SENSEMAKING AND THE SELECTION OF PRINCIPALS TO OPEN CAMPUSES

IN FAST-GROWTH DISTRICTS IN SUBURBAN AUSTIN

A Record of Study

by

ASHLEY BARTLETT MARQUEZ

Submitted to the Graduate and Professional School of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Chair of Committee,	Daniel Bowen
Committee Members,	Brendan Bartanen
	Jean Madsen
	Andrew Kwok
Head of Department,	Mary Alfred

May 2022

Major Subject: Educational Administration

ABSTRACT

More than 75 school districts in Texas are experiencing a rapid increase in student enrollment. This necessitates the selection of principals to open new campuses. The present study aims to explore the challenges of fast-growth, how principals are selected to open new campuses in fast-growth districts, and what traits hiring personnel desire in these principals.

The data for the present study was collected from one fast-growth district in a suburb of Austin, Texas using semi-structured interviews with three central office administrators and two principals who were selected to open a new campus. Additional data was collected by obtaining human resource documents associated with principal selection. Interview transcripts and hiring documents were analyzed and coded using the constant comparative method. Data was coded using a prior-research-driven approach utilizing the components of Karl Weick's (1976) sensemaking framework. Codes were organized into broader themes including fast-growth challenges, principal selection, and desired traits.

In selecting principals to open new campuses and identifying desired traits in those principals, the hiring personnel utilizes the components of Weick's sensemaking framework. The participants identified four primary areas of challenge for their fast-growth district including the pace of the growth, the pace of hiring, maintaining alignment among campuses, and changing demographics. Multiple principal selection practices are used by the district, including the use of an internal leadership academy, a stakeholder survey, and panel interviews with multiple stakeholders. Finally, hiring personnel prioritize organizational skills when selecting a principal to open a campus.

DEDICATION

The dream of a doctorate was born for me when I met Dr. Stephen Wheeler. He was the Chair of Math and Sciences at Alvin Community College, and he was also my stepfather. Steve came into our lives when I was 13, and he was there for so many important events as I grew up. Perhaps most impactful on my life was his deep love of learning and teaching, and in him, I found someone who was always willing to discuss abstract concepts and ideas right alongside conversations about finances, books, travel, and college and career options. I followed in Steve's footsteps and became a teacher. Since then, I've grown each year as I try to emulate the sort of teacher he was––inclusive, patient, dedicated, and a leader who always sought the best for students. Steve passed away unexpectedly in 2010, and there are times I would give just about anything to talk to him about a work challenge, walk him through the halls of my campus, and hopefully see his pride in who I am as an educator. Steve, you inspired me to keep going in pursuit of learning, and this step in the journey is because of your influence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of those who have helped me accomplish my goals in this endeavor. Without each of you, the dream of a doctoral degree would have remained just that.

Jason, you have been there each and every day to lighten my load so I could do this work. On countless weekends, you've kept our home running smoothly so I could attend class, research, or write, and you have never complained about adding to the incredible load you already carry. I love you, and I feel fortunate that our paths crossed, then merged, so we could do this life together.

Caitlyn and Lorelei, you are the reason I work diligently to make our schools better. Watching you grow into smart, insightful, kind young ladies has been the greatest joy of my life, and the desire to make this world a better place is stronger because you are in it. Thank you for your unwavering support of my dream, even when it interfered with our family life. Chris, you moved in after my coursework was complete, but you have always been supportive and encouraging as I worked on this final piece, and I am grateful. I happily hand over the title to you as the only current college student in the house. Josh, get ready, because your college journey is about to start, and I'm excited to cheer you on! The four of you have my heart.

To my mom–there aren't enough words to describe how you've helped me become who I am, so I won't try. You inspire me, and I love you.

Finally, to my Alvin ISD colleagues and friends who make the job worth it, you have my endless respect and thanks for the ways you've helped me along the way. I could never do this job without the incredible team we are fortunate enough to work with. JB, without the fear of endless ridicule from you, I might have given up when it seemed like I would never get through

this process. Thank you for your insight, willingness to hire such a timid person, and encouragement. To my cohort, you made this fun, and I am forever grateful for many, many Saturdays in College Station and on Zoom. You know it was the group that made this possible. Cheers!

I would also like to acknowledge the support of my chair, Dr. Bowen. You were a true advocate for me in this journey, and your guidance was always impeccable. Dr. Bartanen, you guided my work through preliminary exams, and you were fair and honest throughout the process. Dr. Madsen, I appreciate the feedback and research resources you provided. Dr. Kwok, I am grateful for your enthusiasm and flexibility as you agreed to join my committee with little notice. Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge Dr. Kelly. His insight into the principalship was invaluable, and I am grateful for the having had the chance to learn from him.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributors

This work was guided and supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Dr. Daniel Bowen, Committee Chair and Associate Professor in the Department of Education Administration and Human Resource Development, Dr. Brendan Bartanen, Assistant Professor in the Department of Education Leadership, Foundations, and Policy at the University of Virginia, Dr. Jean Madsen, Professor in the Department of Education Administration and Human Resource Development, and Dr. Andrew Kwok, Assistant Professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Culture.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Texas is home to many fast-growth school districts that are experiencing rapid increases

in student enrollment. The Texas Education Agency defines fast-growth as a "school district in

which the percentage growth in student enrollment in the district, over the preceding three school

years, is in the top quartile of student enrollment growth in school districts in the state for that

period" (Texas Education Agency, 2019). More than 75 school districts are classified as fast-

growth by the Fast-Growth School Coalition (FGSC), using their criteria, in addition to the

State's definition. FGSC is a Texas advocacy group made up of member districts who seek to

educate and lobby elected officials to support the unique needs of districts responsible for a

rapidly growing student population. Districts are eligible to join the organization if they have: (a)

at least 2500 students and have shown growth of 10%, or (b) have enrolled 3500 new students in

the previous five years (Tibiletti, 2017). Such rapid growth often necessitates newly built

campuses to accommodate the influx of students. Subsequently, districts must select principals

who can open these new campuses and establish the culture of the school. This selection process

is critical given the importance of the principal to student success, teacher development,

community collaboration, and school culture (Grissom et al., 2021, Leithwood et al., 2004;

Seashore, 2017).

Principals face challenges in their leadership roles related to upholding or changing

campus culture, supporting high level academic achievement, hiring personnel, and managing

day-to-day campus operations. However, principals who open a new campus face unique

challenges that include uniting a fractured community divided by the necessary school rezoning

process, establishing campus culture and norms, hiring for every staff and faculty, and creating

events and traditions in the community. In addition, some new campus principals find themselves involved in construction decisions, writing the fight song, selecting student organization uniforms, and choosing the furniture that best contributes to the instructional climate (Sims, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

Little guidance exists to aid district hiring personnel tasked with selecting campus leaders, much less with selecting campus leaders to open new campuses (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004; Kwan, 2009). Considering the anticipated population increase in Texas, 88.3 percent between 2019 and 2050 (You et al., 2019), more districts will find themselves qualified as a fast-growth district as they are forced to open new campuses to accommodate enrollment increases. More districts will also find themselves challenged by the need to identify campus leaders who possess the skills and mindset to successfully navigate the challenges related to opening new facilities and district restructuring. Districts that find themselves in the position of opening new campuses have few resources available to aid in making hiring decisions for expected principal vacancies or for identifying the traits they desire in these individuals. Nor do they know for certain if their current practices will be sufficient to address the challenges of fast-growth, or if they will need to modify them to select principals who will open new campuses.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to explore how fast-growth districts select principals to open campuses and to identify the leadership, management, and instructional traits hiring personnel look for when selecting new principals. Using a case study approach, I explored themes common to the selection process used by hiring personnel in one fast-growth district as

they chose leadership for new schools. Additionally, I sought to understand the specific traits that hiring personnel looked for when they considered who they would select to open a new campus in their district.

The specific research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the challenges of working and hiring in a fast-growth district?

2. What recruiting and hiring practices do fast-growth districts use to identify and select principals to open new campuses, and do they differ from recruiting and hiring practices already utilized in routine principal selection?

3. What unique leadership, management, or instructional traits are fast-growth districts looking for in principals who will open a new campus?

Significance of the Study

Research on principal selection is limited, and after an extensive literature review, there appears to be an absence of research that explores selecting a principal to open a new campus (Blackmore et al., 2006; Kwan, 2012; Lemoine et al., 2018; Rammer, 2007; Walker, 2012). There also appears to be an absence of research that explores the challenges faced by fast-growth districts. Additionally, studies focused on leadership selection in a fast-growth district do not appear to exist in the body of knowledge. While a limited number of studies exist that examine district-identified desirable traits in school principals, most of them are quantitative and do not contain the rich information that comes from a qualitative study (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004). The present study intended to add to the literature on the challenges faced by fast-growth districts, as well as principal selection practices and preferred leadership traits for principals who will open a new school.

Though the present study focused specifically on the practices and preferences in fast-growth districts in Texas, it potentially enhances the body of knowledge related to principal selection in other circumstances, including other areas of the United States experiencing rapid

population increases. The present study adds to the existing body of knowledge in the areas of principal hiring methods and contributes research on the desired traits desired of principals opening a campus.

Overview of the Methodology

The basic research design utilized a case study methodology that examined principal selection and preferred candidate traits for principals who will open a new campus in one fast-growth school district in the Austin suburbs, an area characterized by significant population growth and incredible economic and racial diversity (Emerson et al., 2000). A case study offered the best opportunity to explore the decision-making process used by this district as I attempted to understand the how and why of principal selection for the specific purpose of opening a campus (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Data Sources and Context

The participants in the study were three Central Office Administrators involved in principal selection and two Campus Principals who recently opened new campuses. In addition to the data obtained in interviews with these participants, there were three additional sources of data: Human Resource document artifacts, a reflexive journal, and field notes. The document artifacts included an example of a district-created applicant rubric, job description, hiring flow chart, and interview questions for principal vacancies.

Data Collection

I interviewed three district-level administrators responsible for principal selection in a semi-structured format, aided by the use of a recording device. Using the same interview protocol, I interviewed two principals in the district who were selected to open new campuses. In

addition to recording each interview, I also compiled field notes for the purpose of capturing immediate thoughts and points of emphasis during each interview. Upon concluding each interview, I asked each participant to share any document artifacts associated with principal selection. Participants provided the documents by email. In the event that the same document was offered multiple times, I accepted duplicate copies from the participants.

At the end of each interview, I also employed a reflexive journal in the form of a voice memo to capture my immediate thoughts about the data, the interview process, and any connections to any previously collected data.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method, which captured the ongoing analysis that typically occurs in a qualitative study. The constant comparative method permitted me to identify emerging themes and trends from the beginning of the data collection process (Hays & Singh, 2012). After transcribing the interviews, I coded their responses using a prior-research driven approach to connect the data to the components of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). I also looked for emergent themes in the areas of fast-growth challenges, principal selection practices, and desired principal traits, using both within-case and cross-case thematic analysis to compare themes found within the district, as well between central office and campus administrators (Yin, 2014). Additionally, I analyzed hiring documents provided by the school district, such as applicant matrices and standard interview questions, to further identify emergent themes from each data source in the areas of fast-growth challenges, principal selection, and desired candidate traits in principals who open new campuses.

Overview of the Theoretical Framework

The lens of sensemaking was selected as the theoretical framework for this case study because Weick's seminal work (1976; 1995) allows analysis for how individuals make sense of their circumstances and act upon their understanding when making decisions. Leaders utilize sensemaking when outcomes are uncertain or when an organization experiences a discrepancy in typical operations (Weick, 2007). Further, the sensemaking framework is optimal for analyzing times of change, such as is the case in districts that are growing rapidly (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Sensemaking concepts are ever-present in organizational systems and the process is fundamental to decision-making, even when leaders are unaware of the framework (Brown et al., 2015; Matlis & Christianson, 2014; Sleegers et al., 2009).

This framework has been applied to educational leadership and decision-making by other researchers (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Matlis & Christianson, 2014; Sleegers, et al., 2009). Sensemaking has also been applied to the process of hiring in education, though not to the selection of principals (Ingle et al., 2011).

Limitations of the Study

The present study was limited to the information provided by the selected school district, a district near Austin, Texas. However, as a diverse urban and suburban experiencing rapid growth, Austin and the surrounding suburbs offer transferability to other cities that experience similar growth with similarly diverse population groups.

The present study was also limited by potential researcher bias, as I am a principal who was selected to open a high school campus in a fast-growth district (Yin, 2014). My membership in the targeted demographic required I maintain objectivity in the interviews to avoid projecting my own traits or bias into the information I collected. However, membership also afforded me

firsthand experience in the processes used to select leaders for a new campus opening. My experience provided a better understanding of the questions most critical for participants.

As Yin (2014) notes, case studies do not permit researchers to generalize "from samples to universes" (pg. 18). Thus, the findings in this study are not generalizable to other fast-growth districts. While some of the findings of the present study may prove relevant to principal selection and desired principal leadership traits in other districts, care is also required when considering the application of the findings to areas not experiencing fast-growth.

Organization of the Study

Chapter One presented background information, including the statement of the problem, the significance, and the purpose of the present study. In addition, a brief overview of the theoretical framework, methodology, and research questions were also included in Chapter One. Chapter Two includes a detailed overview of the theoretical framework, as well as an outline of the literature related to the present study. Chapter Three contains the methodology of the present study, including its procedures, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. A presentation of the data collected during the present study is discussed in Chapter Four. Finally, Chapter Five includes the summary of findings, implications for school districts, recommendations for further research, and final conclusions.

Conclusion

I hope this study adds rich data to the research on principal selection processes, as well as aids fast-growth districts by identifying common leadership, management, and instructional traits sought in principals tasked with opening new campuses. With continued population growth in Texas, as well as in other parts of the country, knowledge related to principal selection benefits

from deeper understandings, understandings that include what a district should look for in principals who open campuses.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hiring effective leaders is a challenge faced by all entities, whether large private corporations or small or large public school districts. Determining the traits desired in a leader is a challenge, and the traits desired often differ for each organization and even within organizations. They are particularly important when performing a leadership search. Campus principals have the potential to greatly impact the success of students, making the selection of a principal critical as school districts work to provide communities with positive student outcomes (Day et al., 2016; Grissom et al., 2021).

Principal selection is not an area in which an abundance of research exists. However, some scholarship is found that serves as a resource for school districts as they work to identify the type of leader that meets their needs (Fusarelli et al., 2018; Grissom et al., 2021; Hassenpflug, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004; Seashore, 2009, 2017). However, no research offers focused work aimed to guide hiring personnel when tasked with identifying desired traits in campus leaders charged with opening a new school. Similarly, while some studies explore principal recruitment and hiring methods in a general, there is a vacancy in the body of knowledge related to practices in fast-growth school districts sense (Blackmore et al., 2006; Lemoine, 2018; Kwan, 2012; Palmer, 2015. 2017). As a result, school districts lack essential information as they work to manage the leadership pipeline.

Simply stated, a district experiencing fast-growth might anticipate challenges with identifying and hiring a principal to open a new campus, but the lack of resources available to assist them presents an obstacle. For example, hiring personnel are forced to combine their own anecdotal experiences with the limited research available in related areas, utilizing a form of

sensemaking to create a process to select candidates (Ingle et al., 2011; Weick, 1995, 2007). These gaps in the literature not only impact fast-growth districts, but also policymakers at the state level who are not able to provide support for these districts if there is a lack of knowledge about the implications of such growth. Finally, it is helpful to view the problem of principal selection in fast-growth districts through the framework of sensemaking, a tool to organize patterns and observations in decision-making given the complexity of the problem (Weick, 1995). These areas of research are represented in the following review of literature.

Background for the Study

In order to understand the recruiting and hiring practices used by fast-growth districts to select principals to open new campuses, as well as to understand the traits hiring personnel are looking for, there is contextual information that is important to consider. First, it is important to understand what it means to be fast-growth, the unique challenges brought about by that growth, and the resources already provided to address those challenges. It is also important to understand the general recruiting and hiring practices used in principal selection that have already been studied. Similarly, other researchers in previous studies have examined the traits district hiring personnel say they desire in principal candidates, even if they did not study traits specific to leaders who open campuses. Understanding factors related to principal turnover and the number of qualified principal candidates are important to this study because that information impacts principal selection. Additionally, with many fast-growth school districts facing challenges related to changing demographics due to population growth, it is also important to consider those implications when choosing a campus leader. Before trying to understand how these factors might differ in fast-growth districts, it is important to consider what other researchers have found in similar studies that only consider more general principal selection practices.

Challenges for Fast-Growth Districts

Across the state, Texas enrolls an average of 75,000 new students each year (Tibiletti, 2017). The Fast-Growth School Coalition (FGSC) in Texas serves 75+ districts that meet their criteria for membership (Tibiletti, 2017). The FGSC identifies school districts as fast-growth if they have a student enrollment of at least 2500 and have either a 10% increase in the preceding five years or a net increase of at least 3500 students during the same period. In addition, the FGSC in Texas seeks to help member districts in managing what they define as tremendous growth, but also works to advocate for state support for the unique challenges faced by member districts (Tibiletti, 2017). While Texas has six of the top 15 fastest growing cities in the United States, cities in other states are also impacted by rapid growth, including Arizona, Florida, Tennessee, and Georgia, making the challenges a nationwide issue (US Census Bureau, 2020).

The impact of such rapid growth has both positive and negative implications for school districts. In the 14 years from 2000--2014, over $33.1 billion in construction projects were completed in fast-growth school districts in Texas, and this growth also supports approximately 26,810 jobs each year (Tibiletti, 2017). While the influx of capital and jobs has a positive impact on the economy, the burden of educating students new to the state or area falls to local school districts, which must provide facilities to house them (Tibiletti, 2017). In addition to the challenges of building facilities at a rate to keep up with the growth, staffing challenges are another obstacle faced by fast-growth districts (Tibiletti, 2017).

The burden of rapid growth within school districts is also recognized by the state of Texas and provided for in educational funding from the state. In the 76th Legislative session in 1999, Senate Bill 4 was enacted, and in part, it provided for the creation of the New Instructional Facility Allotment (NIFA) to help public schools and open-enrollment charter schools. This

allotment helps offset the expenses of operating a new instructional facility, such as administrative costs, transportation, personnel, instructional materials, etc. New facilities typically open under their maximum capacity, but some of the increased costs for personnel, utilities, and transportation are not diminished with fewer students in the building, meaning the daily allotment might not match the financial obligations of the campus. NIFA helps with that financial disparity (TEA, TEC). When written, NIFA provided $250 for each student counted in the average daily attendance. NIFA is a significant financial contribution from the state, underscoring an understanding that opening a new campus brings challenges that existing campuses, and their principals, do not share.

Much of the growth in Texas is within reasonable commuting proximity to urban centers (Tibiletti, 2017). These rapidly growing suburban and rural areas face the challenge of changing demographics as their student enrollment increases. Leaders in these districts must work to create inclusive environments that serve a newly diverse population of students (DeMatthews, 2015). Some of them may find themselves working to integrate more culturally relevant curriculum and working through language differences that are novel (DeMatthews, 2015). Districts might also need to consider a leader's ability to mediate and lead on issues of cultural significance (Madsen & Mabokela, 2014). Madsen and Mabokela (2014) found that leaders of diverse schools must understand how students and teachers are integrated into the organization, and Kemp-Graham (2015) cited similar importance in the value of a social justice mindset in ensuring equity for students of all races, genders, ethnicities, and socioeconomic class. Evans (2007) found that campus leaders have the ability to accept or change the status quo as their schools become more diverse, and this can impact everything from campus-level hiring to how students are treated.

While changing demographics is not a factor for every fast-growth district, the potential impacts principals have on their campuses in this scenario make the matter worthy of consideration.

Principal Selection Practices

There is little in the research regarding how principals are selected as most of the available literature focuses on what hiring personnel are looking for rather than how they identify candidates with those traits (Kwan, 2012). The limited studies that have examined the practices hiring personnel use to recruit, interview, and select campus leaders do not distinguish between campus levels. Neither do they consider differences that might exist between these selection practices for existing campuses compared to newly opened campuses. Absent from the literature is evidence of any commonly accepted or utilized hiring process.

The process of resume writing, submission, interviews with or without a panel, and checking references is familiar in other industries, and candidates within the organization are typically preferred over those from outside (Blackmore et al., 2006). Some schools begin the process for filling principal vacancies by anticipating future needs and encouraging likely teachers to complete the principal certification process or attend a district-sponsored leadership preparation program (Hooker, 2000; Lemione et al., 2018). This type of succession planning might also be an important factor in campuses that are experiencing fast-growth, though there is not research to support this idea.

Paula Kwan and Allan Walker, researchers in Hong Kong, completed multiple studies, both working together and individually, to analyze topics related to principal selection, including the use of selection panels and superintendents' perspectives on hiring. After surveying 93 superintendents, Kwan and Walker found that respondents felt the use of selection panels to choose principals was fair, and they also viewed the panels themselves as professional and

unbiased (2009). Selection panels are defined as interviews with a varied mix of stakeholders that might include parents, teachers, and supervisors (Blackmore et al., 2006). Some school districts even attempt to involve the entire faculty in the process of selecting a new principal, from engaging teachers to help write a job description to submitting instructional questions for the interview (Hassenpflug, 2013).

Brandon Palmer surveyed 221 principals to understand their perceptions of the selection process, and he found that 33% of principals felt their own hiring process to focus more on non-merit-based factors, such as fitting a specific campus better than a candidate with more experience or having a close professional relationship with the hiring personnel (2015). Only 15% of principals surveyed felt their selection process was merit-based, according to Palmer (2015). Similarly, Hooker (2000) found that superintendents relied heavily on post-interview discussions within the panel or committee where less tangible factors were explored, such as the ability of the candidates to excite the interviewers. These disjointed findings across the literature make it difficult to even identify a commonly used interview protocol among educational organizations.

A 21-point leadership responsibility survey was developed by Robert Rammer in 2007 that contained traits previously identified by Marzano, such as communication, culture building, change agent, flexibility, focus, involvement in curriculum, and visibility, among others. In 2017, Brandon Palmer used Rammer's instrument to survey 83 superintendents, finding that the participants felt similar, more objective instruments would be helpful in principal selection, beyond the standard practices of interviews or committees to make a selection. This seems to indicate a need for further research into principal selection practices used by school districts.

The question of whether internal or external candidates are preferred was analyzed by Cruzeiro and Boone in 2009 and by Sabina and Colwell in 2018. Both studies found that while talent can come from anywhere, districts are wise to use a two-pronged approach to filling principal vacancies. First, a strong teacher mentor program, designed to train teachers in administrative practices while they are still in the classroom, is valuable in growing future administrators (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Sabina & Colwell, 2018). Second, districts must recognize the challenges and opportunities that come from hiring external candidates, such as realizing that external candidates might not understand the district's culture and climate, but they also bring fresh ideas to stagnant practices (Sabina & Colwell, 2018). Sabina and Colwell (2018) found that districts who sought both internal and external candidates had a greater pool of applicants they felt were qualified. Ultimately, the research supports that internal candidates are preferred for campus leadership positions in some school districts (Sabina & Colwell, 2018).

Desired Principal Traits

Before considering what fast-growth districts desire in principals who will open campuses, it is important to have an understanding of the traits that hiring personnel believe are generally desirable in principals. Numerous studies aim to identify the traits that are desired or sought by hiring personnel in campus principals, chief among them the work done by Kenneth Leithwood and built upon by many others, including Seashore, Grissom, Hassenpflug, Cruzeiro, Kwan, and Palmer. Leaders on a campus must, at the core of the role, provide direction to the campus and exercise influence (Leithwood et al., 2006). In an analysis of current literature on the topic of what hiring personnel deem important in selecting leaders, Leithwood et al. (2006) and Grissom et al. (2021) found that nearly all selected school leaders possess similar leadership traits and utilize similar leadership practices within these functions. However, it is of equal

importance to note that desired traits cannot be equated to effective traits since the research is also limited in determining efficacy of a given trait. Largely, the research relies on insight from hiring personnel, based on their preferences in selecting campus leaders. Further complicating the issue, Seashore (2009) found that the expectations for school leaders and their attributes have changed to place an emphasis on transformation and change.

Research identifies communication skills as a desirable trait among hiring personnel for the campus leaders they select. School leaders are able to provide direction when they build a shared vision and inspire others to support it (Cruzeiro, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2006). Creating shared meanings is also an element in organizational sensemaking, and this skill is critical on any campus (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Center for Educational Policy Analysis, 2003). In order to communicate the vision or shared meanings, a campus leader also needs to have strong oral and written communication and presentation skills (Kwan, 2012). These skills are utilized in the creation, communication, and execution of strategic school improvement plans, designed to impact student success (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Campus leaders are also adept at developing and managing their staff and possess strong interpersonal skills (Leithwood, 2006). Hassenpflug (2013) cited the ability of principals to grow teachers, in order to foster academic success in students, as a priority. Encouraging reflection and providing growth opportunities, as well as supporting staff in areas of individual need, are additional traits that campus leaders might possess (Center for Educational Policy, 2003). In order for growth to occur, teachers must feel supported by their principal and cared for on their campus (Seashore, 2017). Finally, principals who have a capacity for developing others also understand the importance of empowering others to make decisions, and they also rely on input

from other successful leaders within their school and district (Leithwood, et al., 2004; Tillman, 2005).

Having an academic focus and an aptitude for working with a diverse student and teacher population are two other traits that some superintendents identify as being valuable in campus leaders (Cruzerio & Boone, 2009). Knowledge and experience, in both curriculum and instruction and management, are also desirable traits, but similarly vital for leader success is the ability to be willing to learn from others and open-minded (Kwan, 2012; Leithwood, et al., 2006). Principals who offer sound instructional feedback during teacher evaluations are able to impact student success (Garet et al., 2017). Instructionally minded principals also support professional learning and invest time and resources into the development of Professional Learning Communities (Cravens et al., 2017).

Central office places high emphasis on a proven track leader when selecting a principal (Parylo & Zepeda, 2014). Prior leadership success, marked by increased test scores or low teacher turnover, makes the selection less of a risk, but also important is finding someone who is a community leader who can connect with the stakeholders within the boundaries of the campus (Parylo & Zepeda, 2014). Connecting with stakeholders is one element of "fit", or being the right person to do the right job on the campus, an idea which dates back to research done by Balzell and Dentler in 1983 (Parylo & Zepeda, 2014).

Principals must also have capacity in managing teachers, students, resources, and the campus (Grissom et al., 2021). Generic managerial skills include skills like hiring, supporting and evaluating teachers, and monitoring the school environment (Kwan, 2012; Leithwood, et al., 2006). Students and teachers must feel secure at school, and this requires a principal to have a systems mindset to prevent conflict and promote safety (Jacobson et al., 2007). When a principal

possesses effective time-management skills, they are able to better meet the demands of the job (Grissom et al., 2015).

Principal Turnover and Shortage

A final challenge facing school districts as they seek to hire principals is the issue of how many qualified applicants are seeking principal positions and how many effective principals want to remain in their current positions. From 1996 to 2003, Roza (2003) found that principal job postings increased by about 15%, in part due to population growth. Though 82% of superintendents report a high level of concern with principal applicants, both in number and in quality, there is not a serious principal shortage (Roza, 2003). Districts on a national scale report an average of 17 applicants for each principal position, and this only represented a decline of about two applicants per posting in the seven years prior to 2003 (Roza, 2003). Texas schools report an even higher number of applicants at 20-25 per principal job posting, though this number only results in three to five finalists (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009), meaning a low percentage of applicants are truly considered to fill vacancies. While the availability of candidates with the appropriate principal certification is not a concern, that does not mean that all of the candidates possess the traits desired by superintendents (Hooker, 2000).

Closely intertwined with the challenge of finding viable principal candidates, another factor that impacts principal selection indirectly is the principal turnover rate, with national rates hovering around 18% (Snodgrass, 2018; Bartanen et al., 2019). Because the cost to a district to recruit, train, and develop a principal is about $75,000, the issue of turnover is also financially significant when considering hiring procedures (Snodgrass, 2018).

In fast-growth districts, candidates who open new campuses are sometimes transferred from existing campuses within the district, creating other hiring challenges for a school district.

With the potential to have a negative impact on students through the replacement effect, as well as the consideration that principals must be on a campus for at least five years to have a positive impact (Bartanen et al., 2019; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010), moving a previously successful principal still has a cost for the district to consider.

Succession planning is becoming more common in public education, though the idea of preparing for the change of leadership has been present in the business world for some time (Fusarelli et al., 2018). Some school districts address concerns about filling principal vacancies by anticipating future needs and encouraging likely teachers to complete the principal certification process or attend a leadership preparation program (Hooker, 2000; Lemione et al., 2018). Developing strong leadership preparation programs to grow future leaders is one way to address leadership turnover, a problem that impacts and increases the need to hire new principals. Some organizations have found success by focusing on the connections between job training, next job assignments, and career advancement (Fusarelli et al., 2018). Districts that embrace this model follow the steps of identifying strong candidates, providing leadership training in some form, and then filling available leadership positions from the pool of applicants they've cultivated (Fusarelli et al., 2018).

Lemoine et al. (2018) found equal importance in a school district's tendency to value an internal "grow your own" program, yet also create systems to identify outside candidates to successfully fill principal vacancies. The use of headhunters and national advertising campaigns is another way to seek out talent in much the same way that large corporations utilize these services to find the best candidates.

Human Resource Theory Alternative

For issues related to personnel or hiring, such as selecting a principal to open a campus, the theoretical frameworks that might appear to be the most applicable are those that deal directly with such issues. For example, Human Resource Theory, also referred to as Organizational Behavior Perspective, may appear as the most obvious match in any hiring scenario (Shafritz, 2016). Human Resource Theory proposes organizations work to match employee skill sets with the position that aligns best to those skills, fitting seamlessly with the continuation of Hugo Musterberg's post-1950s ideas that explored how organizations could encourage their current employees to grow and develop (Shafritz, 2016). Many school districts have abandoned the "boss knows best" mindset and moved towards the Musterberg idea, helping ensure new hires are well-matched to organization expectations. Further, they charge the organization with supporting a positive employee attitude toward the work (Shafritz, 2016). Shafritz argued, organizations that utilize the Organizational Behavior Perspective assume the following: (a) organizations serve human needs, (b) the relationship is mutual, (c) if the fit is poor, one or both will suffer, and (c) a good fit benefits both the organization and the individual. Therefore, the selection of a campus principal to open a new school could be considered through this lens, provided one focuses solely on the human resource side of the problem.

However, the same Human Resources Framework could be applied to any hiring scenario. It fails to marry the complicated factors that arise in selecting a campus administrator in a fast-growth district, as well as selecting a leader to establish the procedures and culture of a brand-new campus (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood, 2004). Opening a new campus requires a principal to hire for every faculty and staff position, establish norms, craft belief statements to

drive culture, unite students and their families, and even help design learning spaces (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004). That which is sought in a leader who simply perpetuates current systems and processes differs from that which is needed of a leader tasked with opening a new campus. For example, principals who step onto established campuses must address campus culture in some way, either through a decision to continue supporting the existing culture or by implementing new expectations and procedures to improve a poor culture. A principal who opens a campus must establish the campus culture, set expectations, and develop procedures without the benefit or the challenge of an existing context.

Sensemaking Applied to Organizations

The complexities involved in selecting a new principal require viewing the process through the lens of sensemaking, a term applied to organizational studies by Karl Weick in the late 1970s. Sensemaking aids organizations as they marry factors related to decision-making. Weick (1976, 1995) asked, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" Weick et al. (2005, pg. 412) also suggests that the sensemaking cycle answers two questions: "What's going on here?" and "What do I do next?" Questions like this sum up sensemaking, helping individuals or groups create understandings of shifts or changes in an organization. Data, actions, policies, observations, personal knowledge, and conversations help identify patterns and themes in sensemaking (Weick, 2007). Those data sources, once interpreted, help organizations in the decision-making process. Sensemaking is an ongoing process that is constantly evolving, similar to processes forced upon fast-growth districts. Fast-growth districts face challenges as they continually open new campuses without excessive time to craft or test a foolproof principal selection procedure (FGSC, 2017).

Weick (1995) also encouraged individuals to take the term sensemaking literally, in order to make some set of circumstances sensible. To that end, he identified seven components for the process of sensemaking: (a) grounded in identity construction, (b) retrospective, (c) enactive of sensible environments, (d) social, (e) ongoing, (f) focused on and by extracted cues and, (g) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Using these components, the literature supports the idea that sensemaking can be helpful in the hiring decisions of organizations (Ingle et al., 2011; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

In his book, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Weick (1995) explains the components of the sensemaking process. Identity construction acknowledges that anyone attempting to make sense of a situation relies on their own perception, understanding that this perception is also retrospective, or tied to our previous lived experiences, and ongoing. Our interpretations of events also depend on our socialization and interpretation is also a social event that often occurs with others. Extracted cues refer to how one pulls information from observations while relying on plausibility, meaning that one cannot know everything and must operate with the information that is likely reliable (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking has been applied to the process of hiring in education (Ingle et al., 2011), though not to the selection of principals. Ingle et al., (2011) analyzed the processes used by 21 school principals in Florida, finding principals looked for different teacher traits in different school contexts. The authors found principals used their own ideas about ideal traits in a teacher, coupled with the influences of the school context, population, and district policies to make sense of their hiring options.

Three Elements of Sensemaking During Change

Weick (1995) also identified three elements of sensemaking that can be applied to changes in an organization, including hiring, commitment, identity, and expectations. These elements are applied to shared meanings, which must be considered when a group of people are tasked with making a decision, often the case when selecting future leadership (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Commitment refers to the level of adherence to a perception made by an individual, which helps when an effective plan exists (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). However, commitment to an idea may also hinder change and create blind spots. Therefore, hiring personnel must be aware of this when evaluating decision making. Maitlis and Sonenshein describe identity as important because a strong sense of shared identity anchors decision-making. In the hiring context, organizational identity is a critical part of decision-making, relating to the organizational identity of a new campus, a shared identity by all employees on the new campus. Finally, expectations are an important factor in understanding shared meaning in sensemaking given they are held by individuals who dictate outcomes in the form of self-fulfilling prophecies (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). For example, if a hiring committee maintains the right candidate does not exist within the organization, the committee might fail to identify a potentially successful principal position for a new campus.

Weick (1976) described individual campuses as loosely coupled systems, each operating within the larger complexities of the district. While individual schools may share commonalities with the rest of the school district, each maintains its own identify. Individual and collective identities come into play when selecting a principal for a campus, especially for a new campus where identity must be entirely established.

Sensemaking and Identity

Gioia et al.'s (2013) research on organizational change and sensemaking highlights the way managers use external factors to influence the way employees feel about change. In opening a new campus, a principal must do the same, capitalizing on the opportunity to use the change to create a new organizational identity that unifies the campus employees (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Both Weick (1995) and Gioia et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of shared meanings among individuals in a group, and this is critical when establishing the culture of a new campus. Gioia et al. (2013) found that organizational identity is a factor that resonates with people because it is deeply meaningful and personal, combining both the self and the organization. Sensemaking is critical in times of change, in part because commitment to the organization, through the process of creating a shared organizational identity, helps individuals move forward with a plan, such as setting the new culture of a campus (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Sensemaking in Education

With the landscape of education in constant flux, the sensemaking framework can aid leaders in decision-making. School leaders are faced with challenges and problems each day, and the application of the sensemaking framework can help researchers understand how leaders problem-solve (Sleegers et al., 2009). The nature of schools, with multiple perspectives and sources of input in a social setting, creates an opportunity to apply the framework (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017). While most of the sensemaking research in education focuses on policy reform, Ganon-Shilon & Schechter (2017) utilized the framework to analyze how principals make sense of their school environments. Their study compared sensemaking to a learning process, and they identified examples of how principals responded to triggers of change and

uncertainty by involving campus staff in a cyclical sensemaking response (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017).

Evans (2007) and DeMatthews (2015) applied the sensemaking framework to issues related to social justice and demographic change in schools. Evans (2007) argued that school leaders make decisions about policy and practice using the sensemaking process. However, she noted that leaders sometimes omit or reframe aspects of their school identity and experiences to showcase a desired picture (Evans, 2007). DeMatthews (2015) also identified this phenomena, citing the tendency of principals to be influenced by sociopolitical forces in their communities when they make sense of issues within the school organization.

The many applications and components of sensemaking render it applicable to the complex nature of this study. Weick (1995, pg. 635) said that "the basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs." Leaders in a fast-growth school district seek to identify principals to open new campuses in a changing landscape with little information to guide them as to what they should be looking for in their candidates.

Gaps in the Literature

While the available literature provides important information that contributes to the understanding of how principals are selected, as well as district-identified desirable traits for campus leaders, there are no prior studies that focus on principal selection for a newly opened campus, nor any studies about this process in fast-growth districts. The skill set of running an established campus likely differs from what is needed to build a campus culture, staff, and community image from the ground up. Yet school districts, specifically those in fast-growth districts who open new campuses frequently, have no reliable information to consult about the

selection process or traits that might be important in candidates. This gap in the literature has a high cost if the person selected is not right for the position. With 75 districts in Texas that qualify as fast-growth, selecting principals to open campuses is a relevant issue that impacts the entire state. Additionally, with other areas across the nation experiencing similar growth, this issue is relevant beyond Texas.

Conclusion

In focusing this study on the procedures and considerations used in the selection of principals to open campuses in fast-growth districts, there is the potential to impact not only districts who meet the criteria for fast-growth. Any district opening a new campus would benefit from understanding the what and how of selecting an individual to build a campus from the ground up. Additionally, any district that wants to rebuild a campus's culture might find value in the outcomes. This study will unify the existing literature regarding effective principals and hiring processes through the lens of sensemaking as applied to organizational decision-making with a focus on the specific task of opening a new campus.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The present study explored the challenges of working and hiring in a fast-growth district, as well as how principals in fast-growth districts are selected to open new campuses. In addition, the present study sought to identify leadership, management, and instructional traits that were desired in principals who open new campuses. Chapter Three explains the research methodology used in the present study, and includes the following sections: research design, data sources, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Design

Using a case study research approach, I explored the recruiting and selection process used by one fast-growth district to fill new campus principal positions. Additionally, I attempted to identify the leadership, management, and instructional traits hiring personnel sought in selecting principals to open new campuses within the district. Case study methodology was selected given it best fit the needs of the present study, allowing me to gather thick, rich data from a single school district, promoting my ability to study this phenomenon in the natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). Though a case study in a bound system does not allow generalizability, this design still best fits the purpose of this study.

While some measure of generalizability could be attained by using quantitative methods that relied on survey data from superintendents or human resource personnel, Hays and Singh (2012) identified a case study as an ideal model for understanding the how and why of an issue. In the present study, the case study approach facilitated deep understanding of the process used by hiring personnel when selecting principals to open campuses in fast-growth school districts, as well as the hiring process experienced by principals in the district. Further, while

quantitative data would help identify trends in the hiring methods used or traits desired in potential campus leaders, it would lack the context and depth provided in a case study.

Collecting data in the form of semi-structured interviews, from a smaller sample in a single school district, allowed me to gain deep understanding of the selection practices for principals. It also afforded me the opportunity to tell the story of this district (Hays & Singh, 2012). In the same way that Kwan (2012) and Palmer (2017) used the case study methodology to dig deeply into principal selection within the specific contexts of their work, I used similar methods to gain understanding about principal selection in one fast-growth district in Texas. Case studies employ the same traits prized in Weick's sensemaking, using all available data, including observations made during interviews, the interviews themselves, conversations with a peer debriefer, document artifacts, and emerging themes to make sense of information provided during the data collection and analysis process (Weick, 1995). Finally, the present study adds to the narrow body of knowledge focused on qualitative studies in the areas of principal selection and desired principal traits.

Data Sources

Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to identify and select one fast-growth school district in the suburbs of Austin, Texas that met my criteria for inclusion in the present study (Hays & Singh, 2012). The selected district needed to be diverse in terms of student demographics with no group representing more than 50% of the student population. The selected district had to be a member of the Fast-Growth School Coalition, since voluntary membership in an advocacy organization seemed to indicate an awareness of the challenges fast-growth brings. I sought permission from two Central Texas districts who met the criteria, ultimately selecting a district that opened both

an elementary school and a secondary school in the preceding two years. This allowed me to gather data from a broader, K-12, perspective.

The selected case study site experienced a 740% increase in student enrollment since 2005, adding ten campuses between 2005 and the time of the present study. The student demographic breakdown includes the following breakdown: 13.18% African American, 46.05% Hispanic, 33.01% Caucasian, and 1.47% Asian. In addition, 42.25% of students qualified as economically disadvantaged and 12.5% were classified as English Language Learners (TAPR, 2019). In order to preserve confidentiality, the district is referred to using the pseudonym, Fast-Growth ISD (FGISD).

To narrow participants further, I interviewed the superintendent and two other central office administrators involved in principal selection. During the superintendent interview, I asked her to identify other possible participants who served in the district's principal selection process. The superintendent's recommendations were important given they were the most information-rich person in the district, providing access to other knowledgeable persons involved with principal selection (Hays & Singh, 2012). Additionally, I interviewed two principals who were selected to open a new campus. One principal opened an elementary school in 2020, while the other opened a high school in 2021. Interviewing the principals provided differing perspectives related to the district principal selection process; perspectives that differed from those held by central office administrators.

The demographics of the individuals interviewed were 80% female and 20% male. Sixty percent of the participants were Caucasian, 20% were African American, and 20% were Hispanic. Each participant had more than 15 years of experience in education, and 80% of the

participants had more than 25 years of experience. The complete demographic profile for each

participant can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants.

Role	Gender	Race	Years in Education
Central Office Administrator A	Female	Hispanic	40
Central Office Administrator B	Male	White	22
Central Office Administrator C	Female	White	31
Elementary Principal A	Female	White	27
Secondary Principal B	Female	African American	17

Human Resource Document Artifacts

Documents related to hiring were sourced from the school district. This included scripted

principal interview questions, principal job postings and descriptions, district-created applicant

rubrics, and a principal onboarding checklist.

Field Notes/Reflexive Journal

Field notes were taken during the interviews to ensure active listening. Further, taking

field notes allowed me to capture my impressions during the interviews (Seidman, 2013). These

additional data sources helped spark connections in the data as I reflected upon the interviews

(Hays & Singh, 2012), employing the sensemaking framework in both the lens through which I

analyzed the data, as well as how the district approached selecting principals to open new

campuses.

Data Collection

I used multiple methods of data collection, including two semi-structured interviews with each participant. I also collected documents related to the hiring process from each participant. The collection of multiple data sources was employed in an attempt to triangulate the data and achieve more reliable results (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Interviews

Interviews are the preferred instrument for qualitative case studies given their ability to obtain in-depth information (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Hays & Singh, 2012). Formal, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant virtually. The virtual format facilitated audio and video recording. Though audio and video recording is possible when conducting face-to-face interviews, the virtual platform was chosen due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial interview questions (Appendix C and D) were developed to capture information related to the district selection and hiring process for campus principals. The questions sought information about desired traits for campus principals, including characteristics specific to principals opening a campus as well as specific challenges experienced by fast-growth districts. Scripted interview questions helped capture the components of sensemaking used by hiring personnel in their decision-making processes in the areas of fast-growth challenges, principal selection for new campuses, and desired traits in principals who will open campuses. Weick (1995) suggested that sensemaking allows individuals to explain or justify their past actions or decisions. The interview questions supported this perspective as they sought to understand how the participants arrive at their decisions and why they make them. I included probing question stems to encourage participants to elaborate on their answers, in a further effort to capture any of

the sensemaking components used in their decision-making (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Seidman, 2013).

The interviews were transcribed and, to ensure accuracy through member checking, the transcripts were shared with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Follow-up interviews were conducted approximately four weeks after the first interview. The follow-up interviews allowed participants the opportunity to clarify past responses as well as provide additional data (Seidman, 2013). The follow-up interviews also allowed me to ask questions that arose when reviewing the transcripts from the initial interviews. The follow-up interview questions (Appendix E and F) were also written to align to the themes of principal selection and desired traits, as well as the components of sensemaking. Additionally, follow-up questions asked participants to elaborate on responses from the first interview to allow an opportunity to understand any of the sensemaking components used in their interpretations of the challenges.

At the conclusion of each interview, I asked each participant if they wanted to offer any additional information. That deliberate, open-ended question allowed participants the freedom to express any other ideas related to the case study subject matter; representing a necessary component of case study methodology (Hays & Singh, 2012). In addition, probing questions were also used in the follow up interviews to encourage participants to share examples and anecdotes related to their answers (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Seidman, 2013).

Field Notes

During each interview, I took field notes as each question was answered as one means of recording essential information. This allowed me to log the data in a way that was different from relying solely on the recordings and transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In some instances, I recorded descriptive field notes that helped capture details of the participant's answers (Hays &

Singh, 2012). I also recorded reflexive notes during the interviews that allowed me to capture

emotions, assumptions, and ideas (Hays & Singh, 2012). Together these notes provided a more

complete picture of the real-time data collection when I later reviewed the transcripts.

Document Artifacts

At the conclusion of each interview, I inquired about obtaining any human resource

documents mentioned during the interview. Each participant shared the documents to which they

had access and/or experience. In some cases, participants provided the same document.

Regardless, I collected each document from each participant.

One participant provided a recent demographer's report to illustrate the scope of area's

growth. This document was referenced as she discussed the challenges of fast-growth, and it was

provided through the district's website at the end of her interview.

Reflexive Journal

Immediately upon closing the virtual meeting software, a reflexive journal, in the form of

a voice memo, was recorded. Recordings were completed in a solitary location to preserve

reflexive focus. Additionally, reflexive audio recordings were employed after reading interview

transcripts and field notes, documenting any thoughts related to the personal impact of the

research process (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Data Analysis

A thematic data analysis strategy was utilized to make sense out of the data collected

from the interviews, document artifacts, and reflexive journal (Boyatzis, 1998). Boyatzis

described thematic analysis as the process of encoding qualitative data. Specifically, I used the

process preferred by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the constant comparative method, because it

promoted a circular, responsive approach to the data. The cyclical process, supported by the

work of Glasser and Strauss, helped me make connections between the data and the theory of sensemaking. Further, this approach to data analysis also promoted the ongoing, retrospective process supported by Weick in the sensemaking framework.

I utilized a prior-research-driven approach to developing the codes (Boysatzis, 1998), and initial codes represented the components of sensemaking prized by Weick (1995): identity, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, extracted cues, and plausibility. Using Weick's research and definitions of these components, I generated a codebook that named each code, described it, and identified an example of the code using data from the interviews (Boysatzis, 1998). The codes were then grouped into themes, or larger units of information, that connected them in the areas of fast-growth challenges, hiring practices and desired candidate traits. I anticipated the emergence of common themes in the areas that related to sensemaking utilized by the district, as well as the traits the district desired in individuals selected to open new campuses.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the present study maintained internal and external validity, I utilized member checking and a peer debriefer. Member checking, conducted after completing each interview transcription, allowed participants the opportunity to ensure the accurate representation of their responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking also allowed interview participants to clarify answers and/or provide more complete answers, had participants gained new insight after the interview. In addition to member checking, Creswell and Poth (2018) advocate the use of a peer debriefer, adding credibility and reliability to the present study. Peer debriefer familiarity, in the areas of inquiry reflected in the research questions, enabled them to provide feedback related to the research design and data. Additionally, the peer debriefer challenged the themes and

findings from the present study, pushing me to throw out assumptions and look closely at the data. The chosen peer debriefer was a closely trusted mentor who, at the time of the present study, worked in the human resources field in a fast-growth district. That person was familiar with selecting principals to open new schools (Hays & Singh, 2012).

The use of multiple data sources served to triangulate and add validity to the present study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hiring documents used by the districts in the principal selection process corroborated the data from the interviews, highlighting similar themes in desired traits among principals to open campuses (Yin, 2014).

Reliability was also found in the rich, thick descriptions the interviews provided, facilitating thorough analysis of the information. Further, the peer debriefer added a layer of reliability, assisting with data analysis, through his or her role in helping the researcher analyze the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Researcher Bias

My positionality as a principal in a fast-growth district, selected to open a new campus, makes me cognizant of personal biases and assumptions regarding principal selection processes (Yin, 2014). However, my role in the present study's targeted group benefited relatability and understanding of the specific challenges faced by a fast-growth district, allowing for occasional opportunities to connect to the participants (Seidman, 2013). My shared experiences allowed the participants and I to relate, serving to avoid possible interruptions caused by the need to have participants offer detailed explanations related to fast-growth district characteristics, processes, and procedures.

Limitations

The present study was not without limitations, primarily driven by financial and time constraints. Because of these limitations, the research was limited in scope to one school district. As such, the likelihood for generalizability beyond the single school is limited. Further, schools not classified as fast-growth will have differing experiences that limit generalizability. While every measure was taken to inhibit the impact of these limitations, they do exist.

Delimitations

The delimitations set by the researcher in the present study included the focus on fast-growth districts and the challenges they may or may not encounter when selecting principals to open a campus. The present study did not cover principal selection outside of the fast-growth environment, nor did it cover principal selection for established campuses. I also chose to include perspectives from both the elementary and secondary level in order to capture any differences that might exist between the roles. Finally, the present study focused on a single school district to fit the case study design as well as apply the sensemaking framework to a single organization.

Assumptions

The present study was based on two assumptions. The first assumed that data collected from each participant would be accurate. Second, it was assumed that the principals and central office administrators would offer honest responses when interviewed.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of the present study was to explore how fast-growth districts select

principals to open campuses and to identify the leadership, management, or instructional traits

hiring personnel look for when selecting these principals. The guiding research questions

included:

1. What are the challenges of working and hiring in a fast-growth district?

2. What hiring practices do fast-growth districts use to select principals to open new
   campuses, and do they differ from the hiring practices utilized in selecting a
   principal for an existing campus?

3. What unique leadership, management, or instructional traits are fast-growth
   districts looking for in principals who will open campuses?

Results indicated the fast-growth district include in the present case study experienced

many challenges attributed to rapidly expanding student enrollment, primarily related to the brisk

pace at which growth and hiring occurred. I also found that this district used internal systems to

identify future leaders, a common practice referred to as "growing your own." The district also

utilized multiple tools to assess their principal applicants. For every vacancy, they employed a

stakeholder survey, applicant rubric, and panel interviews. I found minor deviations in how they

hired a principal to open a new campus. Specifically, when opening a new campus, there

appeared to be a stronger preference for internal candidates. The district also preferred hiring the

new campus principal much earlier in their cycle, up to one year in advance. Finally, I found the

participants valued instructional knowledge, relational capacity, and the ability to grow

themselves and others in each of their principal candidates. However, in principals tasked with

opening new campuses, the hiring committees prioritized management traits like organization

and the ability to multi-task.

To provide a framework to analyze how principal selections were made by the district and the traits for which they were looking, I used Karl Weick's components of sensemaking (1976; 1995). Weick's sensemaking framework allowed me to categorize the participant responses to better understand the reasons for their ideas and insight. Sensemaking is described as "the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meaning for individuals" (Evans, 2007, pg. 168). The components of sensemaking also provided a framework to understand the how and why of principal selection practices as well as desired traits in principals who open campuses in the chosen school district. Prior research indicated that leaders are continuously engaged in the process of making sense of their organization and environment, especially during times of change (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Hiring principals to open a new campus represents a time of great change for a school district, and the individuals in the present study exhibited the use of sensemaking in their decision-making process.

Throughout the interviews, the participants used language that indicated they utilize the sensemaking framework as they make decisions about how they select principals to open new campuses, as well as what traits they desire in these individuals. This was represented in the interviews as the participants described relying on multiple data points in a social context that considers environmental cues and identity as they make retrospective decisions about their hiring process and what they seek in principals who will open a new campus. Their ongoing process relies on each of the components Weick (1995) names in his sensemaking framework, and the participants continuously seek to answer Weick's questions of "What is going on here?" and "What do we do next?"

The participants in the present case study provided context regarding the challenges they faced as a fast-growth district, both in general and related to hiring. The findings were initially reviewed to ascertain understanding of the circumstances experienced by this school district. Then, the findings related to the district's principal hiring practices were reviewed, including a review of differences in hiring practices, based on whether the candidate was assigned to open a new campus or lead an existing campus. Next, the findings related to desired principal traits were reviewed. I also analyzed the traits the district valued in principals, followed by the traits they desired in principals assigned to open a new campus. The conclusion of each findings section includes a description of the sensemaking components embedded in the participants' decision-making process, as well as within the human resource documents provided by the participants.

Challenges of Fast-Growth

I found that central office administrators and principals experienced various hiring challenges related to increases in student enrollment, impacting the future of the district. Participants in the present study were asked to describe the challenges of working and hiring in a fast-growth district. The participants identified four primary areas of challenge for their district: (a) the pace of the growth, (b) the pace of hiring, (c) maintaining alignment among campuses, and (d) changing demographics.

Pace of Growth

Fast-Growth ISD (FGISD) grew by more than 7,800 students in the 15 years prior to 2021 (from 1000 students to 8,802 students). Further, growth over the next 10 years is anticipated to range from 3.18% to 10.57% per year (Zonda Education, 2021). One way the district prepares to address the challenges brought about by continued fast-growth is to contract

demographers to forecast the growth by year. The most recent demographer's report was

presented to the FGISD School Board in September 2021 (Zonda Education, 2021). The report

showed substantial increases in almost every housing indicator (Table 2). One strong indicator of

continued future growth is the number of Vacant Developed Lots (VDL) within the school

district's boundaries. VDLs are the number of lots that are already zoned and approved for

homes. FGISD had 1,936 in the 2nd quarter of 2021. The Inventory indicated the available

homes for purchase during the quarter, and Futures referred to the number of housing lots

potentially available, but not yet approved, for development. In short, the report indicated FGISD

will continue to experience rapid growth, necessitating new schools to accommodate the

expanding school-aged population.

Table 2. One Year Change in District Housing.

	2Q20	2Q21	Difference
Annual Starts	1396	1547	+151
Quarterly Starts	417	523	+106
Annual Closings	1185	1454	+269
Quarterly Closings	287	263	-24
Inventory	648	851	+203
VDL	1250	1936	+686
Futures	8483	7731	-752

To contextualize how the housing numbers correlate to student growth and the impact on

campuses, it was important to consider the yearly student enrollment forecasts. Data indicated

FGISD could expect a year-over-year change in enrollment of 887 students during the 2021–

2022 school year. The breakdown of the impact by campus level is presented Table 3.

Table 3. Projected Enrollment Growth 2021-2022.

	Fall 2021 Enrollment	**Projected 2022 Enrollment**	**Change**
Elementary Campuses	3952	4421	469
Middle School Campuses	2036	2285	249
High School Campuses	2403	2572	169

At the campus level, this rate of growth changed the dynamics of the school. Principal A described her school as the smallest elementary when it opened in the 2019–2020 school year. During that year, the school had a population of 400 students, increasing the potential for familiarity among staff, students, and families. In August 2021, the campus enrollment rose to 730. The increased population made relationship building more difficult. Further, the increased enrollment created curricular material acquisition challenges. To date, enrollment numbers continue to rise.

Central Office Administrator C described the challenge of expanding from a single high school district into a multi-high school district saying, "it changes the traditions and the community hasn't had time to adjust to the idea of having competing high schools." Echoing sentiments related to challenges while also speaking to potential rewards, Central Office Administrator A commented,

> I think part of the challenge of being in a fast-growth district is also what makes it most exciting because you're always in a planning mode. You're always looking ahead. You can never, ever relax. I've got a great team who are constantly looking at who are the next leaders coming up the pipeline.

The one constant in the district was change, and each participant expressed similar feelings of excitement about the future of their schools.

Pace of Hiring

When it comes to finding leaders to take on the new campuses, central office administrators in FGISD cited challenges related to the pace of hiring in a district with rapidly increasing enrollment. They described how difficult it was to remain aware of promising candidates, rather than focusing on the growth of current employees. Central Office Administrator B felt that the challenge was not related to hiring principals because, "the principalship is still a desirable job;" instead, "looking for the person that's able to absorb the changes as fast as they come" was viewed as the real hardship. Central Office Administrator C echoed a similar feeling, citing the fact that turnover in the district had been low and that there were many applicants for each principal opening. However, she also felt that the challenge lay in, "trying to find the right fit to open a certain campus the way you want it to open." Principal B also felt like applicants were plentiful, even going so far as to say that there were more qualified candidates in the district than there were principalship opportunities. Principal A agreed, believing that the district, "grows people into the upcoming principal openings," though she acknowledged that hiring was a never-ending process in a fast-growth district, due to the demand for administrative professionals on new campuses.

The challenge created by the pace of hiring were not only found in the need to hire campus leaders. Principal B shared her challenges when hiring teachers throughout the year to match the increase in student enrollment, saying, "it hasn't slowed down yet." Principal A shared similar feelings about hiring for her campus, but she felt the hiring challenge related to timing. She said,

> One of the big things is just staff allocation, making sure that we look at what the demographers say. But then sometimes it can be over, or it can be under. We have to make sure that we get the people we need. And it's unfortunate that oftentimes we get the

people after the fact, like after we get the kids and saying, okay, yeah, we didn't have sufficient staff.

Central Office Administrator C agreed that constant enrollment changes made hiring enough teachers difficult. For example, the school led by Principal B opened with six teacher vacancies, negatively impacting students. Principal B stated, "it was hard for the kids…and it has been a priority for the district to try to stay ahead of the increased need for teachers while also being fiscally responsible in approving additional teaching units." Balancing the need for more teachers without overemphasizing hiring is difficult. Unfortunately, this means that many teaching units are not approved until after the start of the school year, contributing to delayed hiring, sometimes well into the school year.

The hiring challenges in fast-growth districts do not stop with principal and teacher vacancies. Central Office Administrator C described the increased need to hire for operational areas in the district. He said,

> The biggest thing is just keeping up with the influx of people that you need to manage the fast-growth. Most people think about teachers, but you also have a huge amount of support staff that has to grow in concert with that. Everything from maintenance to cafeteria workers to administrators and central office staff. There are always questions about which positions you need, when, and how many of them.

The pace of hiring in a fast-growth district is not confined to one part of the year, nor is it restricted to one type of employee. Hiring in a fast-growth district is an ongoing process.

Maintaining Alignment

Another challenge faced by a fast-growth district is that of maintaining alignment among schools across the district. In other words, the participants experienced challenges in keeping campuses, students, and teachers on the same page with regards to their practices in the areas of district values, curriculum, and procedures.

Central Office Administrator B felt that maintaining a common, "organizational set of core values and culture" was difficult when, "students just constantly arrive all year long." He added that new employees were also continually added to serve the influx of students. Training new employees in the district's core values, processes, and culture, particularly when new hires began mid-year, was taxing.

Central Office Administrator C shared that the issue of alignment went beyond values, impacting curriculum, stating,

> The other thing is, as you get bigger, you have different needs. For example, when you only have one high school, one middle school, and one elementary, it's easy to keep everybody on the same page curriculum-wise. The curriculum alignment team did the work, and then suddenly you're much larger. It's a lot harder to keep everybody aligned. So you have to have new tools and new resources in order to do that.

The principals interviewed for the present study shared similar challenges related to the constant enrollment of new students, as well as alignment impacts felt on their respective campuses. Principal A talked about the need to acclimate new students to the new campus throughout the year. On a campus that experienced typical growth, it was easy to establish routines and procedures at the beginning of the year, so that all students knew and understood expectations. When students enrolled throughout the year, routines and procedures had to be continuously introduced and practiced, to maintain the culture of the campus. Principal B talked about the challenges related to meeting students' needs when, "the classes continued to grow" throughout the year. In her experience, alignment on a new campus was challenging because there was, "no way we've always done things." Central Office Administrator B described this as the need to apply, "previously learned structures and systems to a new physical building" to establish expectation alignment from one campus to the next. The challenge for new campus principals included the notion that what worked on one campus might not work similarly on

another. Therefore, systems had to be adjusted, while maintaining alignment with district

expectations for how campuses are run.

Changing Demographics

One of the changes to which the district had to adapt was that of changing demographics.

The ability for a leader to embrace and be responsive to a diverse student body is an important

skill (Madsen & Mabokela, 2014). Principal A spoke about the impact of changing

demographics at her campus, as well as how her campus responded to the challenge, making sure

parents were included in campus activities:

> My campus has students that speak 23 different languages at home. We've had to do a lot
> of learning just about different cultures because we've had different kids than we've had
> before in our schools. I think we've had to think creatively of how to get parents more
> involved. You know, we used to also have just lots of parents who were up here all the
> time volunteering. Now we have mostly working families, often where both parents work
> outside the home. Even just having to adjust our schedules to be available outside of
> regular school hours is a way to get the community involved. We're still exploring the
> best ways to do that, to make sure that we're still reaching everybody and building those
> strong relationships.

Principal B commented on the impact of changing demographics on her campus. She felt

it was important to always, "adhere to the needs of [the] kids as [the] population continues to

change." Training teachers to be culturally responsive and aware of how to address different

viewpoints, religions, and cultures was also something she prioritized on her campus. She

described the district as having evolved from a rural area to an extension of a nearby urban

center.

At the central office level, only Administrator A discussed changing demographics, but

her perspective related to the need to build a diverse staff to better represent the new district

demographic. She elaborated that changing student demographics might necessitate specific

skills in a campus leader. Recently, the district needed to hire a Spanish-speaking principal after

learning the previous, monolingual principal was unable to meet the needs of the students and

parents on that campus. This was the first time the district became aware of a concrete need

related to changing demographics.

Making Sense of the Challenges of Fast-Growth

In explaining the context of working and hiring in a fast-growth school district, the

participants drew on their own experiences to describe challenges. The process of sensemaking is

often described as a process that uses, "retrospective accounts to explain surprises" or changes in

a somewhat familiar setting (Weick, 1995). Everyone interviewed for the present study had more

than 16 years of experience in education. Each participant cited the challenges of a fast-growth

district in terms of how it compared to their other experiences in campus leadership and principal

selection. Weick (1995) also used the word "interpretation" to describe the process of

sensemaking. In this case, participants shared their ideas about principal selection and desired

principal traits based on their interpretation of the challenges that exist in a fast-growth school

district. The participants also alluded to being increasingly cognizant of their environments,

using present challenges to predict future challenges and solutions.

More so, while the participant responses to the interview question regarding the

challenges of fast-growth were largely descriptive, they revealed an environment which

promotes the use of the sensemaking framework. Sensemaking is triggered by uncertainty, and

the challenges described by the participants in the present study bring uncertainty about future

needs (Ganon-Shilon & Schecter, 2017). The participants used words and phrases to indicate this

uncertainty, such as "we aren't sure," "anticipate," and "haven't been here before." In each

response where a participant used language that indicated change or uncertainty, they inevitably

followed up the concern or challenge with language that indicated a sensemaking approach to

addressing the concern. Central Office Administrator A described tools, such as demographers' reports, that provide data points for decision-making. Principal B referenced multiple meetings with stakeholders to gather ideas to resolve pinch points in the campus procedures. These meetings allowed those involved to enact their thoughts in a social setting, building on the suggestions of others in an ongoing attempt to improve procedures. The mindset, from these participants, appeared to be that the challenges of fast-growth invite opportunities to grow and adapt.

Principal Hiring Practices

I found that FGISD used a methodical approach when hiring their principals, a process that deviated only slightly when hiring for a new campus. Principal selection began before a principal vacancy was posted due to the district's succession planning, whereby they use a leadership academy to prepare current employees for future principal openings. When a principal opening is expected and opens, the district uses stakeholder surveys, district-designed applicant rubrics, and panel interviews to select the final candidate. When selecting a principal to open a new campus, the selection process prioritizes internal applicants and similar tools are used to select the final candidate. However, one major difference is the hiring timeline, which is lengthened to provide extended startup time for the new principal at the new campus.

Hiring Any Principal

FGISD employs a principal selection process that was described similarly by each participant. The central office administrators who were directly involved in principal selection and, who were interviewed for the present study, included all of the individuals who designed the current principal selection process. Principal A and Principal B have experience with the principal selection process both as participants and as interview committee members.

Leadership Academy

Before FGISD has a principal opening, they take steps to ensure their leadership pipeline is robust. The district offers two separate leadership academies for employees who are interested in stepping into a future leadership role. One academy is dedicated to growing instructional leaders, such as curriculum writers, and the other is dedicated to growing administrative leaders. Central Office Administrator A described this as, "constantly building the pipeline of leaders…so you always have the next person that's ready to jump, not just for growth, but for regular attrition, too." The academies serve, in part, to address the increasing demand for campus level leadership within the present study district. The academies have proved especially helpful in the event of a mid-year vacancy, which occurs with accelerated growth. Central Office Administrator A cited an example of a recent vacancy that resulted from a mid-year resignation. The candidate who was selected to fill the vacancy was a product of the leadership academy.

Central Office Administrator C identified the leadership academies' job shadowing component as one of its most useful tools. Future leaders in the academy request to shadow positions for which they have interest. Shadowing broadens the lens of participants because they are encouraged to explore what the district offers. Participants in the present study agreed that the principalship is a multifaceted job. Therefore, exposing potential leaders to all areas of district operations are useful.

The leadership academies have evolved since the district first instituted the resource. Most recently, they added an application process that includes a recommendation from the applicant's current campus administrator. Each of the central office participants felt this change was helpful because it strengthened the pool of future leaders. The principal participants also felt this change was positive because it gave them a way to influence the future leaders in the district.

Further, it also provided a way for principals to encourage promising teachers to grow into other positions.

Stakeholder Survey

For any principal position, whether for a new or existing campus, the central office administrators first create and electronically distribute an open-ended survey to campus stakeholders. While I did not see the survey, it was described as a way for stakeholders to share any traits and/or qualifications they feel important for their campus. Surveyed stakeholders include teachers on the campus (or who might move to the new campus), students who attend or will attend the campus, and parents of students who attend or will attend the campus. Community members are also included in the survey. The responses to the open-ended survey are reviewed to identify the most common responses as the district attempts to understand the traits that the stakeholders value in a potential principal.

Central Office Administrator A placed high value on the data gathered from stakeholders. She commented, "they [the stakeholders] know the needs of their campus best." Central Office Administrator B and C shared similar ideas. Both felt the survey helped individualize the hiring process to match the campus. Principal A felt like the survey indicated the importance of including staff voice in major campus decisions. As a result, she tries to emulate the survey practice in some of her own critical hires.

Applicant Rubric

Central office administrators use stakeholder survey data to create a unique applicant rubric for each principal vacancy. Frequently requested traits are included in the applicant rubric. Some of the traits identified by stakeholders in past surveys are attributes like prioritizing someone with an advanced degree. The applicant rubric is used to screen every applicant who

applies for the position, and each applicant's qualifications are compared to the rubric. Central

office administrators also add any criteria they feel important, based on both prior knowledge

and the potential needs of the campus. Central Office Administrator C recalled the process of

referencing past rubrics, reviewing the traits or qualifications they prioritized for previous

openings. An example of how additional criteria is added to the screening rubric was shared by

Central Office Administrator A:

> We talk about, what are the qualities that we're looking for, what's important experience
> or content area knowledge? Does the campus need a strong instructional leader? Do they
> need strong instruction, or do they need strong management? Because maybe the
> associate principal and the other assistant principals are really strong instructionally. So
> maybe you bring in a strong manager or it could be vice versa. So it just depends on what
> need for this particular campus.

Each element of the rubric is also assigned a point value. While Central Office

Administrator A acknowledged the applicant rubric is "somewhat arbitrary [because] it is created

in-house." The rubric is applied to every applicant for every vacancy, and the points are added to

identify the top applicants. The top scores represent the individuals they interview, and Central

office does not alter or adjust the final candidate pool. They, "let the best applicants rise to the

top based on the numbers [and] typically interview four or five candidates."

The principals interviewed for the present study were aware of the applicant rubric, and

appreciated its use, feeling it made the screening process, "more equitable." They felt it

eliminated the notion that principal selection was based on, "who you know." Principal A

recalled her participation on an interview panel for another principal vacancy, confirming the

rubric was shared with everyone involved in the interviews. She said that when the panel

debriefed after each interview, Central Office Administrator A referenced the rubric reminding

the panel why the candidate was selected and what the stakeholders said they valued in a

candidate.

Panel Interviews

Interviews for any principal vacancy are conducted by a panel of 10–12 individuals. The same central office administrators who created the rubric attend the interviews, along with teachers and paraprofessionals from the campus. Additionally, Principal A shared that "parents and community members are typically included on the interview panel," particularly for secondary campuses. Finally, students are included on the panel when the position is for a secondary school, and "they are encouraged to ask questions during the interview," according to Central Office Administrator C.

Central Office Administrator A felt the panel interview was a way to value the voices of those most impacted when a principal is selected. She described a recent example in which a campus secretary, with 16 years of campus experience, sat on the interview panel for the new principal. Central Office Administrator A stated, "she's the one who holds all of the institutional knowledge about that campus." Including her on the interview panel brought that knowledge to the interview, also honoring the experience of the longtime employee.

There were times using a panel to interview candidates extends the selection process. This typically occurred because the individuals on the panel could not come to consensus on a top candidate. Central Office Administrator A described a recent principal vacancy that took three rounds of panel interviews to fill. While it was challenging for the central office screeners, she felt it was worth it to continue the search to ensure the best candidate was found.

> We couldn't find an overwhelming number one that the committee could agree on, and it wasn't contentious or controversial in any way. It's just you could tell by the teachers and the parents on the committee that those were not the people they wanted. So even though we thought we had a top candidate, the committee didn't think that was the person. So we didn't select them because (we thought) what's going to happen after we name them and we walk away? They're the ones who have to be there.

Central Office Administrator B shared a similar experience. He recalled the necessity to, "pull the plug and start over, as painful as that is." From his perspective, taking the time to find the right person supported the campus in the long run. He also felt this prevented campus resistance toward an incoming principal.

After each interview, the panel discusses their impression of each applicant, highlighting pros and cons. At the conclusion of the interview process, the interview panel narrows the field to their top two choices. Since the superintendent is part of the panel, she is aware of the discussion and reasons that led to the selections. She meets with each candidate for a second-round interview before making her final recommendation to the school board. In the district's history, the school board has never rejected the recommendation of the superintendent.

The principal selection process was described similarly by the principals who were interviewed and selected for their positions. While they were not privy to the applicant rubric, they were aware of its use in the selection process. They also had positive experiences with the use of the staff and student survey to identify desired traits in potential candidates. Each principal felt that the staff had greater buy-in to their selection because they felt like they had a say in choosing the principal.

Evolution of Principal Selection in Fast-Growth ISD

The hiring practices for principals evolved during the tenure of the current superintendent, in response to the rapid growth of the district. Central Administrator C shared that, "we didn't really have a plan," but now one is needed because of the increase in the rate of the growth. She also shared that district leaders, "saw the need for some alignment in what we wanted the interview process to look like." Central Office Administrator A attributed the change in the district's interview process to, "the focus on alignment, on instruction, the focus on using

data to guide decisions, the focus on purposeful and intentional conversations and on

[candidates] having that skillset." The need to create alignment and the need to identify specific,

desired traits drove the development of the applicant rubric that is created for each principal

opening.

Another evolution in the hiring process was added in 2020 when central office created a

guide for hiring for every campus-based position. The guide is a hiring flow chart that includes

notes from central office, guiding the entirety hiring process. The document also indicates who

has the final say on the selected candidates, and it has worked to, "keep [the district] aligned in

how (they) hire," according to Central Office Administrator C.

Finally, a recent addition was made to the interview process when Central Office

Administrator B suggested incorporating a presentation into each interview. The presentation

piece was added because the district was looking for a way to make the interview process more

dynamic. According to Central Office Administrator B,

> we became much more individualized depending on the campus. For example, the last
> one we just did recently for a dual language campus, and we wanted to have them present
> to the community. We said we would like you to get in front of us and present to an
> audience of brand new community members and explain your dual language program and
> why it's a good thing. It also gave us the chance to see how much do they know about
> dual language and how well can they communicate that effectively to a community that
> may or may not have been exposed to a dual language program before.

Each of the participants interviewed referenced the evolution of their hiring process, along with

the expectation that it will continue to change to identify and select the best candidate.

Selecting Principals to Open New Campuses

When selecting a principal to open a new campus, FGISD utilized the same process for

any principal position, whether for a new or existing campus. However, there were minor

differences in the application of the hiring process for a principal tasked to open a campus. For

these positions, FGISD strongly favored internal candidates and the hiring timeline was extended.

Internal Candidate Preference

Each participant described a district-wide preference for internal candidates to fill leadership positions. However, this was not always the case. Central Office Administrator A shared examples of when the district hired a principal from outside the organization. Regardless, each participant described the importance of selecting principals who will open a new campus from an internal pool of candidates. Central Office Administrator B described internal candidates as having an "inside advantage [because] they knew who to go to for all of the operational pieces." While Central Office Administrator C agreed situations may dictate the "need something different (an outside candidate)" she also felt that looking internally was a good way to, "value people here, especially when choosing someone to open a campus." Principal B shared a similar sentiment when she said, "I believe firmly that they want to allow you to move up in-house if the skill set is there."

According to Principal A, a 24 year FGISD veteran, the district has never hired an external candidate to open a new campus. When Principal A was hired FGISD had only two campuses.

Hiring Timeline

The hiring timeline for a principal who will open a campus is the second difference FGISD considers when hiring a principal to fill an existing campus vacancy. For example, Principal B was hired a full year prior to the opening of her secondary campus. Principal A was hired the March of the preceding school year to open her elementary school. This time allowed the principals to complete tasks associated with opening a new campus. It is also indicative of

the difference in scope FGISD places on opening an elementary school campus versus a high school campus, due to the increased programming at the secondary level.

Both principals interviewed in the present study discussed how they used the additional time prior to the occupation of the building. For example, both recalled the time it took to order furniture and supplies. Preparation was particularly challenging for Principal B who was tasked with preparing a new campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both the uncertainly of the future schooling and supply chain backlogs added difficulty to the process.

An additional factor that contributed to the early onboarding of Principal A and Principal B was the need to staff new campuses. Unlike an existing campus, these leaders were tasked with hiring for every position in the building. Not only did they need to hire classroom teachers to staff the campus, they also had to select paraprofessionals for both instructional and clerical support. Principal B reflected on the spring prior to her school opening saying, "it was literally hiring, hiring, hiring-up to 15 interviews every day."

When principals are hired for an existing school, Central Office Administrator A preferred to a two-month transition period for all hires. The early hiring practice is unusual in public schools because it is expensive to hire a duplicate for a top leadership position, even if for a short time. Regardless, Central Office Administrator A felt it was worth the additional cost and continued to promote negotiations for early hiring with the district's chief financial officer. Central Officer Administrator A commented, "You have to (because) it's an investment, but I think the investment pays off. You have a smoother operation, you have a smoother transition and just a smoother operation of the campus." She also echoed the importance of allowing a principal who will open a new campus even more time to prepare for the first day of school.

In terms of hiring a principal to open a new campus, each participant agreed to the impracticality of hiring a campus leader the summer prior to the campus opening. Principal B stated, "preparing to open a campus is a job unto itself. People think you might have a year off, but there is so much that goes into opening that isn't visible." Each Central Office Administrator echoed this sentiment.

Sensemaking in Principal Selection

Evidence of the sensemaking framework was embedded throughout the participants' thought process in the area of principal selection. Each participant described elements of the selection process with language that was indicative of changes in response to information, such as "tweaking," "adjusting," "doing our best," and "finetuning." Participants also referenced multiple data sources as the catalyst behind some of the changes to their principal selection process. All of the participants referenced the importance of listening to the community stakeholders. All of the Central Office Administrators also cited the importance of reviewing past hires and evaluating the impact of the interview process on who was selected.

Central Office Administrator C described FGISD's hiring procedures as a product of retrospection when she said, "we're still exploring the best ways to grow our people to make sure that we're still reaching everyone and building those strong relationships."

Multiple participants acknowledged that their selection processes are the result of ongoing adaptations that consider factors unique to each principal opening, as well as each person's own experience in education. Central Office Administrator A described that the district moves forward with the most plausible hiring processes without the ability or time to know that everything they have done is the absolute best. Rather, it is "the best [they] can do at any given time" with an expectation of evolution over time, according to her. Evidence of this is apparent

in the evolution of the FGISD hiring process, along with the district's willingness to adjust when a particular hire fails to meet district expectations. All of the central office administrators referenced the need to continue updating their practices to better serve students and families. Central Office Administrator B also described principal hiring as a process that is "always being tweaked" as the district learns more about their community needs.

District leaders also discussed the importance of identity in the process of hiring for a campus, evidenced by the fact that they approach each principal position distinctly and in consideration that campuses have different needs, depending on where they are and who they serve. One example of this was a mid-year change to a Spanish-speaking principal for a campus that needed that specific trait due to the establishment of a Dual Language program. The change was based on the family concerns and needs that became apparent after the school year began. Central Office Administrator A and B both described this decision as one that happened after gathering input from the teachers and parents connected to the campus. In addition, they sought input from a neighboring district with a Dual Language program to better understand why the campus might benefit from a Spanish-speaking leader. The use of multiple data points to make a decision, adjusting to new circumstances, and considering identity are hallmarks of the sensemaking framework.

Data for the present study revealed FGISD attempts to create shared meaning in their hiring process. Central Office Administrator C described this as, "creating a common vision." The FGISD common vision is elaborated using the applicant rubric, guiding the selection committee with a framework for spotting applicant strengths and weaknesses. Central Administrator A stated, "we project the rubric onto the wall" after interviewing each applicant for a principal vacancy, reminding the interview panel of "what we said we wanted in a

principal." The emphasis on the rubric and stakeholder data maintains the common vision connection.

Desired Principal Traits

In every potential principal, FGISD looks for instructionally strong leaders who can build relationships with all stakeholders and grow others. While this is still true when they need to select a principal to open a new campus, they place a greater priority on identifying an internal candidate with strong organizational and multi-tasking skills.

In All Principals

Each participant was asked to describe the leadership, management, or instructional traits they felt valuable in all principals. Three common traits emerged from participant responses. Each participant highlighted the importance of campus principals being an instructional leader. Further they identified relational capacity as a desired characteristic, as well as the ability to grow themselves and others.

Instructional Knowledge

Each participant described the importance of campus leaders having strong instructional knowledge in order to successfully lead teachers. Instructional leadership was described by Principal A as a non-negotiable trait for a campus leader to possess. She said,

> You need to be an instructional leader. You need to know about instruction and how to talk with your teachers, how to teach, how to model what good instruction looks like. Because if you don't, you really don't have a leg to stand on with teachers. You have to be willing to learn where to be vulnerable with the instructional piece, but be able to show what you're talking about with instruction.

For this campus principal, the collaborative nature of instructional leadership was also important as she prized leaders who were able to work alongside teachers to solve curriculum and teaching challenges. The collegiality was valued over simply delivering instructional

knowledge. Central Office Administrator A agreed with the idea that instructional leaders must

maintain an understanding of the teaching craft that, "goes beyond a textbook understanding of

strategies or curriculum." She further elaborated,

> but from the instructional standpoint, they have to have a good solid instructional
> framework and they have to be willing to go in there and tap into the instruction,
> whatever it is. They can't be afraid of the instruction. They have to go in and be willing to
> be a part of it. That's what a good instructional leader looks like to me. You know, they're
> really getting in there, they're involved, they know what's happening in classrooms.

Instructional knowledge is one of the most important traits Central Office Administrator

C looks for in all principals. She believes the focus on student success and learning is why

schools exist. She believes principals have to have a, "solid instructional framework, and they

have to be willing to go in (classrooms) and tap into the instruction." However, she was not

opposed to a potential candidate who required some support in this area, valuing leaders who

acknowledge they need opportunities for professional learning and development.

Principal B also cited the importance of strong instructional leadership. She identified

one sign of that trait as, "having your pulse on what's going on with teaching and learning on the

campus." She, along with the other participants, referred to instructional expertise as the primary

reason for, "why principals are here."

Relational Capacity

In addition to the campus leader's knowledgeable of curriculum and instruction was the

emergence of principal relational capacity, a term commonly used by the participants to refer to

any relationship building or employee support abilities in a potential candidate. In reference to

sharing instructional strategies to promote student growth Principal A described relational

capacity as, "being willing to be in the trenches with teachers." Central Office Administrator A

shared that relational capacity is the ability to, "make people feel valued." She felt that principals

must build relationships inside and outside their buildings, especially with community members. In addition, Central Office Administrator B felt people benefit when their work is recognized. He reflected on his desire to hire, "people who can build relationships because that's the foundation of any leadership role."

According to Central Office Administrator C, "principals must have the ability to connect with teachers and make those solid relationships to make things move on the campus." The notion to use relationships to improve instruction was something that Principal B also found important. She also cited the importance of relationship building while adding the need to empower people to make decisions about how they teach is a strategy. To that end, she cited a focus on relational capacity as the ingredient that builds positive relationships with teachers who might not otherwise buy in to her vision.

Growing Themselves and Others

The ability to grow themselves and others was also seen as a necessary trait of campus leaders. Central Office Administrator B described this as one of non-negotiable traits he looks for when hiring a campus principal. He stated, "I desire principals who are willing to grow and practice and learn and engage in instruction." He elaborated that a good leader, "engages with their staff and teachers and asks the right questions." He equated this trait to that of a lifelong learner, viewing lifelong learning as vital for anyone desiring to lead others.

Acting as a coach with others was a desired trait that Central Office Administrator A shared. She felt "coaching people" described, "not just being able to mark things off of a checklist, but really being able to have quality conversations and follow-up conversations" with everyone on their campus, including assistant principals and support staff. Coaching teachers is one of Principal A's primary tasks so she feels like every principal should have that ability. The

ability to grow teachers was important to Central Office Administrator C as well. However, she also felt a caveat of the trait is, "knowing how hard to push." When people struggle, according to Central Office Administrator C, "it is okay to slow down and allow them time to develop themselves at a pace that eases some of their stress."

Principal B also found value in the ability to grow others, though she described this trait as the ability to "build capacity in others" in the areas of teaching and learning. She equated this trait as key to a leader's success when she said, "the true success measure of [a principal's] success is how many leaders they left behind." Creating leaders was one reason she felt the leadership academy was such an important tool because, allowing her the chance to provide others with growth opportunities.

Other Valued Traits in All Principals

Though each participant described the importance for campus leaders to maintain strong dispositions toward instructional leadership, relationship building, and coaching, other desired traits emerged. Principal A felt that being approachable was key to being successful as a campus leader, while Principal B cited the ability to delegate as critical to the role. Central Office Administrator B also echoed to a leader's ability the delegate, but his interpretation of the trait extended to knowing when to delegate, as well as knowing how to follow up on delegated tasks.

Each central office administrator had individualized perspectives related to other desirable principal traits. For example, given contemporary school safety challenges, Central Office Administrator C advocated for a strong sense of situational awareness among principals saying,

> I think situational awareness has to be one of the strongest leadership qualities that they have nowadays. I don't know that I would have said that ever before now, but now I really do think it is important. They have to be able to pivot in the moment. They have to be able to assess the situation and handle it right then and there. And so many things are

happening to them now that we haven't experienced before. So you really just need to be able to be confident, and you need to be able to address those types of situations management-wise.

In his follow up interview, Central Office Administrator B added situational awareness as a trait he came to value after observing a struggling new principal who lacked the ability. Based on his observations, he realized that her, "pain point was she couldn't anticipate where her attention was needed until after the fact." Discussions with other central office administrators, further revealed the importance of situational awareness. As a result, the district is looking for ways to identify situation awareness in the FGISD interview process.

Central Office Administrator B valued decision-making abilities in prospective principals, but he felt this trait needed to, "be aligned with the organization's goals and values" so the leader could, "apply them into the novel situations that principals encounter every single day." In addition, Central Office Administrator A cited the importance of decision-making abilities, though she found value in a candidate, "knowing when to make the decision themselves and when to make the decision with feedback from others."

An analysis of the hiring documents used by the district revealed an alignment between the traits described in the interviews and the language used in the documents. For example, the principal job description included administrator competencies. One of these was the ability to, "model and expect autonomy." Another spoke to the ability to, "motivate and empower others." Identified skills on the applicant rubric and in the job description for a principal vacancy also included organization, problem-solving, and instructional knowledge.

New Campus Principals

The participants echoed much of the research from Leithwood et al. (2006) in their beliefs about desirable traits in campus principals, especially in the areas of instructional

knowledge and relationship building. However, when pressed to identify desired traits specific to principals who will open a new campus, their responses shifted to focus on practical skills related to management.

Central Office Administrator A felt principals of new campuses needed to possess skills that mirrored the district's approach to principal selection by, "involving key people in the decision-making process." She elaborated that someone opening a high school needed to be out in the community, "visiting local businesses and making connections." Central Office Administrator C felt opening a new campus required a principal with a, "really good, big lens to see the big picture . . . to make it all happen from the ground up." Part of that big picture, according to Central Office Administrator C, included the ability to rapidly grow a team of teachers to support the vision for the campus. Central Office Administrator C shared an example of a high school that opened with more than 200 adults who had never worked together; the need to, "forge a team very rapidly" was paramount.

Organization and the ability to multi-task were the only desired traits mentioned by every participant. The two principals interviewed felt strongly that both organization and the ability to multi-task were the most important traits for someone assigned to open a campus. Principal A described working on "a big to do list for opening" for several months before the school year began. Prior to opening, she had to review the furniture orders, remedy missing items and ensure the, "functionality of the spaces." For example, in a life skills classroom, only one teacher desk and chair were ordered for a space occupied by three adults. She saw her strong organizational skills and her ability to multi-task as necessary for preparing the campus. Additionally, Principal B valued her strong system of organization given the number of personnel she had to hire. She

described the spring before her school opened as a time when she was, "literally hiring, hiring, hiring, like 15 interviews every day."

Central Office Administrator C felt that principals who open campuses need to, "really be a systems person, so very organized [to prevent] a lack of systems that have to be put in" once the students arrive. She elaborated and gave examples of systems that needed to be designed before the first day of school asking, "when do students get to be dismissed from a classroom? If they're out of the classroom, do they need a hall pass? What does a tardy system look like?" While seemingly small, according to Central Office Administrator C, even the simplest systems, when out of place, can cause "a lot of distraction and disruption." In addition, Central Office Administrator B felt a systems mindset was an important trait because, "opening a campus involves a lot of attention to detail and processes [since] nothing exists, and you've got to figure all that out."

Principal B also felt her ability to multi-task was critical, not only before the campus opened, but in the first few weeks of school. She remembered, "dealing with architects in the midst of somebody [having] a fight down the hall." While the principal job often requires wearing many hats, Principal B felt managing the final punch list items on a new campus added a layer of stress not felt by principals of existing campuses. Principal A reflected on leaks and air conditioning unit malfunctions during the first week and throughout the first year in her new building. Technicians had to complete repairs during the school year, adding stress to teachers and students. According to Principal A, those types of building-related stresses were not a factor during her first principalship in an existing campus.

Making Sense of Desired Traits

Weick (1995) described the steps of sensemaking as the cyclical process people undertake when searching for meaning. In this process, they gather data from internal and external sources before they move forward with a response or behavior. The hiring personnel in the present study indicated that they made their decisions based on the information acquired as well as their own understandings. Sensemaking such as this exhibits Weick's (1976; 1995) component of plausibility and the belief that individuals cannot know everything exhaustively when making decisions. When determining the traits that are important in principal candidates, the participants in the present study appeared to draw on their own identity as educators, identifying the traits that had served them well. They also drew on their previous hiring experiences and the positive and negative outcomes associated with each hire, in an example of how they utilized extracted cues to come to decisions on desired traits.

Central Office Administrator C said her experience with the opening of the newest secondary school highlights why she now feels so strongly about system-mindedness and the need to be situationally aware. Central Office Administrator B described current challenges with a principal with developing situational awareness. Both administrators referenced leadership meetings where these challenges were discussed and response plans were created. At the same time, all three Central Office Administrators discussed ways they would adjust their interview process to ensure these desired traits in future candidates. As Central Office Administrator C commented, "some of these traits aren't things I've considered before, as being critical in principals who will open a new campus; but I will come up with a way to assess them in the interviews." The ongoing nature of the conversations among Central Office Administrators

about the traits they desire in principals who open new campuses is responsive to changing ideas and incorporates the social aspect of sensemaking.

This sort of input-driven, retrospective planning for future hires is indicative of the sensemaking framework. In this instance, the Central Office Administrators are deep into the sensemaking cycle as they attempt to address Weick's (2005) questions of "what's going on here?" and "what do I do next?" Each Central Office Administrator indicated specific campus needs and changing populations continually inform their personnel preferences, in addition to their own interpretation of the traits that are important in principals who will open a new campus. Principals A and B also displayed sensemaking steps in their understanding of the traits that are desired in principals who open new campuses. Each referred to their own experience in opening a campus to reflect on the skills that served them best. Principal B said that she is still identifying additional traits that she feels are important to the role because she continues to learn about the needs of a new campus. Principal A acknowledged that the traits she feels are desirable are likely tied to her own identity when she said, "it would be weird if I thought a trait were important if I didn't have it." She then displayed retrospection in real-time when she went on to say that she increased her capacity in the areas of targeted delegation, a management trait, only due to input from others after she was hired. She ended by accepting that she did not possess this trait to start, but her environment demanded that she evolve.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Chapter Five includes a discussion of the findings in connection to prior research, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research. The purpose of this chapter is to further elaborate the findings as related to previous research on principal selection in fast-growth districts and desired principal traits for opening a new campus. In addition, Chapter Five presents recommendations for future research.

Discussion of Findings

In attempting to understand the principal selection process in a fast-growth district, a case study design was utilized to examine how principals were selected to open a new campus as well as the traits are desired in these candidates. The following questions guides the present research:

1. What are the challenges of working and hiring in a fast-growth district?

2. What hiring practices do fast-growth districts use to select principals to open new campuses, and do they differ from the hiring practices utilized in selecting a principal for an existing campus?

3. What unique leadership, management, or instructional traits are fast-growth districts looking for in principals who will open campuses?

Though prior studies that examine the challenges of fast-growth in a school district do not exist, there is evidence that the Texas Education Agency understands and acknowledges the presence of complexities due to the financial allotment provided to districts when they open a new campus. Prior research also indicates that principal selection practices are not well-studied (Leithwood et al., 2006), though research indicates this position has a significant impact on the campus (Grissom et al., 2021). Additionally, the cost to recruit and hire a principal is high (Snodgrass, 2018). Therefore, schools financially benefit from sound principal selection practices.

In addition, prior research specific to marrying Weick's (1976; 1995) sensemaking

components with hiring practices in fast-growth districts is not present in the body of knowledge.

I will discuss the findings in each of these areas, connecting the findings to the limited

prior research. For a brief summary of the findings presented in Chapter Four, please refer to

Table 4 below. Next, I will discuss the findings through the lens of sensemaking. Finally, I will

discuss the implications of the findings on practice, followed by my recommendations for future

research related to the challenges faced by fast-growth districts, their principal hiring practices,

and principal traits desired by their leaders in principals who will open a campus.

Table 4. Summary of Findings

Research Question	Findings
What are the challenges of working and hiring in a fast-growth district?	1. Pace of Growth 2. Pace of Hiring 3. Maintaining Alignment 4. Changing Demographics
What hiring practices do fast-growth districts use to select principals to open new campuses, and do they differ from the hiring practices utilized in selecting a principal for an existing campus?	*For All Principal Vacancies:* Leadership Academy, Stakeholder Survey, Applicant Rubric, Panel Interview *For Principals Who Open New Campuses:* Lengthened timeline Open to internal candidates only
What unique leadership, management, or instructional traits are fast-growth districts looking for in principals who will open campuses?	*For All Principal Vacancies:* 1. Instructional leadership 2. Relational capacity 3. Ability to grow themselves and others *For Principals Who Open New Campuses:* 1. Practical management skills 2. Organization 3. Ability to multi-task 4. Systems-minded

Challenges of Fast-Growth

Fast-Growth ISD (FGISD) experiences many challenges related to fast-growth, and understands they operate in a rapidly changing environment. There is no fast-growth research they may reference as the district navigates their unique challenges. However, FGISD is able to rely on research related to some of the specific challenges resulting from fast-growth.

The single biggest challenge is the pace of the growth in FGISD. The growth will not slow in the coming years, and FGISD will continue to experience the pains that come with increasing enrollment (Tilibetti, 2017).

Aligning to Madsen and Mabokela (2013) and Kemp-Graham (2015), the FGISD leaders understand that principals can impact the racial dynamics of a campus, including how their teachers and students feel about their role on the campus. The student population in FGISD has changed, and the relatively recent diversity necessitated the inclusion of culturally relevant teaching practices in their district professional development program.

The rapid changes related to student growth, an increased pace of hiring, and the district's changing demographics create an environment that is conducive to the cyclical problem-solving framework of sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

Principal Hiring Practices

FGISD employs many of the principal selection methods studied by other researchers. Both Hooker (2000) and Lemione et al. (2018) speak to the benefits of an internal leadership program, one focused on the preparation of qualified leaders. The FGISD leadership academy espouses this focus, preparing persons interested in campus administrative positions. In addition, the leadership academy prepares individuals interested in pursuing administrative positions related to curriculum and instruction.

This district uses panels with multiple stakeholders represented to interview prospective principals. Similar to Kwan and Walker's findings (2009), this district has experienced success with the representation of multiple perspectives in the interview process using an interview panel.

Participants in the present study indicated a strong preference for internal candidates to fill principal vacancies, similar to the findings of Blackmore, et al. (2006) and Sabina and Colwell (2018). In opening a new campus, the district exclusively considers current employees. However, participants all acknowledged that outside ideas and perspectives add value to the district, aligning aligns to the work done by Sabina and Colwell (2018).

Desired Traits

The leadership, management, or instructional traits sought by the district also aligned with the limited research in this area. For example, Cruzeiro (2009) identified the importance of a leader who could create a vision for a campus. The participants in the present study felt this trait was important, as well as the ability to unite a campus and community using that vision (Parylo & Zepeda, 2014).

Relational capacity was a quality that each participant identified as crucial for any principal, aligning to the work of Seashore (2009; 2017). Hassenpflug (2013) cited the ability of principals to coach teachers as important, which also relies on the ability to build relationships. Madsen and Mabokela (2014) identified the importance of a principal's ability to mediate issues of cultural significance, which was mentioned by one participant within the category of relational capacity. Kwan (2012) found that leaders need to have sound interpersonal and communication skills, traits foundational to relational capacity. One way campus leaders demonstrate

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interpersonal and communication skills within an instructional framework is through honest, targeted feedback (Garet et al., 2009).

Another frequently cited trait by the participants was that of organization, specifically related to the ability to multi-task and create systems. In FGISD, these traits were considered non-negotiable for a principal tasked to open a new campus. The research emphasizes the importance of general management capacity, including organization and systems thinking (Grissom, et al., 2021; Kwan, 2012; Leithwood, et al., 2006). However, the body of knowledge does not emphasize the afore mentioned traits to the same degree as FGISD. Since no scholarship speaks to principals who will open a new campus, it is reasonable that certain traits are more important to the specific task analyzed in the present study. In addition, the traits the FGISD desires in principals who will open a new campus are responsive to the challenges they have seen in their own district when a principal lacks these traits.

Parylo and Zepeda (2014) found superintendents placed a high emphasis on a proven leader when selecting a principal. FGISD does the same, and experience is the first component of their district-created rubric. Other components of the rubric consider prior achievements within and outside the district. Some achievements important to FGISD is having an academic focus, as well as an aptitude for working with a diverse student and teacher population. These traits were also identified by superintendents in other studies as being valuable in campus leaders (Cruzerio & Boone, 2009; Grissom et al., 2021). Knowledge and experience, in both curriculum and instruction and management are also desirable traits in campus leaders (Grissom et al., 2021; Kwan, 2012).

Sensemaking

Weick (1976; 1995) described sensemaking as being enacted when one encounters situations of no familiarity. In the case of hiring principals to open campuses in fast-growth districts, the hiring personnel cannot solely rely on what the research says about hiring practices or desired principal traits. Instead, it seems they must use all of the information available to make sense of the challenges brought about by fast-growth.

The participant interviews revealed these individuals have utilized the components of sensemaking in their approach to selecting principals to open new campuses. While this might be, in part, because of the lack of research, it is also a helpful framework for an organization to use during times of change (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). A common theme in all of the interviews was the notion that one cannot know what one does not know.

The leaders in FGISD embraced the idea that they were always learning and growing in response to the challenges of regularly opening new campuses. They understood the importance of keeping a common vision at the forefront of their decision-making process, aligning with the work of Matlis and Sonenshein (2010) and Gioia et al. (2013). Each participant described the process of making the best decisions they could, based on prior experience and knowledge, then revising their next decision based on the outcomes and new information or understanding. In their hiring practices, they also analyzed the needs of each campus, making their decisions, "grounded in both individual and social activity" (Weick, 1995, pg. 6).

The leaders in FGISD also understand that there is a need to have a district identity (Gioia & Thomas 1996), and they are reflective on their own experiences as they navigate the challenges of fast-growth. FGISD enacts the social, ongoing process of extracting cues from the district's environment to create plausible solutions to the challenges of hiring principals for new

campuses. This is similar to the problem-solving methods employed by school leaders in the research of Ganon-Shilon & Schehter (2017). When new information or new needs come to light, the district is responsive to the extracted cues gathered from sources like the stakeholder survey, helping ensure the right candidate is selected. FGISD also learns from sensemaking in the hiring process, applying that learning to future principal hires.

As the FGISD continues to tackle the challenges of hiring principals to open new campuses in a fast-growth setting, district leaders consider the components of Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework to align themselves and their processes. The fact that their process has evolved over time, as well as FGISD's intentional reflexiveness, exemplifies the ongoing nature of sensemaking.

Conclusions

The findings of the present study support prior research in the areas related to how principals are selected and what hiring personnel look for in principal candidates. FGISD has created a thorough process to interview and select candidates to open new campuses who will meet the needs of their community. The district incorporates stakeholder voice in their selection practices, and they utilize tools that keep their interview panels aligned to the desires and needs of the campus. FGISD leaders value instructional and relational strengths in their principals, but have identified critical traits that new campus principals must possess. In these candidates, they prioritize the traits of organization and the ability to multi-task, along with experience working in the district.

In part, due to limited research about hiring practices in fast-growth districts, the participants in the present study must utilize the ongoing, retrospective practice of sensemaking to make selections for principal vacancies for new campuses. Vacancies in the body of

knowledge, dedicated to the specific needs of a fast-growth district and the traits a principal must have to open a campus, required FGISD respond to the social needs of their community. FGISD also collected cues from their environment to determine which hiring practices worked, while discarding those that failed. These processes exemplify Karl Weick's (1976; 1995) process of sensemaking. The sensemaking framework allowed the district to "make sense" of their hiring challenges similar to the principal selection practices described in Ingle et al. (2011).

Implications for Practice

Working as a Principal in a fast-growth district who was selected to open a new high school offers a unique perspective as I consider the implications for practice. Many of the practices identified by FGISD are mirrored in my own district, including the use of a leadership academy to promote a healthy administrator pipeline and panel interviews that include multiple stakeholders. While we have also occasionally utilized an informal survey to identify traits current campus teachers desire in their next leader, we are not as consistent or methodical in the application of surveys, nor do we use them to create an applicant screen tool. Additionally, we prioritize similar traits in principals identified by these participants. However, I am not aware that we have placed such high importance on the traits of organization and management. That could be because we have opened nearly triple the number of campuses as FGISD in the last ten years, and these traits are found in so many of our administrators because of that experience. It is with both my own knowledge of fast-growth and my findings in FGISD that I share my perspective on how this study might impact practices in the field.

Principal selection is an area that warrants attention from hiring personnel due to the significant impact the principal has on the campus (Grissom et al., 2021, Seashore, 2007). The present study, in addition to the limited research available, indicates that administrators who hire

principals benefit from careful consideration regarding how they select their principals and what they desire of their candidates. Specifically, hiring personnel should approach each principal vacancy as a unique position, rather than rely on candidates that fit a generic mold. Needs specificity is especially important in fast-growth districts due to the ever-present need for principals and the unique challenges involved when opening new campuses.

The district represented in the present study has experienced success incorporating student voice into their hiring process. Prior research conducted through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation indicated student voice is a valuable source in measuring teacher effectiveness (Kane & Staiger, 2012). Using a similar strategy to include student voice in hiring might benefit districts as they select future campus administrators. Additionally, research prior to the present study suggests areas of rapid growth and development tend to show signs of changing demographics (Tilibetti, 2017). Hiring personnel in school districts should be mindful of the impacts and needs of an area experiencing shifting demographics. Specifically, districts do well to find leaders that reflect student demographics (Madsen & Mabokela, 2014).

The findings in the present study imply a thorough, aligned system for selecting campus leaders might lead to lower turnover rates, as seen in FGISD and in contrast with the national turnover rate of 18% (Snodgrass, 2018). While fast growing districts might feel the effects of time constraints when selecting principals, it could save time in the long run to invest substantial time and resources into vetting applicants to ensure the best candidate is selected for the job.

Fast-growth districts should consider the unique aspects of opening a campus when designing their ideal candidate profile. The participants in the present study indicated there were some traits that were desirable in all principals. However, the participants also cited specific traits that were of particular importance for a principal opening a new campus. For districts

experiencing rapid increases in student enrollment, consulting an experienced fast-growth district in their area may shed light on the unique needs of a new campuses and the tasks that must be completed for a successful opening. Further, prior knowledge would be helpful when selecting a candidate.

Finally, fast-growth districts should explore the sensemaking framework to ensure they are actively responding to the challenges of rapid growth. The cyclical, retrospective nature of sensemaking invites campus leaders to revisit challenges and obstacles to reflect on their decision-making. It also encourages the use of multiple data points and perspectives to create plausible solutions, and it involves stakeholders in the ongoing process. A deliberate process for reflection is fundamental to learning, and campus leaders could benefit from a systematic approach to the needs of their complex organizations.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study was conducted in a single school district in the suburbs of Austin, Texas. Though the findings were aligned with the limited prior research in the areas of principal hiring practices and desired principal traits, as well as the use of sensemaking by organizations during times of change, the focus on these aforementioned characteristics with respect to fast-growth districts is underrepresented in the literature. The present study is the only scholarship I found that considers principal selection in fast-growth areas. In addition, it is the only study that focuses on the selection of a principal to open a new campus.

Further research in these areas is needed to give hiring personnel in rapidly growing areas insight into hiring under circumstances. Future research should include fast-growth districts in urban and rural areas, as well as similar areas in other states that are experiencing rapid population growth. The findings in the present study suggest that there may differences in hiring

to open an elementary campus versus a secondary campus, primarily due to the impact on the community. Future research should dig deeper into the differences between campus levels, including that which is needed in their leaders. Future research should also explore any differences in how school districts select campus leaders at each level, as well as how the timeline might differ for the different levels.

The body of knowledge would benefit from a quantitative study that samples fast-growth districts throughout Texas and in other states. Casting a wider net would provide a more complete picture of the challenges facing fast-growth districts when they select principals to open campuses. With 75 Texas school districts that meet the fast-growth definition, there is ample opportunity to study this issue on a much larger scale. Comparisons could be made based on district size, proximity to large cities, student demographics, professional pay scale, or years of experience for those involved in hiring and/or leadership. The use of a mixed methodology would be ideal for a future researcher to obtain broader data, while still gathering the rich data obtained with qualitative methods.

Finally, research should be conducted to determine the challenges faced by fast-growth districts outside of the areas of principal selection. Fast-growth school districts are impacted far beyond human resources challenges. Deeper insight into the obstacles created by increasing student enrollment would benefit school districts in many of their practices, including how increased funding is used. One possible study might analyze how fast-growth districts gain taxpayer support through bond processes that finances growth. Researchers might also consider how students in fast-growth districts demonstrate learning when compared to students in a similar district with stagnant student enrollment.

There are certainly other areas of need for research related to fast-growth school districts. In Texas, with enormous growth projected for the foreseeable future (You et al., 2019), there exists significant benefit for research that helps school districts understand how to navigate the challenges that come with fast-growth.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Good morning, _____,

My name is Ashley Marquez, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Administration program at Texas A&M University. After completing my coursework, I am ready to begin my Record of Study, and I am writing to ask if you would be willing to be a participant in this voluntary study.

My study will explore the principal selection methods and desired candidate traits for principals who will open new campuses in fast-growth districts in suburban Austin school districts. It is my hope that this study will aid other districts who face the many challenges of continuously opening new schools to meet the increase in student enrollment.

Your participation in the voluntary study will include an interview that will last approximately one hour, and you will have the opportunity to review the interview transcript and participate in a brief follow up interview to provide clarification or correction. The results of this study may be published in scientific research journals or presented at professional conferences. However, your name and identity will not be revealed and your record will remain anonymous.

If you have questions about the study before you make a decision, you can contact:

Ashley Marquez

832-683-7673

ashleymarquezedu@tamu.edu

If you are interested in participating in this study, you may reply to this email or contact me at 832-683-7673. I greatly appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

Ashley Marquez

APPENDIX B

CONSENT SCRIPT AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Script: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. My name is Ashley Marquez, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Administration program at Texas A&M University.

My study will explore the principal selection methods and desired candidate traits for principals who will open new campuses in fast-growth districts in suburban Austin school districts. It is my hope that this study will aid other districts who open new schools to meet the increase in student enrollment.

Fast-growth is defined by the Texas Education Agency as "a school district in which the percentage growth in student enrollment in the district over the preceding three school years is in the top quartile of student enrollment growth in school districts in the state for that period."

The results of this study may be published in scientific research journals or presented at professional conferences. However, your name and identity will not be revealed and your record will remain anonymous. Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time. You are under no obligation to participate in this study, and there is no penalty to you if you decline to participate.

Do you verbally consent to participating in this study? Do you also consent to the use of an audio recording device?

APPENDIX C

CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographic Information
1. What is your name and position within the district?
2. How long have you worked in this district? In this field?
3. Describe your experience and career progression in public education and administration.

Challenges for Fast-Growth
4. In your experience, what are the challenges brought about by fast-growth for the district and its administrators?
   a. Describe the challenges, if any, you feel fast-growth districts encounter with hiring principals.

Principal Selection
5. How does your district plan for future growth when making hiring decisions?
6. Tell me about your district's process for identifying and selecting a principal from recruiting to bringing his or her name to the school board.
   a. Can you describe the process you use to make a final decision when choosing a principal to open a new campus?
7. Do you feel there is a preference for internal or external candidates in your district? Why, or why not, if no preference?
8. Describe the tools your district uses to aid hiring personnel in selecting a principal.
9. How do you create a shared meaning, or a common applicant profile, among hiring personnel as to what traits a candidate should possess?

Desired Traits
10. Describe the leadership, management, and instructional traits you feel are valuable in principals, in general.
    a. Is one or more of these traits non-negotiable? If so, which one(s) and why?
    b. Describe any traits you feel are important in principals who will open a new campus.

Final Thoughts
11. Is there any other information that you feel is important to understand about how your district selects principals, specifically for new campuses?

Probing Questions To Allow Deeper Responses
Tell me more about that.
Can you give me an example?
What was that like for you?

Participants will also be asked to share any documents related to principal selection, such as standard interview questions or applicant matrices, as well as past or current principal job postings and descriptions.

APPENDIX D

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (NEW CAMPUS)

Demographic Questions
1. What is your name and position within the district?
2. How long have you worked in this district? In this field?
3. Describe your experience and career progression in public education and administration.

Challenges of Fast-Growth
4. In your experience, what are the challenges brought about by fast-growth for the district and its administrators?
    1. Describe the challenges, if any, you feel fast-growth districts encounter with hiring principals.
2. Beyond the challenges any new principal faces, what, if any, additional challenges are present when opening a campus?

Principal Selection
3. Based on your experience, tell me about your district's process for identifying and selecting a principal from recruiting to being approved by the school board.
4. Do you feel there is a preference for internal or external candidates in your district? Why, or why not, if no preference?
5. Describe the tools you are aware of that your district uses to aid hiring personnel in selecting a principal.

Desired Traits
6. Describe the leadership, management, and instructional traits you feel are valuable in principals, in general.
    a. Is one or more of these traits non-negotiable? If so, which one(s) and why?
7. Describe any traits you feel are important in principals who will open a new campus.

Final Thoughts
8. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience working in a fast-growth school district?
9. Is there any other information that you feel is important to understand about how your district selects principals, specifically for new campuses?

Probing Questions To Allow Deeper Responses
Tell me more about that.
Can you give me an example?
What was that like for you?

Participants will also be asked to share any documents related to principal selection, such as standard interview questions or applicant matrices, as well as past or current principal job postings and descriptions.

APPENDIX E

CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS

1. After reviewing the transcript from our initial interview, is there anything from our first interview that you would like to clarify or elaborate on?

2. In regards to principal selection, how have you changed your selection methods over time, if at all? If yes, what is the reason you've changed your methods?

3. How does your district's leadership academy, described in our initial interview, impact your principal selection process, if at all?

4. In our initial interview, you shared that _____ is/are important traits in a principal who opens a new campus. Can you share an example or anecdote that illustrates why you believe that trait is important?
   a. Since our initial interview, have you considered any other traits you feel are important in a principal who opens a new campus?

5. Is there anything else you would like to share about principal selection in your district or the traits you feel are important in principals who open campuses?

APPENDIX F

PRINCIPAL FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS (NEW CAMPUS)

1. After reviewing the transcript from our initial interview, is there anything from our first interview that you would like to clarify or elaborate on?

2. In regards to principal selection and your experience as a principal in the district, how have the selection methods changed over time, if at all? If yes, what is the reason you've changed your methods?

3. How does your district's leadership academy, described in our initial interview, impact your principal selection process, if at all?

4. In our initial interview, you shared that _____ is/are important traits in a principal who opens a new campus. Can you share an example or anecdote that illustrates why you believe that trait is important?
   a. Since our initial interview, have you considered any other traits you feel are important in a principal who opens a new campus?

5. Is there anything else you would like to share about principal selection in your district or the traits you feel are important in principals who open campuses?