

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP SUPPORT & SYSTEM

ALIGNMENT: STAKEHOLDER INPUT

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By  
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to all school principals who give their time with patience and kindness.

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To Anett Sandoval-Serrato, my wife. Your encouragement throughout this process can't be expressed with words alone. Your prayers and smiles lifted me when I needed them most. To my 7-year-old daughter, Isabella Annette Serrato, who seeing Anett's support, insisted on helping with amazing patience by highlighting key words and phrases. I appreciate both of you.

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## ABSTRACT

This study highlights the perceptions by K-12 school principals of dimensions and attributes of the principalship. Prioritizing time with many stakeholders when leading staff, managing a site, and maintaining a student-centered focus requires the principal to balance his/her time to stay focused on ensuring students are learning. In many circumstances, the instructional leadership aspects of the principalship—such as conducting classroom observations and support, having collegial conversations with the teaching staff, and providing general instructional support—take a backburner to non-instructional aspects, specifically to secure an orderly and supportive environment. Given the nature of the continued expansion and demands placed on the principalship, coupled with the multilayered and multidimensional demands of this complex role, school principals must continue developing their leadership practices. My study points to the value of assessing and aligning systems within school districts and structures that are already in place, such as evaluations to integrate support mechanisms and tools that focus on the strategic development of each principal.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The principalship carries a deep and wide level of multi-layered responsibilities in leading and managing K-12 schools. Just as teachers are expected to continuously improve their craft, so too are the expectations of school leaders who make complex schoolwide changes and multilayered decisions on a regular basis. School principals are presented with new challenges when guiding and leading school sites with the increased use of technology for communication, new instructional techniques, and state testing formats. Other increased challenges include the interpretation and application of new laws, regulations, and reforms in education. In addition to new technologies and laws being implemented, school leaders must also navigate through increased demographic changes that more likely require a greater understanding of multiple cultures (e.g., majority White to majority students of color). Many times, these changes may carry the fear of litigation and political ramifications whereby school leaders are expected to keep pace and continuously navigate with these added challenges while increasing student performance.

#### **Background of the Study**

Before 2000, many education reformers knew school principals played a pivotal role in student learning, particularly in turning failing schools around, but policy makers and K-12 administration did not agree on successful leadership practices or dimensions critical to the principalship (Mitgang & Gill, 2012).

Leadership research regarding school principals lacked on most policy reform agendas in the past. However, in 2010, policymakers, researchers, and school administration recognized the need for principal leadership as a central key to student success, resulting in collaborative efforts by reformers and policymakers alike to support efforts geared towards school principalship success. For example, Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) showed that high-performing school districts with central office leaders who understand and believe they can support principals more effectively have an increased capacity to support and enhance principal leadership growth.

Closely tied to the issue of supporting the principalship is the alignment of systems such as evaluations with professional development and tools or mechanisms that support principal growth. Alignment of systems that support educators, including evaluations, is not a new concept and part of all educators' professional practice. McCleary (1979) asserted that the primary purpose of evaluations is to support changes in individual behavior to effectuate organizational improvement, personal satisfaction, and continuous professional growth. Given this definition, evaluations should support constant school reform and the professional development of each principal. Although teacher evaluations have been an integral part of education for over 30 years (Rebore, 2004), and more innovative methods and practices to improve evaluation system outcomes have been employed for teachers (Brown & Irby, 1998), the same innovations have not been similarly developed for

school principals. Moreover, evaluation systems remain vastly inconsistent between school districts.

### **Research Question**

With this in mind, the purpose of this study is to collect, describe, and share the combined narratives of school district stakeholders regarding the principalship.

In my dissertation, *Principal Leadership Support and Alignment: Stakeholder Input*, I examined research related to the national standards for school leadership, evaluations, and stakeholder input. Specifically, Grey Valley Unified School District (GVUSD), located in Northern California, is seeking to develop a research-based evaluation tool, in part to guide and support their principals. The GVUSD board of trustees and its superintendent have expressed a desire to listen to stakeholder input in their pursuit to align systems that are more closely associated with the local community's goals of improving student learning through increased principal success. There is currently no major study of stakeholders' views on leadership practices in this district where major demographic shifts have occurred over the past 20 years from majority White to majority students of color. Understanding how principals view their leadership practice is significant because added cultural, political, legal, and technical challenges may require the principals to be supported in ways that may currently be blind spots for the school district in their efforts to increase student performance. I collected the narratives of principals and was guided by the following research question: *What leadership dimensions do principals use to describe the principalship?*

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study will inform practice, policy, and further research related to school reform, including systems of evaluation, that support and align principal practices to increase student performance. My findings will also contribute to the scarce literature concerning the importance of stakeholder input. My research is also intended to encourage additional research and further collaboration between local school districts and universities to design better training and development for aspiring principals. Mitgang and Gill (2012) underscored the value of such collaboration when they showed that principal burnout and turnover can be mitigated when school districts and universities work together in aligning systems that support efforts for principal preparation and continuous leadership growth.

### **Definition of Key Concepts**

Before turning the literature review in Chapter II, I first offer brief definitions of key concepts that are integral to my study. Each definition offered below is contextual to this study. In other words, there may be more than one interpretation of the term, but what I describe here is how the term is used in my study.

**Evaluation Process and System:** The evaluation process includes the steps used in an evaluation system to measure job performance. The purpose of school principal evaluation systems is to improve leadership and, in turn, student achievement. Principal evaluations provide meaningful information to improve leadership practices (Reeves, 2004; Waters & Grubb, 2004). Effective evaluations identify performance expectations that principals aspire to meet (Cantano & Stronge,

2006). Evaluations support changes in individual behavior to effectuate organizational improvement and personal satisfaction (McCleary, 2001).

**Evaluation Tool:** The evaluation tool is synonymous with any instrument used by the evaluator to measure a principal's quality of work and performance. Evaluation instruments can serve as powerful communication tools that outline and articulate school principal responsibilities (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, & Elliot, 2009; Reeves, 2004; Waters & Grubb, 2004).

### **Dissertation Outline**

This dissertation has five chapters. The first chapter summarizes the general background of my study, including the research question and the purpose of my study.

Chapter II provides a review of literature focused on principal evaluation systems, the national standards for principal evaluations, and the use of leadership theories in evaluation system alignment of the principalship. Chapter II concludes with a summary of identified gaps in the literature. Chapter III highlights the overall methodology, research design, steps to ensure trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. I provide a rich background of the researched site including teacher and student demographics in this chapter.

I report on the data gathered in Chapter IV and summarize the findings along with the major topics based on the data. Implications of the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are presented in Chapter V using a leadership theory of effective leadership practices as a lens.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The goal of this chapter is to provide a summary of the literature related to evaluation system alignment of the principalship to increase student performance. I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of existing evaluation systems, critical leadership characteristics of the principalship, leadership theory, and standards that have been put forth as important to principal evaluation design. In addition, I address the importance of stakeholder input and contextual considerations within evaluations. At the conclusion of the chapter, I provide a brief overview of the importance of principal evaluations in general and, more specifically, to support the development of the principalship.

#### **The Role of the Principalship in Student Achievement**

There is a strong correlation between good principals and student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Walstrom, 2004). In the subsequent paragraphs I discuss the litany of research that shows how school principals affect the culture and conditions that support teaching and learning (Hirsch, Frietas, Church, and Villar, 2008; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; McIver, Kearns, Lyons, & Sussman, 2009; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011; Wallace Foundation 2009; Wallace Foundation, 2011). I also use several meta-analyses research that shows how school leadership, particularly principals, contribute to student learning through their

leadership with teachers (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

Leithwood and colleagues (2004) reviewed a broad range of empirical research related to school leadership and its correlation to student learning. They found that good principals make an even greater impact on student learning in low-performing schools. Teachers make the biggest difference in student achievement, but principals have a strong influence on the decisions that lead to recruitment and retention of good teachers (Darling-Hammond, La Pointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2009). With an understanding that school principals' decisions make a big difference in student achievement, it makes sense that evaluation systems should be aligned to inform and increase effective leadership practices that support the principalship.

Mitgang and Gill (2012) noted the failure in training and developing principals despite major reforms and changes in school systems, resulting in possible haphazard leadership development approaches by K-12 school districts. Mitgang and Gill (2012) specifically identified the university system as the major training ground for school leaders. Yet, sadly, principals are seemingly ill-prepared through university systems as a result of the disconnect between the actual practice and theory of the principalship. A recent survey found that 80% of superintendents and 69% of principals believed that institutions that prepare school leaders are not in touch with the complexity and realities of school districts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). As a result, school principal leadership training and development has rested on the shoulders of K-12 school districts.

Misalignment of what the K-12 principalship actually does, with the initial training grounds (universities) is ineffective, in part because the role of the school site principal has expanded and has been challenging to keep up with—and continues to expand greatly—over time. School leaders who are not well prepared to meet the demands and complexities of their leadership role will learn on the job, but this can be a very haphazard approach. On the other hand, a well-thought-out evaluation system can support the professional growth and success of school leaders by empowering the principal to make improved decisions. Evaluation systems that are vetted for accuracy, validity and reliability may help guide the principalship. Evaluation processes must provide accurate, valid, and reliable information that is gathered through multiple measures. As the literature summarized in the later sections of this chapter reveals, such a system should be trustworthy, allow for school site contextual nuances, and focus on leadership growth. Before addressing these issues, I first turn to a discussion of the importance of developing a comprehensive principal evaluation system, process, and tool.

### **Principal Evaluation Systems**

Although effective principals are critical to school success, evaluation systems for the principalship have been given little attention (Catano & Stronge, 2006). Clifford and Ross (2011) summarized current research and found that principal evaluation studies typically focused on the rigor and convenience of evaluation systems rather than key leadership characteristics of the principalship. The literature offers limited information regarding systems, processes, and tools that fully capture

the role of a school site principal for evaluative purposes. Amsterdam, Johnson, Monrad, and Tonnsen (2003), for example, conducted a case study of evaluation standards used in South Carolina and developed valid evaluation standards, evaluation criteria, and instrumentation. Largely, however, discussions on how to further develop fair and valid evaluation systems are seemingly absent (Amsterdam et al., 2003).

Research indicates that evaluation systems and tools are mostly used to gather data and information about the quality of a principal's strengths, areas in need of improvement, and overall practices (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, & Elliot, 2009). Although principal evaluations are used for accountability, they have the potential to provide meaningful information to improve leadership training and development (Reeves, 2004; Waters & Grubb, 2004). Principal evaluations should be tied to the critical components of the job, together with overall student learning, a rigorous curriculum, quality of instruction, professional behavior, connections to the community, and accountability systems that improve academic and social learning (Goldring et al., 2009). Principals are also expected to lead by planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating, and monitoring these critical components (2009). Developing an evaluation system that connects principals' critical responsibilities with expected leadership roles is at the heart of an evaluation system that can support clarity of the principalship and growth in the position. In particular, evaluation instruments can serve as powerful communication tools that outline and articulate school principal responsibilities.

To be effective, Stine (2001) notes that both the evaluator and the school principal must understand clearly defined job descriptions and expectations. Stine asserts that evaluations systems “must begin with precise job descriptions which would provide structure to the summative evaluation instrument” (p. 4). Likewise, Cantano and Stronge (2006) asserted that effective evaluations identify performance expectations that principals aspire to meet. As such, evaluations can support the continuous growth and development of principals. Unless there is strong alignment between the job description and the evaluation process, the overall evaluation system may result in nebulous and ambiguous expectations. Indeed, according to Davis and Hensley (2000), evaluation tools are meaningless if they do not have clearly articulated and communicated purposes. Unfortunately, current evaluations void of a clear purpose will contribute minimally to accomplishing district goals and objectives.

Importantly, if an evaluation system, process, or tool is perceived as unfair, the evaluation may be seen merely as a checklist, rather than as a supportive process. Stine (2001), in fact, studied 17 school districts in California and found that school principal evaluators typically used standard freeform, checklist, and management objectives formats, with most having a checklist with clearly communicated criteria. Rebore (2004) explained that checklist type evaluations only measure pre-established objectives that take the unique context of the school out of the evaluation equation. He argued that evaluation instruments must take the complexity of the job into account to purposefully support school principal performance. Similarly, Lashway

(2003) found that evaluation tools were often overly broad or did not include assessments of critical leadership characteristics: “many evaluation instruments treat leadership skills as ‘binary’ traits that either exist or do not exist, whereas in reality many skills fall along a continuum” (p. 3). Unfortunately, the goals and priorities of a school district are sometimes disconnected from the evaluation tool, resulting in misalignment with district objectives.

The principal’s job is complex, in part due to the added layer of unique and political nuances they encounter. Being evaluated on factors out of their control not only contributes to the job’s complexity but can also lead to poor evaluations. A study by Davis and Hensley (2000) highlighted the reality of inconsistencies between principal demands and politics. For example, in the political context, a principal may opt to placate powerful constituents, like school board members, teachers unions, affluent community members, or local governing officials, versus keeping the focus on student learning. These authors conducted in-depth interviews with principals and superintendents and found that the principals felt that the evaluations were not useful in assessing their abilities, and they were assessed on criteria beyond their control, including political forces. They asserted that principals should be given an active role in the development of evaluation systems to help align them with more useful assessments.

School leaders have often been left out of evaluation innovations, perhaps because they are in charge of implementing the evaluation systems in the first place, and therefore do not think it is necessary to include themselves in the process.

Unfortunately, McAdams and Barilla (2003) found that the day-to-day work that principals actually performed did not match what was being evaluated. They also found that evaluation practices were not designed to be adaptable or to change.

Overall, there is little guidance for school districts on the development of principal evaluation systems that align to effective leadership dimensions of the principalship. Also, school leadership programs, such as universities, focus very little on system designs for leadership evaluations (Clifford & Ross, 2011). As such, more research is needed in the area of aligning critical dimensions of the principalship with innovative and effective evaluations systems to develop principals (Clifford & Ross, 2011).

### **Standards of Principal Evaluations**

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), in their Standards for School Leaders, highlighted six research-based key standards on which school principals should be evaluated, each with three components—knowledge, dispositions, and performance (Kaplan, Owings, & Nunnery, 2005):

- **Shared vision:** develops, articulates, and implements a shared vision of learning;
- **School culture:** advocates, nurtures, and sustains a school culture conducive to professional growth and student learning;
- **Learning environment:** creates a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment through management, operations, and use of resources;

- **Family and community collaboration:** responds to community interests and needs;
- **Integrity:** acts in a fair and ethical manner; and
- **Influence:** understands and responds to the larger, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

The ISLLC professional standards for principals have been adopted by 38 states and articulate what principals should do (Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011). These standards are not tied to behavior indicators and, as a result, they have been framed into behavioral indicators by some organizations and are being used by several institutions (Clifford, Feters, & Yoder, 2014).

More recently, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) have all pointed out that the evaluation of principals is a central component of school success because evaluations reflect the expectations of the principals.

A report issued jointly by NAESP and NASSP (2012) highlighted seven research-based areas for effective evaluations of principals: professional development; learning; site-specific context; site-specific needs of the school; trustworthiness; relevance; and the inclusion of principal created components. Likewise, NASBE (2011) highlighted six similar key research-based recommendations: linkages to professional development, attention to circumstances within the school or contextual nuances; inclusion of reliable and measurable

information; basis in leadership standards; promotion of school improvement; and a focus on observable behavior. Thus, the three organizations share an attentiveness to the *trustworthiness* of the evaluation system, the *context and circumstances* of the school, and a recognition that the evaluation system should lead to *professional growth and learning*. I discuss each of these three components in turn.

### **Trustworthiness**

Principal evaluation systems are not typically developed around research-based professional standards, and thus they often fail to provide reliable and valid information (Goldring et al., 2009). Research suggests school principal expectations and practices should be measured consistently—as Kearney (2005) noted, “Having one set of policies on paper and another set in practice adds confusion to the system. The drift from ‘what we are supposed to do’ and ‘what we actually do’ contributes to a hidden practice and compliance mentality instead of open practice for continuous improvement” (p. 19). To be trustworthy, the evaluation system must be consistent with district goals and provide relevant information based on observable behavior that is tied to leadership standards.

The alignment of the evaluation instrument to leadership standards and district goals is just as important as the consistent application of the evaluation instrument and process (McAdams & Barilla, 2003). Moreover, Reeves (1998) highlighted that for feedback to be effective, it must be frequent (at least quarterly) and measurable. Also, the feedback should be grounded with policies and procedures that support communication practices. Brown and Irby (1998) described the feedback process as

an ongoing monitoring strategy that loops into evaluation systems of principal evaluations.

A school district may align its vision and mission through clear language within an evaluation instrument. To achieve alignment of evaluation systems with the vision and mission of school district, research suggests using a clearly defined leadership theory of action from which it operates (Kearney, 2005). A district that uses a theory of leadership that guides the development of the evaluation tool can also communicate expectations and allow principals to have a clear understanding of how they are being assessed (Reeves, 1998). Clear expectations that align to district goals build on the trustworthiness and consistency of evaluations.

As mentioned above, having a clearly defined leadership theory of action to support alignment of district goals is important to guide principal evaluation tools. Robinson and colleagues (2008) studied transformational versus instructional leadership types and their impact on student outcomes. Their meta-analysis found five sets of leadership practices that impact student outcomes. The five leadership dimensions were inductively derived, which include;

- **Establishing goals and expectations:** Develops, aligns, communicates, and promotes focused goals and expectations.
- **Resourcing strategically:** Acquires and aligns resources including instructional material, curriculum, intervention programs, professional developments, trainings, and staff to site needs.

- **Planning, coordinating, and evaluating teachers and curriculum:** Active in collegial conversations and continuous alignment of learning goals and objectives across grade levels.
- **Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development:** Source of knowledge of curriculum and instruction.
- **Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment:** Creates a physical and emotionally safe learning environment for teachers, parents, and students.

Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development had the highest potential impact on student outcomes (large impact), followed by establishing goals and expectations, planning, coordinating, and evaluating of teachers and curriculum (moderate impact). Resourcing strategically and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment were found to have the smallest impacts on student outcomes. Robinson and colleagues (2008) place a caution in their study not to mean one leader needs to possess high levels of capability on all five dimensions nor that a school is in a position to focus more on any of the five dimensions, “Schools at different stages of development will need different leadership emphasis. For some schools, a focus on orderliness, safety, and civility may be an essential prior stage before leaders can give more attention to the curriculum and teacher professional learning” (p. 668). The national standards for principal evaluations share several key outcomes in common with Robinson and colleagues’ study, notwithstanding the need for professional development. Principal input may be one way of understanding what professional development the principal may need as discussed in turn.

NAESP and NASSP (2012) noted—and others have agreed (e.g., Anderson, 1991)—the importance of principal and stakeholder involvement in the creation of principal evaluations. This involvement supports buy-in from principals, who may provide insights that are key to increased overall school performance. For example, as Heck and Marcoulides (1992) noted, it allows the evaluator “to assess how the principal may contribute, both directly and indirectly, to the processes through which the school is governed, how it is organized instructionally, and how the climate of the school is developed” (p. 128). Thus, principal feedback and buy-in as part of the development of an evaluation system or tool can enhance perceptions of fairness, consistency, and trustworthiness.

Research on evaluation also supports the involvement of other stakeholders—such as parents, teachers, students, and community members—in the development of the evaluation system (Amsterdam et al., 2003; Davis, Kearney, Sanders, Thomas, & Leon, 2011; Murphy & Pimentel, 1996). Stakeholders can support the principal through their involvement in the evaluation process, and in turn become more engaged in the school system. Stakeholders input may result in varying and wide-ranging opinions and as such should be well moderated: “When any group of stakeholders begins to brainstorm leadership domains, it is likely to think of a very long list of characteristics of leadership performance” (Reeves, 2004, p. 39). Without proper moderation, stakeholder involvement may result in ineffective lists of characteristics that are not consistent with district goals or effective researched-based leadership and performance standards.

As discussed above, school principals' perceptions of evaluation systems, processes, and tools may not always be favorable. Brown, Irby, and Neumeyer (1998), for example, found that principals believed that neither the complexity nor the full scope of their job was necessarily being reflected in current evaluation systems. If critical areas are not being measured or are hard to measure, then there is an inherent problem. According to Hart (1994), "inconsistencies develop because of the differences between the nature of principals' work and the nature of the evaluation decoupled from context" (p. 4). In addition, evaluators (usually superintendents) in Hart's study perceived that they did a good job overall: "superintendents often perceive the evaluations as being more thorough than the principals do" (p. 2). Unfortunately, if a principal feels the evaluation system is not reflective of his or her true practice, he or she may not trust the evaluation system at all.

The implications of principals not trusting an evaluation system from the outset may be compounded by the anxiety felt by some of the more veteran and respected school principals. Peterson (1991) found that those who enjoyed their status as highly respected leaders often resisted more comprehensive evaluation systems. The principals in Peterson's study felt that respected leaders had little to gain and much to lose with an evaluation system that was more comprehensive, and they feared they would lose by any changes.

To be trustworthy and reliable, the evaluation system and process should be guided by research-based performance standards—"without standards, evaluations are constantly subject to the shifting sands of relative performance rather than the

bedrock of clear, fair, and immutable standards” (Reeves, 2004, p. 21). Alignment of district goals to professional standards helps to communicate expectations to the principal. Catano and Stronge (2006) stipulated that alignment of district expectations with professional standards should promote job satisfaction and lead school principal effectiveness by reducing confusion (Catano & Stronge, 2006). Likewise, Stufflebeam and Nevo (1993) noted that alignment of a school principal evaluation to professional standards should lead to more ethical and legal assessments of the leaders’ performance and abilities.

### **School Context in Evaluation Systems**

Every school is different, with its nuances and culture. Some schools are newer while others may have a very veteran staff. Every school community is unique with wide ranging demographics that include socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic differences. This variation should be considered in the development of an evaluation system. As Hart (1994) noted, “principals should be held to a standard of behavior consistent with those in similar circumstances. Standards tie knowledge and action to context. This requires principal evaluation frameworks that acknowledge the importance of actions taken in context under unique circumstances” (p. 5). Hart (1994) researched the dynamics between the social context of a school and student achievement. Using context-grounded theory, Hart’s (1994) study found that evaluation of principals may be enhanced when the context of the school is part of the evaluation system. Hart’s (1994) study asserts that each school is unique in its needs. Hence, the actions by the principal should match the contextual nuances and needs

specific to the site. As a result, some schools may require more leadership on instruction versus alignment of services. As discussed later in this chapter, Robinson and colleagues (2008) refer to alignment of services as resourcing strategically. Other sites may need greater support with student and parental engagement. Robinson and colleagues (2008) describe student and parental engagement as part of ensuring a safe and secure learning environment.

Clearly defined job descriptions and expectations tied to the context and circumstances of a specific school allow for improved job evaluations of the principal. Hart (1994) asserted that evaluation systems need to consider adding environmental influences and controls for biases. As part of an evaluation system, a flexible approach that takes into account the varying circumstances and context of a school may be useful in assessing principal performance and supportive measures.

Also, when the context and culture of the school are not taken into consideration, school principals may be more distrusting of the evaluation system (Thomas, Holdaway, & Ward, 2000). Thomas and colleagues (2000) noted that principals understand their schools, including culture, better than external evaluators. They found that principals felt that the evaluator may be ill-informed regarding the school's culture, and this may translate into an evaluation that is not consistent with the actual performance of a school principal. Evaluation models often do not accurately measure desired behavior, and can restrict interpretations of principals' effectiveness and how they should act. It is important that evaluation systems remain flexible enough to integrate contextual information about the school site that helps the

evaluator assess information under the circumstances that are specific to the school site and principal.

An evaluator may take into account site-based context using innovative and flexible collection methods for the evaluation of principals. To align and accurately measure principal performance, for example, nontraditional data could be collected using performance portfolios (Brown & Irby, 2001; Davis et al., 2011; Stine, 2001). Other means of collecting performance evaluation data might include student tests scores, attendance reports, newsletters, and newspaper clippings (Peterson, 1991). As a result, an evaluator can obtain a more accurate picture, and therefore provide more specific recommendations. It is important to note that the addition of a contextual component may come at the expense of efficiency: “School districts might quickly seize on standardized instruments and use them as the measure of principal performance even though they are not sensitive to the particulars of a given principal’s job in a given year” (Stufflebeam & Nevo, 1993, p. 33). Nevertheless, the literature supports the notion that circumstances and site-specific needs should be taken into consideration as part of an evaluation system.

### **Principal Leadership and Professional Development**

Evaluations are important for the continuous professional development and refinement of school principal leadership and practice (Thomas et al., 2000). Evaluations that gather information in a fair and trustworthy manner can identify the principal’s strengths and areas in need of growth, and, as Reeves (2005) noted, these areas of growth should inform professional development and other types of support.

Mitgang and Gill (2012) noted that “professional development to enhance principals’ skills in specific areas are frequently based on ‘whims, fads, opportunism, and ideology’ rather than standards or sound research” (p. 24), and development should instead be tailored to each principal’s individual and district needs.

Principal evaluation systems with leadership development components can increase the number of high-performing principals. Indeed, Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2009) have noted that successful principals can be made. Other researchers suggest that leadership qualities are developed over time and can be enhanced (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2008). Mitgang and Gill (2012) noted that “professional development to enhance principals’ skills in specific areas are frequently based on ‘whims, fads, opportunism, and ideology’ rather than standards or sound research” (p. 24), and development should instead be tailored to each principal’s individual and district needs. A report issued jointly by NAESP and NASSP (2012) highlighted seven research-based areas for effective evaluations of principals: professional development; learning; site specific context; site specific needs of the school; trustworthiness; relevance; and the inclusion of principal created components. Likewise, NASBE (2011) highlighted six similar key research-based recommendations: linkages to professional development, attention to Leadership development is complex and contextual, however. Day (2000) examined the multiple outcomes that leadership development has on the knowledge, skills, abilities, and motivations of school leaders, and found that assumptions that on-the-job experience alone can sufficiently enhance principal performance can lead to haphazard learning

processes. Without coherent intentionality of principal development, decision making that leads to increased student performance can be hindered rather than enhanced (Day, 2000).

Research recommends a reflective, long term, job-embedded, and coherent leadership curriculum as part of the professional development of school leaders (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000). Moreover, evaluative systems that focus on gathering information to identify areas of professional growth and that are supported by an experienced administration can lead to enhanced leadership. McCall (2004), for example, asserted that diverse experiences specific to an organization are a key part of leadership development and that experienced school leadership can provide professional development that supports the principal in navigating diverse situations and working with diverse groups of people.

Professional learning can take place through goal setting and self-reflection. Research increasingly supports the assertion that self-reflection is at the heart of leadership. As Day (2010) put it, “part of developing as a leader is identifying a more articulated and complex conception as a leader” (p. 67). Likewise, Hitt, Tucker, and Young (2012) discussed the need for continuing development for veteran school principals. They asserted that evaluations of experienced school principals should include individualized reflection and growth components linked to professional development opportunities.

Principal evaluations may include performance goals developed within the evaluation system between the supervisor and principal. Anderson (1991) noted that

school districts should require ongoing principal goal setting and objectives as part of this evaluation process. Likewise, Marcoux, Brown, Irby, and Lara-Alecio (2003) asserted, “the evaluation process should enable the principal to set and focus on goals that are aligned with the vision of the school district and campus” (p. 14). Goal setting is not a precise science, however, and the goals must be realistic and specific to the school’s context and circumstances (Murphy & Pimentel, 1996).

Setting goals with reflection is an opportunity for a principal to refocus and grow, and it gives the evaluator areas to support the principal. An evaluation system may include a reflection component that leads to better decision-making skills (Marcoux et al., 2003) because, as Reeves (1998) noted, “reflection and self-assessment offer valuable insights into the principal’s effectiveness and needed areas of growth” (p. 10). Self-reflection is another doorway to professional development in the evaluation process that can enhance the evaluation system.

### **Summary and Identified Gaps in the Literature**

In this chapter I have highlighted the scholarly literature related to the purposes, politics, challenges, and perceptions of evaluation systems that may support school principals. The end goal of the evaluation system is to enhance the principals’ leadership practices and successfully guide schools to ultimately facilitate student success.

Overall, the literature highlights three areas of research that should be a part of the development of evaluation systems. First, to be trustworthy, the information collected in evaluating principals should be measurable and reliable, and key

stakeholders—specifically school principals—can be involved in the development of the evaluation system. Second, the evaluation system should allow for contextual nuances specific to each school, perhaps through more creative forms of data collection such as principal portfolios, agendas, and awards. Third, the system must lead to professional development.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

This chapter contains a description of the methodology that was used to conduct a qualitative case study to understand the perceptions of school principal leadership practices and expectations. A purpose of this study was to support a school district in developing a better understanding of how principals view their leadership practices. In collaboration with three other researchers, we collected and analyzed the narratives of students, principals, and teachers regarding school principal leadership within Grey Valley Unified School District (GVUSD). I focused on collecting principal data only.

As noted earlier, this study was guided by an overarching research question: *What leadership dimensions do principals use to describe the principalship?* The research team undertook a comprehensive study that included principal, teacher, and student perspectives on school site leadership. Within this larger study the team was guided by the following two sub-questions:

1. What dimensions do principals use to describe effective principal leadership?
2. Why do principals identify those dimensions as relevant?

These questions can best be answered through a qualitative approach (Merriam, 2002). I collected narrative data through a series of focus groups, an approach that can produce greater information among participants when they have

similar experiences and work cooperatively (Creswell, 2007). My study focused on principals who work in the same school district in achieving positive student outcomes through school district initiatives. One major benefit of conducting the focus group discussions is being able to collect data from multiple participants using individual group settings. A goal in using this approach was to provide a non-threatening environment where the participants felt comfortable in expressing themselves.

### **Paradigm**

I used an interpretivist framework for this qualitative study (Klein & Myers, 1999). This approach allowed me “to understand human thought and action in social and organizational context” (Klein & Myers, 1999, p. 1). Specifically, it allowed me to understand the thoughts of K-12 school principals within GVUSD as they related to the social and organizational context of the school system and perceptions of the principalship.

The interpretivist paradigm values the way participants perceive their surroundings and interpret that information (Merriam, 2002). Thus, multiple interpretations of participants’ experiences were collected, synthesized, and sorted for common themes using Robinson and colleagues’ (2008) five dimensions of effective leadership practices as a lens. Once saturation was reached, a system for categorizing was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## Research Site

Grey Valley Unified School District has over 50 schools, including four comprehensive high schools, five middle schools, and 35 elementary schools (California Department of Education [CDE], 2014).

### Teacher Demographics

GVUSD employs approximately 1,400 teachers. As illustrated in Table 3.1, 23% of female and 27% of male teachers held advanced degrees, respectively.

Table 3.1. *Average Teacher Tenure and Level of Education*

	<b>Approximate Number of Teachers</b>	<b>Average Years of Service</b>	<b>% with Master's Degree</b>
Females	1,000	12	23%
Males	400	12	27%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,400</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>24%</b>

The student–teacher ratio in the district is 22 to 1, with an average class size of 24.7 students. GVUSD teachers have an average of 12 years in the teaching profession. The teacher racial/ethnic diversity ranges between 1994 and 2014 (see Table 3.2) were 70-90% White, 5-10% Hispanic, 1-5% Asian, and 1% African-American. The Hispanic teaching population did increase by 5% over the last two decades, to 10%. In 2004, approximately 15% of the dataset included no response, which may explain the discrepancy, particularly with the White teacher population going from 90% to 70%, and back to 80% in a relatively short time.

Table 3.2. *Teacher Demographics for GVUSD*

	<b>*1994</b>	<b>*2004<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>*2014</b>
**Other	—	17%	7%
Asian	4%	5%	1%
Filipino	1%	1%	1%
Hispanic	5%	6%	10%
African-American	1%	1%	1%
White	90%	70%	80%

<sup>a</sup> Approximately 15% of 2004 teachers did not report (no response)

\* Approximate (rounded up)

\*\* Other includes mixed races and unreported data

### Student Demographics

Table 3.3 shows the demographics of the more than 30,000 students in GVUSD—an increase of approximately 6,000 students since 1994. The largest demographic group in the district is currently Hispanic (45-50%), and 20-25% of students are White, 5-10% are African-American, and 5-10% are Asian.

Table 3.3. *Student Demographics for GVUSD (approximate ranges)*

	<b>1994</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2014</b>
Asian	15-20%	15-20%	5-10%
Filipino	1-5%	1-5%	1-5%
Hispanic	15-20%	30-35%	45-50%
African American	1-5%	5-10%	5-10%
White	45-50%	30-35%	20-25%

Additionally, 20-25% are English language learners (ELL) and 64% qualify for the free and reduced lunch program (Table 3.4).

Table 3.4. *Special Populations of Students in GVUSD (ranges)*

	<b>1994</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2014</b>
Free and reduced lunch	45-50%	50-55%	60-65%
English language learners	25-30%	25-30%	20-25%

There have been major student demographic changes in the last 20 years, primarily between the Hispanic and White populations. In 1994, the Hispanic student population was close to 20%, and in 2014 approximately 50%. Conversely, the White student population was close to 50% in 1994, and it is now approximately 25%.

The district's school boundaries are divided into four areas designated by their respective feeder high school, such that each area has a comprehensive high school and at least one junior high and several elementary sites. Table 3.5 below represents school boundaries in these four areas. Area 1 is found in the southwest corner of GVUSD. Area 2 is found in the most northern part of the school district. Area 3 is found in the southeast part of GVUSD, with Area 4 sandwiched between the other three.

Table 3.5. *Major Student Demographics by High School Areas (approximates)*

	<b>A1</b>	<b>A2</b>	<b>A3</b>	<b>A4<sup>a</sup></b>
Asian	20%	3%	40%	10%
Hispanic	30%	40%	30%	50%
African-American	15%	1%	15%	2%
White	20%	50%	10%	30%
Low SES	60%	50%	80%	65%
EL	10%	15%	20%	25%

*Note.* Only numerically significant percentages represented (2% or greater).

<sup>a</sup> A4 has a significant Filipino population (12%).

Areas 1 and 3 high schools have the largest African American populations (approximately 15% each), and the largest Asian populations (approximately 20% and 40%, respectively). These high schools also have some of the largest low socioeconomic (Low Socio-Economic Status) populations in the studied school district. In addition, areas 1 and 3 are neighbors to a local school district with high

African American and Asian populations. Area 3 borders and crosses over into this neighboring school district and is a larger suburban city.

Area 2 and 4 neighbor school districts with demographics unlike Areas 1 and 3. Areas 2 and 4 have the highest White and Latino populations. Area 2 is composed of approximately 50% White and 40% Latino. Area 4 is composed of approximately 30% White and 50% Latino.

Next, I explain the research design, rationale, and my role in the selection process of the participants. I conclude the chapter with a summary of the aforementioned sections and a description of the potential risks and limitations of the study.

### **Sampling Method**

The Grey Valley Unified School District (GVUSD) has approximately 30,000 students, 1,000 teachers, and 50 principals, with a diverse student population. In addition, the school district has four assistant superintendents, a superintendent, and seven school board members. Based on the research question, our research team established interview criteria and determined adequate school settings to conduct the focus group discussions.

The research team worked with the superintendent and principals to find suitable locations that were private and as comfortable as possible for the participants. The team collected the narratives and perspective of students, teachers, and principals regarding their perceptions of the principalship. I sought to study some of the

connections associated with school leadership conditions, support, and perceptions of school principals.

To obtain maximum participation, all principals were invited to participate on scheduled dates and strategic locations. With the assistance of the superintendent, a co-member and I invited all current principals employed in GVUSD during the 2015–2016 school year to participate in the study.

The school district sought the help of the university to conduct this study. Consequently, the superintendent’s invitation helped in obtaining site and personnel access.

### **Data Collection**

I began this study after UIRB approval and after meeting with the GVUSD superintendent during the fall school year of 2015. Focus groups were the primary tool used to capture the combined narratives of the participants (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Before conducting any focus group discussions, the research team collected demographic information from the participants via a pre-focus survey (see Appendix C). The pre-focus group survey and the consent form (See Appendix A) were administered and signed before the focus group questions (See Appendix B) being asked.

Our team worked with the school district to communicate and coordinate with each participant via email, mail, and/or phone to establish, confirm, and communicate the focus group discussions. The focus group dates, times, and venues were negotiated between the research team, the school district, and the principals.

The principal focus group discussions consisted of 3–5 participants and lasted up to 70 minutes. The focus group discussions took place within the months of September through October 2015. Falco & Spaulding (2013) defined a focus group as “a design used by many qualitative researchers to gather in-depth perceptions” (p. 24). Five focus group discussions took place with 20 principal participants. I gathered rich descriptions of their perceptions regarding the principalship.

Falco & Spaulding (2013) further assert that all participants are asked the same questions during focus group interviews, but they respond to the questions individually. Thus, each participant in the focus group discussions was asked the same pre-established questions over several focus group sessions at designated locations. With the permission of each participant, I audio-recorded, which freed me from the distraction of note taking and allowed me to concentrate on the interactions with the participants. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber.

The data in Table 3.6 below reflects five K-12 focus groups experiences through discussions of twenty diverse school principal participants of Grey Valley Unified School District (GVUSD). The focus group data reflects approximately 50 percent of all the principals from GVUSD. Of the twenty principals fourteen were White, four were Latino(a), and two were Black. Eight of the principals who participated were female, and twelve were male. Fifteen of the twenty principals have over ten years of experience within the school district. Fourteen elementary,

four junior high, and two high school principals participated in the focus group discussions.

Table 3.6 *Focus Group Principal Profiles*

<i>Focus Group Pseudonym</i>	<i>Years at GVUSD</i>	<i>Age Range</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Cultural Demographic</i>	<i>K-12 School Level</i>
1	0 – 3	46 – 50	M	Latino/a	Elementary
1	10 +	51 +	F	White	Elementary
1	10 +	51 +	F	White	Elementary
2	10 +	51 +	M	White	High School
2	10 +	51 +	F	Latino/a	Elementary
2	0 - 3	51 +	M	Latino/a	Elementary
2	0 - 3	46 - 50	F	White	Elementary
2	10 +	51 +	M	White	Jr. High
3	10 +	51 +	F	White	Elementary
3	10 +	41 - 45	M	White	Elementary
3	10 +	46 - 50	M	White	Jr. High
4	7 - 9	51 +	M	Black	Jr. High
4	10 +	51 +	F	White	Elementary
4	10 +	46 - 50	F	White	Elementary
4	10 +	51 +	M	White	High School
5	10 +	41 - 45	M	White	Elementary
5	10 +	46 - 50	M	White	Elementary
5	10 +	46 - 50	F	White	Jr. High
5	10 +	51 +	M	Black	Elementary
5	0-3	36 - 40	M	Latino/a	Elementary

### **Data Analysis**

Using an interpretivist framework, I collected narrative data through 5 focus group discussions and used a grounded theory of coding. After collecting the focus group data, I had it professionally transcribed. Tierney (2012) suggested that “standard coding methods require substantial investments of time and resources, which may not always be available to researchers. The methods are not used as a graphical method but were used to visualize relationships within the data” (p. 175). I synthesized my data after reading through the focus groups discussion transcripts

several times. I created tentative labels for each focus group discussion based on common data relationships. I then summarized each focus group discussion until major themes emerged. I then re-synthesized the five focus groups data and combined the more common themes and topics. Independently, I used Robinson and colleagues' (2008) findings of effective leadership practice as a more focused lens and imputed the data into Dedoose and developed correlated findings as they emerged.

At the heart of this study is improving student performance and the connection to the growth and acceleration of successful leadership practices of the principalship. I use a leadership theoretical framework of successful principalship practices related to student performances as a lens to examine the focus group data. I present the findings in the last chapter through these five dimensions.

### **Steps to Ensure Trustworthiness**

To establish trustworthiness, I did everything I could to accurately represent the experiences of the participants being studied by being careful not to interject my opinion during nor after the focus group discussions. Following guidelines established by Lincoln and Guba (1985), I focused on credibility, transferability, and credibility. To establish credibility, I ensured that I accurately represent participants' statements. I establish credibility through member-checks during the focus group discussions by using clarifying questions such as, "this is what I heard and this is what was said and is this what you meant when you said?" In addition, I provide a rich description of the setting and context in Chapter IV. Transferability is the

applicability of this research to other similar settings and circumstances. Through the description mentioned above, the reader of this study can assess whether the context is similar, and therefore whether the findings can transfer to other settings.

I establish dependability by tracking the techniques and methods I use to gather data including recording and having the focus group discussion data transcribed professionally. Also, in the write-up of my findings, I use data tables and offer descriptions of how I have collected the data. To establish confirmability, I focus on accurately depicting the voices of the participants, in part through rich descriptions of the data collected. In addition, all recordings and transcripts from my research are available for review by IRB and stored in a secure format, and hard copies are also stored in my private home office.

Focus group discussions have nuances that I considered. Glaser and Strauss (1967) highlighted the importance of not developing or having preconceived notions of what is or may be discovered when doing a qualitative study. As a researcher, I was mindful of the possibility of my personal biases that could create artificial results such as changing my behavior as I conduct and learn from the research. For example, Langsberger (1958) found a pattern where participants in a research study modified their behavior as they learned from the study. Giddens (1984) explained this phenomenon as the “Hawthorne effect,” where the researcher may inadvertently be influenced by the research and modify his or her behavior during the study. Likewise, I remained mindful of the inadvertent behavior changes as a result of the mutual interplay between the studied parties and the researcher—double

hermeneutics (Giddens, 1984)—and was careful not to change my behavior. I minimized the artificial effects of double hermeneutics through grounded theory research data collection.

As a researcher with prior experience as a teacher, vice principal, school principal, and district level administrator, I worked with GVUSD's superintendent and site principals to find locations to conduct the focus group discussions and gather the participant stories, while remaining open to their challenges and general concerns. Moreover, I did not filter the data through pre-conceived hypothesis and biases (Glaser & Holton, 2004). The goal of my interviewing was to listen to and observe participants and moderate for the possibility that some participants may monopolize the conversations. My experiences in leading conversations with principals helped me in minimizing any pre-conceived biases and taking steps to guide the focus group discussions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To ensure the welfare and political considerations of the participants, the participants were afforded anonymity as much as possible. The anonymity maximized the benefits of gathering information while minimizing the risks. I received informed consent from each of the participants. Informed consent was also necessary for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process. Seidman (2006) noted the importance of the following eight steps to meet IRB conditions:

1. Invitation: Describe the scope, length, purpose, and sponsors of the research.
2. Risks: Explain the potential risks of the study.

3. Rights: Describe participants' rights.
4. Benefits: Explain the possible benefits of the study.
5. Confidentiality: Ensure that participant information remains anonymous.
6. Results: Explain how the collected data will be shared.
7. Consent of underage participants: Explain the consent procedure for collecting the narratives of students under the age of 18.
8. Contact information: Explain how information will be used for participants.

I followed Seidman's IRB steps to ensure that the study was conducted in an ethical manner. I received the signed informed consent forms from participants before collecting focus group discussion data. At all times, the participants' confidentiality was protected. All recordings and transcripts are stored in a secure format.

Participants were informed of the confidential nature of this study. In line with Seidman's (2006) definition of confidentiality, I maintained the confidentiality of the participants, which include recordings, notes, transcripts, and any other material that could identify the participants. I use codes and pseudonyms to limit the possible identification of locations or parties associated with this study. In accordance with the IRB, the doctoral committee overseeing this study has access to the collected information for auditing purposes. Any written material, when not in use, is locked in a filing cabinet within my personal residence. Upon completion of the study, all materials have been secured in a locked file cabinet for the remainder of one year, after which they will be destroyed.

### **The Role and Background of the Researcher**

My background has influenced my perception of the value of stakeholder input, particularly that of the principal. Working with the local research community along with the K-12 systems and understanding how they work together is central to my thought process. I believe the school principal is at the center of many communities in proximity to leading, communicating, and leveraging resources for all students.

As an immigrant from Mexico, my mother cherished learning and highly respected teachers and the principal positions. She infused that in my siblings and me. As a single, illiterate, Spanish-speaking mother in a foreign country with six children, she did not understand how to access the educational system. As a result, my mother had very few interactions with the school staff as we moved from place to place before settling down in a small town in Central California. Education above high school was unthinkable, “eso no es para nosotros” (“that is not for us”), she would say.

Many of my fellow Latino counterparts, including myself, were strongly encouraged towards careers in auto mechanics with several school friends and family following their suggestions. This was my first major experience in the need for strong school leadership that understands the community’s stakeholders.

I realized the importance of principals understanding parent and family input especially when there are major changing student demographics. My

mother passed away during my senior year in college. Soon after, I discovered some documents my mother saved (e.g., telephone bills, school information, etc.) on which my mother had written on the back which resulted in a timeline showing my mother trying, over the course of many years, to learn how to read and write in Spanish. On the back of one particular school document, my mother poured out her heart regarding how blessed she felt for the benefits that this country was giving her children. She expressed how happy she was for the opportunity given to her children to learn and attend school in such a safe community. Ironically, this document was from the high school administration written in English. The letter stated that my youngest sister was missing too many days of school and failing too many classes. I was very disappointed and frustrated. My mother could not read the school's document. The only child still living at home was my youngest sister, of whom the letter was referring. The rest of my siblings had already moved out and were not around to read the letter to my mother. I was disappointed because my mother was known to take care of rebellious issues effectively.

I visited the high school and the principal where all of my siblings and I attended and expressed my disappointment with the lack of communication. To my surprise, the principal agreed that policies to include more Spanish components and phone calls were needed. Since then I recognized the significance and power of knowing the stakeholders and understanding simple solutions to issues that could make a big impact.

I recognize the importance of conducting this understudied topic. The reasons for writing a dissertation in this area are both personal and professional. My experience in education and the community, in addition to my background as an immigrant, may help add to research from a more holistic approach. I have navigated the educational experience as an immigrant with a reflective lens on leadership, understanding the how principals are part of each community.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The general analysis conducted for this study examined how Grey Valley Unified School District (GVUSD) principals perceive the principalship. More specifically, I focused on the following overarching question: *What leadership dimensions do principals use to describe the principalship?* To answer this question, I synthesized and interpreted the data derived from five focus group discussions with 20 principals. In this chapter, I present the findings regarding the leadership dimensions as reflected by the data. The following six dimensions of the principalship emerged from the data;

1. Maintains a safe and secure learning environment
2. Wears many hats
3. Sets goals and a vision for the school
4. Responds to multilayered contexts and multidimensional needs
5. Learns quickly and adapts to constant change
6. Invests time in personal leadership development

The first and second dimensions pertain to the day-to-day operation and safety of the school site. For example, to maintain a safe and secure learning environment the principal ensures the enforcement of discipline and social codes. The principals expressed wearing many hats when advising parents and students in addition to acting as “social workers,” “parents,” “counselors,” “advocates,” and

several other roles. Dimensions three through six focus more on the instructional leadership aspects of the principalship.

### **Overview of the Chapter**

In this section, I summarize the focus groups' perceptions of the principalship. I describe the various themes that emerged from the data in greater detail, offering exemplary quotes to support the findings.

The data suggest the principals' perceptions of the principalship as having multiple roles. This was expressed in terms such as "wearing many hats," and being a "jack of all trades, master of none." Participants in all of the focus groups felt their primary role encompassed being a leader who ensures a positive and safe learning environment for students and staff. They felt the principalship is central at a school site such that the principal "does whatever it takes to get it done" and meets the needs of many stakeholders, including the community at large, teachers, unions, parents, the school district, and students. According to my data, the role of getting it done was described in terms of being a resource for all personnel, specifically for ongoing development. Also, the focus groups expressed their role as being a general support to the site, while providing encouragement as cheerleaders, coaches, and mentors for their respective staff. In addition, my data revealed that principals need to have budgeting and time management skillsets to steer a site properly.

To accomplish all of the above, participants in the focus groups conveyed the need for principals to have amazing interpersonal skills to build a climate of trust and transparency where all stakeholders are invested in the best interests of the students.

## **Dimensions of the Principalship**

In the subsections that follow, I present the findings of the focus group data. First, as I will discuss in the subsection immediately below, it is evident principals spend more time interacting with a wide range of stakeholders to provide a safe and secure learning environment than any other dimension. My data suggests the day-to-day efforts of the principalship seem to be continuously re-centered around maintaining a safe and secure learning environment.

### **Maintains a Safe and Secure Learning Environment**

Research underscores the role principals play in day-to-day management of schools, including keeping an orderly school environment (Hornig, Klasick, and Loeb, 2010). Principals are charged with the physical aspect and operational structure of the school site. In doing so, principals establish and enforce discipline and social codes in creating and maintaining a physical and emotionally safe learning environment for teachers, parents, and students.

**Flexible planning.** When creating a safe learning environment, all five focus groups discussed the principalship as having to be flexible with their time in their day-to-day planning. Principals explained that a heavy priority and a great deal of their time was invested in this dimension, in part because of the sheer number of stakeholders they work with. Overall, the focus groups revealed that time spent on maintaining a safe and secure learning environment required working with numerous people and is unpredictable. One focus group member expands on the idea of flexibility as a general concept of the principalship:

One thing that jumped into my mind was I tend to be of the nature that I have to be organized or I fall apart ... And when things didn't work out the way I thought I had planned ... I sat back and thought okay, this is what you thought you were doing but obviously not ... I understood ... we have to be flexible.

Several participants emphasized the need to be flexible when planning in general and with their daily activities.

All focus groups underscored that the principalship's role is first and foremost to be a catalyst for providing and maintaining a positive, safe, and secure learning environment for students and staff. Participants described this responsibility as being plant managers, leading by example, and doing whatever needs to get done for all stakeholders, including the community at large, teachers, students, parents, and the school district. Creating a safe and secure learning environment by managing the school site was discussed in depth in all of the groups. For example, in one group, a participant mentioned, "we have to monitor that the faucets are working and that there are pencils available." Also, all focus groups included discussions of the need to make the community feel cared for and listened to in order to succeed in creating and maintaining the desired learning environment. The focus groups explained the importance of understanding the community they serve as part of this dimension as reflected by one of the participant comments: "You have to understand the needs of your community and how you approach that, how you address it is going to determine success." To this end, participants in all of the focus groups expressed a desire to learn about their communities.

**Time for building trust.** One focus group discussion turned to building trust as a reason for investing in getting to know the community and make the community feel cared for. For example, one of the participants said, “I spend extra time getting to know my community...to build that trust.” In another group, a comment focused on simply wanting to know who they were serving: “I may not be aware of them as a culture, a family, a community.” Building trust was at the center of explanations for why participants desired to get to know their stakeholders and community as part of creating and maintaining a safe and secure learning environment. To understand and build community trust, the principals emphasized that it takes time. For example:

But it took me five years to get from point A to point B. And a lot of it was showing them [the parent community], “Here is [Mr./Mrs.] so-and-so. Look at all of the things that [he/she] has tried with your son.” But it took time, you know, to get to the community... Five [years] ... It takes a long time.

In short, time was at the heart of building trust with parents, students, and the community at large.

**Time for instructional leadership.** Participants in all the focus groups felt that investing time in planning to create and maintain a safe and secure learning environment was, many times, unpredictable. Sometimes spending a great amount of time in this dimension left very little time for the instructional aspects of the principalship such as visiting classrooms, engaging in collegial conversations, supporting teachers, and reviewing test score data. Managing the site alone can take up the entire day of the principal as a few participants explained, “I can spend the

whole day just on paperwork” and “I put in 10 hour days and can still put in more time, but still be behind.” In several groups, principals explained a level of frustration with how to restructure and align their time to focus more on instructional dimensions of the principalship, while creating and maintaining a safe and secure learning environment.

In one focus group, a participant mentioned that “some other sites, I think that’s the number one goal, is to make sure you have got a safe environment before you can move on to a good old test score for example.” All focus groups included expressions of similar frustrations on wanting to invest more time on instructional leadership dimensions. But, as one participant elaborated:

There’s always going to be an angry parent in the office. There’s always going to be a kid that just hit another kid. You know, there’s always going to be some paperwork that’s due. There’s going to be needs that are going to use your resources and your time.

Overall, it was evident that participants in the focus groups felt the success of the principalship hinged on maintaining a safe and secure learning environment, and expressed spending a lot of time (“extra time”) in this dimension, with the acknowledgment that principals need to take on many roles.

### **Wears Many Hats**

A second major theme that emerged was that the principalship also meant having to “wear many hats” as one of the participants articulated, resulting in being a “jack of all trades and master of none.” In all of the groups, participants expressed, in

one way or another, the feeling they were a lot of things to a lot of people in order to maintain a safe and secure learning environment. They noted that the principalship may call on them to be “community resource officers,” “social workers,” “parents,” “counselors,” “advocates,” and several other roles to many stakeholders. One individual explained that, “I think it’s the nature of educators to want to serve, to want to please, to want to help.” A less veteran principal further described “being relatively a new administrator wanting to solve everybody’s problems.”

To maintain a safe and secure learning environment, one group expressed the need for the principalship to be understanding: “We are living in the Burger King world, where everyone wants it their way.” This same group further expressed the need to sometimes spend a lot of time with a few stakeholders: “Mom and pop gang, parents sometimes want it their way. There are five parents that take up 75% of my time.” Tying back to the initial theme of flexibility, all focus groups principals expressed the need to spend a large portion of their time in unpredictable ways as part of maintaining a safe and secure learning environment, which required investing a lot of time with a lot of people.

All of the focus groups emphasized a desire and understanding that the principalship requires spending as much time as possible on several aspects of their role outside of simply maintaining a safe and secure learning environment. For example, to invest more time on goal setting and visioning, the participants noted that it requires a lot of focus, determination, and sometimes courage. I elaborate on these ideas in the following subsection.

### **Sets Goals and Vision for the School**

The data revealed a third theme that I describe as goal setting and visioning. The focus groups described goal setting as empowering staff, seeking staff consensus, and prioritizing site goals aligned to the vision of the school. The principals expressed the need to align the expectations of teachers by coordinating the work of teachers with established goals in mind. Although the principals felt challenged to invest more time in this dimension, it was a very important aspect of the principalship and deeply rooted in what the principalship is about. My data revealed the principals in the study felt conceptually comfortable with goal setting and visioning as an important part of their professional role, and they expressed a desire to spend more time focusing their school sites on this dimension.

**Direction and clarity.** Members of one group expressed the importance of goal setting and visioning as facilitating direction and clarification. As one participant put it, “People that are constantly changing, I think, blurs the vision of the school and people don’t know who to follow or what to do.” In order to set goals and move a school’s vision forward, all focus groups acknowledged they must invest as much time as possible listening, collecting, and using formal and informal data to accomplish desired outcomes. In one focus group, there was discussion about being encouraged by GVUSD to use staff meetings to collaborate as part of goal setting and moving the school vision forward. One principal noted that the school district is “listening”:

They want us to focus and collaborate ... and they put it as a priority that the collaboration comes early on the agenda rather than the last thing you never get to ... I have to listen to teachers and so I try to make collaboration a focus for our staff.

In the same group, another participant clarified:

You have to listen, observe. You need to listen and take the input, all sources ... and then analyze, okay ... What do you see are the trends? What do you think is the most important thing that we need to focus on in your grade level? ... So providing opportunities for collaboration for the staff and ... because I can't do all that by myself. I have to listen and I have to provide opportunities for others to give input in order to move forward. So looking at data, formal data and informal observational data, and when I go through the classrooms at different times, what I am I seeing? Am I seeing observing trends?

**Gaining consensus.** Gaining staff consensus was also mentioned in all focus groups as an important collaborative tool and process with goal setting. For example:

We go to the staff and say, "How do we want to handle this?" Yes, you are going to have to make an administrative decision at some point because there are staff members who just want you to make that decision and then they complain, and that's okay, that's alright. However, there are so many experts at a site that you need to call on all of them in order to lead the whole ship.

In two of the focus groups, principals expressed that they felt challenged by their inability to invest more time to align their sites with the focused goals. They spoke of needing greater clarity and of the need to get stakeholders onboard before and during the launching of new expectations or initiatives. The need to have a model of the expected outcomes of new initiatives before launching was emphasized in one of the focus groups: “So you got to completely shake it up until you can get teachers the model for how to do it. And [if] there is no time to do it [modeling], it is doomed.”

In addition to wanting more concrete models of new directions prior to launching, principals also desired to support teachers with fewer distractions. To lessen distractions, the principals explained how they help parents understand some of these new initiatives. The following response was in the context of the new Common Core method, which involves students discussing and “talking math” during class as a learning technique: “Well, and then getting parents on board with that because parents are calling like, ‘Why are they talking so much in math class? The teacher doesn’t have control.’” Principals are expected to launch district and state initiatives such as the Common Core math along with site goals, all while getting parents on board. These changes in what and how instruction is delivered take focus, courage, and determination.

One focus group mentioned that while they understood the importance of the visioning process it was a challenge, thus they wished they had received more support with the visioning process. The data suggest that this was particularly true for newer

principals. Participants explained that their training programs did not do a very good job guiding school principals through this process. As one principal queried, “Do you know what that vision is, can you get it out to other people? ... and you need to see a model by colleagues. This industry is not good about that.” The same group elaborated that building relationships with district office personnel is important in getting some of that support. As one principal explained:

When we have meetings at the district office, I leave early and get up there early, and I will go hit a couple of departments and say hi to them. As a new principal and you start not knowing a whole lot. It is kind of learn things gradually, don't be overwhelmed with all the stuff you don't know, just go meet people. Learn one thing at a time and just keep at it in your tool belt.

In other words, getting support requires principals to figure it out as they gain consensus through the goal setting and visioning process. In keeping with this, some principals take the initiative to seek help.

**Courageous focusing and prioritizing.** A topic related to goal setting and visioning was the need principals' felt to prioritize constantly and have the courage to stay focused on their vision. One participant stated that:

There are so many things that pull us away from our number one goal which is the focus on the students is that I have to have a very good grasp of every single person on campus from their para educators and custodians and every single staff member, student, or parent who is on the campus or has an impact on the campus so that I can keep my focus on the students because these

things could easily distract you or take you away from the ultimate goal of focusing on the students so just to be in touch with everybody that is on campus.

Another principal expanded that, “but the greatest challenges is there is just so much that it can take you away from the students or it can take you away from your goals, so you got to stay focused. Easier said than done.”

All of the focus groups also expressed an understanding that it takes time for principals to stay focused and establish trust with many stakeholders. One participant elaborated:

There’s all these other pressures that are trying to pull your time and your money in other directions. There’s going to always be some need that comes up, but trying to stay focused despite all of those other issues that’ll distract you from what your goals are or what the school’s goals are that you’ve helped ... [What’s important is] maintaining that focus, allocating the majority of your day, towards meeting those goals.

Data also revealed that the principalship involves prioritizing the layers of the job and that these layers were in large part determined by the environmental and contextual needs of their sites. As one principal put it, “Prioritizing your list is going to be completely impacted by these environmental factors.” Taking into account the competing interests of a large cohort of differing stakeholders (e.g., students, teaching staff, unions, district office, parents, community at large, etc.) while balancing the need to establish and maintain trust with the same stakeholders was, in general,

expressed as a challenge. One focus group discussed prioritizing in terms of focusing on what is most important:

So it's a matter of prioritizing and keeping your vision, the vision of the staff that has been created, what are the needs, what's the priority, keeping focused on the most important things. I'll stick with the most important before I deal with those other ... but sometimes you have to, you got facility issues and...you're working with all different types of people, and some people are easier to work with than others. So some will complain about every tiny little thing and other people are just so reasonable and they will bend over backward ... it is a balancing act because there's just so much, and just to constantly keep in focus what is the most important thing that's going to be beneficial for students and adults to be successful.

The frustration was expressed in terms of understanding the need of principals to spend as much time as possible on all dimensions of the principalship, including supporting staff in setting goals and moving the school's vision forward. Prioritizing time and resources using environmental and contextual factors was also mentioned as a big part of responding to the multilayered and multidimensional demands of a site, as I discuss in the next section.

### **Responds to Multilayered Contexts and Multidimensional Needs**

My data suggests a third dimension of the principalship in that principals must work under multilayered contexts with multidimensional needs. Some of the contextual layers of a school include the location of a school (e.g., students are bussed

in or walk to school, near a busy area or in a rural neighborhood, great parental involvement or little to no parent involvement, etc.). Another contextual layer for a site to consider may also be political, such as labor unions. One focus group participant explains working within this layer as a juggling act:

A lot of what we do is driven by what we can do in terms of limitations with unions and we all try to do the right thing but sometimes you can't do what we think is the right thing because we can cross a line with the union ... sometimes you can't do stuff that you know is right and sometimes you can do stuff that you know is not going to be perceived as being right, but eventually it works out so it is a juggling act.

The multidimensional needs include student demographic factors such as the socio-economic status and language development levels.

**Contextual awareness.** In all of the focus groups, participants expressed their understanding that to be effective, they had to be aware of site-based contextual aspects including the community at large, student demographics, the socioeconomic status of parents, the teacher experience, and respective groups' strengths and weaknesses. The data reveals that principals understood they needed to be highly aware of their respective school environment with an emphasis on socio-economic aspects as elaborated by one participant:

The biggest factor is a low socioeconomic because you are bringing the dynamics of poverty, and then the lack of education by the parents, so it is dealing with combating the trust of the authority, the trust of the police, the

trust of any agency ... and we spend more time trying to convince parents that what we are doing is the best thing for their kids, and we are not out to get them in trouble or call the police on them, and that's a lot of the time.

Awareness was key to the principalship as one participant explains the need to understand the contextual nuances of the site to be successful, "to make it or break it. If you walk into that blindly, you're doomed", as one principal explained. The focus groups emphasized needing to have a good understanding of the cultural, as well as social aspects of school because it serves as a guide for decision making,

So kind of a different decision-making process based on what I knew of that community ... every decision I make and I think most principals make, we are always thinking about that, you are always thinking about your demographic, who you are calling, the parents, the background of the kids, where they are coming from ... I have to be mindful each every day and help my staff to be mindful

Another participant added,

And whether it be cultural diversity, linguistic, religious, whether it be changing socio-economic diversity where maybe families have had maybe a low paying job and they have lost their job and they have gotten another job or they have unemployment or other aspects related to where a person lives in relation to the neighborhood, you may live in one home and you are renting it and you move to another home and you are staying with someone, all of those are factors that you know, we have to consider when we are educating our

students and they are all important at the same time in the lives of the students.

The principals take in a lot of contextual information when leading a site, which likely vary by site. One participant elaborated:

You have to understand their needs because that's going to influence your perceptions. And whether that's socio-economic stuff, academic stuff, there's so many different levels of needs when we say needs. But you have to ... see what they are, you have to have discussions about what those are and that will influence your perception of okay, what do we need to do as a school, what does my leadership need to do, what direction do we need to go in?

The focus groups also expressed that each site is different and each site has different socioeconomic and cultural needs that affect the expectations and focus of a site, "those needs kind of define the culture of the school and the strengths define a culture of the school." Another principal expanded on the great lengths some principals go to meet student needs:

You buy food, you buy clothing, you buy shoes, you go to Target and get a coat. While you have them, you have to take care of those needs, in order for them to even be able to attend the class, if you have chaos and crime and stuff going on at home, I can't expect to do homework. If you are having to go home and take care of siblings instead or if there is crime going on.

One group in particular expressed that the multilayered demands also translated into layers of needed resources to meet the respective groups' needs:

I think for me it is the multiple demands that are heightened ... when those demands come in they just don't come in one facet or a little tiny package, there is layers and the ability to manage the layers as a situation unfolds throughout the day is where the challenge comes in, an example would be working with a teacher maybe on instructional strategies, then there is another demand that's pressing, maybe it is a health and safety need of another's child and in that layer that gives layered because maybe we can't contact the parent but we have to provide care for that student but the teacher also needs help too so those are two multiple demands that are important in the lives of those that we are working with and I think for the principalship that's for me one of the bigger challenges.

Principals also collect contextual information by empowering their teachers, as one participant mentioned:

To understand need, we have to be present, we have to see our kids, we have to feel what they're feeling, we have to see our parents... we have to rely on our teachers as well and we have to encourage them to build relationships with our students, build relationships with their parents.

The contextual layers of a site were expressed in terms of needing layers of resources to meet those needs as explained in more detail in the next topic.

**Awareness of resource needs of the school site.** There was some level of frustration for these principals when they sought resources. One participant explained:

Some of the challenges are when you see there's a need for your school and you go to the people that you would think that were going to support you, whether it's programs or whatever it needs...but there's never a follow up.

This idea was also expressed more generally. Two groups discussed their attempts to meet the needs of all students but said they were unable to do so because they could not align staff and program resources based on contextual factors such as the staff's strengths and weaknesses. In one group, participants expressed the desire to have more resource input and flexibility with specific programs and ideas they have for their site:

At your school, you might think I need this kind of academic intervention....Some districts have a drop-down menu, choose from this window and don't waiver from that....We have to be able to be trusted and knowing how to do it at each different school.... I understand if you can't show growth.... And if you don't show growth, then obviously you're not as effective.

Two focus groups discussed the need for more flexibility to resource strategically to align staff, programs, and interventions. In general, participants in all the focus groups felt they understood their site contexts and environments better than anyone (e.g., student needs, personnel strengths and weaknesses, sense of site community, etc.) to be able to align resources more strategically. The sense from two of the groups, however, was that their attempts to align resources to specific student learning needs were met with some communication barriers and frustrations. For

example, one principal said that “not having the ability to perhaps move one or two out of that grade level really leaves you without another tool.” Participants seemed to understand some of the barriers were related to “political” reasons such as unions, parent groups, and district resources. Some of the frustration apparently stemmed from the past of unresponsive central office administration and increased bureaucracy.

While I have discussed the above ideas as discrete themes that emerged from my analysis of the data, the data also suggest that there is a great deal of overlap between the presented themes. For example, the schoolwide process of setting goals and visioning may divulge novel material, curricular, professional development, programmatic, and even staffing ideas to meet the respective needs based on the goals and vision of each school. In several focus groups, participants expressed a desire to have more support, control, flexibility, and autonomy of resources based on the needs specific to their site. The focus groups discussed identifying the teaching staff’s strengths and weaknesses and desiring to hire or adjust staffing to student needs. The focus groups also described their desire to align instructional programs to match site needs, including interventions during and after school.

In several focus groups, principals shared their thoughts related to their inability to acquire resources they felt were needed for specific subgroups of students. They felt more strategic resources, including intervention programs, could provide greater benefits if they were given the opportunity for more funding and flexible program selection. Two groups in particular expressed that they had site contextual

and environmental knowledge—a high percentage of Hispanic Spanish-speaking families or very diverse cultures such as Indian and Asian families with a sub-Asian population that is low socioeconomic status—that need to be taken into account. In one group, there was a discussion related to homework and a school’s high English language learner population:

I’m finding out that a lot of the parents have a difficult time helping their children to do homework...We have almost 50% of students are English learners. You have to be almost proficient in the English language to help students do math. And so you constantly have to reevaluate...How can we help our parents? How can we help our students be successful? And so you...not only reinvent yourself, but be able to say...we do have a problem, what can we do?...We have intervention programs such as the bridge program...Some of our folks are not trained to do Common Core, and...there are classified folks that don’t have the skills to do that. Even a parent with a bachelor’s degree [finds it] very difficult sometimes to help their children do math Common Core because it’s different. And so as a result of that...we decided to use interventions before school and after school with a certificated person that is bilingual, willing to help parents.

### **Learns Quickly and Adapts to Constant Change**

Another dimension the data revealed was that principals are continuously learning. In all the groups, principals expressed an appreciation for and understood the importance of participating in teacher learning.

The focus groups expressed their learning as leaders mostly in terms of attending professional development and trainings that the teachers attend and as one principal expressed, “at my level for my position. I think it’s more so I can be the support person, right? ... That’s what our job is to support everyone.” In general, the focus groups expressed wanting to be a source of knowledge for teachers. Likewise, when guiding and setting goals and visioning the participants understood the importance of having knowledge of curriculum and instruction. One focus group stated that, “number one as a leader I think I should have a knowledge of curriculum and instruction”.

**Teacher professional development.** Members of the focus groups expressed that the majority of their time was invested in attending teacher trainings and learning what the teachers were learning. All of the principals expressed that they had attended a lot of professional development sessions and trainings held specifically for teachers. They described trainings they had participated in including professional learning communities, and training sessions related to budgets/finance, Common Core, Cue Conference, positive behavioral intervention, growth mindset, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), and technology. Outside of these general trainings, some of the participants mentioned they had done book studies, read educational articles, and done informal partnering with other colleagues. Also mentioned was at one point the school district partnered a few principals for a two-hour meeting to start the school year.

Indeed, several of the needs described in the focus groups pertained to the importance of using resources more strategically based on a specific group of students or combination of student and parent demographics (e.g., socioeconomic, migrant, etc.). In all of the focus groups, principals mentioned and/or agreed that their role included being instructional leaders, and they expressed a desire to stay knowledgeable of what the teachers were expected to learn. For example, one noted that “number one as a leader, I think I should have a knowledge of curriculum and instruction.” Others said it was very important to have “the knowledge of good teaching qualities, the knowledge to be able to do that because you need to be able to lead by example.” Some principals mentioned staying current in research as well: “A successful principal is an instructional leader keeping current of research practices overall.”

**Change process support.** A theme that stood out within this dimension resulted from an understanding that change is part of education as one participant articulated, “If we know one thing about education is that change is constant.” A need was expressed in the form of help with the process of change. Members of three of the focus groups expressed the need for more support in the continuous growth and development of the principalship, in large part because of the increasing growth and changes in the role, moving parts, targets, and demands. The participants felt a need to couple the change process with school system wide alignment. They expressed the challenges inherent in change, such as aligning new textbook adoptions with professional development, classroom observations, and evaluations of

curriculum and instruction, amongst other layers. One focus group participant expressed the never-ending changes of the principalship:

I think the biggest challenge to me overall is the never-ending change. It's not change, "Hey, we're changing this instructional strategy, we're changing from this system of state testing to this," because that's going to change again, too.

Another group member added that it is the inherent nature of K–12 education to stay on top of many layers. However, navigating change in so many different areas all at once was a challenge:

Being able to keep up with the never-ending change in so many facets, whether it's state testing, whether it's instructional practices, whether it's new textbook adoption, whether it's in new hiring practices, whether it's in a new intervention program.

Another focus group elaborated on the challenges of change in the form of a process, But knowing how to engineer change in a way that you bring everybody in, I came here we had to make some big changes, big changes, so the only way we can get agreements is to start with small agreements, who are we, why are we here, what are bullies, what our vision is? So we sat down and we studied all these things. That was very important work, a year work ... and then we worked in school-wide learning outcome so we kept that, we got agreements, we made progress, then you start looking at big stuff. So, that's I think that the biggest challenge is how to start that change, go from inertia to momentum,

and we have got some crazy momentum going on because that's I think in terms of principalship, not just for me like that's what the biggest challenge is.

These never-ending changes seemed to be mostly outside-influenced initiatives that stemmed from state and federal laws and filtered through the school district.

Participants in the focus groups understood the changes were multi-faceted and required relationship building.

**Stakeholder relationships.** In all of the focus groups, principals expressed the need for relationship building with a lot of stakeholders to help guide changes. In one group, they expressed the desire to guide all stakeholders more fluidly through the change process by establishing trust:

A lot of my colleagues are afraid to change the status quo, you know, because they don't want to upset the balance. When you upset the balance you get people mad at you, so the biggest challenge is knowing how to do that, knowing how to bring people along in the change process without making it feel threatened. That comes down to trust.

Another group acknowledged part of their decision-making process included a perception of being supported. Specifically, "a lot of our decision-making is based on, well, 'I'm not going to get supported if it goes over my head anyway, so okay fine I'll just do that.' It's sad but that's the truth."

**Follow-up.** Although many of the principals expressed that they attend most, if not all, of the trainings held for teachers, not much was mentioned on how they followed up at the site level to align the learning into observable behavior, and the

principals were not asked about this directly. This is therefore not likely a reflection on whether there was or was not further development at the site.

### **Invests in Personal Leadership Development**

A dimension that developed from the data was the need for strengthening structures for personal principal leadership development. All focus groups expressed a need for personal leadership development in light of the increased demands and changes inherent in the principalship. The participants' desires stemmed from wanting to be more effective in supporting their respective school sites (specifically, their staff).

The principals were mostly silent when asked what professional developments they were involved in to increase their personal leadership outside of the teacher trainings they attended. Some felt their continuous education helped (e.g., a master's program or Clear Administrative Services Credential program). When asked what areas they could use support and professional development in personally, several mentioned more support with navigating the constant changes of their complex and multilayered roles.

In one focus group, a participant summarized the need for better preparation and support of the principalship to strengthen learning and understanding:

I was just going to say I think that's one of the flaws in school leadership. We prepare people through credential classes. Very little of that is truly on-the-job training. Is it important? Yes, you're learning the laws of personnel and hiring, special ed[ucation] laws, I mean there's an awful lot of learning there

that is important. But the daily aspect, day-to-day things that principals as school leaders need to handle, to deal with—that comes down to interpersonal communication. That comes down to people skills and how do you handle that particular situation, something that pops up....Somebody else, have mentors, or those kinds of things. We're not very good at that in this business, in this field. We're really not. And that's what I think lacks. When we do teaching for people going through credential programs and...now they're going through a student teaching program or credential program, they are student-teacher for a few weeks, maybe a semester, maybe with a teacher in a government class or English class, or whatever it is, and they're doing their student teaching. We don't do that for administrators. We don't have a, "Hey, go and job shadow a principal for six weeks while you're learning to be a principal." We don't do that. It's out of the frying pan and into the fire.

I noticed that in the focus groups, principals found the question about any development they may want or need as a challenging one. As one individual mentioned, "At my level, for my position, I think it's more so I can be the support person, right? I mean it really is, right? That's what our job is, to support everyone." Others mentioned they are there to serve, but time management and prioritizing was mentioned as something they could receive support with:

I'm learning now ... it's a challenge for me because ... I want to be helpful and I want to be that servant. But at the same time I want to protect my integrity as well. So for me it's getting to learn what is the priority and to take

off that ADHD hat and just stay super-focused on whatever the vision is that you've set forth for yourself and your staff and be able to ... put that on the list, the priority list ... and that's a big challenge for new administrators especially.

As result of principals perceiving their roles as servants rather than receiving help, they may not have contemplated what professional development they could receive to improve or accelerate their leadership such as prioritizing and time management. Nevertheless, group participants mentioned mechanisms for leadership development, including self-reflection, peer-to-peer, or mentoring, that could support the acceleration of principalship learning and development. For example, one principal described mentoring as a possible mechanism to support and develop the principalship:

We're not terribly effective at doing that [mentoring] part. So the mentor piece to me would be huge. And also the being able to understand, you do need to have a vision that...is compatible with the school, the staff, the community, the stakeholders, the true need of that environment. Can you portray...that vision, can you get it out to other people? And I don't really mean sell it, but can you encourage, can you be the cheerleader of that vision and then embrace people...get people to embrace it, and then have them come and help you support, so you're not just a one man, one person show. That's tough. And you need to see a model by colleagues and stuff. And we're not... this industry is not good about that.

Within the same discussion, another participant emphasized peer-to-peer reflection and collaboration as another tool or mechanism that could support principalship development:

Piggy backing on that ... going through my day, I'm thinking, ugh ... I don't have time to do this [participate in this focus group discussion], because it's another thing ... Sitting here and listening to [all the other principals], this is very, very helpful ... and, oh my gosh, I need to look at it this way, I need to look at it that way, that could really help out. So there's benefits from this process ... of our leadership ... encourages us to ... commit to this process, so our time has been scheduled to make this happen. But if we have to try to fit it in to get with our colleagues and, you know, "Hey [principal] ... can I come over and shadow, you know, your science program with you? Or go over this or that?" In theory it's marvelous. And I know I could gain a whole lot ... but when?

Another focus group mentioned a quasi-group peer to peer collaboration as a tool for growth as well:

What we do is as always refining our practices no matter what it is, that's why this time of year is so valuable because we are learning from each other, we don't really care about enough time, we have meetings but we don't have enough times to really talk, we have even mentioned it to our assistant superintendent, saying we would love to have more time to hear what is working well at your site, I mean just have that time of clarity

Three of the focus groups engaged in sharing their experiences and some effective practices they used to lead their sites through many of the dimensions and topics I have discussed in this chapter. It was evident that the newer principals, and in some cases the more veteran, were very appreciative of the reflective focus group discussion process.

Principals expressed the need for support and increased time for instructional leadership aspects of their job. For example, as one principal put it, “my biggest challenges are as an instructional leader. I don’t have time to get into the classrooms because I monitor and support teachers, because there is not enough support for me in the school office.” The groups expressed a desire to spend more of their time on these types of tasks, but it appeared their ability to grow and develop in planning, coordinating, and evaluating of teachers and curriculum was challenged, given the little attention they are able to give it. Given the multilayered and multidimensional challenges in spending more time with instructional aspects of the job, the frustrations of focus group participants were self-evident.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In sum, the principalship requires a lot of time, understanding, courage, dedication, and flexibility. It is not an easy job, in large part because of the multilayered demands placed on individuals as they manage time and resources and confront constant change, all while finding ways to meet the significant multidimensional needs of students. The focus groups emphasized goal setting and visioning as very important to guiding their respective sites. Themes also highlight

the principals' desire to find a better balance between instructional and non-instructional dimensions of their jobs. As a result of the multilayered and multidimensional demands on the principal the focus groups expressed needing to, at times, spend an uncontrollable amount of time on the first dimension, securing a safe learning environment. Finding a balance was an evident challenge for the principalship. Given that the principals want to spend more time on instructional aspects of their roles the school district as a whole and its principals may have a common interest that may be supported. The focus groups expressed some areas and tools or mechanisms that may support them such as mentoring or peer to peer collaboration, however the strategies to implement principal leadership development were unclear.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was guided by the following overarching question: *What leadership dimensions do principals use to describe the principalship?* The findings expand our understanding of the leadership practices and the challenges participants found in several aspects of the principalship. Moreover, the results of my study contribute to the knowledge base of K–12 school administration, policy makers, and challenges leaders face as they attempt to balance the competing demands inherent in leading schools. This final chapter includes my interpretations of my study’s implications, as well as its limitations and significance. In this chapter, I relate the themes that emerged from my study of the principalship through Robinson and colleagues’ (2008) five dimensions of effective leadership practices of the principalship and provide recommendations. My concluding interpretation includes the focus groups’ desire for a greater balance of their time between instructional and non-instructional leadership dimensions of the principalship.

#### **Interpretations**

I found the themes that emerged from my data mirrored many of the dimensions identified by Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe’s (2008) in Chapter II of my study. Robinson and colleagues’ (2008) inductively derived five leadership dimensions of the principalship from their study that had significant impacts on student learning. The five dimensions include: ensuring an orderly and supportive

environment; establishing goals and expectations; resourcing strategically; promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. I discuss each of their dimension and the correlations to my study findings in turn.

Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment mirrors my study findings as principals wear many hats to maintain a safe and secure learning environment (my first and second dimensions). When establishing goals and expectations, principals set the goals and the vision for the school, my third dimension. In resourcing strategically, principals respond to the multilayered contexts and multidimensional needs of the site, my study's fourth dimension. When promoting and participating in teacher learning and development, principals are having to learn quickly and adapt to changes, which mirrors my fifth dimension findings. Finally, I discuss planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum in terms of needed support through investments in personal leadership development, the last dimension in my findings.

According to Robinson and colleagues' (2008) findings, promoting and participating in teacher learning and development had the highest potential impact on student outcomes (large impact), followed by establishing goals and expectations, planning, coordinating, and evaluating of teachers and curriculum (moderate impact). Although all dimensions had a significant impact on student achievement, resourcing strategically and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment were found to have the least impact.

My overarching findings show that every dimension requires building relationships and trust with a wide range of stakeholders. In addition, principals do not inherently possess or randomly acquire proficiency in any of five dimensions of effective leadership practices as research suggests that leadership qualities can be strategically developed and enhanced over time. In this concluding chapter, I offer recommendations based on the study findings.

### **Ensuring an Orderly and Supportive Environment**

My data suggests that principals must be able to perform many different administrative responsibilities, such as enforcing discipline and social codes. Also, the principals manage the day-to-day operation of a school site to secure and ensure an orderly and supportive environment—the first of five dimensions from Robinson and colleagues' (2008) study. My data suggests this is the one area in which the principal spends a majority of his or her time. The non-instructional demands placed on the principalship by many stakeholders, notwithstanding students (e.g., parents, community, labor unions, teachers, district office, etc.), are extremely important parts of the job. However, the urgent nature of this responsibility often detracts from the principals' ability to invest more time in instructional leadership aspects of the profession. Robinson and colleagues (2008) found that creating an orderly and supportive environment had a small overall effect on student achievement (0.27 standard deviations).

It is worth noting that other studies have reflected similar findings concerning how much time principals spend on instructional versus non-instructional

(administrative) aspects of the job. For example Horng, Klasick, and Loeb's (2010) study of what principals do and where they spend their time found that they spend approximately 8% of their time in classrooms and overall only 10% of their time devoted to instruction-related activities.

Additional importance should be given to Robinson and colleagues' (2008) caution and understanding that school principals may not be in a position to focus more time on dimensions outside of ensuring a secure and safe learning environment: "Schools at different stages of development will need different leadership emphasis. For some schools, a focus on orderliness, safety, and civility may be an essential prior stage before leaders can give more attention to the curriculum and teacher professional learning" (p. 668). Nevertheless, principals in the current study expressed a desire to spend more time directly on instructional leadership aspects of their job.

Given the principals' aspirations to spend more time on instructional dimensions of the job, further analysis of this desire by GVUSD may be of value. The district may look at developing a structure or system to assist in empowering these efforts. The school district may look at current research on how structures or tools are being applied system wide to support more school principal time on instructional leadership. In addition, participants in the focus groups expressed interest in further leadership development, which may provide insight as to how a system or structure can be designed to support this effort. I discuss some

development tools, mechanisms, and areas the focus groups mentioned in the following sections.

### **Establishing Goals and Expectations and Resourcing Strategically**

Establishing goals and expectations and resourcing strategically are two other dimensions directly tied to instructional leadership aspects of the principalship (Robinson, 2008). The focus groups emphasized that it takes a lot of courage to focus on, and in turn, invest more time in establishing goals and expectations. The principal is expected to build relationships, empower staff, and make decisions that are verified through informal and formal data as part of establishing goals and expectations. The principal is also expected to understand the multilayered, contextual site-based needs as part of these dimensions, which in turn may help to resource strategically and relate the resources to the site goals and expectations. Members of the focus groups expressed a desire for more input, control, autonomy, and flexibility of resources given their site contexts (e.g., student socioeconomic, English learners, and immigrant populations). In order to meet goals and expectations, strategic resourcing is a tool that could help.

Strategic alignment of the site resources with goals and expectations—including the work of teachers as well as instructional and intervention programs—to achieve desired learning outcomes was very important to several of the focus groups participants. There was some evidence of GVUSD encouraging the principals to spend more time setting goals and expectations, specifically with the collaboration of teachers during staff meetings. In addition to encouraging more principalship time on

goals and expectations, GVUSD should look at providing more flexibility and develop a system to support resourcing strategically, specifically given that each site has contextual factors that may significantly set them apart from the others.

Understanding school site contextual factors are important for more reasons than merely establishing goals and expectations and resourcing strategically. I noted several studies in Chapter II that accounted for the importance of contextual factors, including one by Thomas, Holdaway, and Ward (2000), which showed that when the context and the culture of the school are taken into consideration, school principals are more trusting of evaluation systems. They note that each site may have unique differences that determine how they prioritize their leadership practices. Likewise, a report jointly issued by NAESP and NASSP (2012) highlighted site-based contexts and environmental factors as something evaluation systems should take into account. It may be in GVUSD's interest to review current systems, such as evaluation tools that incorporate site based contextual factors as part of goal setting and for strategic resourcing as part of the evaluation process.

### **Promoting and Participating in Teacher Learning and Development**

The fourth dimension—and probably the most impactful in increasing student achievement, according to Robinson and colleagues' (2008) study—is promoting and participating in teacher learning and professional development. As a result of the changes inherent in the principalship (e.g., new methods of teaching, curriculum, Common Core, etc.), participants in the focus groups expressed a desire for better site wide streamlining of these changes. Although the participants attended many teacher

trainings, very little was mentioned regarding any leadership development or support of the principals themselves. Supporting the principalship in navigating and influencing the change process is something several focus groups members felt would benefit them in the area of leadership development.

Chapter II describes a plethora of research regarding the connection between leadership development and increasing the number of high-performing principals. Research suggests that leadership qualities develop over time, can be enhanced, and leadership development can be tailored to each principal (Darling-Hammond 2009; Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2008; Mitgang and Gill, 2012). A report issued jointly by NAESP and NASSP (2012), in addition to the NASBE, highlights the value of principal professional development that should be included as part of the evaluative process to support the principal. Given the desire for self-development, GVUSD should consider a system that supports strategic professional development for the principalship.

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

The last dimension I write about in my study is planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum. The focus groups found this dimension to be very important to the principalship, and participants desired to focus more in this area, as it is central to aligning the other four dimensions. Although the focus groups did not provide much data regarding this theme, I note the principals' desires and frustrations in wanting to be more effective in this regard. To plan, coordinate, and evaluate teachers and curriculum effectively requires the principals to complete a

large list of very complex activities such as monitoring student progress data, reviewing curriculum across grade levels, aligning and developing learning objectives with the teaching staff, and the evaluation process of teachers (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

Participants in the focus groups mentioned some tools or mechanisms that may strengthen and accelerate their learning and development such as self-reflection, mentoring, and peer-to-peer collaboration. Research supports self-reflection as a central part of developing leaders (Day, 2010). GVUSD may consider looking into more opportunities or a system/structure that supports self-reflection to further develop principals that focus on Robinson's (2008) five dimensions of effective leadership practices. For example, peer to peer or mentoring mechanisms that enhance the use of site-specific contextual and environmental data through self-reflection may be incorporated into an evaluation system.

### **Researcher Reflections**

The focus groups expressed a desire for a better balance of their time. More specifically, the principals felt they need to spend more time on direct instructional aspects of their job while still maintaining a safe and secure learning environment. Support of the principalship through validation, guidance, and support could enhance the practice; a combination of systems that support the principalship could be enriched through existing structures such as evaluation systems. An evaluation system may include the principals' goals and expectations, along with contextual components, culminating with a strategic professional development specific to each

principal which may incorporate mechanisms and tools for support and self-reflection such as mentoring or peer to peer collaboration. Just as evident was a deep desire and understanding on the part of the principals of the need to dig more into direct instructional aspects of leadership, however due to time constraints as a result of needing to invest so much time on ensuring an orderly and supportive environment, not much time was left. Participants desire a greater balance between instructional and non-instructional time. The focus groups discussed planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and curriculum the least; this dimension involves the evaluation of the other dimensions. Part of this dimension includes classroom visits and assessing and guiding teachers. By the time principals get to this dimension, their most important resources are likely depleted; time to think through the very complex metacognitive exercises needed to be effective in this dimension and time, in general, to visit, assess, and guide teaching and learning.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

My focus group participants spoke about the need for balance for the principalship in two forms. First, they spoke about balance in terms of their time while on the job regarding the dimensions of their responsibilities. Second, was the balance in terms of family and life outside of the job. Participants in all of the focus groups expressed a struggle with finding a balance between meeting the many needs of their sites and their personal lives. Several expressed leaning on their faith while others relied on hobbies, exercise, and family to help them stay sane and centered.

They felt that balance between the principalship and personal life was key if they were to be more effective and lessen the possibility of burnout.

Greater insight may be gained from exploring the conditions of burnout and stress among principals. A study of highly successful principals who have learned to bridge the balance between work and life may be helpful. Identifying successful and balanced principals may prove to be very challenging, but perhaps an initial study with a quantitative survey that is used to identify such principals may be a starting point. Such studies may reflect the practices and approaches principals use to find that balance. It will be important to include varying demographics in the sample for this study, including the number of years in the principalship and a diversity of school settings (e.g., low socioeconomic status families, a high proportion of English language learners, migrant populations, etc.).

Although I received some information regarding what types of personal professional development those in the principalship may need, the responses were mostly silent. I believe this was in part because principals are typically the ones in charge of facilitating and guiding—in a sense they are the support provider resource. Those in the focus groups did mention better time management, technology training for the principalship, making quicker decisions, and influencing more effectively as part of a short list. A study specifically related to what principals need in terms of their professional development may offer insight that can lead to more strategic and targeted structures for developing principals.

## Conclusion

My study explains principal perceptions of the principalship using a lens of effective leadership practices. I found that the principalship is described and akin to being a political figure who tries to understand and meet the wants, needs, and expectations of diverse stakeholders, including students, parents, labor unions, community members, and school district administration. A major goal of the principalship is to influence and get buy-in from these stakeholders throughout the never-ending change process inherent in education. Principals need to understand the wants, needs, and expectations of the stakeholders, in major part because the stakeholders are part of the change process of guiding and doing the work needed to achieve the desired outcomes for students.

A major challenge of the principalship, in particular during such changes, is maintaining a balance between being too much to many stakeholders while maintaining a focus on what is best for students. The focus group discussions recounted the challenge of maintaining a student-centered focus—a task that requires courage and a lot of time because of the multilayered and multidimensional layers of the job, including building trust and relationships with a wide range of stakeholders. Evident within the principalship is the challenge and frustration of finding a balance between investing time with non-instructional versus direct instructional aspects of the job.

In many circumstances, the instructional leadership aspects of the principalship—such as conducting classroom observations and support, having

collegial conversations with the teaching staff, and providing general instructional support—take a backburner to non-instructional aspects, specifically to secure an orderly and supportive environment. Other studies have reflected similar findings and frustrations concerning how principals must spend their time (Horng, Klasick, and Loeb, 2010).

The findings of this study have revealed a greater understanding of the principalship and how principals can be supported through increased balance and the use of effective leadership practices that impact student learning. Given the nature of the continued expansion and demands placed on the principalship, coupled with the multilayered and complex multidimensional role, it is reasonable to expect these site leaders to continue improving their leadership practices to remain current. The remaining question, then, is centered on how best to support their growth and development. My research points to the value integrating support mechanisms and tools that focus on the strategic development of each principal. Doing so can facilitate the alignment of effective leadership practices.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### CONSENT FORM



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, STANISLAUS

Date

Dear Participant:

You are being asked to participate in a research project that is being done by a team of doctoral students to fulfill requirements for a Doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at CSU Stanislaus. We hope to learn the perceptions of students, teachers, and principal on the qualities and attributes of the principalship. The overarching question you will help answer is: What dimensions do district stakeholders use to describe effective principal leadership? As a principal, your role will help answer the specific question of: *What dimensions do principals use to describe effective principal leadership?*

If you decide to volunteer for the study, you will be asked to take a short pre-interview survey this summer. You will also be asked to participate in a focus group with 7-10 others in your district. A team of four research students from the Educational Leadership doctoral program will be conducting their research in your district as part of their dissertation. The focus group discussions will take between 90 and 120 minutes. The purpose of the focus group is to collect information from stakeholders (students, teachers, and principals). The focus group discussions will take place in one of the school sites near you. You will be asked questions about the principalship including your perceptions regarding your expectations of the position. To protect your privacy and guarantee your confidentiality, your real name will not be used anywhere in the analysis, writing, presentation or publication of this study. The research team will ensure that all participants feel comfortable and safe during the focus group sessions, as well as provide you the freedom to withdraw from the study if you feel the need to. There are no major known risks to you for your participation in this study.

It is possible that you will not benefit directly by participating in this study. The information collected will be protected from all inappropriate disclosure under the law and will provide all participants anonymity through the study. All data will be kept in a secure location. The research team will be the only individuals having access to the collected data. These will include Sean Richey, Jermaine Williams, Israel Gonzalez, and myself, Roberto Serrato.

There is no cost to you beyond the time and effort required to complete the procedure(s) described above. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate in this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. You may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

If you agree to participate, please indicate this decision by signing below. If you have any questions about this research project please contact me, Roberto Serrato at [phone number] or my faculty sponsor, Anyisia Mayer Ph.D. at [phone number] If you have any questions regarding your rights and participation as a research subject, please contact the UIRB Administrator by phone (209) 667-3784 or email IRBAdmin@csustan.edu.

Sincerely,  
Roberto Serrato  
Doctoral Student, Graduate School of Education  
California State University Stanislaus

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Participant Signature          Date

## APPENDIX B

## FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Please describe what the principalship means to you?  
  
*(Follow-up) How do you feel your perceptions of the principalship affect your interactions with students, teachers, and other principals on a day to day basis? (Probing) Can you give me an example?*
2. What are the biggest challenges for the principalship?  
  
*(Follow-up) How do your perceptions about the principalship affect how you approach those challenges? (Probing) Can you give me an example?*
3. How do environmental factors such as the location of the school, socio-economic status of students, or cultural demographics affect your actions as a principal, if at all? Please explain.  
  
*(Follow-up) How do your perceptions about the principalship affect how you lead your school under your school's contextual factors? (Probing) Can you give me an example?*
4. What are the three most important attributes you feel are needed to be an effective principal?  
  
*(Follow-up)-From the three you described, which is your strongest and which one do you feel further development would be helpful? Please explain. (Probing) Why?*
5. What have you done to further develop yourself professionally over the past 24 months?  
  
*(Prompt: may need to prompt by highlighting examples about non-traditional professional development activities such as professional learning communities, mentoring, coaching, book study, etc. if these types of activities are not discussed)*
6. Optional - if time allows - Is there any final advice regarding the principalship that you would give a new principal?



7. Which best describes you-I am currently a principal in one of the following schools?
- a. Quadrant 1: North boundary area
  - b. Quadrant 2: East boundary area
  - c. Quadrant 3: South boundary area
  - d. Quadrant 4: West boundary area
  - e. Other: Continuation, Charter School, etc.
8. Highest Level of Education completed:
- a. Bachelor's Degree
  - b. Master's Degree
  - c. Doctorate Degree
9. Growing up as a student, did you attend schools in this School District?
- Yes                      No
10. I applied and interviewed for my current position.
- Yes                      No
11. I was promoted from within the district for my current position.
- Yes                      No
12. Before entering the education sector, I was in:
- a. business/private sector
  - b. government/service sector
  - c. non-profit sector
  - d. student/college
13. For how many years?
- a. 0-3 years
  - b. 4-6 years
  - c. 7-9 years
  - d. 10+ years
14. Name the position or title that you had before becoming a principal (ex: teacher, counselor, etc.).