central office needs to be involved. Spillane

contended that district-level offices operate behind the scenes, more invisible than visible (1998). Why is that? Often, district central office functions separate from schools rather than aligned and united. In one study, central office administrators commented that it is easier to work on other tasks than directly support instructional issues at the campus (Rowan, 1983). Instruction is intricate work. In a study of six effective school districts located in five different states, conducted by Armstrong & Anthes in 2001, district level positions were all of the service orientation culture, focusing how to help principals and teachers with learning. Some district offices simply are not attentive to instructional issues; therefore, many questions go unanswered regarding the central office instructional support levels (Spillane, 1996). How central office operates is obscure, so Spillane admitted it is challenging to determine how they are contributing to support principals and assist in school efforts (1998). However, Miller, Smey-Richman, & Woods-Houston (1987) suggested that there are four general areas where the district office can support leadership development in schools. These include developing school site management; principal involvement in hiring and placement; monitoring and evaluating; and training and development. Elmore (2000) believes district central office exists to provide a buffer to principals and teachers for non-instructional issues. Additionally, schools should indentify their needs and develop an action plan which the district office should directly support, according to John Goodlad during an interview with Quinby in 1985. This support would entail a close working relationship. The district central office should be focused on the specific needs indentified at that campus adjusting as needed to assist (Joyce & Showers, 1988). This

close working relationship between the district central office and campus leaders is supported by many researchers. (Corcoran, Fuhrman, Belcher 2001; Cuban, 1984; Elmore & Burney, 1997; Finn, 1991; Pajak, 1989; Rallis & Goldring, 1993; Wimpleberg, 1987). District central office and campus principals must work closely together as a team (Knapp, Copland, Plecki, & Portin, 2006), which does not always exist in every school district (Fink & Resnick, 1999).

Unfortunately, central office also can be considered a barrier between unsuccessful schools and successful schools (Berg, Hall, & Difford, 1996). Knowing what campus principals face on a daily basis and being aware of the support needed helps tremendously. One Oklahoma school district experimented with gaining that knowledge by focusing the district leaders and tried to get them to see through the lens of a school. Tulsa superintendent implemented a “Day at School” program where district officials spent multiple days in schools by shadowing a student at each school. The district leader spent the entire day at the campus assigned and followed their student’s daily schedule. They found that the school and in particular, classroom instruction was not meeting the needs of children. Instantly, district officials realized how what they did at central office needed to change. The business manager, personnel employees, as well as curriculum and instruction staff all felt they could easily do things differently in their job that would help school. According to the superintendent, “supporting and encouraging quality teaching and learning in our classrooms” is what all of our jobs is about (Sawyer, 2004, p. 43). On a contrasting note, Honig (2003) found

that usually district level support helps campuses with district level initiatives, not the schools' own decisions or work. The question has become who is supporting whom?

Therefore, central office leaders must empower, motivate and encourage campus principals by working from a shared vision with continuous support. Having a collegial collaborative environment assists with this endeavor (Corbett & Wilson, 1992). Miller, Smey-Richman, and Woods-Houston (1987) described the relationship between district central office and schools as one of a shared responsibility. Having clear communication and involvement in school improvement is critical. This partnership balances the top-down and bottom-up decision making that ensures a trustworthy, sound working relationship. Central office leaders in their role of guiding instructional improvement respond to schools with a clear, consistent message (Corbett & Wilson, 1992). Keeping principals focused on student learning even when they are faced with the other necessary educational issues is critical. Effective central offices are selective in what demands they place on schools, keeping communication open, and modeling efficient and research based practices. They are often a stimulus for change but school improvement is a cooperative endeavor according to Miller et al. (1987). Staff at central should operate behind the scenes and be dedicated in making things simpler for schools. Bureaucracy cannot take over and negatively impact campus principals. Central office is vital in keeping the main thing, the main thing.

Schlechty (1997) believes district level leaders need to create system capacity. They should assist campuses in acquiring information or knowledge that they need. He also contends central office leaders should be experts at collecting meaningful data and

conducting proper analysis. Principals take action based on data and central office should ensure principals have the information to lead action. Schlechty shares effective organizations have a vision and beliefs developed and practiced throughout the organization. He offers additional ways district central office leaders can help schools include:

- a) building credibility up and being viewed as resources;
- b) assisting schools in acquiring necessary requirements;
- c) seeking opportunities to be invited to work on campus teams; and
- d) fostering communication and dialogue. (pp.89-90)

Likewise, Marzano and Waters (2009) found that the correlation between district leadership and student achievement to be at .24 and that it was significant at the .05 level. “When central office operates effectively and applies leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement increases” (p. 5). The principals hold the leadership in between this critical relationship of central office and student achievement. This meta-analysis conducted by Marzano and Waters (2009) identified five district level responsibilities important to student achievement. These include:

- a) ensuring collaborative goal setting;
- b) establishing non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction;
- c) creating board alignment with support of district goals;
- d) monitoring achievement and instruction; and
- e) allocate resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction. (p. 6)

Additional studies have identified specific actions or support behaviors that district offices can do to improve instruction. McKinsey (2007) acknowledged three critical factors for school district offices. One in particular was developing teachers into effective instructors and ensuring the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child. Also the Council of Chief State School Officers published the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards of 2008, revealing six leadership standards specifically addressing the system or district focus for instruction. The quality of the instructional program conducive to student learning and professional growth is purposely elaborated. The need for instructional support is vital.

*Central Office and Campus Principal Partnership*

Principals need people they can trust and turn to as needed. Leaders can provide balance in an organization. District central office leaders and campus principals need to be connected and involved in school improvement and district efforts, not done in isolation. According to Johnston (2001), district central office can be one of the most “untapped resources” (p. 4). With a clear process, he claims, central office can help principals and teachers streamline many requirements. School districts need to know what in their organization interferes or competes with the real work of the principals. The question is, what specifically can central office leaders do to support campus principals with instructional leadership? Studies on school districts prior to 1990 found there was little, if any, focus on curriculum and instruction, let alone preparing principals to lead with this expectation (Crowson & Morris, 1985; Floden et al., 1988; Hannaway & Sproull, 1978; Rowan 1982). More recent studies are finding there are critical areas

the district central office can assist. States passed along the curriculum and instructional matters to local districts, which in turn was forwarded along to the campus level for principals and teachers (Elmore, 1993). District central office serves as a crucial link and strength of the school system by modeling effective school characteristics (Crandall, 1984; Eubanks & Levine, 1983; Wimpelberg, 1987). They can ease the burden the workload of principals if focused on instructional needs like planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. Protheroe (1998) believes superior central office leadership is necessary to support and coordinate the instructional programs at the local schools. They are the key to effective and efficient education systems.

### **Statement of Problem**

Without a doubt the roles and responsibilities of the campus principal are immense, and with standards on the rise and increase in accountability, assistance is necessary. District central office support seems essential; however, the ways in which the central office can assist principals with planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum have not been thoroughly researched and require additional study. Additional research is needed in the area of how the district central office can support the high school campus principal with instructional leadership.

### **Purpose of Study**

It is impossible for the high school principal to bear the sole responsibility of meeting the needs of students, staff, and community without further support. District central office is a critical factor in school improvement. The primary aim of this study, therefore, is to provide insight and a deep understanding of how high school principals



perceive support from the central office as the instructional leader, specifically in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. This study will contribute to the limited research currently available and, thus, contribute toward filling this important gap in the research literature.

### **Research Question**

This study was guided by a single overarching research question:

What are high school principal perceptions of support given to them by district central office administrators in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (Robinson et al., 2008)?

### **Methods**

“Research methods should follow research questions in a way that offers the best chance to obtain useful answers” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 17-18). This study was primarily about the perceptions of high school principals. They were asked to divulge their personal thoughts regarding the level of support they feel they receive as an instructional leader by their district central office. The instructional role of their position is critical and important to ensure student achievement. The questions were aimed at determining, with the huge demands placed on high school principals of large high schools, how do they get it all done? The responses to the open-ended questions yielded categories or themes that were developed using open coding. Therefore, this study was designed as qualitative work. Rossman and Rallis (1998) recommended that qualitative studies to be performed in the natural setting using multiple methods if possible. They suggested that the research is emergent, fundamentally interpretive, allows for the self-

reflection on the part of the researcher, and uses complex reasoning (1998). Simply stated, the study was conducted using qualitative research from the viewpoint of interpretivism. I am telling the story of principals' perceptions of central office instructional support as relayed by the selected interviewees. One of Robinson et al., (2008) instructional leadership dimensions framed the study: planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. Proper preparation ensured that this study held true to the essences of qualitative studies, which, according to Glesne (1999), are best at adding value and a deeper understanding of perceptions and thought development. The study was designed to include sound research measures to lay the solid foundation.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

Interviews were conducted in three large schools districts in Texas. In this state, the University Interscholastic League (UIL) classifies school districts based on their enrollment size. For the purposes of this study, schools included in the largest category, 5A, which meant the high school had over the 2,065 minimum student enrollment, were considered. From that pool of schools, another layer of screening was used to identify schools. The list of schools was narrowed to schools with a state rating of Recognized or higher in the Texas state accountability system and was located in close proximity to the researcher. Six successful high schools meeting the criteria were selected in three school districts. The principals were interviewed face-to-face individually by the researcher. This qualitative study allowed the researcher to examine how high school principals in large school districts feel their district central office leaders support them

with instructional leadership, defined according to Robinson et al. (2008) as planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum.

### **Data Collection**

After obtaining proper permission from the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and following all school district research requirements, the researcher contacted the designated principals to arrange a convenient time for the interview. All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. Questions were developed from the identified leadership dimension: planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (Robinson et al., 2008). Three broad categories of interview questions including instructional leadership, curriculum and instruction were formed. All interviews took place in one sitting and lasted about an hour each. With permission, each interview was audio-taped and the participants had the opportunity to verify transcriptions at a later date.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed for meaning using the open coding method, which is where the researcher specifically names and categorizes chunks of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Responses were examined starting with the identified categories named above. Themes emerged and careful data analysis was exercised during this phase of the process. Since six total principals, two from three different school districts, were interviewed, an opportunity opened up to examine professional experience, gender, and district patterns.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

In this qualitative study on perception of high school principal instructional leadership support, specifically in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluation of teaching and the curriculum from central office administrators, trustworthiness and credibility were significant components. As mentioned, member checking was used as one way for me to ensure accuracy of participants' thoughts as well as the strategy known as peer debriefing. Additionally, Creswell (2003) recommended another person to review and ask questions about study as another way to establish trustworthiness as well as an outside editor to review entire study. Therefore, a Texas A&M University graduate student, Christie Whitbeck fulfilled this role for the study.

### **Significance of Study**

This study is important as it identified from the high school principal perspective, the specific instructional needs they have in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluation of teaching and the curriculum (Robinson et al., 2008). Explicit examples and needs highlight support high school principals feel are critical for student success. Results show ways in which district central office leaders can strengthen instructional leadership of principals in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluation of teaching and the curriculum (Robinson et al., 2008). This study yielded new information on the relationship between district central office administrators and campus instructional leaders in large school districts. The research conducted here is important to principals and school districts to continue to improve student learning.

### **Organization to Dissertation**

Chapter I introduced the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study. The literature reviewed that is associated with instructional leadership, district central office, role of the principal, and accountability is shared in Chapter II. Research methodology including the design, site and participant selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, limitations, and assumptions of the study is revealed in Chapter III. Findings of the study are shared in Chapter IV and the final chapter summarizes the implications, recommendations, suggestions for future research, and final thoughts.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

“The quality of education offered by a school district is measured by the extent to which all of its students become successful learners” (Corbett & Wilson, 1992 p. 1).

Schools embrace this challenge of educating children using a variety of instructional practices that are fluid due to the rapidly changing technology, ever-varying demographics, and twenty-first century learners. Educators face incredible pressure for continuous increases in student achievement from the local, state, and federal levels. School districts have been under attack to raise student performance for the past few decades. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* was produced by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which portrayed America’s schools as not being academically successful. This report specifically identified the need for improved student performance (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Despite this poor image of schools by the media, student performance did not alter greatly in the areas of reading and math.

Then, January 8, 2002, President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) into law that aimed to close the achievement gap. This law demanded success for all students without providing any additional funding (Fusarelli, 2004). American educators began to feel increased strain because this bill had severe financial strings attached. The federal government increased its role to be more active by holding schools accountable for learning and connecting federal dollars to performance. (No Child Left

Behind, 2002). Students would have to demonstrate mastery of skills in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics before they could graduate from high school (No Child Left Behind, 2002). NCLB was developed as a twelve-year progression, which ultimately requires or ensures 100% of the students are successful. “NCLB establishes a comprehensive framework of standards, testing, and accountability absent in previous federal legislation, and in the process it removes some discretion from local education authorities in determining what the goals and outcomes of education should be” (Fusarelli, 2004 p.72).

Schools not meeting the high standards with all student populations will be punished by possible withdrawal of federal dollars, threats of privatization, and public school choice. This stringent federal accountability plan is known as Adequate Yearly Progress, (AYP). Some state level agencies also have strict state accountability. Accountability is not new for the State of Texas. The Student Success Initiative was passed in 1999, which intended to end social promotion. Students would have to pass certain state assessments, known as the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, (TAKS) in particular grade levels and content area. Noticeably, both federal and state accountability was on the rise. Thus strong leadership is needed for schools to meet the desired reform. Ultimately, the responsibility to meet these standards lies in the hands of campus principals.

To illustrate the discrepancies of student performance, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report of 2005

not only shows that the percentage of Black and Hispanic students performing at or above the Proficient level in mathematics is much lower than that of their White peers (47 % for Whites vs. 13 % for Blacks and 19 % for Hispanics at grade four; 39 % for Whites vs. 9 % for Blacks and 13 % for Hispanics at grade eight), but it also shows that a large majority of Black students fail to meet the proficiency standard. (Lee, p. 15, 2006)

Student performance disparity continues to be large as evidenced here. Sobol (1997) suggested that, if we are serious about school reform, we should consider these five matters: support teachers, provide the resources, deal straight with race, nurture community, and enable the purpose.

What are the successful schools doing to meet these high standards for all students? Numerous research studies on effective schools have been conducted over the years. One of the initial and most widely known studies was conducted by Ron Edmonds in the late 1970's. According to him, school improvement and reform work is a journey. He studied the relationships with school leaders' behaviors of principals and the organizations effectiveness. He believed the principal was the most important factor in student achievement. Based on his work and others, seven correlates of effective schools emerged. The correlates identified include: safe and orderly environment; climate of high expectations for success; instructional leadership; clear and focused mission; opportunity to learn and student time on task; frequent monitoring of student progress; and home-school connection (Edmonds, 1979a). Many studies around this time concentrated on effective schools. Another study conducted in London in 1995 by



Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore identified eleven factors of effective schools. These include:

- a) professional leadership;
- b) shared vision and goals;
- c) a learning environment;
- d) concentration on teaching and learning;
- e) purposeful teaching;
- f) high expectations;
- g) positive reinforcement;
- h) monitoring progress;
- i) pupil rights and responsibilities;
- j) home-school partnership; and
- k) a learning organization.

Important findings from this study include the importance of flexibility and the ability to adapt teaching approaches which are more important than any one particular teaching style (Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1995). Effective schools have strong leaders, high expectations of student achievement, basic skills, a safe and orderly climate, and frequent evaluation of pupil progress (Brewer, 1993; Edmonds, 1979b; Harris, 1985; Teddlie, 1985; Smith & Andrews, 1989). All of these studies have various characteristics of effective schools and one common factor in each one was the quality of the principal. The principal is the leader of every campus. The research has varied on

effective schools with the descriptors or characteristics; one variable is unanimous: the leadership abilities of the principal.

During the past fifty years, the debate whether the principal makes a difference in student achievement has existed. Coleman (1967) claimed that “schools bring little influence to bear upon a child’s achievement that is independent of his background and general social context” (p. 325). This concept did not last long as various studies surfaced on the positive effects of the teacher and student achievement (Brophy, 1973; Dunkin & Biddle, 1974; Flanders, 1970; Soar & Soar, 1979, Stallings & Kaskowitz, 1974). Teachers design and implement learning. They make a variety of decisions which "taken collectively, these decisions define a student's opportunity to learn, especially for school based subject matter such as math” (Carroll, 1963, p. 101). More recently, the work of examining effective teaching strategies have identified the ways students learn best (Marzano, 2003). Knowing and using specific instructional strategies that increase achievement is powerful. The teacher has a direct impact on student learning. One of the main responsibilities of principals is to supervise and support staff members, including teachers. Leitner (1994) and Hallinger and Heck (1996) describe the connection of the principal to student achievement to be indirect and extremely complex.

Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore (1995) also concluded, based on empirical studies, that the identified eleven factors of successful schools described above are crucial to the school as a learning organization. Research suggests the principal has a positive impact on student achievement through monitoring of the instructional process

(Brookover & Lezotte, 1977; Edmonds, 1979b). The Southern Regional Education Board in 2003 took a deep look at our school leaders: the principal. Bartell (1990) claim effective principals have four major areas of responsibility:

- a) evaluate teacher performance;
- b) provide supportive climate;
- c) articulate the goals of the school; and
- d) provide an orderly atmosphere for learning. (p.123)

The work of the principal is that of facilitating instruction in every way possible. Superintendents who participated in the Wallace Foundation “Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What’s Needed to Fix Public Schools” in 2003 believed a good principal is the key to a successful school. “Superintendents are convinced that a good principal is at the heart of any given school’s accomplishments” (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffet, 2003, p. 37). The notion that effective schools have effective principals is repeated in the literature (O’Neill, Fry, Hill, & Bottoms, 2003). The impact of the school leader is important.

In looking at the research on leadership, there definitely is no shortage. Leadership has been examined for many years, therefore one can imagine a multitude of definitions have surfaced on this topic. The concept of leadership, being an effective manager, or characteristics of successful leaders fluctuates and has been written about for a long time. Bennis in 1984 wrote there were more than three hundred fifty definitions of leadership. Leithwood and Duke (1999) describe leadership as having many variations that it is difficult to pin point one statement. They suggest complex

concepts, like leadership, have fuzzy or unclear definitions “as if impressions helpful in keeping phenomenal properly unbounded” (p. 7). According to Phil Schlechty in his *Working on the Work* book in 2002, a leader as one who “inspires others to do things they might otherwise not do and encourage others to go in directions they might not otherwise pursue” (p. xx). What do leaders do to ensure their organization is effective? What types of characteristics are critical for leaders to possess?

According to Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) three basic practices for successful leadership include; setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization. Their study titled *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* found a critical component to note: “leadership is second to only classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (p.5). Without a doubt, research is clear about how the quality of instruction directly impacts the level of learning. Linda Darling-Hammond (2000) claimed teacher preparation and certification strongly correlate with student achievement. Rockoff ‘s (2004) research includes the finding that the amount of experience a teacher has can significantly raise student achievement performance, especially in reading.

Who supervises the teachers? The next closest factor in looking at student success is the quality of the principal. Kathleen Cotton (2003) synthesized eighty-one reports/studies that are related to the effective principals and their link to student achievement. She identified twenty-five principal behaviors that contribute to student achievement. The principal actions impact learning. Achieving results through others is the essence of leadership according to Hallinger and Heck (1998). This is critical as the

school leader, the principal, works with many teacher leaders who directly impact students. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) draw three conclusions of leadership:

- a) Many labels used in the literature to signify different forms or styles of leadership mask the generic functions of leadership.
- b) Principals, Superintendents, and Teachers are all being admonished to be: instructional leadership: so much clarity about what that means.
- c) Distributive Leadership is in danger of becoming no more than a slogan unless it is given more thorough and thoughtful consideration. The superintendent or the principal cannot do entire job themselves adequately. (pp. 6-7)

If it is known the quality of the principal is imperative to student learning, the question “what is it that successful leaders do?” must be asked. What does a campus leader, the principal, do or possess to guide the staff for attaining and maintaining high standards? Let’s start by defining leadership in schools: “The guidance and direction of instructional improvement” (Elmore, 2000, p. 14). The nature of leadership remains elusive, which is a challenge in itself (Simpkins, 2005). According to Leithwood in 2004, leadership is simple and complex. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) describe leadership as a person who “provides direction and exercises influence” ( p. 7). Thomas Sergiovanni in his 1995 book claims leadership is personal, and Murphy and Louis (1994) assert is it more than authority. Leadership in education has been illustrated with an adjective like “instructional,” “democratic,” “moral,” or “strategic” to name a few. However, no matter what the adjective that is used to describe the type of leadership,

Leithwood believes there are two essential objectives vital to any organization effectiveness: developing a set of directions and secondly, influencing staff to move in that direction (p. 6). The second part of these objectives is the challenging part for leaders. Many people might know what needs to be done, but they are not sure how to get it done. Numerous studies have identified the importance of leadership in schools. Bennis (2003) frames effective leadership using four critical characteristics: engage others in a shared vision, clear voice to constituents, operate from a strong moral code, and the ability to adapt to relentless pressure to change.

Furthermore, leadership at the campus level is necessary to embrace for school reform to occur. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) articulated seven strong claims regarding successful leadership:

- a) School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.
- b) Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices.
- c) The ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices-not the practices themselves-demonstration responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work.
- d) School leaders improve teaching & learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions.
- e) School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.

- f) Some patterns of distribution are more effective than others.
- g) A small handful of personal traits explains a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness. (pp. 27-28)

School leaders are responsible for ensuring quality instruction exists regularly in all classrooms. To make this possible, dealing with the complex variables that affect learning need to be a priority. The impact of a school leader is educationally significant according to Leithwood and Reihl, (2003). They argue that school leaders play a critical role in ten interdependent variables; state leadership, policies, and practices; student/family background; district leadership, policies, and practices; school leaders; other stakeholders; school conditions; teachers; classroom conditions; leaders' professional learning experiences; and student learning.

Having mentioned various types of leadership, establishing the importance of the principal as the organizational leader, one additional thought is important to add. This is the work of researchers Ogawa and Bossert (1995) who articulate that "leadership is important as it openly affects how organizations perform" (p. 224). They argue that leadership exists throughout an organization, not just in one person like the CEO or president of a company/organization. They believe "leadership is an organizational quality" and "leadership flows through the networks of roles that compromise organizations" (p. 225). Direction or guidance is prevalent not just from one person or a small group of people, but from within and throughout the organization. Leadership, through this lens, is a systemic characteristic. From Ogawa and Bossert's work surfaced four dimensions of leadership: function, role, the individual, and culture. For the

purpose of this study, which examines leadership in the school setting, a deep look at the principal leadership was investigated.

### **The Role of the Campus Principal**

If the responsibilities of the campus principal were to be compiled in one list, it would be massive in size. The role of the principal is becoming more complex and involves a great deal of responsibility (Cotton, 2003; Leitner, 1994; Farkas, et al., 2003; Rallis & Goldring 1993). Job descriptions for principals are three to four pages in length with extensive qualifications covering over thirty major duties. Among the main responsibilities include specifics under instructional and school management; school improvement; personnel management; fiscal, administrative, and facility management; student management; professional growth and development; and school/community relations. Principals today handle issues and challenges that are more complicated than addressed by their predecessors (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Unmistakably, campus principals play a key role in the education of our children. Studies have proven that, yes, the principal does matter and is significant to school improvement (Rallis & Goldring, 1993). The role of the principal is critical to student success (Blase & Blase, 1998; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Firestone & Wilson, 1985; Krug, 1992).

Two specific ways principals make a difference is by the selection and hiring of quality teachers and setting the school goals. Also, agreement exists in the research literature that leadership is an essential component of school improvement and the principal has significant effects on student engagement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Purkey & Smith, 1985). There is less agreement about the specifics of the necessary



behavior, styles, or skills required of the position (Purkey & Smith, 1985). Principals are important for student achievement via instructional leadership (Heck, Larsen, Marcoulides, 1990). Kathy O'Neill and Gene Bottoms (2003) characterize the principal as the chief learning officer who bears the "ultimate responsibility for success or failure" of a school.

The principals are the ultimate leader of the campus offering support, guidance, and communication to all staff, students, parents, and the community. They are a social advocate (Giroux, 1988; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2001) and the chief executive of the campus. The leader of the school sets the tone for the building providing a vision or direction of the school. Louis, Wahlstrom, Michlin, Gordon, Leithwood, Anderson, Mascall, Strauss, and Moore share in a report published March 2010 that the principals are the formal leaders of the school and are closest to the classroom. They are most efficient and confident when they are working from clear, common goals with the district personnel and other principals and teachers.

A mixed-methods study conducted by these colleagues with forty-three school districts, one hundred-eighty schools, over eight thousand teachers, and almost five hundred school administrators highlighted that when principal and teachers work collaboratively, and share the leadership with one another, student achievement increases. "The focus on the principal as the key to the improvement of learning for all children has intensified in the past few years" (Cotton, 2003, p. v). After reviewing eighty-one research studies from the past twenty years, she identified twenty-five

essential behaviors or traits of effective principals. She categorized them into five themes:

- a) establish a clear focus on student learning;
- b) interactions and relationships;
- c) school culture;
- d) instruction; and
- e) accountability. (pp. ix-x)

One of the identified behaviors discovered was vision and goals focused on high levels of student learning. Just as Edmonds (1979a) found in his work, Cotton concurs that articulating the expectation and working towards academic goals and having high expectations for students is critical (2003). Having a strong and clear mission was found to be an indirect influence of the principal in studies by Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996).

In some school districts, principals carry out the message or initiatives by the district central office and school board. The principal's primary duty is they ensure high quality instruction occurs for all students. Learning is the premise on which schools were created. Having high expectations for students (Brewer, 1993; Edmonds, 1979a; Harris, 1985; Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1995; Smith & Andrews, 1989; Teddlie, 1985) and staff is essential. Another crucial task is the hiring, maintaining, and supporting qualified teachers and staff. Endless hours are invested in staff. Supervising staff members takes an inordinate amount of time and usually is conducted during the school day. This time is working with teachers to improve their professional practice

and dealing with others who are ineffective. A main responsibility of the principal is recruiting and retaining effective teachers.

Furthermore, principals must comply with local, state, and federal laws, which at times create a tremendous amount of paperwork. Implementing these policies or programs affects budget, schedule, training, and often students and parents. Principals handle the main operations of the building including the physical layout as well as the scheduling of teachers and students. NCLB is an excellent example. Demands from NCLB have provided additional pressure and stress on campus principals and school districts. Since the purpose of NCLB is to close achievement gap, with the new accountability measures and financial strings principals across the country have developed a sense of urgency to respond. The four main principals of NCLB include:

- a) holding schools accountability to show students are achieving;
- b) increasing flexibility for schools in reaching goals;
- c) providing more options for parents to choose outside of low performing schools;
- and
- d) using research on what works best for student learning.

Principals certainly feel the additional pressures from this law.

Another responsibility principals bear is that of providing a safe learning environment. Safety is considered as one of the utmost critical components in a school building (Brewer, 1993; Edmonds, 1979a; Harris, 1985; Smith & Andrews, 1989; Teddlie, 1985). Ensuring safe procedures in the classroom and building includes tasks like having hallway/classroom/lunch behaviors well-defined, putting processes in place

for emergencies, and dedicating time to practicing fire drills, and even tragic measures. Safety also includes a risk-free environment where safety nets are in place for children. There should be a sense of warmth and accessibility in the school (Cotton, 2003). Procedures should be established where students can confidentially report important issues like bullying or the presence of a weapon on campus. Behavior expectations for students and staff need to be clear. Building a culture of safety begins with relationships. Staff, students, and parents should learn more about the other and partner in the learning process. Kids must feel safe in order to learn. In 1999, Johnson and Asera found in a study with nine high performing elementary schools that developing a sense of responsibility on the part of students allowed for a decrease in behaviors referrals and an opportunity for teachers and students to focus on learning. This is true in secondary campuses as well. Bartell (1990) found in her study of successful secondary principals the common thread of a positive, social climate fostering a caring feeling in the building.

In addition to providing a safe learning environment, principals must have a variety of additional skills and diversity of perspectives to accomplish this enormous job as campus principal. They are under constant scrutiny from staff members, board of trustees, parents, media, and others. Principals must have a large “bag of tricks” to fulfill the role of the principal successfully. How does one person exude the characteristics or behaviors to include factors like strong professional learning, building shared views and goals, and establishing a learning environment where teaching and learning is the main school activity? Principals need to be proficient at the mundane

details of tasks as well as possess the big-picture and global perspective (Fullan, 1985). Purposeful teaching exists with high expectations, positive reinforcement, frequent monitoring of student progress, and building of strong school-home collaboration. Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore (1995) feel these are crucial to the school as a learning organization. Smith and Andrews (1989) stated that the principal is directly responsible for improving instruction and learning. Additionally, Barth (1991) noted that principals need the specific behaviors necessary but also need to know when to use them. They must be careful to monitor their effects on learning within the school. Ron Edmonds (1979b) emphasized that "strong leadership from the principal is the single most important factor in schools that work" (p. 25).

Furthermore, effective communication is also a key characteristic of successful principals. Gaziel (1995) concluded that the main work of the principal is verbal communication. Verbal and written communication is significant. "The concept that effective principals have good people skills is so obvious that it might seem needlessly redundant to make further comment" (Davis, 1998, p. 9). His study revealed that a superintendent perceiving that principals have poor interpersonal skills was the number one reason principals lose their jobs. Thus, communication is high on the priority list for effective principals (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Smith & Andrew, 1989; Peterson, 1987; Whitaker, 1997).

Research by Marzano and Walters (year) supports the need for successful school principals to have numerous leadership skills. In 2009, they identified twenty-one principal leadership responsibilities in their meta-analysis on district leadership. They

were affirmation; change agent; contingent rewards; communication; culture; discipline; flexibility; focus; ideals/beliefs; input; intellectual stimulation; involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment; knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; monitoring/evaluating; optimizer; order; outreach; relationships; resources; situational awareness; and visibility. How does a principal perfect all of these skills? Even with a full “bag of tricks” the job of the principal has grown so much that, absolutely, the principal cannot do the job alone. The additional responsibilities that have been added to the plate of the principal are not possible if done in isolation. To illustrate this is the major undertaking of the principal of the instructional and curriculum responsibilities. The core business of schools is teaching and learning and principals are the head learner of the building (Barth, 1991). Principals cannot assume sole responsibility (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Cuban, 1984; Grove, 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Kleine-Kracht, 1993; Lambert, 2002; Olson, 2000; Spillane, Haverson, & Diamond, 2000; Wimpleberg, 1987). In essence, the principal needs extensive assistance and encouragement to be successful.

According to an article written by Stronge (1988), one-tenth of a principal’s time was spent on instructional tasks. The principals in this study noted that possible reasons for this small percentage included lack of training, time, too much paperwork, and the community's perspective of role as a manager. Furthermore, over five hundred principals were surveyed in the late 1990’s, where findings revealed that most of the principal’s time is spent on administrative tasks (Graham, 1997). Only five hours a week was dedicated to instruction and only one-fourth of the principals considered

themselves as an instructional leader. In contrast, research shows that instructional leadership is the primary responsibility of the principal (Blase & Blase, 1998; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001). If the heart of education is centered on teaching and learning, how can the principal only spend five hours a week on instruction or not see themselves as the instructional leader? It is recommended that principals need to free their schedules of bureaucratic tasks and make time to focus on instruction. With the essence of a school is learning, principals must have time dedicated to learn more about instruction and how to be an instructional leader (Jenkins, 2009).

Steven Adamowski, Susan Therriault, and Anthony Cavanna (2007) conducted a study on Key Leadership Skills which showed over forty percent of district school principals felt they needed more training than they had in managing and analyzing data, communicating effectively, making data-driven decisions, building a community of learners, developing a teacher/staff performance accountability system, building a community of support, evaluating classroom teachers, evaluating curriculum, and designing curriculum. Principals need ongoing support in the various areas for continued growth and confidence.

In words from current practitioners, in 2003, The Wallace Foundation and the Public Agenda collaborated to seek out information from our nation's school leaders in an opinion research study that surveyed nine-hundred twenty five public principals, and one thousand six public school superintendents (Farkas et al., 2003). This survey sought information regarding issues leaders face. Eight findings were developed and several are

related to this study. Principals do feel they can successful at their job if they had more flexibility and less red tape. Superintendents are concerned with the quality of instruction at the campus level. They feel principals are the key to successful schools. Principals expressed the need as the instructional leader of the campus to learn from other current practitioners. Principals want to learn from one another. The need for collaboration exists in order to grow, which is also true for teachers. Another finding from this study was the amount of paperwork a principal is expected to complete, shuffle, and manage is overwhelming, time-consuming and frustrating. Day-to-day minutiae often consumes the time of principals. This extensive survey conducted in 2003 with principals and superintendents supports the fact that the role of the principal is demanding and complex.

As previously stated, the central focus of schools is learning; therefore, creating a learning environment for students and teachers to be successful is the first step. This is an on-going process that needs to take priority for principal at all schools. Frequently principals feel like they are juggling too many balls in the air at one time. They need relief. Ultimately, the principal is directly responsible for improving instruction and learning (Smith & Andrews, 1989), and often, the instructional responsibilities of a principal are not kept as a priority. As noted, not enough time gets dedicated or preserved for improving instruction. Principals remain torn between responsibilities. Cuban (1984), Olson (2000), and Spillane et al. (2000) share the view that the managerial role of the principal has dominated and received more attention than the instructional side. Seventy-four percent of the principals who participated in the



Wallace Foundation study in 2003 reported that “daily emergencies rob [them] of time that would be better spent in the classroom or on teaching issues” (p.15).

### **Robinson’s Leadership Dimension**

The importance of the principal being the instructional leader of his or her campus is evident. Therefore, for this study, a particular dimension identified in the research conducted by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe in 2008 was used to structure the study as it focuses on principals being an instructional leader versus a transformational leader. Initially, twenty-seven leadership studies were examined and later narrowed to twelve studies, which resulted in five dimensions surfacing regarding instructional leadership practice:

- a) establish goals and expectations;
- b) resourcing strategically;
- c) promoting and participating in teacher learning and development;
- d) ensuring an orderly and supportive environment; and
- e) planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. (p. 635)

All five dimensions include leadership practices that require the integration of task and relationship considerations. The dimension titled Promoting and Participating in Teacher Learning and Development had the highest effect size, .84. The other dimensions ranged between 0.27 – 0.42. Professional growth is vital in the teaching and learning process. The school leaders’ involvement in teacher learning provides them with a deep understanding of the conditions required to enable staff to make and sustain the changes required for improved outcomes. While campus leaders have to create those

conditions for teachers, it is assumed to be a critical component of successful instructional leadership. The particular dimension titled planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum includes leaders being involved in discussions about how instruction impacts student achievement. Also incorporated in this dimension is the leader being active in the oversight and coordination of instructional programs and the level of involvement of classroom observation and subsequent feedback. This dimension goes on to contain that the leader ensures their staff systemically monitors student progress. Eighty indicators of this dimension across nine of the twelve studies in this analysis showed this type of leadership has a moderate impact on student achievement and had an effect size of 0.42. It is for that reason along with the parallelism to the components of being a superior instructional leader, that this dissertation was framed using the Robinson's leadership dimension of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. Within this dimension exists four sub-components:

- a) leaders actively involved in the collegial discussion of instructional matters, including how instruction impacts student achievement;
- b) leaders active in oversight and coordinating of instructional programs;
- c) degree of leader involvement in classroom observation and subsequent feedback;
- and
- d) leaders ensure staff systematically monitored student progress. (p. 662)

Later on, additional connections will be made illuminating the importance of the instructional leader in relation to this dimension. This leadership dimension "lies at the

heart of instructional leadership” (Robinson, et al., 2008, p. 667). The importance of the principal as the instructional leader is apparent. This study was the first meta-analysis on instructional leadership that found student outcomes were three to four times those of transformational leadership. It is for this reason that instructional leadership, one of the many roles a campus principal has, will be further explored.

A few connections to research shared thus far to Robinson’s leadership dimension include: seven of the twenty-one responsibilities identified by Marzano and Waters (2009) directly relate, equating to thirty-three percent. Specifically these are communication; involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment; knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; monitoring/evaluating; relationships; resources; and visibility. Likewise, half of principals who participated in The Wallace Foundation study in 2003 say they need additional support in areas directly related. Also, effective schools and their leaders place an emphasis on quality teaching and learning, which connects to this important dimension as well (Edmonds, 1979a; Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore, 1995; Smith & Andrews, 1989). Therefore, a closer look at research on instructional leadership follows.

### **Instructional Leadership**

In the research on successful school leaders mentioned thus far, there has been a focus on instruction and on the importance of strong instructional leadership. Many researchers say instructional leadership is the chief component in a school (Blase & Blase, 1999; Elmore & Burney, 1997; Hallinger & Murphy, 1987; Smith & Andrews, 1989). Convincingly, there is no role in the principalship that is more significant than

that of providing instructional leadership and guidance (Coleman & LaRoque, 1990; Cuban, 1988; Griffin, 1999; Hord, 1990; Keller, 1998; Pavan & Reid, 1994).

How then is instructional leadership defined in the literature? It is not a single trait, but a combination of behaviors professed Gibb (2000). Blase and Blase (1998) claimed there is no clear definition but “traditionally, it is a blend of supervision, staff development, and curriculum development” (p. 20). Simply put, DuFour (2002) articulated that an instructional leader must be up to date on three things: curriculum, instruction, and assessment. He preferred the term “learning leader” over instructional leader. Leithwood and Duke (1998) characterized instructional leadership as “typically focusing on the behaviors of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students” (p. 555). Wanzare and DaCosta (2001) define instructional leadership as

focusing on activities and strategies geared toward the improvement of teaching and learning for the benefit of students. Instructional leadership involves principals attempting to improve instructional programs, teaching and learning, and student performance by developing a conducive working environment; providing direction, needed resources, and desired administrative support; and involving teachers in decisions making processes in school (p. 271).

Involving teachers in collaboration and decisions also is widely supported (Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, and Daly, 2008; Rosenholtz, 1985; Wanzare & DaCosta, 2001). As one can see, there is no common definition (meaning) used, yet a plethora of

definitions exist. There are a variety of explanations, suggested skills for instructional leaders, and professed ways to incorporate an instructional focus. Unquestionably, principals play a key role in “shaping teachers’ attitudes concerning students’ ability to master school subject matter” (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998, p. 140). Additional meanings of instructional leaders include leading learning communities in which staff meets on a regular basis to discuss their work, collaborate to solve problems, reflect on their jobs, and take responsibility for what students learn. An action research team under the research of a doctoral student from Edgewood College in 2005 examined facilitating instructional leadership and offered the following

instructional leadership is the utilization of each other’s strengths to identify, share, model, facilitate and promote best practices in instruction and leadership to develop a learning community. Components are: a common understanding of good instruction must be articulated; an understanding of the “core” ---what is taught and what is learned---must be built and sustained through leadership; leaders know how to identify and utilize multiple opportunities to strengthen and promote good instruction; leaders engage in ongoing evaluation and reflection of the process on a systemic level; leaders involve the entire system and community. A prerequisite for instructional leadership is a strong, high-functioning leadership team. The team is necessary to realize effective instructional leadership. This includes a feeling of safety, belief in one

another, trust in one another, and the knowledge that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. (Kox, 2006, p. 61)

This comprehensive definition of instructional leadership illustrates the complexity. Instructional leadership is not something principals pull out one time a week and do. This multifaceted role is continuous and ongoing.

The review of instructional leadership unmistakably argues that principals are the instructional leaders on the campus, although it is not clear how principals go about making the best instructional decisions. Presently, it is accepted “despite leadership and management involving a diverse number of activities and processes, instructional leadership is central to successful school leadership” (Southworth, 2002, p. 76). Principals seem to bear the sole responsibility of the instructional efforts (Richardson, 1990). Effective schools had principals who stressed the importance of instructional leadership and made it a top priority of schools (Brookover & Lezotte, 1977). They are heavily involved in classrooms and know what instruction looks like in their building. Instructional leaders set goals, allocate resources to instruction, manage curriculum, monitor lesson plans, and evaluate teachers (Flath, 1989; Fullan, 1991).

Furthermore, "effective instruction represents a solid basis for instructional improvement programs" (Rosenholtz, 1985 p. 363). Curriculum is developed collaboratively and understood. The best instructional practices are aligned with goals and used by all teachers. Instructional goals are well understood and clear. The model developed by Fenwick English (2001) of the written, taught, and tested curriculum must be aligned needs to live in schools and principals carry this burden on their shoulders to

carry out. Leithwood, Aiken, and Jantzi (2001) also concur with Rosenshine in that smart schools have curriculum written and understood by staff. High quality curriculum is collaboratively developed meeting the school needs coupled with instructional practices that are compatible with school goals/priorities. The instructional goals/content/and student assessment practices are aligned which concurs with Fenwick English (2001).

The question is raised, how do principals as the instructional leaders accomplish all of overwhelming duties? Additional areas of focus include instructional leaders assisting the educational community to identify instructional goals, continuously work for highly effective teaching, building productive educational organizations, creating a climate for teacher growth and leadership, and providing adequate resources for teaching. Instructional leadership involves developing that coherent instructional vision; building norms of trust, collaboration, and academic press; supporting teacher development; and monitoring instruction and innovation (Heller & Firestone, 1995; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Rossman, Corbett, & Firestone, 1988; Sheppard, 1996).

Without a doubt, the importance of the instructional leader is grounded in the literature. Research from Purkey and Smith in 1983 identified two characteristics of unusually effective schools which include the principal as the instructional leader and the teachers along with the principal agree about the educational goals of the school (p. 99). Instructional leadership focuses on activities and strategies geared toward the improvement of teaching and learning for the benefit of students (Wanzare & Da Costa, 2001). Furthermore, it refers to sets of instructional theories that have been generally

accepted within the educational community as valid ways of promoting successful learning for all students (Corbett & Wilson, 1992, p. 3). The primary focus is on the development of curriculum and instruction rather than on human relations activities (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee, 1982).

Principals with strong leadership, develop clear school mission statements, systematically monitor student progress, actively coordinate the curriculum, protect instructional time from interruptions and maintain high standards for teachers and students. Integrating the tasks of the instructional leader unites teachers with school goals (Glickman, 1991, p. 350). Studies show principal instructional leadership influences classroom teachers and classroom instruction. Principals influence student achievement in two important ways: by promoting reflection and professional growth for teachers (p.352).

To summarize the plethora of research conducted on instructional leadership, there is not one well-known and accepted definition. As noted in Table 1, a compilation of nine instructional leadership studies, research suggests specific behaviors of instructional leadership, functions of instructional leadership and skills/practices common to strong campus instructional leaders.



**Table 1****Summary of Instructional Leadership Research**

<b>Smith &amp; Andrews 1989</b>	<b>Whitaker 1997</b>	<b>Blase &amp; Blase 2000</b>
<i>Effective IL do:</i>	<i>4 Essential IL Skills</i>	<i>6 IL Behaviors</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Place priority on curriculum and instructional issues</li> <li>- Is dedicated to the goals of the school and district</li> <li>- Is able to rally and mobilize resources to accomplish the goals of the district and school</li> <li>- Create a climate of high expectations in school</li> <li>-Functions as a leader with direct involvement in instructional policy by: (communicating with teachers, supporting staff development; establishing teaching incentives for use of new instructional strategies; display knowledge of district adopted curriculum materials</li> <li>- Continually monitor student progress and teacher effectiveness. Teacher evaluation: frequent class visits, clear evaluation criteria and feedback; is used to help students and teachers improve performance;</li> <li>- Demonstrate commitment to goals (clear vision)</li> <li>--Effectively consults with others by involving the faculty and other groups in decisions processes</li> <li>-Effectively &amp; efficiently mobilizes resources such as materials, time and support to meet academic goals</li> <li>-Recognizes time as a scarce resource &amp; creates order &amp; discipline by minimize factors that disrupt learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Need to be-resource providers instructional resources (knowledge of effective instructional practices, issues related to instructional observation curriculum)</li> <li>- Good communicators (regarding learning)</li> <li>- need to create visible presence</li> <li>- Focusing learning and designing programs and activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Making suggestions</li> <li>- Giving feedback</li> <li>- Model effective instruction</li> <li>- Solicit opinions;</li> <li>- Provide PL opportunities- support collaboration</li> <li>- Giving praise for effective teaching</li> </ul>

**Table 1 (continued)**

<b>Hallinger &amp; Murphy 1985</b> <i>10 functions of IL</i>	<b>Peterson 1999</b> <i>6 Behavior sets</i>	<b>Glickman 1991</b> <i>5 Primary Tasks</i>	<b>Robinson, Lloyd, Rowe 2008</b> <i>Leadership Practices</i>
-Frame AND communicate school goals	-Regularly observing teachers and providing feedback	-Direct assistance to teachers	-Establishing goals and expectations
- Supervise and evaluate instruction	- Monitor student progress by reviewing test results with teachers	- Group development -Staff Development -Curriculum development	-Resourcing strategically -Planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum
-Coordinate the curriculum	- Working with teachers to build a coordinated instructional program	-Action Research	- Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development
-Monitor student progress	- Promoting staff development by securing resources and finding opportunities for growth	<b>Lashway 2002</b> <i>Skills of IL</i>	- Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment
-Protect instructional time	- Promoting staff development by securing resources and finding opportunities for growth	-Interpersonal -Planning -Instructional observation	- Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment
-Maintain high visibility	resources and finding opportunities for growth	-Instructional observation	- Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment
-Provide incentives for teachers	- Communicating to teachers their responsibility for student achievement	-Research and evaluation skills	- Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment
-Promote professional development	their responsibility for student achievement	-Research and evaluation skills	- Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment
- Provide incentives for learning	- Acting as an information node and instructional resource person by regularly discussing matters of instruction with individual teachers and at faculty meetings		<b>Bartell 1990</b> <i>IL Behaviors</i> -Evaluate teachers -Supportive climate -Goals of school -Orderly atmosphere

It is evident that similarities exist in the generated lists. Whether one is looking at the list of essential skills, primary tasks, behavior sets, or functions of instructional leadership, five commonalities are present in them all:

- a) focusing on curriculum;
- b) focusing on instruction;
- c) feedback, monitoring, assisting, and evaluating teachers;
- d) professional development; and
- e) communication and commitment to goals.

Solid research on instructional leadership is available. The five common areas noted heavily at the various research studies indicate their importance. As the instructional leader, the principal must place a priority on keeping curriculum and instruction center in the organization. Teachers using an aligned, rigorous curriculum are essential. Teachers continuously need to be challenged and supported to perfect their craft. Quality instruction is imperative. This is an ongoing process for principals to be involved with teacher feedback. Principals need to be out of their office witnessing the learning present in the building. They are continuously monitoring the instruction occurring. Assisting teachers and providing support is critical. The formal process of evaluating teachers is expected and providing help as needed. Teachers need relevant and specific feedback to improve. Principals are responsible for the professional development on campus and ensuring teachers receive the training needed. This component ensures the quality learning exists for the adults in schools as well. Being the primary communicator to staff, parents, and students is vital. The principal upholds

and keeps the goals, including academic and instructional as well, of the school present at all times. This commitment to continuous improvement is what keeps the work on track and headed in the correct direction.

The instructional leadership research had commonalities as discussed but also had connections to the framework of this study, the leadership dimension by Robinson et al., (2008). As noted, the planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum dimension grounds this study. With several definitions and key points of instructional leadership established, it is critical to inspect what instructional leadership research reveals as it directly relates to this dimension.

#### Planning, Coordinating, and Evaluating Teaching and the Curriculum:

- a) Leaders actively involved in the collegial discussion of instructional matters, including how instruction impacts student achievement (Bartell, 1990; Blase & Blase, 2000; Glickman, 1991; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Lashway, 2002; Peterson, 1987; Smith & Andrew, 1989; Whitaker, 1997)
- b) Leaders active in oversight and coordinating of instructional programs (Bartell, 1990; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Peterson, 1987; Smith & Andrew, 1989; Whitaker, 1997)
- c) Degree of leader involvement in classroom observation and subsequent feedback (Bartell, 1990; Blase & Blase, 2000; Glickman, 1991; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Peterson, 1987; Smith & Andrew, 1989)
- d) Leaders ensure staff systematically monitor student progress (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Peterson, 1987; Smith & Andrew, 1989)

### **The Role of the District Central Office**

School districts have been defined as "geographic entities representing a designated area and a set of schools contained within these boundaries. Districts are also legal entities, required by state law to provide education to all students--regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and disability" (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002). So it is no wonder that each school district is unique and retain individual characteristics both geographically and in operational purposes.

The operation and development of the district central office and evolvement of its roles, structure, and support can greatly impact student learning. However, Fullan (1985) and Foley (2001) claimed that the role of the district central office and the implementation of school changes is not widely studied. Little is known about the activities and functions of the district central office (Hall, Putnam, & Hord, 1985; Wimpleberg, 1987). The structure or design of district central office is locally determined, not mandated by the state or federal guidelines. Local educational agencies make this determination, therefore, there has been non-standard development, creating a wide variety of central office structures. How the district central office operates is also unique. School districts vary in their operations and approaches to supporting student learning since each district determines how to function.

Possibly, the vagueness around the details of the central office work of enhancing high quality teaching and learning is a disconnect in what schools perceive. The work of McGivney and Haught (1992) divulged "controlling the situation was how central office perceives its role/self". Harris (1998) believed there is some information on how school

districts improve instruction and bring about innovation but it is indeed limited. Studies by conducted before 1990 found little district attention was allotted to curriculum and instruction or in preparing principals to lead in this way (Crowson & Morris, 1985; Floden et al., 1988; Hannaway & Sproull, 1978; Rowan, 1983). Wimpleberg (1987) said the district central office has been overlooked and offers five propositions:

- a) Instruction in most schools is not likely to improve unless a leadership consciousness at the district level develops in such a way as to forge links between schools and central office, among schools, and among teachers within schools.
- b) The best links are forged, not through centralized instructional prescriptions, but through an exchange process in which central office and school administrators simultaneously challenge and support one another.
- c) The central office personnel with the highest potential for exercising instructional leadership are intermediate administrators who have the organization authority to supervise and evaluate principals and the expert and referent authority to support them.
- d) The primary responsibility of the intermediate administrator is to see that every school principal develops both a technical and cultural consciousness of the school.
- e) The instructional leadership role of the central office administrator requires a new kind of intimacy with schools. (p. 104-111)

These propositions emerged from the belief that there is a connection between the district central office and schools.

### **Historical Synopsis of Research on the District Central Office**

The district central office over the years has experienced changes in both the operation and design. Briefly discussed earlier, one can see the transformation of the purpose of central office.

District central office traditionally have served as a fiscal or administrative “pass-throughs” for federal and state initiatives or have managed certain local operations, such as school buses, facilities, purchasing and the processing of school teachers and administrators through local civil systems (Honig, 2008, p. 627).

Focusing on management, politics, governance, operations and control is well accepted in the literature on district central offices (Campbell, Fleming, Newall, & Bennion 1987; Gittell, 1967; Spring, 1997). The timing of the district central office era is less agreed upon. Spring (1997) shared that the district central office began during the late 19th century, while others (Campbell, Fleming, Newall, & Bennion, 1987) said that this occurred at the beginning of the 20th century. In looking back, in the early 19th century, teachers were responsible for instruction as well as all other aspects of school. The classroom teacher handled all aspects of education, not just the instruction. As schools grew, there existed the need for someone to organize or manage the school, hence the principal. Growth and expansion, as well as demands placed on principals, lead to the creation of the role of superintendent for school districts. Eventually that structure also

was outgrown; therefore, as the superintendent could not manage everything alone and as a larger and more complex school district evolved, supplemental district-level positions were added. This was the commencement of the district central office. In other words, the superintendent needed assistance in providing the services to schools (Kimbrough & Nunnery, 1985). Larger school districts continued to add positions at central office, but the function of personnel at that time focused on rules, procedures, and monitoring.

Due to the increasingly large number of schools and students, it was common for the school districts to serve as a bureaucratic layer (Agullad & Goughnour, 2006; Louis, 2008). Gittell (1967) found that the district central office's primary functions were to control, operate, and participate in bureaucracies. In the twentieth century, the Taylor Scientific Theory was predominant and it was believed there was one best way to perform any job (Callahan, 1964). School districts followed suit and embraced this one-size-fits-all approach to an effective organization. Rigid control and direct decision making from the central level did not allow for much flexibility.

District central office efforts expanded beyond the managerial and operational tasks during the 1980s, according to Spillane (1998). Districts hired staff members who were dedicated to instruction at the district level. Instruction was a focus, and curriculum related issues were taken more seriously. Around this time, *A Nation at Risk* was published, portraying schools to be unsuccessful. Student performance was not where it should be. The district central offices started aligning their instructional policies and established elaborate systems to monitor classroom teaching. Policies were



developed that addressed what was taught, when it was taught, with what resources, and, in some places, how it would be taught. District central office provided professional development, curriculum guides, curriculum materials and student assessment, instructional supervision and other policies. During this time local school district policies were developed to match the state policies. Spillane (1998) contended that state and local levels needed to work together. Local education agencies focused on connecting to state initiatives and policies.

An example of the historical changes experienced by school districts was the transformation of being superintendent lead, top down approach in the early 1900's to decentralization (Tyack, 1974). Researchers had mixed feelings about this model of decentralization. Glickman (1991) believed it was no longer best to be centralized as it was too authoritarian for democracy. Quinby (1985) wrote about strong feelings of schools identifying their needs and developing an implementation plan. Then the district should assist schools in implementing that plan. Decentralization gained support, allowing local schools to be more effective (David, 1989; Edmonds, 1982). The local district role is about performance, not procedure (Cohen, 1988). Cohen (1988) felt the challenge is for districts to create an effective decision making structure while working with campuses. It is about strong working relationships. Interesting to note, in 1979 according to AASA, the Superintendent's contract named fifteen things a school board can expect the superintendent to do. Three of them directly relate to improvement of instruction, educational programs, and providing materials for needs of schools.

Ortiz in the early 1980's studied the structure of the district central office. This work revealed that the district central office can be divided into four categories (1982).

- a) The first group holds the most authority and interacts with the superintendent both formally and informally. These are the assistant superintendents and usually do not have as much tenure in the district as other members of the district central office. The reference group for this category is the school board.
- b) The second group has been in the district a long time and the mainly interacts with the campus principals. The work of this group is monthly meetings and informal discussion at the central office.
- c) The third group of administrators Ortiz found was appointed to be community pleasers and was often minorities.
- d) The final group was comprised of staff that was responsible for various tasks and often had erred in other assignments. This information is interesting as we think of how district central offices are designed and how they operate to support learning.

To illustrate in more detail, according to Gittell (1967), overarching themes of the district central office at this time were policy-making, decision-making, hierarchical influences and roles that influences changes in schools and classrooms. He conducted a study in New York City study that revealed brief information on how policy was made. Staff at the headquarters, like the core of supervisors, made the majority of policies.

### District central office staff

conducted textbook adoption; ordered new textbooks; evaluated supplementary materials; conducted formal observation of teachers; assisted teachers having difficulties; designed and conducted staff development; facilitated teacher attendance at professional conferences; organized countywide activities like science fairs; organized informational meetings for parents; met with citizen committees on each instruction area; analyzed ach data; applied for and managed grant-funded projects; and completed state and federal required reports. (Wimpleberg, 1987, p. 47).

The district central office spends a large amount of time with managerial and organizational types of work on behalf of the district. Key decisions on curriculum and instruction were passed from states to districts, from districts to principals, and from principals to teachers with little focus or guidance (Elmore, 1993). However, very little is known about the specific instructional behaviors of district central office staff regarding their roles in school effectiveness and school improvement (Wimpleberg, 1987).

Those two examples exemplify the organization and focus the district central office has been on operational tasks. Researchers in the 1990's began to question or challenge school districts on their ability to promote and sustain high quality (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Elmore 1993) as student achievement had not significantly increased. In 2001, a national network of reform leaders from major urban cities including Baltimore,

Chicago, Denver, Houston, Louisiana, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Seattle initiated an effort to identify district roles and central office structures that supported instruction and system-wide student achievement. This effort was a start at using key school district leaders in supporting instruction. Early studies identified the key element of any public school organization was the central administrators or superintendent. "The specific tasks performed in the central office... include major or leading functions" (Castetter, 1976, p.27).

Since the late 1990's, the district central offices have begun to transition to service and results-oriented. Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson (2000) in their study on successful schools with diverse populations talk about "prior to their transformation, the function of central office personnel was rule and procedure specification, monitoring, and enforcement" (p.34). With recent, more stringent accountability, the district central office faced unprecedented demands to become key supporters of efforts to improve teaching and learning district-wide (Honig, 2008).

Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy's (2002) study of four improving urban school districts revealed that successful district central offices tended to allocate resources to curriculum and instruction and professional development, defined a role for the central office in improvement, and informed decision-making with data with the goal of improving instruction. Iatarola and Fruchter's (2004) research showed that high performing school districts focused resource allocation decisions on initiatives targeted at improving instruction. They also described that central office non-instructional functions can be critical for school effectiveness. District offices are in a unique support

position to improve performance at all schools, not just some. This includes enabling all schools to consistently perform at high levels. Fullan (1991) wrote about school district offices needing to provide schools with the “right balance of pressure and support” (p. 91). Pressure is applied to improve school student performance through system oversight, management, monitoring of performance, and the attachment of consequences to performance (Elmore, Abelman, & Fuhrman, 1996; Furhman, 1999). Support is also given to schools by operational and educational support services (Finn, 1991; Hassel, 2003; Hill, Pierce & Guthrie, 1997). For instance, in the business world, a term used as a way of providing the right balance of pressure and support is known as “shared services” (Bergeron, 2003; Quinn, Cook, & Kris, 2000; Shulman, Harmer, Dunleavy & Lusk, 1999). “Shared services” are services or assistance provided by the main, central organization (school district) usually for purchase for the smaller, independent units of a system, (schools). They are available as needed and allow for the central organization to provide needed guidance/support to smaller units within the system.

In summary, the role of the district central office certainly has undergone changes in the past few decades. According to Cuban (1990), over one hundred years ago, there were more than one hundred thousand school districts. Over the years districts have consolidated, which Cuban feels has brought order. The shifting from a bureaucracy model with tight control to a more supportive role has commenced. The original core of the district central office started with less instructionally focused work but appears to have altered. Additional tasks of the district central office will be elaborated in the next section.

### **Responsibilities of the District Central Office**

The role of district central office has evolved over time. Hall, Putnam, and Hord (1985) explained that the perception of the district central office has been that central office staff was busy working on various tasks on behalf of the school district but that the specifics of that work were either not known or understood. They found

the roles and functions of the persons in the district office are multi-faceted and diversified in terms of location and task. The stereotypes of the roles that are held by the public at large and by the teachers in schools do not appear to be congruent with their actual activities. Line and staff differences appear to be congruent with their actual activities. Line and staff differences appear to be a useful first step in distinguishing roles. The difference in formal authority appears to be a critical factor. Beyond that, it appears there is much to be done by research that can inform us about the lives and functions of persons in the district office. There is also much that district office personnel can do to become clear about their roles and functions and how they can be more effective especially as it relates to facilitating change in schools. (pp.114-5)

Numerous other studies have claimed that a new role or a restructuring of the district central office is long overdue. Work by Protheroe (2008), declared student achievement could increase given the efforts of the district central office by moving from control and supervision to providing increased support and consultation for school-based efforts. This new role for district central office would include identifying best

practices and providing the resources and training needed to replicate practice at other sites. Specific efforts Protheroe (1998) identified included:

- a) making effective use of data;
- b) increasing staff communication and collaboration;
- c) using professional development to support improve efforts; and
- d) intervening in schools making little progress and assisting students with academic difficulties.

In 2008, one study “called for a new role of central office” that would support principals and teachers in their efforts to educate all students. (Rorrer, Skrla & Scheurich, 2008). The next two studies that will be highlighted are analysis completed on the district central office. Specifically, the studies examined the roles or function staff members endured. Interestingly, the focus of the studies was different providing a perspective of the work completed at central office and how the campuses perceive that work and the other addressing the need to work together.

The first study occurred in 1984 by Blumberg. He asked district central office leaders what tasks or functions occupy their time the most. The responses included broad topics like: meetings, planning, paperwork, curriculum study, staff development, public relations, trouble-shooting and reporting to superintendent, visits to schools, budget, personnel, dealing with parents, teaching, district-wide activities, research, and scoring tests. The lengthy and varied tasks of the district central office (Blumberg, 1984) might be important but possibly not honed in on efforts to support student

achievement. Some school district administrators are not attentive to instructional issues (Floden et al., 1988, Hannaway & Sproull, 1978; Rowan, 1983).

The second study was conducted by Burch and Spillane (2004) that focused on fifty-five mid-level managers from three major urban school districts. Their roles included program managers, content area directors, budget specialists, others who administered or managed programs or services but none of them were not in top cabinet position positions. Specific job analyses revealed all of these roles, regardless of their title, had similar responsibilities:

- a) tools designers who translated reform agenda into tangible materials schools to use;
- b) data managers who worked with implementation and student outcome data to help teachers and principals use to improve instruction;
- c) trainers and support providers who designed staff development and training to support instructional leadership at different levels; and
- d) network builders who created routines and practices that build or sustain connections between people who have the expertise to share but little contact.

No matter the title of the positions examined in the study, they all had similar roles.

They all support curriculum and instruction or the teaching and learning process from various perspectives. Burch and Spillane (2004) argued that "mid-level" administrators involve others in collaboration, "pooling knowledge" and then transform this "collective expertise into strategies, guidelines, tools, and procedures are more likely to be successful in making district instructional reforms relevant to classroom practice" (p.1).



The importance of collaboration and working together is monumental. Not having a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities creates frustration and confusing.

By the same token, according to Louis (2008), research on the district's role in fostering improvements affecting student learning was still in its infancy, not distinctly defined. Numerous studies have found evidence that school districts do matter and make a positive difference by influencing instruction, teacher professional community, reform implementation, and other factors important to teaching and learning (Goldring & Hallinger 1992; McLaughlin 1992; McLaughlin & Talbert 2001; Price, Ball, & Luks 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989; Spillane, 1996). Spillane found that district central office is known to influence student learning by doing two things. First, the district central office provides professional development for teachers aligned with school and district priorities and policies governing the leadership succession and secondly, ensuring the alignment among goals, programs, policies, and professional development.

A collection of research has been conducted on compiling the responsibilities or major work of school districts. Fourteen studies from the past twenty years have been captured in Table 2 for summary and analysis purposes.

**Table 2****Summary of Central Office Support Research**

<p><u>Spillane (1996)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Align professional development with school/district priorities and policies</li> <li>Ensure alignment among goals, programs, and professional learning</li> </ul>	<p>Louis &amp; Miles (1990) <i>4 Approaches to School Improvement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implementation strategy</li> <li>Evolutionary planning</li> <li>Goal based accountability</li> <li>Professional investment</li> </ul>	<p>Snipes, Doolittle &amp; Herlihy (2002)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allocate resources for curriculum and instruction and professional learning</li> <li>Define role of central office</li> <li>Inform decision making with data (goal of improving instruction)</li> </ul>
<p>Public Agenda (2003)-Putting School Leadership on the Public Agenda <i>District Functions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Setting clear goals</li> <li>Allocate resources</li> <li>select good principals and provide training and support</li> <li>Focus on instruction and curriculum</li> <li>provide staff development</li> </ul>	<p>Protheroe (2008)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Making effective use of data</li> <li>Increase in staff communication and collaboration</li> <li>Using professional development to support improvements</li> <li>Intervene with schools making little progress and assist students with academic differences</li> </ul>	<p>Rorrer, Skrla, &amp; Scheurich (2008) <i>4 Roles</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide instructional leadership</li> <li>Reorient the organization by sharing expertise; people working together</li> <li>Setting clear expectations and decentralizing</li> <li>Establish policy coherence and maintain an equity focus (for all students)</li> </ul>
<p>Elmore (1993) <i>Major District Responsibilities:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Buffer non-instructional issues from principals and teachers</li> <li>Design system improvement strategies</li> <li>Design, implement incentive structures for schools, principals, and teachers</li> <li>Recruit, evaluate principals</li> <li>Provide professional development consistent with improvement strategy</li> <li>Allocate system resources toward instruction</li> </ul>	<p>Fullan (1985) <i>Broad Areas District Supports:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advocates of promising new practices</li> <li>Actively involved with the campuses (regular interaction)</li> <li>Developing school site management</li> <li>Principal involvement in hiring and placement</li> <li>Monitoring and evaluating</li> <li>Training and development</li> </ul>	<p>Hallinger &amp; Murphy (1985) <i>Effective School Districts:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Instructional and curriculum focus</li> <li>Consistency and coordination of instructional activities</li> <li>Strong instructional leadership from the superintendent</li> <li>Emphasis on monitoring instruction and curriculum</li> </ul>
<p>Armstrong &amp; Anthes (2001) Education Commission of the States <i>District Offices:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service orientation culture</li> <li>Focused on principals and teachers</li> </ul>	<p>Corcoran et. al., (2001) <i>District Central Office 3 Areas:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decision making about curriculum and instruction</li> <li>Supporting good instructional practice through professional development for principals and teachers</li> <li>Evaluating results and feedback loop from evaluation to decision-making and supporting instructional practice</li> </ul>	

**Table 2 (continued)**

Hallinger & Murphy (1988) <i>12 High Performing Districts:</i>	Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004) <i>12 Strategies:</i>	Elmore & Burney (1997) <i>7 Key Principles</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have strong instructional leader (superintendent and team)</li> <li>• Emphasis on student achievement and improvement in teaching and learning</li> <li>• Establishment and enforcement of district goals for improvement</li> <li>• District wide curriculum and textbook adoption</li> <li>• District advocacy and support for specific instructional strategies</li> <li>• Deliberate selection of principals with curriculum knowledge and interpersonal skills</li> <li>• Systemic monitoring of consistency between district goals and expectations and schools implementation through accountability</li> <li>• District personal involvement of schools in monitoring performance through school visits and meetings with principals</li> <li>• Alignment of district resources for professional development with goals of curriculum and instruction</li> <li>• Systematic use of student testing and other data for planning, goal setting, tracking school performance</li> <li>• Generally positive relations between District Central Office, school board, and local communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District-wide sense of efficacy</li> <li>• District-wide focus on student achievement and quality of instruction</li> <li>• Adoption and commitment to district-wide performance standards</li> <li>• Development and adoption of district curricula and approaches to instruction</li> <li>• Alignment of curriculum, teaching and learning materials, and assessment with relevant standards</li> <li>• Multi-measure accountability systems and district-wide use of data to inform practice</li> <li>• Targeted and phased focuses of improvement</li> <li>• Investment in distributing instructional leadership across schools and the district</li> <li>• District-wide professional development and support for teachers</li> <li>• District and school emphasis on teamwork and professional community</li> <li>• New approaches to district-wide relations</li> <li>• Strategic engagement with state and federal reform policies and resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on instruction,</li> <li>• Understand that instructional change is a long, multistage beliefs,</li> <li>• A belief that shared expertise is the driver of instructional change,</li> <li>• A focus on system-wide improvement,</li> <li>• A belief that good ideas come from talented people working together,</li> <li>• A plan to set clear expectations-then decentralize, and</li> <li>• The importance of values that support collegiality, caring, and respect.</li> </ul>

The research on district central office provides an overview of what effective school districts execute. Providing the organization with the structure and alignment needed for monitoring and support, school districts have incredible responsibilities. The

systems perspective positions the tone for the work environment in the district. From the research above, school districts focus on quality instruction and communicate plainly the curriculum and instruction goals. A collaborative environment with healthy relationships is suggested. District central offices are organized and structured in a variety of ways. This research serves as a catalyst for a change on how districts should be operating. Noticeably, there are responsibilities like policy making, curriculum development, implementation of professional development, the district level should be taking the lead on or handling for schools. Some of the tasks, one can see elaborate on more than operational functions and focus on instruction. There is more a service-minded approach in several of the lists, yet not compromising high standards.

Policymaking and the successful implementation of policies are necessary tasks in a school district. Policies directly influence instructional reforms and district support of teaching and learning through the use of the district developed/approved curriculum guides, instructional materials used, the varied levels of teacher supervision and support, as well as student assessment. These new roles or responsibilities of the district central office are monumental and serve the utmost importance and value. Goldring and Hallinger (1992) claimed school districts influence more than instruction. They affect internal school processes such as instructional leadership, teacher rapport and peer commitment, teacher competency, and the monitoring of student progress. In most school districts, the superintendent usually delegates the curriculum and instruction responsibilities. Pajak (1989) felt that the curriculum and instruction positions are the "glue" of a district and draw together elements of instruction for the campus level and

district level. He went on to say that the role of the school district office planning is with superintendents and central office staff planning with principals and then principals replicating a similar planning role at the campus level with teachers. MacIver and Farley's (2003) work claims central office support is needed for sustained school success.

### **Barriers**

Does the district central office serve as a barrier to schools? Floden (1988) and his colleagues feel central office is either "irrelevant to or inhibitors of" school reform. The Center for Research on the Context of Teaching in 1999 discovered many schools are impeded by the lack of district support for their reform work. The National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) found the district central office had a negative effect on student achievement through its negative effect on school climate. Peterson's (1999) research suggested an invasive district central office is associated with somewhat lower student performance, as much as a drop in one point in standardized tests. It is a small amount but indeed it is negative. He felt that top down decision making adversely affected schools. Greater power at top of the organization is less effective for school improvement. He linked this forced involvement from the district central office to negative effects on the school climate. Simply stated, "schools with choice have a greater positive educational climate" (Peterson, Murphy, & Hallinger, 1999, p. 379).

Finn in 1991 alluded to the importance of the state level actions and of course the campus/school level work, but anything in between was not necessary. Chubb and Moe

(1990) remind us that the research on high achieving schools is associated with the work done at the school level, not the district central office level.

- School district central office are faced with challenges themselves: These include
- a) unsatisfactory academic achievement, especially for minority and low income students;
  - b) histories of internal political conflict, factionalism, and lack of focus on student achievement;
  - c) schools staffed with a high proportion of inexperienced teachers compounded by frequent turnover and difficult working conditions leading to disparity in the capacities of teacher staffs in schools serving different student populations;
  - d) low expectations and lack of demanding curricula for lower income and minority students on the part of school personnel;
  - e) lack of program and instructional coherence within and across schools contributing to fragmentation of district support and weak alignment with state standards;
  - f) high student mobility with consequent challenges for continuity in student learning; and
  - g) unsatisfactory business operations, basic necessities. (pp. 123-124)

Understandably not all school districts rise above these challenges instantly. They need assistance, and the process takes time. An additional impediment school districts often create for schools unintentionally is when policies get adopted, and they are disjointed. Consequently, the policies frequently fail to involve principals and teachers to adopt district content priorities. So a good idea, intended to influence and enhance instruction might be lacking in a coherent strategy for development and implementation (Floden, Porter, Alford, et al., 1988). When a school is in need of direction or support, is the district central office equipped to assist?

A few have questioned whether a school district level is even needed (Elmore, 1993; Finn, 1991; Hightower, 2002; Lasky, 2004; Marsh, 2000; Murphy & Louis, 1994). Do schools benefit from the work of the central office? For the past two decades school districts have not played a significant role in instructional improvement according to Elmore (1993). Another way the district central office serves as a roadblock is where they play games, focusing on power and struggle to increase authority. This may adversely affect schools. Strong central control diminishes teacher morale (David 1989). Budgeting might be another way the district central office might negatively impact campus effectiveness. The district central office budgets for instructional support which is usually designed and monitored by the program directors. In the study by Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson (2000), budget in itself was described as a major obstacle to improving student success (p. 34). To put it differently, "Former Secretary of Education William Bennett once referred to district and central office personnel, school board member, and superintendents as a useless 'blob' that consumed resources, but offered

little benefit to students or teachers " (p. 3-*Education Week*, March 2, 1987, as cited in Walters & Marzano, 2006).

### **Connection to Robinson's Leadership Dimension**

The research conducted on district central office varies in its findings. Some studies specifically identify what successful leaders do and the other bodies of literature focuses on what the district-level responsibilities are for school leaders. The following chart takes the identified research based findings and synthesizes them and connects them to the dimension by Robinson et al. Each piece of research was examined to see how the major finding aligns to the leadership dimension of Planning, Coordinating, and Evaluation of Teaching and Curriculum. For instance, Elmore's work in 1993 found six major district responsibilities. When analyzed with the work of Robinson et al. (2008), three out of the six directly parallel indicating a 50% alignment.



**Table 3****Research Connection to Robinson and Colleagues' Leadership Dimension**

<b>Planning, Coordinating, and Evaluating of Teaching and the Curriculum</b>	
<i><b>Planning</b></i> (leaders actively involved in the collegial discussion of instructional matters, including how instruction impacts student achievement)	
<i><b>Coordinating</b></i> (leaders active in oversight and coordinating of instructional programs)	
<i><b>Evaluating</b></i> (degree of leader involvement in classroom observation & subsequent feedback) AND (ensures staff systematically monitored student progress)	
<b>District Responsibilities</b>	<b>Percentage of Alignment to Leadership</b>
<b>Study/Research</b>	<b>Dimension</b>
Spillane, 1996	50%
Louis & Miles, 1990	50%
Doolittle & Herlihy, 2002	66%
Public Agenda, 2003	60%
Protheroe, 2008	50%
Rorrer, et. al., 2008	50%
Elmore, 1993	50%
Fullan, 1985	50%
Murphy & Hallinger, 1985	75%
Armstrong & Anthes, 2001	50%
Corcoran et. al., 2001	66%
Murphy & Hallinger, 1988	50%
Leithwood et. al., 2004	42%
Elmore & Burney, 1997	43%

From Table 3 one can see fifty percent of Protheroe's identified district central office responsibilities and seventy-five percent of Murphy and Hallinger's High Performing Districts responsibilities support the planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum dimension as defined by Robinson. Of the fourteen bodies of research selected, almost all were fifty percent or higher in alignment with the leadership dimension used in this study. Instructional support from the district central office is possible and the research is clear. The district central office impacts the responsibilities of the instructional leader. Another explicit way the district central office can play an integral role in instructional improvement is enacted through giving a consistent and clear message that instruction and its improvement are the primary expectation for adults in the system.

### **The District Central Office and Campus Principal Partnership**

Research by Corcoran, Fuhrman and Belcher (2001) suggested that support from the district central office for campus principals is connected to instructional improvement. Elmore and Burney (1997) a few years before established the relationship between the district central office and campus principal influences leadership at the school level. Working together as partners, sharing instructional responsibilities is what is needed (Smylie, Brownlee, & Conyers, 1992). Currently the literature reveals district central office and schools do not necessarily work together (Fink & Resnick, 1999). The partnership between the district central office and instructional leaders, the campus principals, needs to be meaningful (Pajak, 1989; Clark, P., 1985).

Laskey (2004) research outlined a set of five system linkages which are vital to connect the bureaucracy of an organization (the district central office) to the subunits (campuses within the district). The five linkages are

- a) resource linkages encompassing material, technological, and human capital;
- b) structural linkages as in federal, state, or district policies relative to reform;
- c) communication linkages both formal and informal;
- d) relational linkages, including professional relationships within and across the system; and
- e) ideological linkages reflecting the shared values, vision, and goals and what constitutes good instructional practice. (p. 273)

In a study conducted by Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, and Daly (2010), this framework was used to see how a school district should balance the administrative controls and professional accountability. Results indicated these linkages are essential and the need to collaborate leadership at both levels allows for a coherent instructional focus and promotes learning for the organization in the area of the process of change (p. 765).

Trusting relationships foster successful reform. Communication is fundamental as well as identifying critical professional learning to enhance the quality of instruction.

Instructional practices need to be recognized and supported. The work of Chrispeels et al. (2010) revealed these linkages provide the needed direction to school systems.

Furthermore, the “district central office is a powerful source of instructional leadership and is often not given enough notice” (Wimpelberg, 1987, p. 30). The district central office and the principal should work together rather than challenge one another.

Good relationships between the district central office and principals are critical (Pajak, 1989; David 1989; Rallis & Goldring, 1993; Cuban, 1984). Blumberg (1984) found in his study that frustration existed at district central office as there is not always clarity on how to know about how to work better to support schools (p. 114-115). Goodlad (1984) argued teachers and principals, those who are the closest to the delivery of services, have more responsibility of their schools' operations. The district office needs to engage the teachers and principals and work in collaboration. This is a shift to a sharing practice between the district central office and teachers/principals (David, 1989).

According to Protheroe (1998), quality district-level leadership is required to support, augment and coordinate the instructional programs of the local schools. Strongly stated by Purkey and Smith (1983) but summative in nature is their belief that the success/failure of effective schools lies in the origins at district level. This responsibility is clear. The district central office should be accountable. The personnel at the district central office are significant to the action in the change process (Cox, 1983). Other research indicates district administrators are important in the successful implementation of state and federal policy (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977; David, 1990; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). Joyce and Showers (1988) emphasized that a close and focused relationship needs to exist between school and central office administrators. Leithwood (1994) had “little doubt that both district and school leaders provides a critical bridge between most educational reform initiatives, and having those reforms make a difference for all students” (p.14).

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presents a review of literature briefly on leadership in general, but specifically on the roles and duties of campus school leaders, the campus principal. One of the main charges of principals includes being the instructional leader of the campus. This chapter explored the responsibilities of instructional leaders in detail. It can be concluded that one of the most critical roles a principal plays is that of being the instructional leader. The Robinson et al., (2008) leadership dimension of the planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum was used to frame this study and literature on instructional leadership was tested for alignment. Research on the instructional leader was compared to this leadership dimension. The importance of the actions a principal makes impacts many factors in schools.

With the vast demands of the campus principal, undoubtedly they are in need of assistance in running schools effectively and ensuring high quality student learning. The obvious choice on how principals could get additional help was to look at the district central office. The district central office role is rather ambiguous and not researched. The historical role of the district central office was highlighted illustrating a shift from managerial and compliance-driven tasks to the introduction of campus support efforts. A variety of structures and practices are in place for school districts. A partnership between the district central office and the campus principals closes the review of literature. A team approach allows for support and district-wide structure allowing for needs of students to be met. Chapter III will describe the methodology used in the study.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the research methods selected for this study including details on the research design, population and participants selected, instrument development, procedures used to collect and analyze the data as well as the limitations of the study. It is important for me to share the underlying premise to this study before discussing the main purposes. Merriam (1998) says critical research begins with life problems and aspires to inform and empower. In my professional career in education thus far, I have had the opportunity to be a classroom teacher at multiple grade levels, a campus administrator, and a district level central office administrator over the past eighteen years. During my quest for improving student achievement and working within the confines of the various school districts within which I worked, there were times I questioned my role as the instructional leader. There were opportunities where instruction and the needs of students came first, but other times, more times than I am comfortable with, obstacles stood in the way. Decisions were made that did not always support students or classroom teachers. This dilemma has become a personal mission of mine. I want to know how the district central office should support campus principals effectively to ensure high student performance. For the past eight years I have been serving the district at the central office. Knowing specifically what and how district central office can support principals to lead their school instructionally is under question.

Therefore, this study has been developed from personal experiences which have led me to ponder our work practices.

### *Statement of Problem*

The roles and responsibilities of the campus principal are immense, and with standards on the rise and increase in accountability, assistance is necessary. District central office support seems essential; however, the ways in which the central office can assist principals with planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum have not been thoroughly researched and require additional study. Additional research is needed in the area of how the district central office can support the high school campus principal with instructional leadership.

### *Purpose of Study*

It is impossible for the high school principal to bear the sole responsibility of meeting the needs of students, staff, and community without further support. District central office is a critical factor in principal support of school improvement. The primary aim of this study, therefore, is to provide insight and a deep understanding of how high school principals perceive support from the central office as the instructional leader, specifically in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. This study will contribute to the limited research currently available and thus contribute to fill this important gap in the research literature.

## **Design of Study**

### *Research Question*

The design of this research study was critical in ensuring the perceptions of high school principals were captured accurately. According to Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, (2004) “research methods should follow research questions in a way that offers the best chance to obtain useful answers” (p. 17-18). Therefore, the study started with a single overarching research question:

What are high school principal perceptions of support given to them by district central office administrators in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum?

### *Epistemological Framework*

Significant deliberation for the ideal research methods occurred. I wanted to know more about the specifics of how district central office staff could support the instructional leaders of the challenging position of high school principals. According to Patton (2002) qualitative research allows the researcher to study selected issues, cases, and events in great details. Quantitative research usually observes and measures data numerically. Statistical procedures are used to make sense from closed-ended questions. Surveys or experiments are the basis of design (Creswell, 2003). Understanding the perception of the principals would only be found by talking to them, personally. Therefore, a qualitative research structure seemed most appropriate. Creswell, (1998) depicts quality qualitative studies as



employing rigorous data collection procedures; framing the study within the assumptions and characteristics of qualitative approach to research; using tradition of inquiry; beginning with a single focus; verifying accuracy of the account; the reader experiences 'being there'; analyzing data using multiple levels of abstraction; and the writing is clear, engaging, and full of unexpected ideas. (p. 20)

Qualitative research would provide the opportunity to examine how high school principals in large districts feel their central office leaders support them with instructional leadership most suitably. Interpreting the data, rather than measuring the data [quantitative methods] became clear from the beginning as Merriam describes in her book (1998). Seeking to listen and understand the perception of successful high school principals was the focus. I as the researcher needed to recognize what the participants were sharing, their comments, thoughts, passion, and knowledge, to accurately draw conclusions (Creswell, 1998).

Qualitative research assumes multiple realities exist and is constructed by different people. Through qualitative procedures would allow the opportunity for participants in this study to share personal and everyday experiences (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). As a result, the study was designed to guarantee I would hear individually from each principal, have quality methods in place so that I could portray the telling the story as relayed by the selected interviewees.

Creswell (1998) offered eight reasons to consider qualitative research. After reviewing the list, unmistakably, this study was best suited for qualitative structure. He

claimed the nature of the research question should begin with a how or what rather than why, like quantitative research. Another reason to consider this type of research is because “the topic needs to be explored” (p. 17). A plethora exists on the importance of principals as the instructional leader of schools (Bartell, 1990; Blase & Blase, 1999; Elmore & Burney, 1997; Peterson, 1989). We see that principals indirectly support student achievement but with greater pressure and demands in place, principals cannot do the job alone. They need assistance. The district central office is a likely option but very little is known about the details of the work completed at the central office level. This study examined the perception of the high school principals on this matter. Some argued the need for central offices (Elmore, 1993; Finn, 1991; Hightower, 2002; Lasky, 2004). The topic is certainly in need of clarification. Thirdly, Creswell felt there is a need to share a detailed view of the matter. Specific information could provide clarity to educators in districts on how to work together better to improve student achievement. The natural setting is recommended for the study to occur which I was able to do. Five of the six principals were interviewed at their office location with the sixth interview occurring in the principal’s home by her choice. The fifth reason Creswell suggests a qualitative study also fits nicely. He shared the style of writing used is the personal pronoun “I” or narrative storytelling. This also was the preferred method. Sufficient time and resources were possible for this study, which Creswell included as his sixth rationale for conducting a qualitative study. The seventh basis for selecting qualitative methods was that audiences are more receptive and finally the eighth factor to consider is the researcher’s role as an active learner. The purpose of the active learner is not one

who is an expert in this area but someone who would not pass judgment but tell the story from the participants' view (Creswell, 1998, p. 17-18).

Furthermore, Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) assert that “no two social settings are sufficiently similar to allow simplistic, sweeping generalizations from one to another” (p. 13). This study was designed for three different school district voices to be heard. Having two principals report out their thoughts would allow for multiple perspectives from one location. In qualitative research, it is important to accept the bias and not attempt to control it. The dangers of bias are monumental in qualitative research. The researcher must find ways to control biases. This qualitative study permits “the researcher [to] build a complex, holistic picture, analyze words, report detailed views of informants, and conduct the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15).

Consequently, this study was conducted using qualitative research from the viewpoint of interpretivism. Creswell (2003) calls interpretivism a theoretical perspective. Thomas Schwandt defines interpretivism as “an approach to studying social life... to unearth meaning” (p. 134). Each principal has their own unique perspective on the level and quality of support received from the District Central Office of being an instructional leader. I was studying the personal beliefs of six principals and determining their feelings of support as an instructional leader. I needed them to feel comfortable opening up to me and sharing practices and examples they have experienced in their districts. This was a qualitative study by design. According to Glense (1999), the essences of qualitative studies are best at adding value and a deeper understanding of perceptions and thought development.

## Operational Terms

- a) Support: Assistance provided with the intent of improvement or growth.
- b) AYP: Adequate Yearly Progress is the federal accountability system in place as a part of the No Child Left Behind educational reform (No Child Left Behind, 2001).
- c) Accountability: A term used in education at the federal, state, and local level to denote an expected level of student achievement.
- d) NCLB: No Child Left Behind is a federal law signed by President Bush in 2001 to promote student achievement.
- e) AEIS/Academic Excellence Indicator System: These annual reports pull together a wide range of information on the performance of students in each school and district in Texas. The reports also provide extensive information on staff, finances, programs, and demographics for each school and district (TEA).
- f) DCO/CO-The district central office or central office established in each school district which supports the campuses within that school district.
- g) UIL-University Interscholastic League is an organization, formed in 1910, that creates rules for most athletic, academic, and music contests for public schools. They also administer these events. They categorize schools based on their student enrollment ranging from 1A (small) to 5A (large).
- h) Success: Accomplishments as defined by the Texas Education Agency accountability system. Only Recognized rated schools were selected for study following criteria outlined by TEA.

- i) Leadership: A person or group of people that guide and influence others in an organization.
- j) Instructional Leadership-Instructional Leadership focuses on activities and strategies geared toward the improvement of teaching and learning for the benefit of students. Instructional leadership involves the principal's attempts to improve instructional programs, teaching and learning, and student performance by developing a conducive working environment; providing direction, needed resources, and desired administrative support, and involving teachers in decision-making processes in the school (Wanzare & Da Costa, 2001, p. 271).
- k) District Office/ Central Office/ District Central Office: Refers to the superintendent, cabinet, and school district employees not working at the school-building level (Foley & Ucelli, 2002).
- l) Student Achievement: The notion that students have learned something that they have moved toward fulfilling some predetermined goal meeting some standard of performance, or acquiring some desired knowledge. Student achievement is usually determined by comparing a student product to a desired outcome (NM Public Ed., 2009).
- m) High School Principal: The head principal of the campus, not an assistant principal.
- n) School District: Schools established in a geographic area that are coordinated by a sole organizer or leader.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

This study was conducted with participants from three large Texas schools districts: Capital Independent School District, Kacey Independent School District, and Southwest Independent School District. In Texas, there are approximately 1,100 school districts ranging from extremely small to extremely large in terms of student enrollment size. For the purposes of this study, the term large is based on the student enrollment that had to be at least twenty-five thousand students.

Since this study looked at the instructional leadership of high school principals, I felt the schools to focus on during this study should be accomplished and successful. What practices are in place in school districts that had large high schools where students were doing well academically? The State of Texas examines the performance of school districts and since 1984, publishes the findings yearly using the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS). This system compiles a variety of information on all schools and districts yearly. Measures include results of the state required assessment; Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) by grade, subject, and all grades tested; participation in the assessment; exit level cumulative passing rates; previous year information for comparison; results on the Student Success Initiative; English language

learners; attendance rates; dropout and completion rates; and multiple college readiness indicators (TEA, 2010). A separate accountability rating and report is completed at the state level based on this data. These data were inspected to identify successful and high performing high schools in one of the Region Service Center areas. One service center was chosen based on the proximity of the researcher. Therefore, for this study, schools of this successful caliber have been state rated using the state accountability system as Recognized or higher. In order to be rated as Recognized or higher, simply stated, includes three categories. The first is regarding student performance on the state assessment, TAKS. Each student group in each subject tested must meet the eighty percent passing standard. Secondly, the Completion Rate percentage must be eighty-five percent or higher, and, finally, the Annual Dropout Rate must be no higher than 1.8 percent. See the TEA replicated Table 4 for more explicit details.

Table 4

## Summary of the State of Texas Accountability

	Academically Acceptable	Recognized	Exemplary
<b>Base Indicators</b>			
<b>TAKS (2009-10)*</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All Students</li> <li>and each student group meeting minimum size:</li> <li>• African American</li> <li>• Hispanic</li> <li>• White</li> <li>• Econ. Disadvantaged</li> </ul> <i>* TAKS (Accommodated) included for all grades and subjects.</i>	Meets each standard: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading/ELA ... 70%</li> <li>• Writing ..... 70%</li> <li>• Social Studies.. 70%</li> <li>• Mathematics .... 60%</li> <li>• Science..... 55%</li> </ul> <b>OR</b> Meets Required Improvement <b>OR</b> Meets standard with TPM	Meets <b>80%</b> standard for each subject <b>OR</b> Meets <b>75%</b> floor and Required Improvement <b>OR</b> Meets standard with TPM	Meets <b>90%</b> standard for each subject <b>OR</b> Meets standard with TPM
<b>Completion Rate I (Class of 2009)</b> <i>(if meets minimum size)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All Students</li> <li>• African American</li> <li>• Hispanic</li> <li>• White</li> <li>• Econ. Disadvantaged</li> </ul>	Meets <b>75.0%</b> standard <b>OR</b> Meets Required Improvement	Meets <b>85.0%</b> standard <b>OR</b> Meets floor of <b>75.0%</b> and Required Improvement	Meets <b>95.0%</b> standard
<b>Annual Dropout Rate (2008-09)</b> <i>(if meets minimum size)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All Students</li> <li>• African American</li> <li>• Hispanic</li> <li>• White</li> <li>• Econ. Disadvantaged</li> </ul>	Meets <b>1.8%</b> standard <b>OR</b> Meets Required Improvement	Meets <b>1.8%</b> standard <b>OR</b> Meets Required Improvement	Meets <b>1.8%</b> standard <b>OR</b> Meets Required Improvement
<b>Additional Provisions</b>			
<b>Exceptions</b> <i>(See Chapter 3 for more details.)</i>	May be applied if district/campus would be <i>Academically Unacceptable</i> due to not meeting <i>Academically Acceptable</i> criteria.	May be applied if district/campus would be <i>Academically Acceptable</i> due to not meeting <i>Recognized</i> criteria.	May be applied if district/campus would be <i>Recognized</i> due to not meeting <i>Exemplary</i> criteria.
<b>Check for Academically Unacceptable Campuses (District only)</b>	Does not apply to <i>Academically Acceptable</i> districts.	A district with a campus rated <i>Academically Unacceptable</i> cannot be rated <i>Recognized</i> .	A district with a campus rated <i>Academically Unacceptable</i> cannot be rated <i>Exemplary</i> .
<b>Check for Underreported Students (District only)</b>	Does not apply to <i>Academically Acceptable</i> districts.	A district that underreports more than <b>150</b> students or more than <b>4.0%</b> of its prior year students cannot be rated <i>Recognized</i> .	A district that underreports more than <b>150</b> students or more than <b>4.0%</b> of its prior year students cannot be rated <i>Exemplary</i> .



This preliminary list was then narrowed to three school districts as I felt it was important to include schools in more than one school district. An underlying premise of qualitative research is that multiple realities exist. Merriam (1998) also believes that “the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception (p. 17). Therefore, two high school principals were selected by each of the school districts. Each principal was interviewed face-to-face individually by me.

Successful completion of the online research course offered by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative preceded the formal Texas A&M University Institution Review Board (IRB) process (Appendix 1). Proper written permission from the IRB office was acquired through Texas A&M University as well as with each school district prior to any contact with principals. Verbal consent was sought by each participant. Each school district central offices identified the two high school principals who met my established criteria which became the participant pool. The selected participants were contacted by email inviting them to participate in the study (Appendix 3). That contact was followed up with a brief overview of the study and copies of the interview protocol. A convenient time determined by the participant was established and thank you letters were promptly sent after the interviews were conducted. The names of the high school principals who participated in the study were kept confidential protecting their privacy.

### **Data Collection**

The majority of the communication in arranging the interviews occurred electronically (Appendix 3). Participants were sent a background information document (Appendix 2) summarizing the study as well as their participant rights and interview

questions (Appendix 4). A convenient time and location was determined by the interviewees. For most of the participants, this was their office at the high school where they were principals. One principal was on medical leave; therefore, I made a home visit for the interview. The interviews took place during the summer of 2010, which was a slower time for high school principals rather than the beginning or end of school. Normally their daily schedules are tight with appointments and meetings; they tend to have very little down time. They move from one meeting/classroom to the next event quickly. Summer schedules are more relaxed and less stressful.

All interviews were conducted in person by me using a semi-structured interview protocol. With permission, each interview was audio-taped using an Olympus digital voice recorder and the participants had the opportunity to verify transcriptions shortly afterwards. No participant expressed any changes to their interview therefore I concluded I had captured the essence of their responses precisely. During the interview, I took brief notes as the participants responded. I was concerned with being an active listener and accurately capturing the information. It was important that the interviewee felt comfortable and could share openly with me. The audio tapes were a critical factor in capturing the data accurately. Thank you cards were sent to all participants.

The information gathered during the interviews served as the foundation of the study. Merriam (1991) believed the primary purpose of interviews is to “enter into the other person’s perspective” (p.72). Perceptions of the six high school principals serve as their testimony to instructional leadership as supported by central office in their respective district.

Seven steps were identified by Mason (2002) for developing the data collection phase. These were used to guide the development of the data collection portion of the study. They include:

- a) List the research questions that your study will explore.
- b) Break research questions into researchable sub-questions.
- c) Develop possible interview topics or items for each sub-question.
- d) Cross-reference interview topics or items with each research question to ensure that nothing is overlooked.
- e) Develop interview structure (i.e. format) and protocol (i.e. guide) for interviews.
- f) Identify minimum information to be gathered from each respondent.
- g) Confirm appropriateness and adequacy of protocol and conduct interview. (42-43)

Specific principal interview questions were developed with the influence of the salient characteristics of strong instructional leaders using the leadership dimension as a basis. Three categories evolved when the interview questions were developed:

- a) Support as the Instructional Campus Leader,
- b) Curriculum, and
- c) Instruction.

These questions developed over time and I was careful not to use questions that promoted a simple yes/no answer or that had negative tone (Tallerico, 2005). I did not want the high school principal to share their perception on instructional leadership support in any other way than what they believed. Wording on interview questions

could possibly suggest something was wrong or have unintentional outcomes. So, careful development of the interview questions took place (See Appendix 4 for exact questions.)

The interviews were conducted primarily in the question order they appear, as I did ask clarifying questions as needed and eliminated questions depending on the participants' responses. Prior to the formal interviews starting, I did begin with global and general questions about them professionally. I wanted to know about their professional experiences such as how long they were a principal, how long have they been in education, etc... This allowed for our session to start slowly, gave me a sense of the participant professionally, and set the tone of our interview. As the researcher, I set the nature of the interview or as Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe, "The human as the instrument" (p. 39). This concept is elaborated into seven components:

- a) responsiveness;
- b) adaptability;
- c) holistic emphasis;
- d) knowledge-base expansion;
- e) processual immediacy;
- f) opportunity for clarification and summarization; and
- g) opportunity to explore atypical or idiosyncratic responses. (p. 193-4)

As the researcher, I was able to immediately sense and respond to the personal and environmental moments. I collected data about multiple factors and processed the data immediately and naturally. The tenor of our face to face interview was critical and prior

communication was only our email message. The influence of the researcher is powerful.

### **Data Analysis**

Knowing the challenge of making sense out of qualitative research due to the vast amount of data collected, careful analysis procedures were implemented (Patton, 2002). Six hours and forty-three minutes of audio files was captured and eighty-two pages of transcriptions were produced. The process of making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said to make meaning of it (Merriam, 1998). Merriam describes data analysis as a “process of making sense out of data” (1998, p.192). Narrative data collected in the qualitative process requires ongoing analysis.

All interviews were transcribed and later analyzed for meaning. The analysis was done in a phased process. Simple notes were taken during the actual interviews. Those handwritten notes were reflected upon and clarity was added by listening to the audio-files. Official transcription was completed by a third party vendor for all six audio-files. I selected three colors to print the written transcriptions on by school district. The first school district was printed on two shades of blue, one for the first principal and the other for the second principal. The colors allowed me to see if there were trends or highlights that were pertinent to the school district. An additional round

of listening to the audio-files was conducted combining hand notes and written transcription summaries to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions. The transcripts were read and audio-files were listened to two more additional times for meaning. During this time, I discovered I had only included small, but important, errors of what was said during the interviews. I had inadvertently missed critical information or during the transcription process information was lost. Listening to the audio files subsequent times allowed me to focus on the specific responses. The first read was simply done from beginning to end gaining a full picture of the information shared from each of the six participants. The second reading was conducted by strand: Instructional Leadership, Curriculum, and Instruction meaning I read through and listened to all six participant interviews of the questions related to Instructional Leadership, and then Curriculum and Instruction following. Notes were recorded in Table 5.

**Table 5****Data Analysis Notetaking**

<b>Leadership Dimension: Planning, Coordinating, and Evaluating Teaching and the Curriculum</b>	<b>Interview Question Strands</b>	<b>Capital ISD</b>		<b>Kacey ISD</b>		<b>Southwest ISD</b>	
	<b>Principals</b>						
		<b>Brittany</b>	<b>Miles</b>	<b>Carma</b>	<b>Sam</b>	<b>Corey</b>	<b>Lloyd</b>
	Instructional Leadership						
	Curriculum						
Instruction							

This approach to reviewing the collected information allowed thematic topics to surface. The third reading followed the second reading and themes and patterns truly emerged. Eight categories or themes emerged. Data comparisons were viewed through careful consideration of the themes. The patterns were noted and continued analysis occurred using a second data collection table, Table 6.

**Table 6****Data Synthesis**

<b>Principal Themes</b>	<b>Brittany</b>	<b>Miles</b>	<b>Carma</b>	<b>Sam</b>	<b>Corey</b>	<b>Lloyd</b>
<b>School District Emphasis</b>						
<b>Instructional Leader Toolbox</b>						
<b>Use of Data</b>						
<b>Principal Professional Dev.</b>						
<b>Deployment of Curriculum &amp; Instruction</b>						
<b>Collaboration between DCO and Principals</b>						
<b>District Central Office Connections</b>						
<b>District Communication</b>						

Each theme was then reviewed individually by closely scrutinizing all six responses for that theme. Examining the collected data chunked into the identified categories, such as the Principal Professional Development, clarity emerged (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Comparisons between the three school districts were made. Specifically, since the year's experience of the principals varied, a closer look at the responses was reviewed from that angle. Did experience affect a principals' perspective? Was there a pattern noticed from the two principals in each district? Was gender a factor to



consider? Did the women principals have parallel thoughts as their male principals? Was education level an issue to reflect upon? This coding process, known as open coding, where the researcher specifically names and categorizes chunks of data worked well as I asked myself these questions. I could make comparisons between principals and districts. The data easily was grouped or labeled to form themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

For this study, I selected a specific leadership dimension called planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum, which was a result of analysis conducted by Robinson et al., in 2008. They looked at twenty-seven leadership studies and the relationship of the leader to students' academic outcome. The planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum dimension was one of five that emerged from the study and it includes leaders involved in discussions about how instruction impacts student achievement, leaders being active in the oversight and coordination of instructional programs, leaders' level of involvement of classroom observation and subsequent feedback, and that the leader ensures their staff systemically monitors student progress. The eight themes that emerged from this study conducted with the six high school principals align nicely. Over half of the themes directly correlate with Robinson et al., leadership dimension with the other three areas indirectly supportive.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

The importance of sound research methods is essential in a quality study. Creswell (2003) suggested that qualitative studies should include more than one strategy

to be used in establishing validity; therefore, several methods were used during the study to guarantee trustworthiness. Member checking is a term used to determine accuracy of qualitative results. Member checking allows for the review of data findings, interpretations to be checked, feedback provided, and any necessary corrections can be made. (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). In a qualitative study the researcher contacts the original participants interviewed and ask they review the written text of the interview. In my study, all six principals were contacted and provided a written copy of the interview transcription. I also offered for them to provide me with any additional information related to my study that they felt was relevant. Accurately portraying the various perspectives was important to me. No formal changes were made to any interview record; hence, I felt confident I maintained the integrity of the interviews.

Another measure included to establish trustworthiness was the process of peer debriefing. Creswell (2003) defines peer debriefing as “locating a person who reviews and asks questions about the study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher” (p.196). This step augments the truthfulness of the study. Peer debriefing was conducted with another graduate student, Christie Whitbeck, who is also a high school principal. She was able to play the “devil's advocate” role. Ensuring the reader would be confident that the research conducted was of high value was crucial (Merriam, 1998). Mathison (1988) suggested that one way to increase trustworthiness is for more than one person be interviewed or included from a source. This study was designed so that within one school district, two high school principals were selected to interview. Three school districts were included so the process was repeated allowing for

an analysis to occur in looking at two perspectives from each district, which is known as triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This cross-reference approach increased the credibility and validity of the qualitative study.

Participants received information containing the details of the study prior to involvement and were notified of their rights. Verbal acceptances of these rights were made at the time of the interview. Consent is important when conducting qualitative research as noted by Lincoln and Guba, (1985). During the study and for five additional years, all copies of transcribed tapes and supporting documents will be secured.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

There were several assumptions present in this study. To begin, the campuses were selected based on a state rating which mainly is comprised of student performance on the state assessment known as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Therefore, the first assumption is that TAKS is a reasonable measure of student achievement. I hypothesized that the principal is responsible for instructional leadership on the campus and that the principals interviewed considered instructional leadership to be critical. The participants included were assumed to have responded during the interview honestly and accurately. The questions developed were assumed to be valid and aimed at ensuring the data collected was what I intended to measure and study. Also the role of the high school principals, as the lead instructional leader, was believed to be critical to student success.

### *Significance of Study*

This study is important as it identified from the high school principal perspective, the specific instructional support needs they have in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluation of teaching and the curriculum (Robinson et al., 2008). Explicit examples and needs highlight support high school principals feel are critical for student success. Results show ways in which district central office leaders can strengthen instructional leadership of principals in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluation of teaching and the curriculum (Robinson et al., 2008). This study yielded new information on the relationship between district central office administrators and campus instructional leaders in large school districts. The research conducted here is important to principals and school districts to continue to improve student learning.

### **Chapter Summary**

Qualitative research, or friendly conversations according to Spradley (1979), was selected for this study, which examined the perceptions of large, successful high school principals on the instructional leadership support provided by the district central office. McEwan and McEwan (2003) describe studies of this nature to be naturalistic, descriptive, and focused on meaning. There was no altering of the environment and all principals were interviewed in their personal offices or homes. Qualitative research is descriptive constantly seeking detail about the topic. All information gathered focused around the instructional leadership support of central office from the perception of the high school principal. Methodology was designed to allow for a thorough and comprehensive study. Six interviews were conducted with successful high school

principals from three districts in a suburban area outside a large Texas city. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for emerging themes. Eight themes emerged during the data analysis phase. Chapter IV will present the findings from the data collected.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

This chapter presents the findings of this qualitative study on the perceived instructional leadership support of the district central office according to six high school principals from three different large school districts. Specifically the level and type of instructional support in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum provided by district central office was examined. The research was conducted using face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with six participants. Principals were asked specific questions focusing on instructional leadership, the curriculum, and instruction as developed from the Robinson et al. (2008) leadership dimension which was used to frame this study. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for meaning. Various trends surfaced allowing for deep study to take place.

First, I will provide a contextual overview of each school district and the six schools as followed by the main findings from each interview. I summarize the participants' general comments and reflections. Secondly, after looking at all three school districts, I synthesize the information collected and noted trends across all high school principals interviewed in light of the instructional leadership support, specifically in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. All three of these school districts are suburban school districts of a large city in Texas, ranging in student enrollment from 32,000 to 100,000. The six high school principals involved in this study are principals of schools that have been rated Recognized by the

Texas Education Agency. For confidentiality reasons, the three school districts and principals have been assigned alternate identities.

### **District and Campus Contexts**

#### *Capital Independent School District*

Several communities now comprise the Capital school district. Initially, the Orcoquisan Indian occupied the Capital lands. They hunted and harvested the resources of deer, bear, and buffalo. The tribes were later run off by the white settlers in the early 1800s. The first known landowner was from Louisiana who received a land grant in October 1835. This began the growth of the Capital lands. German settlers arrived in the area looking for a location that had ample rain, rich soil, and a lengthy growing season. The lands of Capital became a home for many. In 1856 the first post office of the Capital community was established and the Texas and New Orleans Railroad Company became operational. This opportunity brought more settlers to the area and allowed for farmers to transport their goods to market. A famous piece of history included a dance hall that the community built in 1878, which burned a few years later. This was an important piece of the community so it was rebuilt which still stands today over a century later.

The first school house of the community was built in 1884 and was called the Capital School. This one-room school house was the beginning of the Capital Independent School District. The first class of Capital ISD was twelve students who all walked to school, except for a few who rode horses. As the community grew, additional schools were built. Much of the land for the schools was donated by community

members and in December 1939 the two main communities joined efforts to form one school district which is now the Capital ISD. This merger was a collaborative effort between the two school systems and led by the school leaders at that time. With the growth of the large urban city close by, these communities began the shift from a rural community to a suburban community.

The oil business growing along the coast in the early 1900s in addition to the big oil boom has kept this area growing at a rapid pace. Many dwellers were rice and dairy farmers like those in the cities around them. Community life included events like the annual town rodeo which was established in 1944.

In the year 2000, Capital ISD had approximately twenty thousand students and now is a large Texas Education Agency Recognized school district with just over one hundred thousand students. Currently, they are one of the top five largest school districts in the State of Texas encompassing 186 square miles. Within Capital ISD there are 84 campuses and over 6,400 teachers. As a district, student performance is high in all state tested categories including Reading/ELA, Mathematics, Writing, Science, and Social Studies in comparison to other surrounding districts in the area and with the state averages. Their completion rate is 96.3%, which is almost seven points higher than the state average. All SAT/ACT results are above the surrounding district area averages and the state average as well. Capital ISD student demographics are outlined in Table 7.



**Table 7****Student Enrollment-Capital ISD**

<b>Capital ISD AEIS 2008-09 Student Enrollment</b>	
<b>African American</b>	15.7%
<b>Hispanic</b>	38.1%
<b>White</b>	37.1%
<b>Native American</b>	0.3%
<b>Asian/Pacific Islander</b>	8.8%
<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>	41.5%
<b>Limited English Proficient</b>	16.9%
<b>At-Risk</b>	40.0%

Both principals from Capital ISD who participated in this study had over twenty years experience in education, has earned master degrees, and are principals at large high schools with over 3,300 students. Principal Brittany has been a head principal for two years, both at her current campus. Principal Miles, on the other hand, has been a principal for several years and has been in his current position for three years. Both principals are Caucasian.

Principal Brittany's High School is relatively new, just opening its doors about twenty years ago in 1990. As the Capital community continued to grow, additional high schools were needed for students. All of the high schools are built in this school district to serve over three thousand students. In 1999-2000, this campus was named a National Blue Ribbon School. Principal Brittany described the focus at her school as looking to meet the needs and interests of the students. She discussed engaging them with the technology they use on a regular basis. The campus website has videos, podcasts, and other uses of technology to share the information and events of the school. The principal

has her own blog. The newspaper is online and all advertisements for courses, sports, and clubs are done on the website. The school undoubtedly is about learning, and student participation. They offer a multitude of extra-curricular activities, fine arts, clubs, and sports. Over fourteen different sports teams are available for students. This high school has performed well on the annual required state assessments. Reading/ELA, Science, and Social Studies performance has been above the district and state averages, with mathematics slightly behind. Their attendance rate is 94% and the completion rate is well above the state average. Most recently, this high school earned two Gold Performance Acknowledgments from the State of Texas in the areas of College-Ready Graduates and Commended on Social Studies performance.

Principal Miles' High School was established in 1941 on land that was purchased for a mere seventy-five dollars an acre! During this time, a nearby newspaper described this new school as "one of the most modern-equipped and largest school buildings" in the area. The original building serves as the centerpiece in the new and expanded building in existence today. For a short period of time early on, the high school opened its doors to elementary students due to a fire at their school. Elementary school was held at the high school until a new elementary could be rebuilt which was several years later. It was the only high school serving students in this district until 1972.

This high school now has over three thousand students and offers a variety of course selections to the students. In addition to the variety of core classes available, a plethora of electives and extra-curricular courses are offered. The campus has numerous clubs and sport opportunities for students. The goals of the school include providing a

safe and productive learning environment where all students will be engaged in relevant and rigorous coursework to prepare them to be productive citizens. Over the years this school has had numerous principals, and Principal Miles has been here for the past three years. Principal Miles described his large staff as traditional, diverse, and experienced. The school has earned a Recognized rating from the State of Texas and has three Gold Performance Acknowledgments including Advanced Academic Courses, College-Ready Graduates, and Commended on Social Studies performance. All state tested content areas exceed the district and state averages for student performance at this high school as well as high completion and attendance rates.

#### *Kacey Independent School District*

Kacey ISD began as a farming community, with the first family arriving in 1872. Shortly after this time, additional families began moving to Kacey for the farmland opportunities and also because it was easy to get to. The railroad had just opened and allowed for families to arrive safely and quickly. In 1895 a larger group of settlers arrived, many who were working for the railroad. Community plans were underway including one resident who drafted plans which included two parks. In 1897 several dwellers began raising rice, which gained in popularity and dominated the work of the community.

In 1900, “The Storm” devastated many areas, including parts of Kacey. Most of the buildings were destroyed and now only two original homes remained standing in the city. As the city was rebuilt, more families raised rice. At first, school was held in people’s homes, but by 1918, folks came together to create Kacey school district. In

1934 gas fields were discovered and this attracted additional families. Kacey in the late 1950's was an agricultural area with deep roots of rice farming, gas fields, and soy beans. Kacey grew quickly but has preserved the caring atmosphere and charm of a small town.

Kacey now is a flourishing suburban community with the school district encompassing 181 square miles. Its eastern boundaries stretch to the large energy corridor approximately 16 miles west of the downtown city and extend along an Interstate to a few miles west of the city. The homes range from apartments, to large estate homes with and without acreage. The school district is a Texas Education Agency Recognized District with 51 campuses and 56,091 students. Demographics reported from the 2008-09 AEIS report identify Kacey ISD as a minority majority district. The graduates of the 2009-10 school year from the six traditional high schools earned more than 19 million dollars in scholarships. Kacey ISD employs almost 4,000 teachers with an overall count of 7,000 employees.

Recent state testing in the areas of Reading/ELA, Writing, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies revealed elevated performance scores when compared to state and surrounding district area averages. The average daily attendance rate is high and the completion rate is over seven points higher than the state average. The enrollment in advanced/dual credit courses continues to rise and the ACT/SAT performance is above state and the surrounding district area averages. This district is a fast-growth district and is expecting almost 90,000 students enrolled by 2019, requiring the building of 20 additional campuses. Table 8 outlines the student demographics of Kacey ISD.

**Table 8****Student Enrollment-Kacey ISD**

<b>Kacey ISD AEIS 2008-09 Student Enrollment</b>	
<b>African American</b>	10.0%
<b>Hispanic</b>	30.5%
<b>White</b>	48.9%
<b>Native American</b>	0.2%
<b>Asian/Pacific Islander</b>	10.4%
<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>	27.9%
<b>Limited English Proficient</b>	13.8%
<b>At-Risk</b>	37.8%

The two principals interviewed in Kacey ISD have both been in education twenty-five years, but vary in their years experience as a head principal. Principal Carma is in her sixth year as a head principal with four years of experience at the junior high level. She is in her second year as the high school principal at her current campus and interestingly, served as the campus' instructional assistant principal a few years back. She is Hispanic. Principal Sam has been a principal for seventeen years at the elementary, junior high and high school levels. This is also his second year at his campus as the principal, and he is Caucasian. Their schools have similar sizes; both are around 2,750 students and both principals have earned their doctorates in education.

Principal Carma's High School is supported by an experienced staff, involved parent organization, and active school-community partners. The campus is one of the older schools in Kacey ISD, opening in 1984. Originally, the campus opened for only two grade levels, grades eight and nine. In the years following, tenth grade was added, and eventually eleventh and twelfth grades were added, with grade eight being moved

back down to the junior high level. Numerous facility enhancements have been provided by the district level, including a ninth grade center, Performing Arts Center, additional parking, athletic improvements, carpet replacement and a sophisticated phone system installation. The beauty of this school lays in the original architectural design of an open floor plan with an optical illusion wall and glass windows throughout the building.

This campus is a Green Ribbon School which means it is an environmentally-friendly campus that promotes healthy lifestyles, is connected to nature, encourages physical activity, and takes a comprehensive approach to students reaching their potential. It was recently selected to have a National Junior ROTC program a few years ago, which is continuing to grow rapidly. The students and staff have earned numerous awards and honors over the years and work hard at getting students involved. Some of the extra-curricular activities available at this campus include student council, national honor society, foreign language clubs, multi-cultural clubs, service clubs, Future Business Leaders of America, Future Farmers of America, to name a few. Academically, the campus offers advanced placement and honor classes, dual credit courses, international business courses, and a full spectrum of career/technology offerings. They also have English as a Second Language instruction and have a “New comers” program for new immigrants.

Their pride and support is strong. Weekly they offer a student-produced television show which honors students, staff, and upcoming events in a fun and exciting way. This school proudly advertises their school song which was written by the class of

1988 to get the crowd behind the team. Principal Carma leads this school with the mission statement being “to provide within a caring and cooperative environment, an educational program which offers each student the opportunity to develop his/her individual abilities in academic skills, critical thinking, problem solving skills, and behavior skills and attitudes which characterize responsible members of the community.”

Academic performance is a priority of this campus. There is a dedication to improving instruction in all classrooms and their recent student performance on state assessments serves as a testimony to their hard work. Recently they received three Gold-Performance Acknowledgments from the state including College-Ready Graduates, Recommended High School Program, and Commended on Social Studies performance. This campus performs slightly under the Kacey ISD average but either at or above the state averages in Reading/ELA, Science, and Social Studies. Mathematics performance is under the state average by four points and one point under the surrounding area district averages. They have a 95.1% completion rate and have ACT/SAT average scores above the state average.

Principal Sam’s High School is the oldest high school campus in the school district and is filled with pride and tradition. The building opened in 1898, and the first graduating class was in 1900. The community strongly supports this campus and in fact, many staff members at the school or in the community personally attended this campus as a student. In 1998-99, they celebrated their 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary. Alumni events are well attended and historically the school is known for their successful football

program. The original mascot of this campus was the Kangaroos, but in 1942 it was changed to the Tigers. The medals and awards are endless for a school that has been in existence this long and as the community has grown to add the five more additional high schools. Pieces of the Kacey community and this high school have gone with them, creating a large community feeling.

A building of this age has gone through numerous improvement packages by the district offices. Renovations and additions include athletic fields, Performing Arts Centers, security, technology infrastructure, and a new phone system. A high level of student involvement exists at this campus for academic, sport related, or interest based activities. Historically this campus is known for the remarkable football team accomplishments. 1981 marks the last year the community had only one high school. The next year, 1982, students were split between the two high schools of the community. Opening a second high school was an emotional event in the community.

This school was also awarded the National Blue Ribbon Award in 1997-98. Advanced level courses including dual credit courses are offered along with a variety of fine arts, foreign languages, and career/technology preparation classes. Recently, the campus was awarded two Gold Performance Acknowledgments including College-Ready Graduates and Commended on Social Studies performance by the State of Texas. They are a Recognized campus and therefore have achieved high levels of proficiency on the state required annual assessments in Reading/ELA, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. All tested areas are above the state average and close to the district and surrounding areas district averages. Their attendance rate is just under the state average



of 95.6% by three-tenths of a percentage point, but their completion rate is higher than the state average. More students at this high school are taking the ACT/SAT and advanced placement tests. Their performance averages on these assessments mirror that of their TAKS scores. They are above state averages but at or just below the school district and surrounding districts averages.

### *Southwest ISD*

The community of Southwest began with religious roots mainly consisting of German farmers. Many settlers also owned dairies and can be traced back as early as 1830. The dairy owners cleared the thick forests and built the first church in 1848. The Southwest School Society was established in 1856 and was sponsored by the church. The first school opened in 1889, and in 1905, the all white school had 49 students with one teacher, and the black school had 20 students with one teacher.

In the mid-1950s there was a failed attempt for the Southwest community to form a corporation for education. Following this initiative, the surrounding affluent areas joined the effort to make the merger successful. This unity became the Southwest ISD supporting several close-by communities. In 1973, the school district had 40,000 students and over 2,300 teachers. In 1980, over 80% of the graduates continued on to the university level. This post-secondary emphasis has continued in the school district and is evident by the collaborative Five Year Education Plan that was developed in partnership with the community and school district and published recently. The major components of the plan include student performance, safety, operations, community, and people.

Today, Southwest ISD is an established and stable school district in a community of over 180,000 residents. They are dedicated to the small school neighborhood concept and all together, the district covers 44 square miles. Southwest ISD has 46 campuses and employs 2,299 teachers. Over half of the student population is formally identified as economically disadvantaged.

Student performance in Southwest ISD is significant. Performance is high in this school district in comparison to the state performance averages and similar with the surrounding school districts. Mathematics, Writing, Science, and Social Studies scores are all above the state averages with Reading/ELA just one percentage point under the state average. Southwest ISD's student performance mirrors the surrounding area school district averages for Science, Social Studies, and ALL TESTS administered and a percentage point higher in Mathematics. For Reading/ELA, performance is two percentage points lower and Writing one percentage point lower than surrounding area district averages. Attendance rates in Southwest ISD are at the 96% level and the completion rate is at 92.4%, which is above state and surrounding areas averages. Enrollment in advanced courses/dual credit courses is climbing and performance on the ACT/SAT is well above state and surrounding area averages. Table 9 summarizes the student enrollment of Southwest ISD.

**Table 9****Student Enrollment-Southwest ISD**

<b>Southwest ISD AEIS 2008-09 Student Enrollment</b>	
<b>African American</b>	6.7%
<b>Hispanic</b>	55.6%
<b>White</b>	31.2%
<b>Native American</b>	0.2%
<b>Asian/Pacific Islander</b>	6.3%
<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>	53.9%
<b>Limited English Proficient</b>	33.1%
<b>At-Risk</b>	51.9%

The two principals interviewed from Southwest ISD were both Caucasian males and their high schools were both rated Recognized by TEA. Each of the schools has fewer than 2,000 students enrolled. Principal Corey has 24 years in education, has also worked in Kacey ISD as an administrator, and is in his fourth year as a head principal, all at his current campus. Principal Lloyd, on the other hand, has been in education for seventeen years and is in his second year as a principal, both at his current campus. He has also served in a district central office supportive role in Southwest ISD. He is the only principal who has also previously served in a district central office position.

Principal Corey's High School opened during the school year of 1973-74, but, due to weather conditions, there were construction delays causing the students to attend another high school until March of that year. The students were in temporary buildings at this campus which served over 4,000 students that year. The community was thriving and rapid development forced additional schools to be built quickly in Southwest ISD. The first class graduating from this school was in 1977. In 2004, after massive structural

problems were found at the school, the campus was closed. Students were forced to attend another high school, which paradoxically experienced this same situation a few years earlier. These two campuses had an ironic history of hosting one another's students. This campus reopened in 2005, and all students returned to their home campus.

Today the students at Principal Corey's school are on a block schedule and the expectation of high standards and getting involved are paramount. There are a variety of clubs and extra-curricular activities available. Parents and the community are actively encouraged to be involved. The principal has a message on the school website informing everyone of upcoming events at the school, district information and even commenting on state-wide education issues. The need for involvement and support by the community is expected. Post-secondary education is readily supported. In 2005 and in 2006 the high school was noted by *Newsweek* as a top leading high school in the nation. Principal Corey leads this school having the mission statement pave the way: "dedicated to providing every student a quality education in a safe environment." In 1983-84 it was named a National Blue Ribbon School. Recently, the State of Texas awarded the campus two Gold Performance Acknowledgments: AP/IB Results and Commended on Social Studies performance. All state assessments administered at this campus exceed the state, district, and surrounding area district averages. Their attendance rate, completion rate, ACT/SAT results and number of students in advanced classes are extremely high. Dedication to high standards is an expectation and without a doubt many students accomplish this goal.

Principal Lloyd's High School is the second oldest functioning high school in Southwest ISD. It opened in 1964 on the former area country club grounds. The population boom in the suburbs prompted the need for additional schools. Its unique structure is a part of its character with the open areas facing courtyards. This school has been awarded the National Blue Ribbon school honor in 1997-98. The building has had several renovations keeping the facility at a high quality. The campus selected the school song to be to the tune of the Navy Helm as a tribute to World War II hero and President John F. Kennedy, who was assassinated one year before the school opened. The school offers a wide variety of courses including advanced academics and has a large number of sports, extra-curricular activities, and clubs.

Communication is a key focus for this high school campus. The principal has designed the school website to be friendly and full of relevant information for parents, students, and the community. Their mission is for students to become a focal point in the community by providing a rigorous and relevant academic program as well as creating leadership opportunities for students through community outreach, service learning, and mentoring.

Academically, this campus is performing well to achieve the Recognized state rating, although there appears to be more diversity in student performance across the content areas. Students are scoring right at the state average in ELA/Reading and Social Studies. Science performance is slightly under state, district and the local surrounding school district averages and Mathematics appears to be the content with the lowest performance. This high school is nine to eleven points below the state and district average. The school has earned two Gold Performance Acknowledgments from the State of Texas including College-Ready Graduates and Commended on Social Studies performance.

Summarily, six experienced high school principals were interviewed from three large school districts. The high school campuses are all rated by the State of Texas as Recognized, indicating academic success with their students. One-third of the principals were females in the group. Two principals, one male and one female from Kacey ISD, had earned their highest degree of an educational doctorate. A summary of the principals' professional history is in Table 10.

**Table 10****Summary of Participants' Professional History**

<b>Principal Name</b>	<b>School District</b>	<b>Years Experience as Head Principal</b>	<b>Total Years Experience in Education</b>	<b>Highest Level of Education</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Additional Notes</b>
Brittany	Capital ISD	2	21	M. Ed	Caucasian	Moved to Principal role from current campus
Miles	Capital ISD	3	20	M. Ed	Caucasian	
Carma	Kacey ISD	6	25	Ed.D	Hispanic	Moved to Principal role from current campus
Sam	Kacey ISD	17	25	Ph.D	Caucasian	
Corey	South-west ISD	4	24	M. Ed	Caucasian	
Lloyd	South-west ISD	2	17	M. Ed	Caucasian	Worked at Central Office previously

## **Principal Overall Responses**

To begin, overall impressions from Capital ISD principals will be highlighted.

### *Capital ISD Principal Brittany*

The interview with Principal Brittany was approximately 34 minutes in length and was conducted in her office on campus. She was extremely open and thorough in her answers. Generally speaking, Brittany positively responded to the support provided by her school district. She described the interactions with the district central office as helpful and as necessary to her job as the campus instructional leader. They have monthly district level leadership meetings with the superintendent. As a new principal, this is her second year, she has an assigned mentor who has been invaluable to her. The district hosts a summer conference that provides instructional guidance and high quality professional learning. Brittany convincingly believes the district central office takes time to find out the needs of the principals/campuses and is supportive. “You can call anyone” for help, she shared. When asked about what else she could think of that the district central office could do she did not have a suggestion. She elaborated to say that they model what they expect their principals to do. They assist with the day-to-day needs and do not have one large event that covers it all. Frequently throughout the year, the district central office provides support in various ways and models the importance of being present and active on campuses. Capital ISD, according to Brittany, uses a variety of data for decision making purposes.

Additionally, there are multiple opportunities for the district central office administrators and principals to meet and collaborate. Principals also have their own



time to meet as principals. The district has communicated and supports the identified instructional goals. Brittany defined the contents of an instructional leader's toolbox to include clear expectations, quality instruction, visibly in classrooms, celebrating successes, holding staff accountable, positive praise, and being consistent. Instructional decisions made by the district are determined by the needs of kids, resources, data, and staff members.

Brittany described the district curriculum to be solid and widely used by her teachers. There are district level curriculum coordinators for all subjects who work closely with the content department chairs on the 10 high school campuses throughout the year. The revision of the curriculum occurs during the school year rather than at the end of the school year to adjust objectives, pace, sequence, or resources. She feels her role is that of support with the curriculum.

Student learning is an enormous focus for Capital ISD as well as closing the achievement gap, keeping technology up to date, and maintaining instruction to focus on needs of students. Professional learning is provided for all teachers and certain trainings have been identified critical or required for teachers. Most training occurs during the summer, after school, or on weekends. Brittany feels the professional development is aligned to the district instructional goals. As an administrator, she feels prepared to support instruction on her campus. "The district invests in me as the principal" to support the campus.

*Capital ISD Principal Miles*

Principal Miles, also from Capital ISD, was also interviewed in his office on campus. The entire interview lasted 47 minutes and can be described as very informal and friendly. Several times we were interrupted for questions related to instructional decisions on the campus by other staff members. Miles can best be portrayed as a relaxed, easily approachable, and caring principal. In responding to the various interview questions on instructional leadership, curriculum, and instruction, Miles was optimistic yet provided constructive comments regarding the district central office support. By and large, he felt principals in Capital ISD had opportunities to grow as an instructional leader through the open-forum leadership meetings that were held district wide monthly. Also, principals met in clusters frequently where no central office administrator attended allowing for absolute freedom in conversation. Miles felt the professional learning provided by his district for administrators was of high quality and often tailored to the level of students they each support. Elementary and secondary principals met separately at times, and the vast district leadership conference held over the summer was viewed as excellent. He mentioned using several pieces of new learning from the recent conference with his staff this upcoming year. As a principal, he was preparing for the campus professional learning days that were approaching quickly with teachers.

Miles did comment that additional support he felt central office could do was to provide more campus administrators and/or teachers. Campus events or crisis often limit the time of the campus administrators, taking them away from instruction. Data is used widely in the district and frequent testing by subject area was studied in collaborative

teams. Budget constraints were mentioned as possible barriers in the district. Miles mentioned the most important components of an “instructional leadership toolbox” would be easy access to data and to get out in classrooms.

Miles believed his role as the head principal of a large high school was to support the curriculum. He has a director of instruction on campus who is focused on curriculum and instruction. He described the district curriculum to be developed in various ways depending on the subject area. They all used standards and had strong central office staff in place. Each content area had a different number of staff to support the schools based on TAKS results. Campuses can call upon the district central office for support. The district central office has resources including the textbook, model lessons, and test questions available for teachers. As the principal, he felt part of his responsibility was to voice the needs of his teachers to the district central office as needed. Miles felt that, depending on the department, the level of fidelity to the curriculum varied. The district revisits the curriculum on a rotating basis either annually or biennially during the summer.

Student learning was central to the district as well as topics like safety and the budget. Professional development was both a district and campus responsibility. Capital ISD has staff development days designed and implemented by the campuses as well as by the district. Principals determine the campus days content and teachers have a recommended 25 hours of professional learning during the year. This is not a requirement, but it is needed if teachers want to receive the highest rating on their annual evaluation, Professional Development Appraisal System (PDAS), of exceeds

expectations. Principals receive their required monthly learning meetings. Instructional feedback for teachers varies in Miles' building. Depending on the teacher and team, feedback can come in a variety of ways. Each team has a common planning period which is dedicated for reviewing data, instructional planning, and meeting.

*Kacey ISD Principal Carma*

One of longer interviews conducted was with Principal Carma at just over an hour. This interview was conducted at the home of this principal while she was on medical leave. The session began like the others with the question which has the principal reflecting upon a principal development the district offers to support them as an instructional leader. The response took a little while for the principal to articulate and was an experience that occurred approximately four years ago. Basically, she feels the district central office does not provide high quality professional learning for administrators regularly. She recalls various themes over the years but little or no follow-through. She does her own professional learning with book studies or conferences. Evidently, the professional needs are not being met except for the areas of data analysis. Assistant principals also are in need of professional growth, notes this principal. She desires opportunities to collaborate with other principals on instructional topics.

Carma discussed the principal monthly meetings with the area assistant superintendents, but felt that most of the agenda is about policies and practices, not best practices or collaboration among schools. She feels principals need to keep learning. At this time, principals in this district must do this independently since it is not provided by

the district. Carma expressed the need for central office to know more about her clientele as well as instructional goals and practices of the school. The district does not provide clear guidance on how to achieve instructional goals. When asked about components of an instructional leaders' toolbox, she replied "professional learning, conferences, reading, good resources---anything to keep you on the cutting edge of best practices." Carma feels the district looks at equity too much. In her view, all schools, teachers, and students are not the same.

The district has a core curriculum that is aligned in the English Language Arts and Social Studies content areas with Mathematics and Science continuously improving. There are district horizontal and vertical teams that meet in regards to the curriculum. High school department chairs also work closely with the district on curriculum work. As the lead principal of this large high school, Principal Carma feels her role in supporting the district curriculum is to constantly push teachers to try new instructional strategies and then hold them accountable. She felt there is fidelity to the curriculum by her teachers. She said that they tend to get off track at times but for the most part follow the planned curriculum and deliver instruction as it was intended. All students have the opportunity to learn and additional safety nets are in place for at-risk students.

Carma felt the district is focused on learning as well as being exemplary in everything that they do. On the other hand, the communication is poor in district and often the necessary praise and validation is not heard. Principals need the freedom to share among one another in an un-intimidating environment. She does not feel professional learning is aligned to instructional goals, and as a principal she does not feel

she receives help. She longs for district central office to “come talk to me” and “tell me how we are doing.” She would like to know what and how they can do better. Although this principal appeared empowered in many ways, she clearly wanted district direction.

New teachers in the district do receive quality, job-embedded opportunities but the structure in place for veteran teachers needs to be examined according to Carma. The new position of the Instructional Coach is of excellent support for teachers. Teachers at this campus receive instructional feedback in a variety of ways including walk-throughs, instructional coach classroom visits, and department chair visits and discussions. The teachers plan as a team and are focusing on having quality instruction from the time the bell sounds commencing class, to the bell ending class. They are practicing monitoring student learning by frequently moving around in the classroom and not staying located in one physical place. In summary, the district central office needs to focus the work and then communicate the message effectively.

*Kacey ISD Principal Sam*

Principal Sam is the most experienced principal interviewed in this study. This interview took place in the office of the principal and was an hour and thirteen minutes in length. He was able to provide specific examples in his responses and drew from various experiences. He described the support as the instructional leader from the district central office to be varied. Most of the training or support has been embedded in leadership meetings he attends. Some of the professional growth has been incidental to instruction like the focus on communication the district had last year when several meetings at the district level were focused on communication. At this time, not a lot of

the principal meeting time has been dedicated to instructional topics. Extensive time has been dedicated to data. As the head principal he looks closely to the instructional principal, who is an assistant principal on the campus for support who receives assistance by the district. Also teachers and staff members share feedback to the principal providing a variety of perspectives. As for administration, as an experienced principal, most times he sits through information or learning that he has already acquired. Very little is new for him. He desires for professional learning to be designed based on need and to be more prescriptive. He would like to see options so schools or principals can have choice. Even with the focus on data there could be more opportunities to discuss and learn from one another on what to do with the data or share how data impacts instruction.

Sam suggests that the timing of information from the district central office is important. He went into great detail about a monetary support provided near the spring testing time. He received the notice of the financial support and then finally the money very close to the testing time, which did not allow for much preparation on his part. There were so many strings attached to this funding that, in the end, his campus was not able to actually use it. Efforts like this actually bring on poor morale or feelings between campuses and district central offices. Planning and advanced notice is needed. He uses the analogy of elementary schools as large ships. If you need to turn a ship into the ocean or need a ship to stop like in the port of a large city, you plan days in advance. It's not like something done in a short turn around. High schools are complex and massive in size so they are like elementary schools multiplied times a big factor. They need time.

Sam mentions various skills important to the high school as the instructional leader with the first being that one needs others around one to focus on instruction because as the head principal of a large high school, one has so many other responsibilities like finances and stretching resources. Knowing the age levels of the students being served at the school is important as well as keeping the faculty focused and having high standards. One does more through other people and does not control everything.

The district has made numerous strong instructional decisions like the district-wide curriculum, which is aligned. Ensuring teachers are teaching the prescribed curriculum is a responsibility of a principal but at times the challenge becomes a question of how to support instruction when the other side of the district asks one to do something that conflicts. The example he shared was when teachers are using various resources and copies are needed, how can technology, who controls the number of copies per school, require a maximum amount copies that is not sufficient to support the implementation of the curriculum? Overall, Sam feels there is fidelity to the curriculum and that the district has processes in place for updating the curriculum in May and June each year. He shares that the tweaking, or minor adjustments the district makes is done well but there are larger areas that need to be addressed as suggested in the data.

Interestingly, when asked what the district is focused on, Principal Sam first answered money and then compliance. I followed up with asking if the district was also focused on instructional improvement; his response was that some people at central office are concentrating on instruction but have additional responsibilities that interfere. He shared an example from one of the central office departments. Their focus or lens



that they work from is not always connected to student learning, which often poses challenges for the campuses. Shortly after, Sam shared how at times the efforts of the district central office become cumbersome and often conflict with improving instruction. His campus has an innovative Advanced Placement Spanish teacher desiring to integrate technology in her instruction. She first began with a free software program that went well and had a more enhanced subscription she was interested in purchasing. The students used their cell phones and between the department of other languages and technology at central office, the process for her to use this subscription took almost a year and the principal had to intervene.

Specifically, the professional learning for principals is mainly informal and dependent on the personal network of principals. Sam feels principals who have a connection with someone at central office probably have different opportunities than ones who do not. He did not feel as the head principal his role was to get in the nitty gritty of instructional best practices but appreciates the specifics for the teachers and the assistant principals dedicated to instruction. Teachers receive feedback in a variety of ways, and he shared the care and love high school teachers have for children. Often high school teachers receive a negative reputation or are known for caring about their subject more than students. Sam did not feel this was the case at his school.

*Southwest ISD Principal Corey*

Principal Corey's interview was approximately forty-five minutes and was held in his office during the first week of August. He had recently taken a holiday with his wife and was rested and refreshed! Getting ready for school events were on his

calendar. Corey generally favored the instructional support from central office. The major professional learning for principals his district recommended was a summer institute from Harvard University. The participants experience a variety of quality speakers and come back and share the learning within his district.

Another way the district central office supports principals is with the weekly communication that includes “be thinking about this” or other prompts alerting them to important topics or possible professional learning opportunities inside and outside the district. At times the district even financially supports the principal in the events, and, when there is a new principal, they automatically receive a mentor who meets monthly with new principal. Principals and the district central office at times meet for long periods of time and the district has sectioned out the meeting into two parts: the business part and the program portion. The program meetings are six times a year and focus on campus support and instruction. The district organizes support by placing the campuses in support tiers. There are four levels and the oversight from the district is determined by what support tier the school is placed in. The campus has choice and options but might have some requirements determined by central office in the more restrictive tier.

The school district uses data, and one way they support the schools to use data to inform instruction is the Campus Instructional Specialist role. These people support multiple content areas and infuse data analysis with the teachers. It is used to guide instruction and on campus the Campus Instructional Specialist role works closely with teachers and the administration. Corey does not want a stack of data to review but

would prefer the highlights captured on one page. When asked about what could the district central office do to make his job easier in increasing student achievement, he responded that it seems the district central office departments function as separate groups from one another. One group rolls out an initiative, and then another launches a different initiative, and so forth. The initiatives are not necessarily in conflict with one another, but the timing often is difficult for the schools and/or teachers. This does not help the principals. Discussions like the ones held at the program meetings, mentioned earlier, are collaborative conversations between the district central office and the high school principals. This past year the main topics were high school graduation requirements since Texas changed their requirements and student courses that were added or need to be deleted. He shared that virtual and online courses are a big area of concentration at this time. Corey organized the informal breakfast meetings for the high school principals only before their monthly meetings with central office. This allowed for informal pre-discussions in preparation for the meetings. He feels the principals are on the same page instructionally speaking despite their varied student/community demographics. This congruence among principals has been achieved over time through learning together. The process has been both formal and informal as principals meet alone or in collaboration with central office administrators. The communication of this instructional harmony is more than the written memos, but is a series of dialogue.

Corey describes an instructional toolbox to include having the best staff and using them effectively as well as managing them as needed. He shared that the best thing central office can do is select the best principal at schools. He also shared that

during his annual evaluation, he does not receive specific feedback on what or how to do a better job. In this case, he says you may not know what you do not know. “I need feedback as the principal.”

An area this principal felt has improved in the past few years was the district curriculum. An online system is used by all teachers for lesson planning that contains choices. The district places priority in teachers developing and using curriculum road mapping. A roadmap is a plan and direction the teachers will use to guide the planning of daily instruction. There are six late-start days for teachers to use for collaborative planning. This principal holds teachers accountable to the curriculum and believes there is fidelity to the curriculum for the most part. Department chairs, teachers, and the previously mentioned Campus Instructional Specialists, are the touch points for this principal to touch base with on seeing how the teachers are doing. He does not directly monitor the use or implementation of the curriculum. The district provides textbooks and resources to support the curriculum and additional campus support as well. Summer work at central office is used for updating the curriculum as needed, which involves teachers.

Corey reports the district definitely is focused on student learning. Quickly he retorted that his district is highest in the state with college readiness of their graduates of anywhere and commenting that fifty-three percent of their students live in poverty. It was easy to see how proud he was of his school district, noting they are focused on student learning. Later he added that the district is open and looks strongly at innovations in the classroom. Teachers and administrators do not have specific learning

plans or specific trainings they must experience, but the district does have large initiatives like their interactive whiteboards or for writing he mentioned they are in support of the New Jersey Writing Project. So there are important learning events for the various departments or different audiences, but it is not formal according to Corey.

Throughout the year, assistant principals attend various meetings that usually are a modified version of the work with principals. Principals attend an administrative retreat at the beginning of the year. It is at these events that the district central office continues to support the schools giving them opportunities to grow. “They encourage us to grow” and provides the chance to try new things. Instructional improvement is important. Corey felt “we’re confident and not complacent,” meaning the principals cannot continue to do the same things over and over again. They must be willing to change and continuously grow on behalf of student learning.

Teachers have opportunities to receive feedback through observations and in collaborative planning sessions with colleagues. Corey feels his role is to manage these events that allow for teacher growth. “I give them what they need.” He prefers getting in classrooms and seeing the learning occur rather than joining teachers in collaborative planning meetings. The interview ended with Corey saying there are not any glaring weaknesses of the district central office. He feels the most critical action of the district central office is that they listen to the principals.

He ended our session with an example of the district listening to him as a principal and expressing how validated he felt as a principal. Not very long ago a hurricane hit their area, affecting the lives of many. Students were out of power and in

their homes for long periods of time. Seven schools days during the fall semester were completely lost. Students did not attend school. In a collaborative planning session with the campus principals and central office, many ideas and thoughts were shared. Corey thought of something he shared with his direct supervisor over the phone. He asked her just to think about this, not to make any decisions yet. He proposed that for the fall semester, to regain as much instructional days as possible, they do not offer final exams. Approximately six days in all encompass the final exams at the high school level with the reviewing and administration. This would be additional days where new learning would not be occurring. He suggested that for this semester, let's keep these days for learning and not engage in the time-consuming process of finals. The supervisor immediately responded that finals had to be administered. He asked her to think about it.

About thirty minutes later, the supervisor returned the call to Corey asking to talk more about this idea to work out some additional details. At the next collaborative meeting, the idea was shared with principals, and the school district did not administer final exams that semester. Corey felt empowered and encouraged. The district listened to the principals and, ultimately, worked collaboratively on this particular issue. Corey closed his interview with the following comment, "God gave you two ears and one mouth," meaning that one should listen twice as much as one speaks.

*Southwest ISD Principal Lloyd*

Principal Lloyd was having major campus renovations that relocated him for several months; therefore, our forty minute interview occurred at his temporary office at one of the alternative schools in this district. Instantly his passion for work and knowledge was evident. He is extremely pleased with the support of the district central office and is encouraged by the guidance. To begin, he shared the various opportunities his district provides for administrator professional learning. Several opportunities outside the district are available and encouraged for principals like the Harvard Leadership Academies. The school district also holds regular meetings for principals, has specialists coming to campuses, and provides the structured tiered support system. His school two years ago was on heavier support from the district central office where the assistance was greater and requirements were stricter; now, after increased student achievement and growth in campus goals, less support is needed.

The support he describes from the district central office is positive, helpful, and relevant. As principal he has access to numerous professional learning experiences and in district this year the superintendent has communicated a focus on sharing best practices. The district has supported teachers using this process, and now more of an emphasis will occur for administrators. “Some of the best ideas are in our own backyard,” he says. They call this collaborative exchange of ideas Administrator U. Lloyd discussed the purposeful use of data district wide to inform instruction. An assortment of data is used, including student performance, school climate survey, and failure rates. When the campuses have specific data that they need run for them, they

place a data order at district central office. In addition to that central office support, this school district has in place a system where the content area specialists also follow-up with the schools.

He describes the support of central office being extremely supportive of where he wants to take his campus. The superintendent is open about working on the unified message from central office. According to Lloyd, principals in his district have a common understanding of the district instructional goals. He mentions several items he would include in an instructional leaders' toolbox including a basic understanding of pedagogy, which prevails in a principals' message continuously, flexibility, helping others see different views, support of teacher teaming, knowledge of assessment, and an understanding that standards are changing.

When asked about the curriculum, Lloyd confidently responded to the questions and had specifics he included. Obviously, his knowledge, comfort level, and involvement with his staff on curricular issues were strong. He discussed the variety in curriculum by content area and the common process district wide of teachers creating a roadmap from the common curriculum. This collaborative development is a guide that keeps teachers on track throughout the year and is a refinement or specific adjustments needed at the campus level for success. Teachers meet three times a week and are involved in the writing of the curriculum.

As the principal he is particularly involved in meeting with team leaders and department chairs as well as making instruction a topic he addresses the entire staff on frequently. At the time of this interview, Lloyd was finalizing his back-to-school



message and campus professional learning day, where he has allocated 80 percent of the message on instruction. “I think if they see it’s important to me, then it’s important to everybody.” The district supports the curriculum with textbooks and other resources. They have a cost-sharing agreement, as some items are purchased at the district level and others are purchased at the campus. Lloyd feels there is strong fidelity to the curriculum, and there are precise curriculum review plans in place organized by central office involving teachers.

Without doubt, the school district is focused on student learning and in place are several initiatives to increase student achievement. Most recently, Lloyd mentioned the college readiness measures in place and a few years ago a huge professional learning experience known as Design and Delivery of Instruction. He felt the district is getting better at aligning professional learning to the instructional goals. Principals can contact central office at anytime for help. This was described as the “on call service” and as truly the message from central office of asking, “How can we help you?” This is true of all departments including curriculum and instruction but also finance or human resources. According to Lloyd, communication practices are good in the district and occur in a variety of ways, not just in written form. Overall, principals are on the same page with instruction and teachers receive feedback on their practice several ways. Additionally, he said that the superintendent allows principals to be innovative and creative. They are encouraged to try new things and get support from central office staff in the process. Most likely if a principal wants to try something, they will not be told no, but rather guided to think through the idea and will be assisted in preparing for it.

## **Synthesis of All Participants**

All six participants articulated their thoughts freely during their interview session. They all appeared relaxed and responded openly. The specific interview questions centered around three concepts: the principal as the instructional leader, curriculum in general, and the delivery of instruction. After careful analysis, eight themes emerged from the six participants. These themes include the importance of the:

- a) school district focus;
- b) instructional leader toolbox;
- c) effective use of data;
- d) deployment of the curriculum and instruction;
- e) quality professional development;
- f) collaboration;
- g) connections; and
- h) communication.

Now I will elaborate on the eight identified themes.

### **Eight Identified Themes**

#### *School District Focus*

The school districts and, in particular, these six large suburban high schools are unmistakably focused on student learning. As much as possible, these principals expressed the importance of keeping learning at the forefront of all decisions. One principal, Brittany, when asked if her school district is focused on learning replied, “capital Y-E-S, from the superintendent on down.” The second area of focus for these

successful school districts reported by the principals referred to the budget. Economic times are stressful, and school districts are forced to do the same or more with possibly less money. Two campus principals shared the emphasis in their districts is on cutting costs and on trying to prepare for possible changes due to lack of funds.

Another challenge schools face is that of trying to keep up with students.

Principals revealed they are constantly trying to focus on engaging students. Principal Brittany shared

[We are] very focused on trying to incorporate technology to try to keep up with the kids. It's very hard when you think all day long and all summer long, a kid has been interacting with his world. It's like my son. He's thirteen. He's on his Facebook, the TV is on, and he's got his cell phone right there. And so he's interacting. And then I'm going to, in August, sit him in a classroom in a straight row and I'm going to tell him to be quiet and don't interact with anyone. And so I think that our district is really looking on how, or looking towards, how to make our instruction to where we're connecting with kids.

The integration of technology makes this possible and happens to be an area of high interest to Capital ISD.

Additional areas school districts were accentuating including closing the achievement gaps and the de-tracking of students. Expecting students to meet high standards and raising the bar for kids. Principal Brittany shared

Oh well seventy percent of my kids passed, only seventy? What about those thirty percent? You're like, 'Oh we're recognized.' Yeah but, what about those

fifteen or twenty percent that didn't or twenty-five percent that didn't? What about those?

These schools are looking at improved achievement for all students.

Of course student safety was important to the schools in addition to the need to be compliant with local, state and federal requirements. Finding the balance of being compliant without allowing it to take over is difficult. If student learning is important, the question posed is, "Wouldn't everyone in the learning organization be focused on student learning?" Principal Sam shared

there are some people in the district who are focused on student learning and others not as much. Just like the Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources, [her] function is to make sure we're compliant with personnel or whatever. And I think those people do a really good job... Many people at the central office had so many other duties at the time besides their instructional piece. They had to serve on this committee or that committee that it wasn't the hedgehog kind of thing. That seems to be getting better.

Another example from this principal exonerates the need for instruction to be the focus for all positions in the district. He starts off by sharing one of the big initiatives in his district is to integrate technology. So he has an upper level foreign language teacher trying to use technology. She had a free program; of course the Internet's like drugs. Ever thing is free, but then you've got to buy. But, it was a thing where the kids could call in and do a speaking thing over their cell

phones, or their land lines, or whatever but basically the kids were using their cell phones. Then she could pull that stuff up and listen to it. It was a way to have oral practice homework, which is a real issue for foreign language.

This program the teacher wants to use is now no longer free and must be purchased. The campus began the software review process but encountered numerous obstacles. Several departments got involved suggesting other tools to have more meetings to discuss the possibility but months pass. In this particular case, the principal had to become extremely direct and still the issue took over a year to resolve.

So, we got where we needed to be, but I had to behave badly to get it and get people's attention on it. This is important... We shouldn't have to do that, but then again, what are you going to do? There are only so many people. It is a process... But, it shouldn't take a teacher who wants to do something great with her kids a year to get it... Central office will do everything they can to give me whatever they've got. We just all have limits.

One principal mentioned that she felt the district was too focused on equity. Not all schools are created equally and need to be treated differently. Schools need varied levels of support and to meet instructional goals, different levels of assistance are needed. This same principal stated her district expects every school to be exemplary, as

defined by the Texas Education Agency. “Our district goal seems to be being exemplary-nobody tells how to get there but just get there” (Principal Carma).

On a different note, Principal Corey relayed the district core practice of staying ahead of the game. The school district felt it was critical to be innovative and be aware of current and future best practice. This principal has been able to support teachers with this lens as well. Since taking over as principal he has “never told a teacher no to any type of conference, in the three years [he] I have been here.” Innovation is celebrated, and being on top of it is valued by the school district. He elaborated on ensuring the school continued to strive for continuous improvement.

#### *Instructional Leader Toolbox*

All of the principals were asked if we were creating a successful instructional leader toolbox, or in other words, what skills or characteristic make a strong instructional leader? What would be included? Principal Brittany shared “you don’t go to one training and then ta-dah! You’re a great instructional leader!” Rather the skill set or characteristics of the leader are something that is developed over time and comes with experience. Without a doubt, the role of the instructional leader is enormous. Although the principals responded similarly on some characteristics, approximately twenty different responses were collected.

First, over half of the principals begin their response with having a clear and focused vision. The vision or expectation for the staff and students must be in place. The leader must spend time establishing their beliefs. People must know what is expected of them in order to perform. Principal Brittany stated, “So I think we really

need to spend time in the middle teaching them [students] the expectation, not just stating the expectation, teaching them how to accomplish the expectation, and then holding them accountable.” Keeping the faculty honed in on the goals of the school and/or content team is critical. At times the principal is the one that reminds the staff what the big picture is and connects the work teachers are doing. Principal Sam feels he is the keeper of the vision. “You really have to run interference a lot of times and keep the stupid stuff from bogging the teachers down.” Another quote from this principal relays the significance of the instructional leader well: “You have to keep the faculty focused on this is really important. And so one of the things I find at my school that I have to do is I have to spend a lot of time talking to people saying, “Your job is important too, and we value you.”

Interviewees felt that instructional leaders need to be a cheerleader for the staff, constantly celebrating successes, praising staff, and building relationships. At times, principals need to toot their own horns and be positive advocates of their campus. Having good relationships in the work environment was noted by 50 percent of the principals interviewed. Being a people person certainly was helpful as taking time to visit with teachers was important. According to these principals, a principal must be a good listener as they work with staff, students, parents and community members. Relationships in general are critical but principals confirmed the need for good relationships with students as well as knowing and understanding students.

At elementary, it's eight year olds. That's just nuts. At junior high, it's kids who are going through puberty. And at high school, it's kids who may just

broken up with their girlfriend and all of this other kind of stuff. So, to say that all kids will pass TAKS by 2013 is not realistic if you know things about kids. That's not to say that all kids can't, but you got to really deal with all that kind of stuff. So, there's all that piece. (Principal Sam)

In addition to having good relationships, using data and having easy access to data was also discussed. Having knowledge of the budget and financial impact of district decisions also was prevalent. One principal discussed the importance of knowing the financial implications of using technology. Purchasing new equipment, like SMART boards, is an exciting opportunity for student learning, but he noted that if one cannot fund the bulbs that make the SMART boards work, it creates frustration and disappointment. Knowing how things work and the financial impact was imperative.

A few other characteristics that half of the principals reported included having strong pedagogy and knowledge of quality instruction. It was essential for principals to be familiar with best instructional practices and assessment. Making sure the leader is visible during the school day was high on the toolbox list. Also described at great length was the need to empower individuals on campus. The principal cannot do the work alone, and if principals surround themselves with knowledgeable staff members, they are able to rely on them for their expertise. Providing professional growth opportunities for staff as needed strengthens the organization. Principals stated they must have trust and empower others to do their very best. There are some things only the principal can do and needs to do. The principal should be reserved for those types of tasks and therefore allow other staff members to take on leadership roles. Principal Sam said, “you really



have to delegate and trust a lot.” Hiring staff members is one of the most vital roles a principal has. A principal shared that quality instruction and student achievement begins with quality staff. A principal needs people they can call upon and depend upon. Having good resources includes people as well as good information at their fingertips.

As the instructional leaders, the principals felt it was important for the toolbox to contain a skill or need for continued professional learning for the principal themselves. The principal needed to be hungry for learning too! One principal shared that they need to be an avid reader. They must be willing to try new things and support innovation on the campus. Being innovative is a critical attribute for teachers as well.

The principals noted the importance of being flexible. According to them, this skill is key. Principal Lloyd said principals constantly are helping others see differences and appreciate diversity.

Having balance between the responsibilities of management and leading the school is a huge component of the toolbox of the instructional leader as noted by the interviewed principals. One principal stated that he had been an elementary principal and then a junior high principal prior to becoming a principal of a large 5-A high school. He shared, “I thought I was going to be the instructional leader but I do everything but.”

### *Effective Use of Data*

Data analysis was present in all six schools (three districts). Each school had their particular data examination process in place but, data was used to inform decision making regularly at the schools and in their districts. Principal Brittany complimented her district central office profusely for using data when making decisions.

Additionally, the review of TAKS data was predominantly referenced. Principal Miles elaborated on the benchmark his district required in math and science.

Benchmarks are administered each six weeks as well as unit tests in all content areas throughout the year. These assessments are scanned and put in an online system for deep data analysis. Schools and teachers can analyze data by school, teacher, class period, and get individual student information. He shared

then based on the data we can make sure we get in those classrooms to see what support needs to be provide or how we can help in that area.

Our teams sit down and analyze the results and say, “Well, where were the kids strong? Where were they weak? Why were they weak?” And sometimes they’ll say they didn’t teach those questions the way they were asked. Then what are they going to do to re-teach prior to the next unit test?

In addition to state assessment data, TAKS, other types of data were also mentioned. Principal Carma discussed the importance of mobility rate and the need to closely examine Advance Placement scores, Dual Credit information, gifted and talented students, and attendance. Principal Lloyd suggested looking at college readiness as well.

Two out of the three school districts have created or designated a place for data analysis within one or more staff members’ job descriptions. Data analysis is a component of the work they do. The four principals in Kacey ISD and Southwest ISD, all pointed out the benefit to them as the principal of having this type of resource on campus. In one district it might be called an Instructional Coach or a Campus

Instructional Specialist, and they provide data to the principal in a concise and timely fashion. Principal Lloyd shared

I'm a one-page guy, don't give me a ream of data. I'm not going to read it. Put it on one page, even if it's a big page. And I want to be able to look at that and I always like to compare past performance with current so that I can get an idea of trends, where we're at, what's working, what's not working and what we need to address.

Additional instructional support in Kacey ISD had included a district central office support team sent out to certain identified schools based on previous TAKS performance. Both principals from that school district referred to this type of support and data analysis in a positive way. According to Principal Sam, the triage team consisting of staff from central office visited campuses asking, "How can I help you, rather than this is what you need to do?"

Data analysis was also mentioned by one principal in relation to the development of the campus improvement plans. This process recently has been updated by the district, and there exists a strong emphasis on the use of data. Focusing the work based on data has brought a specific lens to improving schools. Another principal, from Southwest ISD, shared how data analysis was used in his principal evaluation completed by central office. As one can see, the use of data is strongly supported by the district central office in all of these school districts.

*Deployment of the Curriculum and Instruction*

All three of these school districts were sophisticated in their curriculum design process. Similar procedures had been implemented as each of them had what they considered an online and aligned curriculum. They started with the state framework, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and also infused national standards. Some principals could elaborate on that process better than others, but, they all were aware of the development of the district curriculum. Teachers assisted the district central office curriculum coordinators/specialists. Principal Miles was extremely complimentary of the quality content of central office staff members. There was a great deal of trust developed with the campus and district central office. Principal Sam described the curriculum in his district like this

The beauty about what we have here through [our curriculum] and really tightening that scope and sequence and all is, if we have kids bopping around from this high school to this high school to my school, the gap shouldn't be that big, because we are all using the same curriculum, we're using the same planning process, we have the same markers along the way, benchmarks, cots [district assessments], whatever.

Horizontal and vertical team meetings also contributed to the success of the communication of the district aligned curriculum. All districts completed revisions and made updates. One district performed their updates later in the year and usually only one time a year. Here is a comment from a principal in that district:

The only problem I have with it is I'd rather it be more spontaneous to where we could do it right away when you see something that needs to be done right away instead of putting it off till the end of the year or to the end of the semester or this, that, or the other. I like for it to happen when it needs to happen.

While other districts did perform edits or revisions throughout the year, Principal Brittany shared that

each month the content area team leader meets with the curriculum coordinator monthly or every 6 weeks for feedback/evaluation...They do not wait until summer. They ask questions like, "Do we need to do this? Did we spend too long on this? What about this new book? What did you think about that?"

Principal Miles continued and extended the process by adding "I think the district is trying to say 'stop teaching everything, but let's teach what we're teaching really well.'" Teachers had to stop using PowerPoint and note taking and get the kids engaged in hands-on activities and labs..."

For the most part, principals felt there was fidelity to the intended curriculum at all three school districts. Some joked that it depended on the classroom, but, overall, teachers are staying at the pace determined by the district and on the objectives outlined in the district curriculum. Principal Carma reported: "And the one thing where I know there's definite fidelity, as if I go down a hallway and I go into six classrooms of geometry, and they're all doing the same thing. I know we're doing what we need to be

doing.” High school campus Principal Corey said, “Getting to endpoint is non-negotiable. How we get there is negotiable. The role of the principal in relation to the curriculum is support and be sure the teachers get to endpoint.” All principals indeed agreed their role as the principal in supporting the curriculum was crucial. Here is what a few of them said. Principal Miles shared his role as principal is simply “to support the curriculum. I bring any concerns forward to central office from teachers. I need to support the teachers but also not confuse them when they disagree. We have to teach the district curriculum.” He continued with stories he heard from teacher like, “We have to cover this much material so quickly.” He responded, “No, you don’t have to cover. What you have to do is make sure the kids get this.” Principal Brittany stated her role as principal is “asking questions. I think it’s showing and I think its celebrating success. I think it’s making sure that it’s happening. I really rely on my department chair and staff a lot. You cannot control it all. I really invest a lot in my staff.” One additional comment about the importance of curriculum which leads into instruction is from Principal Corey.

I talk often to the teachers about the value of the art of teaching and the fact that I don't want everybody who's teaching the same content to be on the same page at the same time. That's not cause for celebration. I hire people who are good and I want to see them teach. I want them to get to the endpoint. However they get there is great, within reason. I think that's important and it's a great resource for our people.

Interviews reported that making the best of the 177 instructional days is the ultimate responsibility. Having resources and textbooks available to teachers is critical. These three school districts certainly provide that and continued future work in curriculum continues as an on-going process. Principal Lloyd referred to the connection curriculum has with assessment and the need for additional future work to be done in his district

It's critical to me that we look at curriculum, we look at assessment.

Assessment is the biggest piece. Teachers write terrible tests. Test banks are terrible. So we don't even measure what we want. I took some math tests last year and I didn't know what they were asking. Math aside, the stem was so bad that I didn't know for sure. So we've got to work on that. We can say common assessments all day long, but common assessments are bad.

Instruction was equally as important to all the school principals interviewed in this study. Many claimed learning was the ultimate number one district focus currently. Each district had a support structure in place for instructional assistance. Capital ISD had directors of instruction on every high school that was an administrative position. They had an on campus helping teacher and there additional helping teachers that were content based housed at the district central office who came to the schools two days a week or on request. Kacey ISD employs an assistant principal designated for instruction as well. This person works closely with an additional position at every high school titled the instructional coach. A great deal of support is generated through these two individuals who also have district central office level support. Southwest ISD has two

Campus Instructional Specialists on each high school. These positions certainly assist the principal with instruction and have varied levels of support from central office.

Principal Lloyd describes the district central office support for instruction truly as “helpful attitude instead of here’s what you are going to do. It was a lot of where are you going, where can we help and assist?”

Another area surfacing during the interviews was shared by Principal Brittany. She felt the district initiative of Mega-Monitoring has improved instruction in her building tremendously. She has a team of twenty-five walkers who conduct multiple five minute walk-through each day. They are administrators, librarians, counselors, and other support staff.

It’s fantastic. It’s like when I am on the treadmill and somebody gets next to me, I run faster. I run, you know I just, it’s just the way it is. We do better when we are being watched. And so for us on this campus that’s been an initiative provided by the district to train us to walk in five minutes, see what we are looking for, even if we never write anything down or we didn’t do one thing with the data, which we don’t do a lot. We don’t have the time to. Just being present.

Principal Sam feels something that has assisted the entire district in quality instruction has been work previously conducted in the district. That is the conversations and time spent looking at how variation is the enemy. This philosophy has been successful in this district as they now have a centralized aligned curriculum that is non-



negotiable. There are district common instructional strategies in place for teachers to be using in their lessons as well.

Professional learning for teachers appeared to be loose in most of the districts. Principal Brittany discussed the clear path if you are a teacher from zero to five years but really no other principal was aware of details regarding teacher training. They really did not know where to look if they had questions. Teachers planned together collaboratively according to the principals and receive a variety of feedback about their instruction. One way was through walk-throughs or the formal evaluation process but many discussed the feedback from their peers. Content teams meet and discuss how instruction went that day or week. Teacher conversations like this one, “Hey this worked for me, how it is working for you? Try this...” are common for principal Sam’s school. Department chairs and assistant principals also are involved in instructional related conversations. Another principal commented

My job as principal is to keep teachers motivated to do their job well. I do not know about chemistry or AP biology. My job is to keep the ‘want to’ because I want you to want to. You don’t want to be here...I don’t want you to be here if you don’t want to be here... There are schools in other places. (Principal Brittany)

This principal describes her role in supporting instruction by helping teachers stay positive and upbeat about the challenge of educating students. When a teacher is not a good fit, she sees assisting that staff member in finding another job as her responsibility. Another principal shared his confidence with instruction as “I feel comfortable to go into

any classroom, and identify something that is working and something that is not working.” The instructional leader needs to have the knowledge of instruction to be able to conduct the necessary work around improving instruction in his or her building.

### *Quality Professional Development*

The principals detailed a variety of professional learning opportunities they were exposed to by their district. Some of these experiences were developed and delivered within the district, and others were outside of the district. Four principals openly expressed their satisfaction with the professional development they were experiencing from the local school district. One clearly was not felt supported and had a multitude of examples outlining her needs as the instructional leader of her campus. For the most part, the high school principals felt equipped to lead their campus and spoke highly of the support received.

To start, I will begin with the outlier, principal Carma. She described the quality of professional development offered to her by the district was more like “the mantra of the year, the mantra of the time, the program at the moment, and then we do not see any follow-through.” She went to say that “I am an avid reader. And the reason I read is because I need to know what kind of staff development, what kind of spin to put on things to keep teachers motivated, to get kids motivated and that kind of thing.” She did not feel her district knew her clientele or her needs. At times there were initiatives or emphases on great things for teachers and students but the timing has not aligned with her campus needs. “But I can’t just sit around and wait for something. I can’t wait for someone to tell me...I can’t wait. I’ve got to do it now.”

Multiple professional learning opportunities offered in the local school district were shared by the other principals. New principals received mentors as they were hired. This support might be a current principal or even a retired principal from that district. Specific and individual attention was dedicated to assist first-time principals in all the districts. Regular monthly meetings coordinated by the district central office were shared as well as back-to-school large leadership conferences. In one particular district, the leadership conference is open to not just that school district but also others. Principals can bring several staff members from their schools to join them in the learning experience. One of the principals described it as “a conference that is offered to us and that is at our back door.” She attributed the success of district level meetings and conferences to the district central office being in tune with the needs of her as an instructional leader. “Because you at central office may think you know what I need but then I know over here I’m struggling with...So they do a really good job finding out what you need.” This same principal later shared in the interview “I feel there is time to grow instructionally as a leader during the regular meetings for principals. There is time for networking and sharing built in.” During one of the interviews the principal who attended this leadership conference had out his notes as he was planning his campus professional learning events. He was already applying his new learning as he had planned to incorporate the district information at his campus level. Two principals from the same district felt their regular meetings were intended for instructional conversations but using policy and mandates drove the agenda. “We get a lot that is incidental to instruction,” Principal Sam shared. This principal also shared that his instructional

assistant principal brings back relevant instructional information and shares with him and the campus as appropriate. At times principals are invited to attend additional meetings or trainings and they attend when their schedule permits. Principal Sam shared, “We get invited to stuff but we hardly go because we are pulled in so many directions.”

In addition to routine meetings, a few principals conveyed special discussions which will be elaborated on in the next section but simply shared where district central office staff and principals meet together to review instruction, data, or program related topics. These were described as additional opportunities for learning for the principal. The built-in network was in place for several principals, and Principal Miles noted “Sometimes the district splits up the elementary and secondary principals to be specific to the principal needs.”

Direction from the superintendent was divulged in several of the interviews. Most talked about the beginning of every school year event where the superintendent greeted staff and including principals set a tone or direction of the year. This message was carried throughout the year in the monthly meetings, but to start the year off there was an elaborate communication. The superintendent was distinguished as a key player in the professional development of the campus principals.

Networking appears to be built in or a part of the regular meetings in some districts as noted above. One principal shared that in his district, it depends on your personal network as to the networking you might experience. It appears some district central office meetings are trying to include engaging and innovative strategies rather

than the sit-and-get method. Most principals spoke of one strand or path for learning as principals. Principal Sam mentioned that he needed “more options. One of the things that happens when you look at the number of us [principals] and we’re all over the place in terms of our expertise and our experience. So, one of the things that happens to me is I end up sitting through a lot of beginner’s stuff.”

Data-related professional learning appeared to be present and ongoing in the three school districts. One opportunity four principals discussed was the notion of principals just meeting alone, without central office staff members present. One district organizes this more on the informal side with a principal alerting everyone to meet for breakfast before a central office meeting to generate hot topics or discuss current thoughts on various topics. The second district formally plans these meetings called “cluster” meetings. Principals are clumped together based on the demographics/performance of their schools, so it is a small group of like schools. A principal does take notes which are forwarded on to a central office staff member for support. It allows the principals a chance to visit freely, discuss items openly, and then alert the district office as appropriate for possible action or informational purposes. This collaboration appeared to be important to the principals as an alternate way of professional learning for them.

Lastly, book studies were mentioned as possible ways to grow professionally but did not seem to be held as frequently as in the past. Some out-of-district events were distributed to principals from central office as options to attend. Both Principal Corey and Principal Lloyd highly spoke of the summer Harvard Leadership Conference.

Principals from the district attend, and, throughout the year, the central office hosts Adm. U, short for Administrator University, where local principals share learning from conferences. “Some of the best ideas are in our own backyard” (Principal Lloyd).

### *Collaboration*

Principal Brittany describes her partnership with her district central office as “They are good people who want me to be successful. Because they’re investing in me. And so they’re providing me with everything I need.” A variety of teamwork was depicted by the interviewed principals. The need for one another exists, but how the two groups work together to support one another is blurry. As mentioned in the previous section, district and campus meetings are possible ways for collaboration to occur in a productive and learning environment. Collaborative meetings were discussed more frequently during interviews.

All principals attended some type of monthly meeting where principals and district officials meet together. For some, the superintendent has a role during this meeting ranging from continuing the instructional district goals conversation to updating staff on the recent school board meeting. There appears to be a need for “business” type information to be shared. For one school district, this basically is the purpose of their meeting. Most agenda items are strictly related to formality or policy practices. “Monthly meetings with area superintendents are meant to be for instruction or collaboration but they turn out to be more policy driven. We never delve into best practices...” shared Carma. For this reason, the principals in Kacey ISD feel the principals have little opportunity to collaborate with one another or with central office

staff. They did not feel the group of principals had a common instructional language in place. “So our common understanding is we have to figure it out and make it work, no matter what,” Principal Sam added. In contrast, participants from another district that was interviewed described the collaborative meetings as productive, meaningful, and enjoyable. Interestingly principals from this same district also felt the presence and support of central office when they met as principals alone. The group did take minutes, which were forwarded on to the district for input and support. “We are here for you” was the feeling.

Two other types of meetings that were shared included a special meeting held at the end of the school year between campus principals and district central office staff members, specifically the curriculum coordinators. The group reviewed current state assessment data, analyzed them, and then shared practices. Principals openly were able to visit with one another to seek successful practices and ideas from one another. A different principal mentioned she had not even seen how the rest of the district had scored as the district central office did not release that information, let alone hold a valuable debriefing meeting. She shared

We need data on all schools, not just our own for analysis purpose. So if a high school gained twenty points in science, what did they do? What was their focus? So in so gained thirty points with their black population in math, what did they do? That part is not being done. Until that part happens, then we’re not really focused on the learning part that goes along with being exemplary in everything you do.

A principal from another district described collaboration in a different way, not in a formal collaborative meeting with other schools but rather in an individual setting. Someone from central office would meet with him, and after reviewing data, would be able to offer support. They would say something like, “Here are three things we could do for and with you, what would you like us to do?” (Principal Corey).

Another form of support described by Southwest ISD principals was titled Program Studies. These events were meetings held throughout the school year with principals and central office staff that were pertinent to a specific program or content area. The example shared was the recent changes to the high school graduation requirements in Texas. Multiple conversations and dialogue were held to discuss implications for students and schools. The district central office sought input from the high school principals when determining local decisions. Other examples might be time dedicated with the content area curriculum coordinators. The district organizes and makes it a priority for principals to discuss instruction and factors affecting the campuses.

It was noted during the interviews that often initiatives are generated or begin at the district central office and trickle down to the schools. Principal Brittany describes the initiative known as “Mega-Monitoring” that her district embraced last year. The importance of supporting high quality instruction was discussed with principals who had input on the process. Training was provided by the district and all campus level mega-monitoring teams have been trained and are fully implementing the program. This principal discussed the positive outcomes of the district-wide initiative, which has



improved instruction at her campus. The identified walkers complete twenty to twenty-five walk throughs every week as described above in a previous section. This district initiative was supported throughout the campuses and according to this principal, “Our instruction has probably gone through the roof and we would never have to write anything down. We would never have to push one button on that but when I’m in your classroom and you’re being watched, you’re just going to be better.” Another principal described the benefit of simply talking with central office about staffing early during a particular year. “Staffing cuts were hard but we worked through it together. Conversations have not been like this but rather logistical.” About this process, Sam revealed that, rather than the central office just cutting whatever they thought was best and then having the principals figure out how to make it work, conversations were held to work as partners to find a solution.

Another layer of collaboration and partnership was described by Kacey ISD by both principals. The central office staff members appointed support teams to visit certain schools during the spring semester. Both principals agreed that they liked the idea, felt teachers did benefit from the initiative, and wanted the support, but found simple solutions to problems that might have been avoided if possibly during the planning stages they were involved. The timing of the assistance was late in the year, extremely close to the state assessment, TAKS, and some of the funding provided to the schools had strict parameters around it, preventing the some schools from even using the funds. Principal Sam shared

The problems that we're having there stem, again, with resources. And not just monetary resources, but time resources. It's very difficult at my high school for us to get kids to after-school tutorials because a huge number of our kids are involved in some sort of athletics or extracurricular activity...

He went on to share the challenge of finding quality staff to facilitate tutorials before and after school. Usually schools pay teachers twenty dollars per session, but the teachers are getting burned out.

And it's hard to find teachers who are going to work outside the day anymore – beyond what they do anyway for their course – because we've been paying twenty bucks an hour for tutorials in the state of Texas since we had TEAMS. Teachers are burned out on it...the superintendent gave a directive that everybody was to go through their penny bank and find the change in their couch, or whatever; but whatever you could muster up, let's give some more money to campuses to help them out. So, we got some more money.

Money from the district central office came late for this principal, and then it was in the wrong account to use for staff, making it practically impossible to spend. The principal here tried to purchase some resources after the staff did not work out, but the vendor was not on the approved local vendor list, a current initiative of the school district at that time.

So that it keeps coming back to this thing – we don't have enough lead time, and then you have conflicting government rules that mess you up. So, in the midst of all this, we can't find a person. The people we have lined up, we told them we were going to pay them the tutoring rate of twenty dollars an hour, and that comes out to more than the substitute rate. So, while we're in process, the assistant superintendent for human resources lowers the boom and says, "You can't pay these people like this. You have to hire them as subs, and oh, by the way, they have to be fingerprinted..."

And the thing is one of the things that's most frustrating is, the bottom line is, no matter what happens up front, no matter how deep we have to cut the staffing plan in February, when the scores come in, none of those people are around anymore. The only person who's left sitting there talking to the superintendent, or the Board, or whoever, is the principal. His name is on it, and they're looking at you like, "Why didn't you do something?" I'm like, "Well, because your personnel policies tied my hands."

At times when the district central office message is not consistent, that poses challenges on the campus. The partnership is broken or disconnected as the principal tries to determine where the break down is located. Principals from this district shared that one's personal connection to the district central office might help if one knows someone in central office.

One final form of district central office collaboration with the campus principals was shared from Principal Corey. He described that while he was working on his master student schedule one spring for the following year, someone at the district central office also reviewed it. They noticed that most math classes were being offered later in the day. They mentioned to the principal if it was possible to shift a few classes to the morning that would provide possibly some more optimal learning time for students. In this district they were working from the premise students perform better in the morning; therefore, math is critical as it is assessed by the state, and maybe moving some classes to the morning would be beneficial. He was greatly appreciative of the information and made adjustments. This was not dictated to him, nor did he feel he had done anything incorrectly. He simply had an additional layer of support and help provided to him for his school. Another perspective on central office collaboration and support from Principal Carma: “I want [central office] you to tell me. You come over here and tell me and show me and I’m going to do it. Because I don’t want to be the campus that keeps us from being exemplary. I’ll do whatever I have to do.”

### *Connections*

Principals freely discussed the existing partnerships currently in place in their districts. These connections had positive impacts on the schools and are worthy of noting. “The best support from the district is support that flows through the campus to the teacher kind of seamlessly” (Principal Corey). Two-way dialogue allows for the exchange of ideas, the discussion of possible obstacles, and collaborative thoughts to build upon one another. Unmistakably, the principals need for the superintendent to

continue providing a clear expectation for instructional goals. “Keep us clear on things, instructionally speaking,” Principal Miles stated. Another principal from that same district said the superintendent “is very clear on expectations-clear direction-at beginning of the year and then monthly at our meetings. We get it a lot.” The consistent message from the district central office so that a unified voice is heard throughout the district is necessary. Staying in tune with campus needs is critical. Principals support the district central offices using a variety of data when making decisions as well as continuation of principals having networking opportunities among themselves. Several principals mentioned the power of the district central office providing encouragement. The pats on the back and verbal praise go a long way. Honoring the principals’ time is greatly appreciated. Capital ISD organizes the principal meetings into business meetings and then program specific meetings to allow for necessary time for all tasks. Staffing continues to be a challenge, and the continued conversations about possible ways to support schools are needed. Principal Miles felt that

Providing additional administrators is needed. So much of our job is dictated by whatever crisis is at hand, whether that is a student failed their class and the mother got angry, or a car getting towed, or a player not starting on varsity volleyball. The parents show up. They want to meet and talk immediately. So... Other things do not get done when there are these kinds of situations. So they do get up to the principal. But you turn around. You are the principal. It’s your school. The buck stops here, so you can’t delegate a lot of that. But I would think if, again, it’s hard but

if we had more administrative support on campus, I think you could free up my time to be more of an instructional leader.

This principal went on to say that “America is the only country that does not prepare or allow for proper teacher preparation. “More time to prepare, provide feedback, reflect, look at best practices, work with their peers, improve their teaching so the hour they’re in front of the students is the most effective hour there is.”

Interviews revealed that the district central office needs to continue being understanding and show support to schools. Listening to the principals is crucial. An example of this that was shared from Southwest ISD. Principal Lloyd shared that, “Sometimes in everyone’s trying to do their job well that pieces get kind of lost and if you’ve got folks in central which we do right now that are elementary heavy, I think making sure that you are understanding and bringing principals and associate principals to the table in some of that planning is important.” Listening to principals is key.

### *Communication*

Several principals shared that the key for smooth operations lay in communication practices. Communication is delivered in a variety of ways including both verbal, written, in person, electronically, or on the phone. Principal Lloyd proudly shared that he felt comfortable contacting his supervisor at any time for advice or assistance. Of the six principals interviewed, three of them felt communication overall from the district level was fairly good, two viewed communication was continuing to improve, and only one person said it is not good.

As the instructional leader, principals felt strongly the message being shared from a school district, a campus, or a classroom should be a consistent meaning. Principal Carma shared “I think that sometimes one person’s doing one thing and another person is doing something else and somebody else is doing something else. So we’re not always getting the same message.” Principal Corey, who felt communication, is getting better in his district, shared

I think sometimes departments of the central office function all as separate entities and when that happens that's not always good. They need to have some communication between their groups because what will happen is, and it's happened in the past is, one group will set up an initiative and that's just one thing. And then another group will set up an initiative and it's one thing and another group. If you talk to them they'll say well we only gave you one thing, but by the time I get done I have got half a dozen things on my plate and it's really difficult to implement them all at one time. One of the things our system has done, and it's been from feedback from the principals all the way to the superintendent, is we really need to coordinate our programming so that we're not implementing too many things at one time.

It is critical for the central office to coordinate and plan collaboratively so that campuses are not overwhelmed with responsibilities or tasks. In large districts it seems harder to do this, but, listening to this principal, it is evident. They find it difficult to implement when initiatives or tasks are overlapping and even in competition with one another.

Communication is vital from the central office to the campuses and with teachers, students, and community. Communication processes take time to establish and are not just in one type of format. Various methods are necessary as different types of communication reach people in an assortment of ways. This principal noted continuous feedback from principals and community members assist in perfecting the process.

These eight themes (school district focus; instructional leader toolbox; effective use of data; deployment of curriculum and instruction; quality professional development; collaboration; connections; and communication), answer how the six successful high school principals interviewed in this study perceive the instructional support from their district central offices. The leadership dimension, by Robinson et al., (2008), had four sub-components which were elaborated on and aligned with current research in Chapter II. Each one will be explained and supported through the lens of the high school principals as shared in the interviews.

The first sub-component, leaders actively involved in the collegial discussion of instructional matters, including how instruction impacts student achievement was discussed in every interview. Principals shared specific ways they are involved vigorously to support instruction like designating required planning time for teachers by course, facilitating or leading student-data discussions, and personally being involved in how classroom instruction looks through walk-throughs and follow-up conversations. These principals keep engaged with instructional matters and assist in making the connections to student achievement regularly.



Secondly, the next component, leaders are active in oversight and coordinating of instructional program dovetails with the first one. Principals mentioned the need for district direction specifically in the curriculum and instructional areas. With this guidance, the principals all assumed their role of coordinating the instructional programs differently. For some, being the budgetary source was a way for coordinating the instructional programs while others responded that overseeing the district expectations was their role. Many of the school districts had district-wide initiatives going on which kept all schools on the same page to some degree. An example shared was the Mega-Monitoring done in Capital ISD. Another example was Differentiation in Kacey ISD. The principals saw their role in keeping their campus on that same page and still focused on meeting the needs of their teachers and students.

The third component titled, degree of leader involvement in classroom observation and subsequent feedback, generated similar responses across all principals in the three school districts. Every principal was clear on the evaluation of teaching and varied some on the way they go about providing feedback to teachers. Some principals included other teachers as means for teachers to seek professional input on their pedagogy. They all had a district practice in place for the formal evaluation of teachers and approximately half of them had additional ways teachers received feedback relative to their teaching. This area appeared to be implemented differently and to varying degrees at each of the schools but they all had a process in place.

The final component to the planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum leadership dimension was to ensure staff systematically monitored

student progress. Several principals discussed data systems their school districts had in place for monitoring student progress based on grades or state assessments. A few of them also talked about how their campus has developed various support plans so students do not fall through the cracks. This included retesting practices, during-the-day instructional support, mentoring, tutoring, and guidance counselor check-ups. They examined multiple sources of data on students and tried to allow students numerous opportunities to be successful. Principals individually also managed data and monitored student progress differently. One principal shared the extensive data analysis she personally conducts and another principal described the need to have the most important information/data on one sheet. The overarching research question developed to design this study, “What are high school principal perceptions of support given to them by district central office administrators in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum?” has been addressed. The feedback from the principals is consistent with the literature and highlights the importance of the instructional leader in schools.

### **Chapter Summary**

All six participants are principals of large, successful, suburban high schools. They range in their expertise, experience, and leadership styles. They all need assistance from their school district central office leaders to meet the demands of public education today. This study examined the instructional leadership support role, specifically in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum, of district central office leaders from the perspective of six successful high school principals.

Eight themes emerged from the interviews conducted which centered around the district central office support of the principal as the instructional leader. Specific questions related to instructional leadership and knowledge of curriculum and instruction were used. The findings were categorized into the following categories: the emphasis from the school district, the instructional leader toolbox, use of data, deployment of curriculum and instruction, professional development, collaboration between the district central office and campus principals, district central office connections, and district communication.

With these flourishing principals, specific areas of support were identified. Learning was the focus in every school district. They named numerous skills and characteristics that were necessary in a successful instructional leader at the high school level. Specifically having a clear direction and big picture vision of the school was critical. Principals need to have a strong foundation in curriculum, instruction, and data analysis. Working with people, empowering others, and being a good listener also surfaced. Hiring quality staff members and trusting your staff deemed vital to the school. Principals must be visible, flexible, and balance the managing and leading of the building.

Extensive use of data to inform decision making was prevalent in all schools as well as a quality aligned curriculum. Instruction was the purpose of the work at the school and the role of the principal was to support the curriculum and instructional needs of teachers. Principals in this study varied on their feelings of district level support of professional development. Undoubtedly, professional learning was important but a

couple of principals felt their district could grow in this area to support them as the instructional leader at the high school level. A variety of ways the school district central office administrators and campus principals collaborated were shared. In most cases a majority of the principals agreed or had similar responses with minor outliers. It appeared networking, leadership, and clear instructional expectations were imperatives. School districts host monthly meetings, beginning of the year events, and curricular specific opportunities for collaboration to occur. Superintendents were identified as a key component in delivering and setting the instructional expectations. Several examples of policy, compliance, or lack of time/planning on the part of district central office leaders posed a challenge to campus principals were shared. Communication from the district level received similar responses from interviewed participants. Most of the six principals were in agreement the significance of communication. Clarity and effective communication was essential for the schools. Conclusions and recommendations will follow in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Summary of the Study**

This research study was designed to provide insight in the area of central office instructional leadership supports in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum, from the perspective of high school principal. With increasing standards and high student performance expectations coupled with strict federal and state accountability measures, it is impossible for the high school principal to bear the sole responsibility of meeting the needs of their students, staff, and community alone. Glasman and Heck (1992) described that the leadership role of the principal has changed drastically in the past twenty years. The intense demands placed on principals are forcing change. An obvious place to look for supporting principals is the district central office. The review of literature revealed the district central office is not widely studied (Foley, 2001; Fullan, 1985; Harris, 1998). Each school district is organized differently and operates uniquely. According to MacIver and Farley (2003), the support of central office is essential in the areas of building capacity and can be a critical factor in school improvement. Therefore, the primary aim of this study was to provide insight and a deeper understanding of how successful high school principals view support from the central office as the instructional leader specifically in the areas planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum.

The key concepts examined in the study included the exigent local, state, and federal accountability actions educators are faced with today, the demanding role of the campus principal, importance of the instructional leader, the purpose and function of the district central office, and the possible partnership between the district central office and campus principal. Research was guided by a single overarching question.

What are high school principal perceptions of support given to them by district central office administrators in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum?

Qualitative research was selected for this study to allow for deep and thorough investigation of the principals' beliefs regarding the central office instructional leadership support. The notion of multiple realities and the study of the details on how principals are supported by the district central office was the heart of this study dictated the need for a qualitative study (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 1993).

Participants were selected based on set criteria. Only current high school principals of large and successful schools as determined by the Texas Education Agency in suburban school districts were considered. After appropriate university IRB approval and specific district research approval, two principals from each school district were selected for participation. They were personally interviewed individually by the researcher during a two-month period of time. The interview protocol used was based on the general research question and the Robinson et al. (2008) leadership study. Interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed for analysis. Each interview session was held at the location and time determined by the participant and the total length of

interviews was approximately six hours in length with over eighty pages of transcriptions captured.

The six participants responded to the interview questions answering with personal narratives. Peering into their leadership style and viewpoint was enlightening. Overall, most of the principals felt supported as the instructional leader by their district central office. They have professional learning opportunities within and outside of their school district. The importance of networking and collaborating as principals is viewed as an excellent way to grow professionally as the instructional leader and was specifically mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews. For the most part, their school district had district-wide curriculum in place and was believed to be followed with integrity. Learning was a top priority for the schools and the district central office seemed to be helpful according to two-thirds of the participants. During the data analysis phase of the study, eight themes emerged. These include the importance of the school district focus, instructional leader toolbox, effective use of data, deployment of curriculum and instruction; quality professional development, collaboration, connections, and communication.

Throughout this study, revelations materialized as more information was acquired either through research, collection of data, or during the synthesis segment. Initially, the work of Robinson et al. (2008) was used to frame the study which discusses the various types of leadership exercised by principals. This study was the first meta-analysis on instructional leadership which revealed student outcomes were three to four times that of transformational leadership. Their study looked initially at twenty-seven

leadership studies and then narrowed the research to only twelve. This work entailed the relationship of leadership with students' academic outcome. This particular dimension was one of five that surfaced and it includes leaders involved in discussions about how instruction impacts student achievement, leaders being active in the oversight and coordination of instructional programs, leaders' level of involvement of classroom observation and subsequent feedback, and that the leader ensures their staff systemically monitors student progress.

Once instructional leadership was determined as a critical role of the principal, numerous studies directly related to the correlation of the instructional leader and student achievement were examined. Universal characteristics of the effective instructional leadership practices in the nine studies were compiled. In general, five commonalities were present in them all:

- a) focusing on curriculum;
- b) focusing on instruction;
- c) feedback, monitoring, assisting, and evaluating teachers;
- d) professional development; and
- e) communication and commitment to goals.

From there, a dedicated inspection of effective district central offices was conducted. Common practices were collected from the fourteen central office research studies. With school districts varying in size (small, medium, large) and type (urban, suburban, rural), how school districts are organized and structured fluctuates greatly as well. These best practices were analyzed and overall the collective practices include:



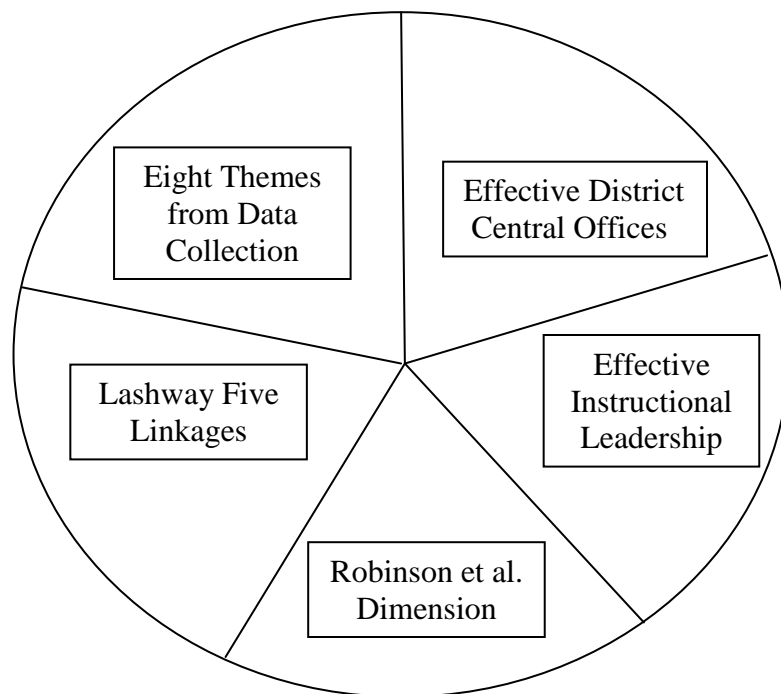
- a) policy making;
- b) professional learning;
- c) foundational components of curriculum and instruction; and
- d) non-instructional responsibilities.

A significant component reviewed after identifying characteristics of principals as the instructional leader and effective district central offices included work by Lashway (2002). His work revealed connections that could be applied to district level offices and campuses. Specifically identified were five linkages present in effective organizations. He claimed that in an organization, connection between the main central office and the sub-offices are critical. Below are the five linkages:

- a) resource linkages encompassing material, technological, and human capital;
- b) structural linkages as in federal, state, or district policies relative to reform;
- c) communication linkages both formal and informal;
- d) relational linkages, including professional relationships within and across the system; and
- e) ideological linkages reflecting the shared values, vision, and goals and what constitutes good instructional practice.

As a final point, the successful high school principals shared their insights during the interview regarding their perceived support from the district central office as the instructional leader. As noted, eight themes materialized from this data collected. So, as the researcher, I examined the collected research on effective school districts including suggestions of what to do and not do from the district perspective. Also, a close look

was given again to the extensive literature focusing on instructional leadership specifically identifying the specific tasks, responsibilities, and efforts of school leaders. These three pieces were coupled with the work of Laskey (2002) on how organizations best operate, and, of course, this study was grounded with one of the leadership dimensions of the Robinson et al. (2008) study. Deep synthesis occurred with these various pieces overlaid with the eight explicit themes surfaced by interviews in the data analysis process. Figure 1 represents the fusion of all these components and serve as an integrating framework in the writing of the conclusions.



**Figure 1**

**Foundational Components of Study Synthesis**

## **Conclusions**

Instructional leadership is essential to effective schools with campus principals leading the way (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Principals are under a great deal of pressure and have overwhelming responsibilities. Fulfilling the role of the instructional leader is often difficult and not necessarily natural for all campus principals. They need assistance and support from the district central office to accomplish the educational goals of today. This dissertation study added to the knowledge base specifically on how the district central office supports high school principals as instructional leaders on six large suburban campuses. Three overarching concepts surfaced from the fusion of the literature review with the data analysis. Each concept will be further explored entwined with the literature and study findings. These overarching conclusions are:

- a) setting high learning expectations;
- b) focusing on curriculum and instruction; and
- c) establishing district-campus partnerships.

### *Setting High Learning Expectations*

It is no surprise that having high expectations is an overarching theme developed from this study. Having high expectations is not a new concept, although it became popular in the 1980s as it was one of the Effective Schools Correlates (Edmonds, 1979), and it is supported by a plethora of research (Brewer, 1993; Harris, 1998; Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1995; Smith & Andrews, 1989; Tedlie, 1985). Brookover and Lezotte (1979) claimed instructionally effective schools have higher student achievement expectations in comparison to other not-as-effective schools. These

elevated sets of standards create an environment where achievement and strong performance is expected and valued by school staff, parents, and students. One principal interviewed in the current study described high expectations as the various support levels built in her school so that all students were academically excelling and adding to their knowledge base. She depicted the importance for learning standards to be high, as did the other principals interviewed. It is not acceptable for students to stop making progress. She shared “Oh well, 70% of my kids passed. Only 70%? What about those other 30%?” Having high standards for all students keeps the focus on improvement and leaves little room for settling. Absolutely, having high standards is important.

Learning is the key for this theme and the concept of setting high expectations focused on learning must be emphasized. Learning should be viewed as valuable and significant to everyone in the school district and community. From the superintendent and school board throughout the district, focusing on learning should be considered vital and taken seriously. It’s not just about having high expectations and hoping everyone does better. Learning directly needs to be as one of the prominent goals of the district and schools. Across the literature having high standards and a focus on learning is acknowledged (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979). Rick DuFour (2002) stated, “When learning becomes the preoccupation of the school, when all the school’s educators examine the efforts and initiatives of the school through the lens of their impact on learning, the structure and culture of the school begin to change in substantive ways” (p. 13). Schools and districts that prioritize learning and establish high expectations develop clear and specific goals, make financial decisions based on needs

of students, and support instruction. The goals represent a shared view of the district/campus priorities and reflect the main work of the organization. Specifically, there should be academic goals signaling learning is important for students and adults. Administrators at the district central office and on campuses have easy access to and use frequently relative data to support the progress of the identified goals. These expectations are understandable to teachers, principals, district central office administrators, and parents. Student performance is supported and expected at all levels of the school district including campuses and central office. Learning is essential and heavily supported district-wide.

Reforming districts, according to McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) categorize five key conditions need to be in place for improvement to occur:

- a) a system approach to reform;
- b) learning community at the central office level;
- c) coherent focus on teaching and learning;
- d) a stance of supporting professional learning and instructional improvement; and
- e) data-based inquiry and accountability. (p. 10)

Having high learning expectations for all students ensuring advancement for each student certainly incorporates a systemic approach. This involves all levels of the district, is focused on teaching and learning as well as instructional improvement, and requires the use of data. A dedication to high quality professional development is critical for teachers and administrators. It requires the attention of the entire district.

Instruction that focuses on the mastery of specific skills and is structured to promote a high level of success results in higher self-expectations among students. Policies that require students to complete homework on a regular basis, protect instructional time, and promote the coverage of substantial content in the curriculum also communicate high expectations for students (Brookover, Schweitzer, Schneider, et al., 1978).

### *Focusing on Curriculum and Instruction*

The research is saturated with support arguing that the learning experience for students is determined by the quality of the instruction facilitated by the classroom teacher (Blase & Blase, 1999; Brophy & Good, 1986; Marzano, Pickering, Pollock, 2003; Rockoff, 2004; Sanders & Horn, 1994). The classroom teacher heavily influences the quality of learning for students. McLaughlin & Talbert (2003) assert that the most promising strategy for school improvement is building the capacity of school personnel for enhanced instruction. One definition of effective teaching is “a set of decisions about the use of a variety of classroom materials and methods used to achieve certain learning goals” (Glickman, 1991, p. 6). In order for this to occur, schools and districts need to focus on curriculum and instruction.

First, a quality, aligned curriculum must be easily accessible for teachers. The curriculum needs to be organized for teachers specifically outlining the learning objectives, several supporting resources, and sample prepared lessons. Teachers are limited on time and to have as much of the work organized for them will allow them to focus more on designing the highest quality personalized lesson to meet the needs of

their students. Secondly, having clear instructional expectations is necessary to ensure the identified standards are being implemented effectively.

Several subcomponents need to be mentioned in relation to focusing on curriculum and instruction: collaborative instructional planning and pedagogical feedback, monitoring of student performance, and professional learning. To begin, successful teachers reflect upon their work and determine the level of learning mastered by their students. They need a strong skill set that allows them to make meaningful adjustments before, during, and after instruction. Fullan (1985) is explicit regarding the importance of principals interacting with teachers around the notion of curriculum and instruction. Having deep knowledge in the best instructional practices is critical. Ideally, teachers working in small collaborative teams should have the opportunity to prepare for instruction. Teachers should focus on student learning and need to receive specific feedback regarding their professional practice and pedagogy frequently. Principals need to supervise yet support teachers by giving this specific pedagogical feedback to them. One principal in the current study described the positive impact of their district wide initiative to support instruction. They called it “mega-monitoring,” but the idea was teachers would experience and feel a tremendous amount of instructional support through frequent classroom visitors who viewed instruction in action. At this campus, they had a team of over twenty staff members that regularly walked classrooms giving teachers feedback. She said, “This initiative has taken classroom instruction to the next level.” Focusing on curriculum and instruction is imperative for improvement.

In addition to collaborative planning and specific feedback, teachers need to base instructional decisions according to how students are performing in class. Monitoring student progress is imperative with the limited instructional time available and the varied rates students acquire learning. Teachers need to access student data easily and frequently so that they see how students are performing, coupled with their daily observations so that they can collaborate on possible future instruction including new learning, interventions or remediation needed. Often this might require guidance or support from other staff members at the school, maybe the reading specialist, the nurse, and so forth.

Finally, in order to focus on curriculum and instruction, a high-quality professional development model must be in place for teachers, principals, and central office administrators. An example would be principals need professional guidance to understand the essential science practices the district has adopted in order to guide teacher feedback, ensure the alignment of purchasing resources, and implement professional practices.

Instructional leaders focus on curriculum and instruction. They have a diverse personal “bag of tricks” or skill set equipping them to support instruction. The principals who participated in the study developed an instructional leadership toolbox which, according to them, would include a leader:

- a) having a clear vision or focus;
- b) being a good listener;
- c) building strong relationships;



- d) being personable;
- e) having access to and use data;
- f) experiencing and designing aligned professional learning;
- g) having knowledge of finance;
- h) being current on organization issues; and
- i) having strong knowledge in the areas of curriculum and instruction.

The reality is to focus on curriculum and instruction, school leaders and district central office leaders need to empower the instructional leadership attributes in others. Teachers are key players in this process as well. Glickman (1991) goes as far to say “the principal of a successful school is not the instructional leader but the coordinator of teachers as instructional leaders” (p. 7). Making the connection to central office administrators, an U.S. Education 2005 publication discussed the central office leaders’ expanding their traditional roles to include teaching and learning improvements. “Priorities should be shifting toward instructional issues that will impact classroom instruction and student achievement” (p. 2). “The measure of school worth is not how students score on standardized achievement tests but rather the learning they can display in authentic or real settings.” (Glickman, 1991, p. 8).

#### *Establishing District-Campus Partnerships*

The final overarching theme developed in this study was that of establishing a collaborative partnership between the district central office and campus principals. The challenge is clear. Campus principals are in need of assistance in overcoming the hurdles faced in the education system and meeting the diverse needs of our students

today. In the past, the district central office has primarily operated as fiscal or administrative pass-throughs for federal and state initiatives, according to Honig, (2008). Now, district central office administrators need to more directly support campus principals on behalf of student achievement. District central office administrators “face unprecedented demands to become key supporters of efforts to improve teaching and learning district-wide” (Honig, 2008, p. 627). The work of Pajak and Glickman (1989) also illustrates that central office supervisors can be key figures in stimulating and facilitating efforts to maintain and improve the quality of instruction.

A partnership means there is a trusting and collaborative relationship guided by the shared values and goals of the district. Everyone understands the purpose of the organization and sees how their role is essential in the educational process. This type of leadership begins and stems from the leader of the school district. The work of the district is grounded in the idea of high learning expectations and research-based practices related to curriculum and instruction adopted by the school district. A true partnership builds upon the strong and open relationships within and outside the district. There is a close teamwork that exists between the various parties like the district central office and the campus principals, or the campus principals and the classroom teachers. Each group has individual and joint specific rights and responsibilities. The key words here are the close cooperation and joint rights and responsibilities. Both groups are involved and work together. Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, and Newton in 2010 stated

Central offices and the people who work in them are not simply part of the background noise in school improvement. Rather, school district central office administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout the public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements. (p. i)

It is important for central office administrators to truly focus on the instructional needs of the schools. Direct and explicit support is possible with strong leaders partnering with principals. The sharing of responsibilities is possible through a trusting partnership. Honig et al. (2008), suggested a transformation of the district central office to include school district partnerships involving:

- a) learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals' instructional leadership focus;
- b) assistance to the central office-principal partnerships;
- c) reorganizing and re-culturing of each central office unit, to support the central office-principal partnerships and teaching and learning improvement;
- d) stewardship of the overall central office transformation process; and
- e) use of evidence throughout the central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools. (p. iii)

Purposeful collaboration between parties would comprise detailed discussion on how to avoid obvious barriers as outlined in the 2010 publication titled *Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement* by Honig et al.

This national study conducted in three school districts indentified specific obstacles including:

- a) school relationships seen as low priorities;
- b) communication based on directives, not dialogue; and
- c) central office staff lack expertise around teaching and learning. (p. 17)

The collaboration discussion would be grounded in concepts connecting the central office and campuses as suggested by Johnson and Chrispeels in 2010. They include having a trusting relationship between the district central office and the campuses. They claim it is necessary. They also feel effective communication was critical to the organization as well as a hared belief in student achievement goals. There needed to be agreement on how increased in student achievement would be accomplished with clear directives following and opportunities for professional development in place.

During the present research study, several principals referred to the separate or disconnected work of their central office. The effect on the principals was negative and was present in all three participating school districts. Specific examples shared included budget decisions, staffing, instructional support including materials/resources, and assessment. Marsh et al. (2005) believed that the district central office should be providing teachers and administrators with the skills, knowledge, and resources needed to help all students meet high academic standards, which is consistent with Cox (1983) who stated “central office staff might well be the linchpins of school improvement efforts, linking the external assisters and the building level administrators and teachers.

They appear to be the most appropriate local sources of assistance in actually new practices."

In closing, the three overarching and connected themes of this study, setting high learning expectations, focusing on curriculum and instruction, and establishing district-campus partnerships are monumental for student success. Educational efforts dedicated to these concepts can improve and reform education. The principals in this study support the notion revealed by Corbett and Wilson (1992) about the responsibility of the district central office is to remove 'the luck of the draw' or the luck factor students face when they come to school. Students should be entitled to the best education no matter whom they receive for a teacher or what school they attend. Structures need to be established district-wide for the sake all students. "Improving instruction across city schools exceeds the capacity of any one institution, making it critical that people working on reforms at different levels and in different settings have the means to pool their expertise" (Burch & Spillane, 2004, p. 29).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

This study adds value to the knowledge base about how central office administrators can support high school principals as the instructional leader. This critical information will allow for a deeper understanding of instructional support that is so greatly needed to improve student performance and achievement. The main purpose of this study has been accomplished by uncovering specific ways high school principals as the instructional leader, specifically in the areas of planning, coordinating, and in the evaluation of curriculum and instruction need support from district central office

administrators. Additional insight and a deeper understanding of high school principals needs as the instructional leader have been provided in this study. This is of course, vital to district central office and campus principals as well. Below is a comprehensive list of recommendations for practice based on this study.

- 1) Clear and specific learning goals need to be identified for school districts and learning must be emphasized and considered a priority by all staff employed in the school district. Decisions made at all levels should reflect this focus.
- 2) The district should have an aligned curriculum easily accessible, collaborative instructional planning, and quality instructional tools available.
- 3) Principals reserve quality time dedicated to talking with teachers and central office administrators about instruction. This includes evaluations, pedagogical feedback, and student progress monitoring.
- 4) District central office administrators should focus their efforts directly to teaching and learning.
- 5) The central office should coordinate as many of the non-instructional tasks as possible to take the load off of principals. Any additional staffing available should be given to principals to free them up to focus on instruction. Additional staffing might be for administrative tasks (like an administrative principal) or for instruction (like an instructional principal or instructional coach) to assist the principal.
- 6) Collaborative meetings between the district central office and principals should be regular with purposeful instructional topics are discussed.

- 7) The district central office should provide staff high quality professional learning equipping them with the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources needed to meet the high academic standards established by the district.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This main focus of this study was to add clarity on how successful high school principals perceive their support as the instructional leader specifically in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teacher and the curriculum by the district central office administrators. This study focused on large high school principals' perspectives. Other studies could be conducted to see how results compare.

- 1) This study targeted the perception of the high school principal. It could be replicated at either the junior high level and/or elementary level to see if the level of principal made a difference in terms of instructional support needed. Do elementary principals feel the same way as high school principals? Investigating a different school level might allow for a diverse perspective. Heck (1992) has completed a study revealing that secondary principals spend less time on instructional tasks than elementary principals. This would be a connected but different study.
- 2) Does the size of the district matter? Here I examined large school districts which all had over thirty thousand students. Knowing the size of school districts varies, it might be valuable to see how districts that are not large support instructional leadership. Support from the district central offices varies. Examining a smaller or even larger school district would provide a variation on this study.

- 3) Taking a look at other types of district could provide value as well. Investigating the instructional support in rural/urban school districts or low performing campuses/districts could be explored.
- 4) Interviewing district central office leaders and compare results to perceptions of high school principals would be a good comparison study. Do the district central office leaders respond similarly or different as the campus principals?
- 5) Quantitative methods could be used to gather particular information and then follow-up with qualitative practices for the personal insights.
- 6) An intense look at a school district and perception of the instructional support might also fit a case study design. An intense process of multiple interviews conducted over time, the examination of school district documents, and observation of instructional practices might all add insight to the study.
- 7) Studying the perception of instructional leadership by the various leadership levels like the superintendent, district central office administrators, principals, teachers, and students would be a different perspective.
- 8) Another study could be conducted to explore the differences between genders of principals. Research by Shakeshaft in 1989 and Hall, Bickman, and Davis in 1996 reveal differences in leadership styles and actions.

### **Personal Insights**

Through this experience, I have discovered the power of qualitative research and the importance of developing sound methods preparation. If I was to participate or design a study again, I would like to include a written component for each interviewee.



Possibly this might have been a written survey prior to the study or even a second interview including campus documents supporting the instructional leadership practices discussed. All data was collected at the one and only interview so possibly another collection format might have been helpful. Maybe this would have allowed for more information or deeper insights. After completing the data analysis process, I might have organized the interview questions differently. As a current district central office administrator myself, I personally have grown. I realize the benefits of working collaboratively with the campuses and see how I can adapt the work in my office to benefit student achievement. I can bridge the work making the necessary connections and sharing in the accountability. Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, and Porter (2010) stated it best when they defined leadership as “shared work and commitments that shape the direction of a school or district and their learning improvement agendas, and that engage effort and energy in pursuit of those agendas” (p. 4).

### **Chapter Summary**

According to the research, principals at one time were the managerial leader positions focusing on traditional tasks of running a facility and managing people (Cuban, 1988; Eisner, 2002; Peterson, 1999). The importance of focusing on instruction and instructional tasks did become more prevalent in the 1980's. Principals focused on setting clear goals, allocating resources for instruction, managing curriculum, monitored lesson plans, and evaluated teachers. Lashway (2002) argued that now, the instructional role is even richer, more expansive than that. Debra King (2002) offered that the deeper involvement is in the core technology of teaching and learning. Principals need to have

more sophisticated views of professional learning and emphasize the use of data to make decisions. Southworth (2002) supported this belief stating “instructional leadership is about leading teachers’ professional learning” (p. 89). Principals should not bear the pressures and responsibility of educating our children alone. Schools districts vary in size and operate uniquely but all exist for the purpose of learning. The district central office can be of assistance to the schools.

The current research study included the interviewing of six high school principals who were asked to respond to how their district central office supports them as being the instructional leader at their school specifically in the areas of planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. Based on the literature on instructional leadership, the district central office, and the role of the campus principal, effective practices and strategies were examined. The synthesis of participants’ responses and current research evolved three conclusions and numerous recommendations for educators. Schmoker (1994) described it well when he introduced the term “Tipping Point” in his article about educational reform. Education is at a crossroads and in need of change. Through working together as a collaborative and active team, the district central office and campus principals can create a structure in place that will positively impact learning. Learning will be at the forefront of the core work and the district will operate from a set of clear and specific goals. “The core leadership challenge of the coming millennium is to build schools in which every child can grow and every teacher can make a difference” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 141).

Therefore, teachers will be involved in the decision-making processes continuously monitoring student progress through the use of data. Teachers would be using the viable and dynamic curriculum, designing/delivering outstanding instruction, and be provided on-going, relevant professional learning. The district would have support structures in place for administrators and teachers by setting high learning standards, focusing on curriculum and instruction and establishing a district-campus partnership.

Ultimately, the provision of instructional leadership can be viewed as a responsibility that is shared by a community of people both within and outside the school. Principals initiate, encourage, and facilitate the accomplishment of instructional improvement according to their own abilities, styles, and contextual circumstances. They still need a lot of help from others if improvement is to become the norm. (De Bevoise, 1984, p. 20)

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## APPENDIX 1

### PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

**TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY  
DIVISION OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE STUDIES - OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE**

1186 TAMU, General Services Complex  
College Station, TX 77843-1186  
750 Agronomy Road, #3500

979.458.1467  
FAX 979.862.3176  
<http://researchcompliance.tamu.edu>

Human Subjects Protection Program

Institutional Review Board

**DATE:** 11-Mar-2010

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** LAWSON, KIMBERLY KELLEHER  
77843-3578

**FROM:** Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board

**SUBJECT:** Initial Review

**Protocol  
Number:** 2010-0150

**Title:** High School Principals' Perceptions of Central Office Administrator  
Instructional Support

**Review  
Category:** Exempt from IRB Review

It has been determined that the referenced protocol application meets the criteria for exemption and no further review is required. However, any amendment or modification to the protocol must be reported to the IRB and reviewed before being implemented to ensure the protocol still meets the criteria for exemption.

**This determination was based on the following Code of Federal Regulations:**  
(<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm>)

45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior, unless: (a) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers

linked to the subjects; and (b) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

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**Provisions:**

This electronic document provides notification of the review results by the Institutional Review Board.

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **INFORMATION SHEET**

#### **High School Principals' Perceptions of Central Office Administrator Instructional Support**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you, as a prospective research study participant, information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research.

You have been asked to participate in a research study designed to gain insight to the area of central office instructional leadership support from the high school principal perception. With the increasing standards and high student performance expectations coupled with strict federal and state accountability measures, it is impossible for the high school principal to bear the sole responsibility of meeting the needs of their students, staff, and community without further support. Central Office is a critical factor in school improvement. The primary aim of this study is to provide insight and a deep understanding how central office administrators influence and support high school principals specifically in the area of instructional leadership.

You were selected to be a possible participant because you are principal of a large Houston area high school which has been rated by the TEA of recognized or higher.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to provide me a convenient time where I could ask you a series of questions related to instructional leadership. There is nothing to prepare ahead of time for this interview. The interview will take approximately one hour and I will meet you at a location of your choice.

Your participation will be audio recorded.

#### **What are the risks involved in this study?**

The risks associated with this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

#### **What are the possible benefits of this study?**

Not only will this study allow for you as an educator to reflect on personal and district level instructional leadership, I will share the findings of my study with you if you desire. This study will add value to how central office administrators can support high school principals in instructional leadership. This critical information will allow for a



deeper understanding of instructional support that is so greatly needed to improve student performance/achievement.

**Do I have to participate?**

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University being affected.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential and information gathered will be protected. 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 I am the only person who will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and again, I am the only person who will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept until the doctoral requirements have been met and then erased.

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact me, Kim Lawson at 832-971-5946 or by email [kim.lawson21@yahoo.com](mailto:kim.lawson21@yahoo.com).

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu).

**Participation**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. If you would like to be in the study, please contact me Kim Lawson at 832-971-0427 or [kim.lawson21@yahoo.com](mailto:kim.lawson21@yahoo.com). Thank you in advance for your assistance.

### APPENDIX 3

#### PRINCIPAL LETTER

Dear Principal,

I am currently working on completing my doctoral degree from Texas A&M University. I have designed my dissertation study and am seeking input from high school principals. This study focuses on the perception high school principals have in regard to the instructional leadership support provided by central office administrators. The purpose of the study is to see what high school principals believe they need from the district office in terms of being an effective instructional leader for their campus.

This study will be conducted with a total of 6 high school principals in three, large Houston area school districts. You are one of the high school principals selected from your district. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate. Although your district has been selected for this study, your individual responses will remain confidential throughout this study and anytime thereafter. Your anonymity is assured.

If you choose to participate, I will schedule an interview time that is convenient for you in the next month. We will need approximately one hour for the interview. For data collection purposes, this interview will be audio-taped. Your feedback is important and critical to my study.

Both university and federal guidelines have been followed in the design phase of this study. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have. Please know there are no foreseeable risks in this study. Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to meeting you.

Any questions may be addressed to me. I can be reached at:

Kim Lawson, 832-971-5946

kim.lawson21@yahoo.com

Respectfully,

Kim Kelleher Lawson

Doctoral Candidate, Texas A&M University

## **APPENDIX 4**

### **SPECIFIC PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

#### **I. Support as the Instructional Campus Leader**

- Can you give me an example of principal professional development your district offers to support you as the instructional leader of your campus? Does CO provide for high quality professional learning to improve principal leadership capacity?
- What can CO do to assist you in being more instructionally focused leader? How can you improve your job performance as the campus instructional leader?
- What should a CO do to promote instructional leadership growth in principals? What recommendations can be made to district level leaders to support instructional leadership?
- Share with me how your district uses data to make academic and instructional decisions.
- What do you need from your CO to make your job easier in increasing student achievement?
- Can you share a recent example of when central office administrators and principals discussed quality instruction together? How often would you say this occurs? Do the high school principals have an opportunity to collaborate on instruction?
- Is there common understanding for principals on the district instructional goals and practices?
- If we could create a toolbox of important things to know as a strong instructional leader, what would be in it? (celebrating student success, focused on high quality instruction, ensuring all students have quality learning opportunities, increase effective instruction, etc...)
- What factors does your district consider when making instructional decisions?

#### **II. Curriculum (what is taught)**

- Can you share with me a little about your district curriculum? Would you say it is aligned? If so, to what? How are teachers introduced to it and what are the expectations to use it? How was it developed?
- What is your role in supporting the district curriculum on your campus? How do you know this expectation?
- Does your district provide textbook materials or other resources to support the curriculum?
- Tell me about how all students have opportunities to learn in your district/campus?
- Is there fidelity to the curriculum? Do you or the district monitor this?
- Does your district have a process for updating and reviewing curriculum (new TEKS, textbook adoption, etc...) for alignment to standards and student learning needs?

#### **III. Instruction (how curriculum is implemented)**

- Is your district focused on student learning?
- What would you say your district is focused on currently? Why do you say? Is your district professional development plan for teachers? administrators? If so, what is included?

- Would you say that your district is focused on instructional improvement? How so?
- Share with me an example of how CO provides support to you in improving instruction?
- Is professional learning aligned to district instructional goals to improve student achievement?
- Do you have ongoing support as a campus principal to share practices regarding improved instruction?
- Are there job-embedded strategies built-in to improve your knowledge of instructional delivery?
- Do you feel there is effective communication practices in place to assist you in improving instruction and student achievement?
- How confident are you that high school principals in your district are aware of best instructional practices and feel current in all content areas? Can you think of any actions central office leaders could do to assist in this area?
- In your district, how do teachers receive instructional feedback?
- What kind of involvement do you have as the principal when it comes to planning for instruction? How do your teachers plan for learning?

**Closing question:** Is there anything that you can think of that you need as the instructional leader from central office that we have not already discussed today?

## VITA

Kimberly Kelleher Lawson has worked in the public education field for almost twenty years as a classroom teacher, campus administrator, as well as a district central office administrator in five different school districts in Texas. Her teaching career was brief, only for four years, serving students in grades five, six, and nine through twelve. She had the pleasure of serving as an elementary campus assistant principal for four years and also an elementary campus principal for three years. Mrs. Lawson's most recent position has been at the central office level which is where she's worked the past eight years. She has served Katy Independent School District, her current district, in a variety of capacities including Director of Research, Assessment, and Accountability; Director of Professional Learning; Director of Secondary Instruction; and presently as Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction.

Mrs. Lawson's formal education has all occurred at Texas A&M University in College Station. Her bachelor's degree was in Interdisciplinary Studies (1992) and her master's degree was earned in Educational Administration (1994). Mrs. Lawson may be reached at Katy ISD Education Support Complex, 6301 S. Stadium Lane, Katy, TX 77494. Her email address is [kimberlylawson@katyisd.org](mailto:kimberlylawson@katyisd.org).