The Relationship Between Principal Leadership and Improving Achievement Status in Secondary Schools: A Multiple Site Case Study

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Abstract

For all that is revealed in the research literature identifying and describing traits and behaviors exhibited by principals who make a positive difference in student learning, many schools are still failing. With all we know, how does this continue to happen? The goal of this study was to develop theory to expand and enrich the existing research by defining and describing what three successful principals—a middle school and two junior high schools—did to turn their failing schools around and positively influence the levels of student achievement in their respective schools. The significant contribution this study adds to the field of educational research is its identification of five themes or categories of leadership implemented by the principal in each of the schools studied that were credited by the participants as causes for their schools' successful turnarounds. These five categories—expectations and accountability, leadership, responding to student needs, climate and culture, and instruction—and their indicators were consistently identified by the participants in all schools as reasons why their schools were successful in improving student performance levels and each school's achievement status. Clearly, the five categories were interrelated and interdependent upon each other and thus, equally critical to the success the schools experienced.

Introduction and Context for Study

Schools have become increasingly aware of the high stakes associated with student achievement since the inception of the Federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001(2002) and the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment, and Accountability Program Act of 1999, (1999). Most all have responded by taking whatever measures they knew about and could implement to ensure they met their yearly academic benchmarks and made adequate yearly progress (AYP). State, district, and local educational leaders, in collaboration with classroom teachers, have explored the research in best practices and participated in numerous training efforts. With varying levels of effort, what they have learned has been implemented. The resulting outcomes have been mixed. Any school which missed its annual growth targets over a two-year period was designated as a "school in need of improvement." However, a number of schools formerly added to the "improvement list" were successful in reexamining and adjusting their strategies, found ways to increase student achievement, and escaped school improvement status.

Secondary schools, both middle level and high schools, have found it more difficult to make AYP – to first avoid and then to escape school improvement status. Historically and at present a much larger percentage of schools that fail and are designated as needing improvement are secondary schools. Fewer secondary schools than elementary schools have successfully initiated and implemented the changes necessary to return to making AYP status.

When seeking ways to move from failure to success in an organization, the best place to begin looking for solutions is other organizations with similar variables and circumstances which have achieved success. The question at hand for this study was whether an examination of those rare cases where secondary schools were successful in progressing from school improvement

status to meeting standards could give leaders in the failing schools helpful insights and strategies to assist them in leading their own schools to success.

This case study examined three Arkansas secondary schools that successfully escaped school improvement status and began meeting standards. Qualitative research is appropriate for describing little understood phenomena, in recognizing and understanding the differences between what is known about theory and practice, and what is actually implemented (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 1998). With this in mind, the focus for this study was to identify and describe the responsibilities, behaviors, and processes the principal of each school used to successfully effect academic improvement. Data were collected through a variety of methods including conducting individual and small group interviews, making observations, and examining relevant documents. During the entire study process, safeguards were in place to insure reliability and validity. Once the data were collected, a systematic analysis that consolidated, reduced, and organized it into categories, patterns, and themes was completed. My hope is that what was revealed through the interpretation of the data collected will be of help to other administrators who are looking for solutions to implement within their own organizations.

At the close of the 2009-2010 school year, nearly 30,000 of the 98,000 public schools in the United States were identified and labeled as being in need of improvement by their state education departments according to the NCLB guidelines (Dillon, 2010). Central to the guidelines of this Act is the requirement for all students to be proficient at their appropriate and current grade level in mathematics and literacy by the end of the 2013-2014 school year. Those labeled as being in some level of school improvement were categorized as such because too few of their students demonstrated for at least the second year in a row, adequate levels of academic proficiency on the state-wide assessments in math and literacy. Arkansas' annual cycle of

assessing and subsequently designating schools as meeting standards or being in school improvement is part of a system which became fully operational at the conclusion of the 2003-2004 school year with the inception of the ACTAAP. ACTAAP was created in response to Arkansas Acts 35 and 1467 of 2003 and is closely linked to NCLB. Parallel to the expectation in NCLB, ACTAAP expects that all students in Arkansas public schools will demonstrate proficiency in mathematics and literacy at their age-appropriate grade level by the 2013-2014 school year (Arkansas Comprehensive Testing and Accountability Program, 1999).

Arkansas' plan for reaching 100% proficiency between 2004 and 2014 required the percentage of students who demonstrated proficiency to increase incrementally each year. Every public school was expected to meet the benchmark percentage yearly in order to demonstrate AYP. Safe harbor, an alternate method for demonstrating AYP, was developed for those schools that could demonstrate growth, but in smaller increments and at slower rates than those meeting full AYP requirements (Arkansas Department of Education, 2010, p. 17). To meet safe harbor requirements, a school must have reduced by at least ten percent the number of students not proficient from the year before. Schools designated as meeting safe harbor must also have demonstrated they met state graduation requirement levels and tested 95% or more of their eligible students. To have met standards by either method also stipulated that the required percentage of proficient students was not only attained by the combined population of all students in the school but by various statistically significant sub-groups, as well. The combined population was defined as the aggregate population for all student sub-populations identified in Arkansas. According to NCLB mandates, this included all student categories except limited English-proficient students in the U.S. less than one year and highly mobile students. Student subgroups recognized in Arkansas included: (a) African American, (b) Hispanic, (c) Caucasian,

(d) economically disadvantaged, (e) limited English proficient, and (f) students with disabilities (Arkansas Department of Education, 2010, p. 19).

A summary report from the Center on Education Policy (2011) shows state test scores across the United States increased at all school levels between 2002 and 2009. However, high school students exhibited markedly less progress than students at elementary and middle levels. More than three-quarters of the states (from 76% to 84%) made gains at the high school level in mean scores and percentages of students scoring proficient. This trend was evident in both literacy and math. However, compared with grades 4 and 8, a smaller proportion of states had gains at high school and a larger proportion had declines. Achievement gains were smaller, on average, for high school students than for grade 4 and grade 8 students. These statistics illustrate an unacceptable trend. They also give rise to the question about what causes could be at the root of the problem and thus, how outcomes in secondary schools might be improved. Thus, a look at the practices being implemented in successful secondary schools was a rational starting point to justify the need for and plan this study.

Studies show secondary schools where students achieve at higher academic levels share some common practices. Having strong principal leadership is one of the most essential (Brown, 2006; Education Trust, 2005; Fullan, 2006; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). According to the Wallace Foundation (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Walstrom, 2004, p. 5), "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors which contribute to what students learn at school". At a time when secondary schools are exhibiting markedly less progress than students at elementary levels, it is essential for more researchers to take a thorough look at identifying which principal practices are being implemented in secondary schools where students perform well.

Effective leadership by the building principal is the most essential element for implementing an effective change process for gaining school improvement and increased academic achievement within a school organization (Bolman & Deal, 2003). For successful change to occur, principals must become instruments for transforming both the culture and the structure in schools (Hargreaves & Fink, 2000; Fullan, 2003). They are uniquely positioned to provide a climate of high expectations, a clear vision for better teaching and learning, and the means for everyone in the system to realize the vision (Bender-Sebring & Bryk, 2000). As Deal (1990) states, "From someone -- or someplace -- energy needs to be created, released, channeled, or mobilized to get the ball rolling in the right direction" (p. 4).

Statement of the Problem

At the conclusion of the spring 2010 state testing cycle, 421 of the 1,066 public school campuses in the Arkansas met criteria for being labeled in some level of school improvement. An additional 213 schools were in their first year of not making AYP and were classified as being "on alert" (National Office for Research on Measurement and Evaluation Systems, 2012). In Arkansas, secondary schools appear to miss the mark of meeting AYP most frequently. This supports the view held by many and supported by the numbers showing among all school levels, secondary schools are the least changed among (Siskin & Little, 1995). Of the few high schools that have made substantial changes and notable progress, few have been able to sustain their improvements (Daggett, 2004; Datnow, 2005).

Meeting AYP goals has caused schools across the states, including Arkansas, to take a thorough and critical look at whether their student achievement outcomes are adequate and, if not, how to implement changes and better practices to produce better results. School leaders, especially at the secondary level, must identify and practice responsibilities, behaviors, and

processes that will more effectively lead to significant improvements in academic achievement and meeting the benchmarks of NCLB and ACTAAP.

Purpose of the Study

This multiple case study took a close look at the principal's leadership in three secondary schools in Arkansas. Each of these schools experienced what can be considered a rare phenomenon I believed was worthy of study. All had, at some time since the inception of NCLB, been designated by the Arkansas Department of Education as needing improvement. More recently, however, each experienced changes and improvements adequate for returning to a designation of making AYP and meeting standards. This study identified and described the responsibilities, behaviors, and processes each principal used to successfully effect academic improvements in their school to make gains and meet standards.

Theoretical Framework

Decades of research have established the correlation between the effects of leadership and productivity in both business and education (Angelo, 2005). Barnard's *The Function of the Executive* (1938) described the need for an executive within an organization who would treat its workers with respect and competence through the establishment of a system of communication, incentives, and organizational purposes and goals. The responsibility schools in Arkansas have for ensuring their students meet the academic standards falls to many individuals, but nowhere more heavily than on the principal of the school. A growing body of research shows leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school related factors that raise student achievement and influence student outcomes (Firestone & Wilson, 1985; Fullan, 2002; Hallinger

& Heck, 1996; Leithwood, 2001). Much research has been conducted on the influence of principal leadership on student learning (Dufour, 2002; Glickman 2002). Research reveals there are schools where excellent teaching and learning can and does occur, but not without leadership (Wimpelberg, 1987, p. 100). Marzano, McNulty, and Waters (2005) cited studies showing the average effect size between school leadership and student achievement is .25, which is approximate to a ten percentile point gain in achievement scores.

Numerous experts and researchers have developed lists of characteristics and behaviors correlated with higher performing schools and their effective principals. Many of their summative outcomes recommend additional studies be conducted to identify the specific roles and actions the principals of secondary schools where academic achievement improved significantly be identified and reported to further the research literature (Heckmann, 2011; Valenti, 2010). The question of what exactly successful principals did to accomplish notable improvement is one that arises often during my conversations with colleagues. It was the goal of this study to answer this question, add its findings to the research, and provide additional strategies to school leaders seeking to improve their student outcomes.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. To what leadership responsibilities and behaviors do school principals in three achieving Arkansas secondary schools attribute their success in moving from school improvement status to a school meeting standards?
2. What were the processes these principals implemented within their leadership roles to which they attribute their success?

Summary of Existing Literature

As a foundation for completing this study, a review of the existing literature that has examined the significance of the relationship between principal leadership and student achievement was completed and the findings of a number of studies summarized. This enabled me to learn from previous theory about the subject, justify the need for the study and how its findings would add ton and enrich the existing understanding and knowledge in the field.

With proper education for all United States citizens viewed as essential to guarding its culture against moral dissolution and economic decline (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), its leaders determined and continue to believe its democracy and economic health are dependent upon the majority of its citizens having access to high-quality and effective education. U.S. education for its young people is compulsory, systematized, and standardized setting which skills should be taught for fostering the development and maintenance of good citizenship and a set of skills necessary for maintaining an acceptable standard of living. As expectations for academic outcomes in public schools have changed and increased in rigor, so has the need to adapt the educational delivery systems responsible for increasing the achievement levels of its students. Knowledge of what works in education and how to improve teaching and learning has become a persistent question for both researchers and practitioners. Public awareness and a desire to solve the problems facing our schools through systematic reform have grown increasingly louder and more insistent over the last several decades (Kozol, 2005).

Much of what was to become today's educational reform began with the publication in 1966 with *The Equality of Educational Opportunity*, also known as the Coleman Report,
In this study, researchers surveyed schools across the United States in an attempt to isolate and measure the impact of various school resources on student achievement as measured by

standardized tests. Their findings showed school success was more dependent on family background than any other variable, leading them to conclude that families make the difference in how students perform, while schools do not (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, & Weinfeld, 1966).

After the Coleman Report was published, realizing many schools existed which were exceptions to Coleman's findings, other researchers conducted studies to look more closely at school effectiveness and the variables associated with it. The findings of many of these studies revealed some schools, even when populated with children from underprivileged and inadequate family backgrounds, could and did make a difference (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979). In what would become the most enduring product of Brookover and Lezotte's findings, a list of characteristics common to these schools, was defined. This list, called "correlates," became the basis for what later developed into the effective schools movement.

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* was published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report warned "…[T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (p. 3). According to this same report, a large part of the responsibility for America's declining productivity in the face of accelerating foreign competition could be traced to its educational system's poor performance. The report went on to charge that our society and its educational institutions seemed to have lost sight of the basic purpose of schooling and of the high expectations and disciplined effort to attain them. With this publication, the American public's confidence in the educational system was shaken and calls for change became all the more pervasive and insistent. Insistence grew for national reforms to include more rigorous, measurable standards and higher academic and behavioral expectations.

In the decades since these aforementioned studies and reports were published, a number of school improvement initiatives have been attempted, each with a different focus on some aspect of the educational system. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, brought the most rigorous, specific, and widespread demand for improved educational outcomes in history (NCLB, 2002). It called for significant changes in academic expectations to be more closely aligned with the needs of our nation's modern, globally-oriented workforce. It also insisted the educational system decrease the disparities among the diverse subgroups represented in the American populous. Rohlen (as cited in Fullan, 2001), in describing the complexity of the change being called for, summed it up this way:

> . . . [O]ur schools need to teach learning processes that better fit the way work is evolving. Above all, this means teaching the skills and habits of mind that are essential to problem-solving, especially where many minds need to interact. (p. 70)

Under this legislation, the onus for increased academic achievement is laid squarely at the feet of principals as reflected in the following statement from the National Association of Elementary and Secondary Principals:

> No Child Left Behind is now asking the principal to weave together the needs and demands of all the stakeholders. These needs and demands create an environment where principals are accountable to these stakeholders in ways they may never have been before. For No Child Left Behind not only spells out that the school is accountable for children's academic progress, it also specifies the areas of schooling to which the principal must attend to ensure this progress; the manner in which the progress will be measured; and how indicator data such as test scores will be analyzed, disaggregated and publicized. (NAESP, 2003, p. 3)

In recent years, national, state, and local leaders have significantly directed their attention on the needs of students in schools failing to meet standards. Concern for what it means for those students who will not be prepared to succeed and contribute to their own personal success or the good of their communities and country has lead the Obama administration to call upon the

country to turn around 5,000 of its poorest-performing schools. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said, "As a country, we need to get into the turnaround business" (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). To help with this endeavor, nearly $10 billion U.S. was pledged to engage state and local officials in the effort. Three of the four options available to those states applying for these funds required districts to replace leadership in persistently low-achieving schools (Kutash et al., 2010).

Additionally, many states' accountability programs require schools that are persistently low-achieving and failing replace their leaders. The administration's willingness to demand this and commit significant resources to it are presumably based on the cross-sector research supporting the notion that as many as 70 percent of the successful turnarounds in organizations begin with a change in leadership (Hoffman, 1989). Leaders which are successful in turnaround situations in both schools and other organizations possess a different set of competencies than do those who are not successful (Kowal & Hassel, 2011).

The Need for Leadership and a Principal

Rarely can a group of individuals who are acting together within an organization accomplish their intended purpose without having a source of leadership and guidance. Bennis (1994) states, "…[W]e need anchors in our lives…a guiding purpose. Leaders fill that need" (p. 15). Guskin (1996) describes a leader as a visionary, a person with both strong personal and professional beliefs, who is skilled at articulating his vision to others to inspire them to embark on the change process.

Simply introducing an innovation and expecting change has not proven effective in schools (Glattner, 1987). Decades of research and educational literature show when left to their own devices, most schools will not grow into places where excellent teaching and learning occur

(Wimpelberg, 1987). Instead, a leader is needed for keeping a school organization focused on making progress toward its goals. "Nothing will happen without leadership. From someone – or someplace -- energy needs to be created, released, channeled, or mobilized to get the ball rolling in the right direction" (Deal, 1990, p. 4). Schlechty (2002) states similarly:

> The primary function of a leader is to inspire others to do the things they might not otherwise do and encourage others to go in directions they might not otherwise pursue. Certainly, great leaders must respond to the needs, interests, and concerns of those they hope will follow them, but make no mistake about it, one of the obligations of the leader is to lead. (p. xx)

Adding justification to the importance of the principal's roll, Reeves (2000) wrote:

> [A] number of people who have spent much of their professional lives around schools, confirm this fundamental truth: even when budgets, faculty, and students are the same, a change in a single person – the principal – can have a profound impact on the morale, enthusiasm, and educational environment of a school. (p. 57)

Fullan (2001) wrote, "I know of no improving school that doesn't have a principal that is good at leading improvement" (p. 141). In a major review of school effectiveness, Sammons (1999, as cited in Fullan, 2001) found, "Almost every single study of school effectiveness has shown both primary and secondary leadership to be a key factor" (p. 141). Dufour and Eaker (1998) concur with this and assert, "The general agreement in educational research has been that the best hope for school improvement is to be found in the principal's office" (p. 182).

The Relationship of the Principal to Student Achievement

Multiple studies reveal there is a direct relationship between school climate and student achievement (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979). There are corresponding indications confirming the principalship as the most influential position from which to shape the very learning environment which makes student learning possible (Bulach, Lunenberg, & Potter, 2011; Edmonds, 1979; Sergiovanni, 1991).

Heck and Marcoulides (1993), looked at the effects of principal behaviors and school achievement and concluded that as separate entities, climate and instructional organization have minimal impact on school achievement, but when managed effectively and combined they can have significant influence. As a result, the principal can significantly impact school achievement by "manipulating a series of variables at the school level" (p. 25). By choosing appropriate approaches and behaviors, the effect can be positive and quite meaningful for increased achievement.

Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) reported in *Review of the Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning* an estimated correlation range of .17 and .22 was found to exist between levels of student achievement and leadership (as cited in Marzano, McNulty, & Waters, 2005). A narrative approach, defined by Marzano et al. as a researcher's attempt to "logically summarize the findings from a collection of studies on a topic by looking for patterns in those studies" (p. 9), was used to complete this study. Leithwood et al. revealed "successful leadership can play a highly significant – and frequently underestimated – role in improving student learning" (p. 5). Additionally, they concluded "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 5) and "leadership effects are usually largest where and when they are most needed" (p. 5).

What Effective Leaders Do

With the expectations set by NCLB (2002), much is at stake for principals. Their role is critical in implementing effective school reform and in sustaining its effects. Researchers have long struggled to identify and describe what it is effective principals do to cause them to be successful. Numerous sources substantiate the importance of principal leadership in effective

schools (Reeves, 2009; Fullan, 2005; Nelson & Sassi, 2005; Portin, 2004, Sergiovanni, 1984). Additionally, the behaviors, traits, and responsibilities correlated with strong leadership are defined in many of these studies. Learning what constitutes effective principals and the work they do is crucial for those who are attempting to lead their own reforms for improvement (Whitaker, 2003). A number of studies addressing what effective leaders do are included in my study's literature review. Some examples are addressed in the following paragraphs.

Yukl (1989) spent the last four decades studying management and effective leadership in business, the military, and public schools. Much of his earliest work was spent analyzing the studies already been conducted by others. From his analysis came the realization that not only had a multitude of effective leadership theories arisen from these studies but so too had a lack of agreement among them about which behaviors were germane or important to effective leadership (Bass, 1990; Yukl, Gordon, & Tabor, 2002). As early as 1982, believing it would be of benefit to "contribute to cross-fertilization of ideas and knowledge between management and educational administration on the subject of leadership effectiveness" (1982, p. 1), Yukl began the development of a taxonomy for classifying important leader behaviors. In his initial work, five decades of research were integrated into a manageable and meaningful conceptual framework that resulted in a hierarchical taxonomy of three metacategories (1989). All effective leadership behaviors he found could be classified into one of the three: relations-oriented behavior, task-oriented behavior, and change-oriented behavior. Yukl expanded the taxonomy by identifying component behaviors correlated to each of the three categories, and described each of the component behaviors.

In 2003, Cotton completed an analysis of 81 studies dealing with the

effects of leadership on student achievement and identified 25 leadership areas along with behavior exemplars that further define and describe each area. She also recognized specific challenges that may impede leadership in secondary schools and determined strong and effective secondary principals are more focused on instructional leadership.

Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) completed an extensive review of a broad range of both empirical research and related literature for the Learning from Leadership Project. The findings were summarized and published in a report entitled *Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. Their analysis looked at leadership effects on student outcomes and resulted in confirming the effects were small but educationally significant. Classroom instruction was shown to be only a slightly more significant variable in learning than is a leader who exhibits effective leadership behaviors. Fifteen core practices associated with effective school-level leaders were identified with each of the practices classified into at least one of four categories: (a) setting directions; (b) developing people; (c) redesigning the organization; and (d) managing the instructional program.

Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) conducted a meta-analysis conducted by Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) of 69 principal leadership studies that involved 2,802 principals, 1.1 million students and 14,000 teachers. Their analysis showed as leadership improved in a school, so did its students' performances. Of the 21 leadership responsibilities and associated practices isolated as having a positive correlation to improved achievement, further analysis showed an average effect size of r = .25 (Marzano, McNulty, & Waters, 2005). This study concluded, for every standard deviation in principal improvement, there was a corresponding 10 percentile increase in student achievement and learning. Each responsibility identified in the study was analyzed to determine its specific correlation to student achievement. Marzano et al.

(2005) conducted further studies in which his team looked more extensively at how the behaviors associated with each of the 21 leadership responsibilities identified in their study related to first- and second-order change. He characterized first-order change as incremental change that would look and feel like the logical next step one might expect to be taken. Second-order changes were those defined as "dramatic departures from the expected, both in defining a given problem and in finding a solution" (p. 66).

Unquestionably, the research literature from the last three or more decades is replete with well-studied and established lists of what makes for effective principals and school leaders. Presumably, training programs for principals at colleges and universities ensure their trainees leave their programs with the knowledge of what the research shows in regard to what principals must do to produce adequate student achievement in their schools. Principal candidates cannot be certified in the state of Arkansas as principals until they can establish they possess the requisite knowledge to practice effectively. However, there are growing numbers of schools in Arkansas that are not achieving adequately and thus are categorized as being in need of school improvement. While some are able to make the changes necessary to escape school improvement designation, this is rarely accomplished at the secondary school level.

As a currently practicing school leader, my colleagues and I have taken special notice of the few secondary schools that have improved enough to move from school improvement status to meeting standards. Each time I have seen this, it has lead me to wonder how the leaders in these successful secondary schools created the conditions and carried out the actions which they and their staff members believe brought them success and provided the inspiration for this study. Other researchers point out a need for conducting studies that define and describe how successful principals have come to be so. After considering dozens of qualitative and quantitative studies

many notable researchers including Leithwood and Riehl (2005) concluded there was little need to add to the large body that already validated existing leadership models or to conduct research to create new ones. Instead, Leithwood and his colleagues stated new research should be conducted that would look into how school leaders exercise their influence within the school setting in order to improve student outcomes. This practical question of "how?" has and is expressed by both researchers and practitioners frequently. Hallinger and Heck (1996) conveyed research is also urgently needed which unpacks, more specifically, how successful leaders create the conditions in their schools which promote student learning. Additionally, the need for conducting further studies of successful principals goes beyond exploring their use of a particular leadership model is recommended in numerous dissertations completed in the last decade (Almeida, 2005; Carmon, 2009: Chamberlain, 2010; Eldredge, 2002).

Research Methodology

Qualitative research is appropriate for describing little understood phenomena, in recognizing and understanding the gap between what is known about theory and practice and what is actually implemented (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002). Exploratory by nature, a qualitative approach allows the researcher to study and analyze human behaviors as they occur in natural, everyday environments (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) while being careful to create as little distraction to the setting as possible (Merriam, 1988, p. 5). Yin (1994, p. 9) regards the use of case study as appropriate when how or why questions are being asked about a current set of events over which the researcher has little or no control. Simply put, a qualitative study is appropriate for use when the research questions start with how or what (Creswell, 1998). The "case" for study may be a phenomenon or a social unit such as an individual, group, institution, or community. Conducting such a study on one particular program or case is appropriate when it

is typical, unique, experimental, or highly successful (Merriam, 1988). In Arkansas, secondary schools that have escaped school improvement status and now meet standards status are rare enough to be considered unique

This case study focused on three such schools which were at one time ranked academically by the state at serious levels of needing improvement. The schools chosen for this study were able to improve their academic performance significantly enough in subsequent years to be reclassified as achieving or meeting standards – a rare phenomenon for secondary schools in the state. The purpose for completing this study was to determine what these three schools did to accomplish this. Having come to believe, through experience and perusal of relevant research, that leadership is a critical factor in organizational effectiveness, the focus for the study is on identifying the responsibilities, behavior s, and processes the principals in these three schools used to gain such success.

To complete the study, multiple visits were made to each of the three school sites and additional conversations and correspondence were completed via telephone and email. The primary sources for data collection were by means of formal interviews and conversations with the principal and selected staff members at each school. In each case, formal interviews were recorded and transcribed. In two of the three schools, both the current and former principals were interviewed to ensure that the accounting of what occurred in the school was complete. During each site visit additional data were collected to add thoroughness to the data and meet triangulation. This was accomplished via observations in the hallways and classrooms and from occasional brief, informal conversations with available staff. Students were not interviewed. Relevant documents from each site were examined and when possible, copies collected. In other cases, pictures and descriptive notes were taken of documents and other pertinent artifacts that I

observed while in the schools. Email and phone exchanges were used to ask follow-up and clarifying questions of the participants.

Using the purpose for the study and the research questions to guide the process, the entirety of the data for each case were first evaluated using a "process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.11) and then analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding.

Grounded Theory

This study sought to generate theory about the "what" principals did to change secondary schools rated as failing into schools where student achievement levels improved enough to be rated as achieving or meeting standards. To accomplish this, grounded theory methodology was used. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) "Grounded theory is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed. Theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection" (p. 274).

Analysis of the Data and Theories Revealed

Intra-analysis of each the three schools revealed nine differently named axial codes or themes among them. Each theme was supported by indicators taken from their school's data which reflected a trait, behavior, or process used by the principal. Using the themes and the indicators for them, a cross-case analysis was completed from which five selective codes were revealed as follows: (a) expectations and accountability, (b) leadership, (c) responding to student needs, (d) climate and culture, and (e) instruction.

What this process and its outcome showed was that principal behaviors and actions related to all five of these themes or categories were in place in all of the schools studied.

Comparison of the indicators that supported each theme showed trait and behavioral variations between schools. In some cases the particular principal traits and actions in a category were the same or similar and while others differed entirely between schools.

The five selective codes revealed through cross-case analysis became the basis for development of five categories of theory that emerged from the data. Each theory represents a category of responsibilities and behaviors exhibited by three successful secondary principals in Arkansas to which they attribute their success in moving from school improvement status to a school meeting standards.

Interpretation of the Data

Through an intra-case data analysis process that included open and axial coding, major themes were revealed for each school. Once all case studies were completed a cross-case analysis was completed that resulted in the development of five categories or selective codes under which all principal responsibilities and behaviors that had been identified during data collection could be classified. These five selective codes, behavioral indicators supporting them, and a summary of the findings that resulted from the interpretation follow.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the responsibilities, behaviors, and processes employed by the principals of three Arkansas secondary schools that were instrumental in their making sufficient academic improvements to be reclassified by the state as achieving or meeting standards. Data show that that successful secondary principals influence improvement in student achievement when behaviors and actions from five categories are enacted in their schools. These categories are: (1) expectations and accountability, (2) leadership, (3) responding to student needs, (4) climate and culture, and (5) instruction. Each of these categories is

supported with open and axial codes from analysis and triangulation of the data, including formal interviews, unstructured conversations face-to-face conversations, phone conversations, email exchanges, observations, and examination of documents. These five selective codes, behavioral indicators supporting them are summarized within the tables that follow.

Theory One - Expectations and Accountability

The first category of leadership behaviors that was evident in all three schools was expectations and accountability. Table 5.1 shows the lists of indicators associated with the category/theory found in each school.

Table 5.1

Theory One: Expectations and Accountability

Indicators	
School A: • Data does not lie. •Procedural Handbook – Their Bible •Procedures are Locked Down •Classroom and Inside School Observations •Constant Monitoring •Work in the System or Move On	School C: •State-Directed Involvement Impetus for Improving •Poor Staff Attitudes/Ineffective Instruction •Raised Expectations •Poor Fit – Move On •Counsel Non-Fits Out •Dismissed Non-Compliers If Improvement Not Shown •Teacher Performance Quality IS Expected •Communicating Expectations: Three Steps •Establish Day-to-Day Procedural Expectations •Use the Data to Own the Problem •Own the Problem Out Loud •Do Not Give or Accept Excuses – Find an Answer
School B: •Establishes Basic Expectations for Staff •Structures and Organizes Procedural Expectations •Gentle Reminders	

Theory Two - Leadership

Leadership is the second selective code that was identified when data from the three schools' were collectively and cross-analyzed. Table 5.2 lists supporting indicators by school. These are indicative of what and how the principal in that school influenced the school's improved academic status.

Table 5.2

Theory Two: Leadership

Indicator	
School A: •Principal is Expert – Research-Based •Intellectual Stimulation – Book Studies •Gain Respect from Staff, Students, Community •Reflect Energy, Enthusiasm, & Hope •Gain Central Office Support •Keep Promises – Always Follow Through •Regular and Frequent Collaborative Team Meetings •Seeks to Improve Community Support •When you Need It, She finds a Way	School C: •Communicate and Be Transparent •Communication Tools •Vision and Mission – See it, Talk it, Live it •Recognition of Good Work to Boost Morale •Encouragement and Support to Try New Things •Works to Have Support from Central Office and Board Members
School B: •Personal Respect for Principal •Development of Relationships at Top of Priority List •Responds to Teacher Needs with Resources •Much Positive Regard for Teachers Motivates Them •Maintains Open-Door Policy – Available to Respond to Needs •Gentle Reminders •Good Hires	

Theory Three - Responding to Student Needs

Responding to student needs is the third selective code that was identified when data from the three schools' were collectively cross-analyzed. Table 5.3 displays the indicators by school which show what the data says the principal in that school did to influence the school's improved academic status. Responding to student needs was revealed during the intra-case study of each school as an axial code or theme, indicating that principal activities related to meeting

student needs and its influence on the school's academic improvement had a strong presence in every school.

Table 5.3

Theory Three: Responding to Student Needs

Indicators	
School A: •Seeks to Improve Parent/Community Support •Principal Knows Every Student's Status •Teachers are to Know Every Student's Status •Principal Converses with Students – Knows Something Personal •Principal has Conversations with Parents When Student Struggles •Has Developed a System for Student Recognition •Sets High Academic Expectations for Students – pre-AP •Set it High and Students will Rise to Expectation •Find Ways to Foster Parent and Community Support	School B: •Established 5-Step Discipline Process to Keep Kids in Classrooms •Follows Handbook Consistently = Everyone Treated Fairly •Student Expectations Set High and Communicated •All Students Have an Adult Mentor Who MUST Get to Know Them School C: •Establish Day-to-Day Procedural Expectations for Students •Prior Culture Low Expectations/Problem has Become Priority •Discipline/Attendance Prior Problem/Incentives for Good •Posted Grades – Shifted Accountability to Students •Principal's Student Advisory – Student Voice •Use/Share Data w/Students to Develop Instructional Goals •Increase Extra-Curricular Offering – Every Kid a Niche •Celebrate Success With Students – Grow Belief in Themselves •A Lot of Incentives •Expanded Alternative School Options •Attention to Building/Grounds: Kid Friendly

Theory Four - Climate and Culture

Another category of findings among the schools that support a fourth theory is climate and culture. This supports the theory that this category of responsibilities and behaviors, when exercised by these principals, contributed to their success in moving their schools from school improvement status to an achieving or meeting standards school status.

Table 5.4

Theory Four: Climate and Culture

Indicators	
School A: •Reflect Energy, Enthusiasm, Hope, Optimism •School Shirts for Every Student •Student Led Projects – Exterior Landscaping	School B: •Significant Personal Respect for Principal •Development of Relationships at Top of Priority List •Responds to Teacher Needs with Resources
School C: •Morale Building Activities •Pats on the Back •Recognition of Staff as Individuals •Use of Peer Pressure to Encourage Harder Work •Works to Have Support from Central Office and Board Members	•Positive Regard and Respect for Teachers' Skills •Honors Teachers Position – Gives them Much Autonomy •Structures and Organizes Procedural Expectations •Student Discipline is Significantly Improved •Maintains Open-Door Policy – Available to Respond to Needs

Theory Five - Instruction

The fifth selective code or theory that arose from the results of this study is instruction. Table 5.5 illustrates the indicators for each school and refers to principal behaviors and actions revealed in the data that support instruction as a category of traits and behaviors practiced by the all of the principals and as contributing to their schools' academic gains.

Table 5.5

Theory Five: Instruction

Indicators	
School A: •Recruitment of Good Teachers •Care in Hiring •Matching Talents to Classroom/Assignments •Regular and Frequent Collaborative Team Meetings •Data Meetings •Formative Assessment •Common Planning for Learning and Collaboration •Classroom Observations to Look at Quality of Instruction •Classroom Observations to Provide Feedback •Constant Monitoring of Student Data and Changing Status •Principal as Expert – Familiar with Latest Research •Reading is Key – Teach Reading, Not English •Connected Math II, Literacy Lab •Encourage and Expect Cross-Curricular Instruction •Principal Monitors SpEd Students Particularly	School B: •Structured Schedule - Increased Time Blocked For Math & Literacy •Good Hires •Help from Outside Providers – Co-op/Other Principals •Enables/Encourages Collegial Help from Within •Enables Teams and Collaboration Time School C: •Analyze and REFLECT Always to Find Solutions •Help from Outside Providers •All Administrative Team Trained/Assigned to Help with Instructional Improvement •Many Collaborative Meetings – Instructional Focus •Master Schedule Arranged to Enable Teams •Proscriptive Professional Development •Use of Peer Pressure to Encourage Harder Work

Recommendations to the Field

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the responsibilities, behaviors, and processes principals in three secondary schools used to reverse their schools' failing academic performance trends and make gains enough to be reclassified by the State of Arkansas as achieving or meeting standards. The motivation for completing it was to add findings to the

existing research literature which could benefit school leaders whose job responsibilities include the improvement of student academics performances in their respective schools. Secondary building principals were the primary audience, but other school leaders who could gain from these findings include district-level leaders such as superintendents, assistant superintendents, and directors. Those in higher education responsible for training principals for work in the field may gain useful insight from the study.

Recommendations for Principals. An individual licensed in the State of Arkansas as a principal has been trained to know what makes a positive difference. The possibilities for filling any gaps in knowledge are available in the form of research literature that can be read and studied, through a multitude of training opportunities available throughout the state, or by spending time with other principals that have been successful. Therefore, the first recommendation for principals is never to use not knowing as an excuse for not acting. The overarching and primary recommendation resulting from this study for principals seeking to improve their school's performance is to emulate the principals who were subjects of this study and become a committed "doer" of what is known to make a difference in students' learning, the school's only real purpose.

Schools that are most likely to improve performance are those where attention is paid and actions taken to strategically align every critical component of the organization along with its people so all are collectively rowing to deliver the boat and its cargo to the same destination. No other person in the school is more responsible for making sure this occurs than the principal.

Nothing can be left to chance or let go and therefore the second recommendation for principals is for them to do whatever it takes to become and remain as intimately familiar with everything occurring in their school as size and time will allow. In larger schools, if time and

size are issues, a team may be designed to help but awareness should always be maintained by that one person, the principal, who must have knowledge of what is occurring throughout the system. This more nearly ensures that no one wastes the organization's collective energy rowing in a different direction or toward a different goal. Each of the principals in this study set examples for this as was evidenced by descriptive comments made by their staff members – "she's everywhere", "nothing happens that she doesn't know about", "she knows every kid and their history", "he's always there when I look up", "she's always ahead of us", "she knows the data inside and out".

The third recommendation arises from the question of what the critical components of the school organization are that the principal should include in this circle of awareness. The findings of this study, based upon descriptions of successful principals in three schools, answer this question, and are the basis for the third recommendation for principals. Assess current practice to determine whether all five of the categories identified by this study are receiving attention. If not in place, find ways to fill gaps that may exist. The categories are the jigsaw pieces that, when put together, form a complete picture of successful and effective principal leadership. The pieces overlap and are interrelated with none being more critical than the other. However, the results of this study and the interdependence of the categories suggest a school is more likely to show improvements if all of the identified categories of principal traits and behaviors are in place.

Other specific recommendation for principals, all of which fall within the five categories of behavior identified by this study are:

• roll up your sleeves and work alongside the staff;

• remain current with the research in the field of effective secondary education practices to stay well ahead of those you are responsible for leading;

• become adept at analyzing, using, and communicating about student data to drive decisions and motivate staff, students and parents;

• be visible, be present, and be engaged with staff, students, and the community;

• communicate with transparency to staff and stakeholders continually;

• structure the school schedule to encourage frequent reflection and collaboration with and among teachers;

• strengthen relationships that satisfy both emotional and professional needs of staff and students;

• get to know the students personally, interact with them as individuals; and

• be the model for trust, dependability, fairness, enthusiasm, courage, determination, and optimism.

Recommendations for Superintendents. When principals of schools that have not been performing adequately become committed to changing the status quo as did those included in this study, if they are to be successful it is critical that they be supported by the district's superintendent and board of education. The first recommendation for the superintendent is to be prepared to extend reasonable levels of fiscal resources to support changes that may occur requiring training, additional personnel, programs, and equipment. When change occurs, depending upon the culture of the community and the nature of the change taking place, it is reasonable to expect push-back from staff and/or community. It is critical to the principal's success that neither the superintendent nor the principal are blindsided but both fully know and understand what the plan is, why it is being done, and have discussed fully the repercussions of what is being proposed and/or implemented.

For these reasons, the second recommendation for the superintendent is to engage in regular communications with the principal to become and remain familiar with the principal's plans for change. The superintendent and principal must always reach consensus regarding what the superintendent can and will support both privately and publically, to include the Board of Education before any actions are taken by the principal. A system of regular updates should be expected from the principal so neither experiences any surprises as the change process progresses.

Being an effective principal requires courage, hard work, and making difficult decisions. Superintendents are encouraged to recognize good work and courage and give pats on the back when appropriate. A principal who knows he has district and board of education support finds himself more empowered do what must be done.

Recommendations for Assistant Superintendents and Directors of Curriculum and Instruction. Assistant superintendents and directors of curriculum and instruction are often in a position to provide the most consistent level of support for principals. The recommendation to central office administrators is that they visit the principal and the campus frequently and make themselves available. Listen to and collaborate with the principal. Be a liaison between them and the superintendent. A second recommendation for those responsible for curriculum and instruction at the district level is to keep an eye and ear on alignment across schools and facilitate the cross-district work that will ensure the students who come from lower grades and feed the school have been exposed to the proper curriculum and instruction before arriving at the secondary school level.

Recommendations for Higher Education. The recommendation for those in higher education is to select more carefully where candidates in training for the principalship are placed. If

observations or internships are completed in schools where the principal is poor to mediocre, not all candidates will be mature enough to differentiate between what is good and what is poor practice. A second recommendation for higher education is to have successful principals like the ones described in this study present to classes of students interested in becoming principals. What a difference it could make!

Recommendations for Further Research

This study was limited to four principals who were able to lead their schools to improve student academic achievement levels enough to reverse their failing trends and made gains enough to be reclassified by the state as achieving or meeting standards. Further research is recommended as follows:

1. A study of three secondary principals at the middle and junior high level who have not been successful in turning their schools around would provide an interesting and useful contrast to this study. The findings of such a study compared to the finding of this study would shed light on the similarities and differences between the two sets of schools and possibly define further what traits and behaviors effective principals exhibit that ineffective ones do not.
2. No high schools were included in this study because none could be identified that fit the criteria for site selection. It is recommended that the principals of high schools when and where this occurs become a case for study.
3. There was some indication in this study that experience as an elementary principal was very helpful to two of the participant principals in preparing them to become a junior high principal. A study of principals in middle, junior high, and high school who have had previous experience as elementary principals could result in useful findings that might be of use to other secondary principals.

Conclusion

For all that is already known and shared in the existing research literature that identifies and describes lists of factors - traits, behaviors, responsibilities, activities – exhibited by principals who make a positive difference in student learning, too many schools, particularly at the secondary level are still failing.

With all we know, why does this continue to happen? Perhaps taking a close and thorough look at the principals of a few rare schools where the school was once failing but is now achieving could shed light on this conundrum. That is what this study sought to do. My goal in conducting this study was to develop theory to expand and enrich the existing research by defining and describing what three successful Arkansas secondary principals - a middle school and two junior high schools - did to turn their failing schools around and positively influence the levels of student achievement in their respective schools.

Extensive data collection and analysis revealed five categories of traits and behaviors common to each of the successful principals included in the study. In each case, these practices were not in place before the school began to turn around and improve. Therefore this study's findings suggests that if a principal wishes to turn a school around, they must ensure that each identified category of practice is firmly in place in the school - expectations and accountability, leadership, responding to student needs, climate and culture, and instruction. The indicators supporting each category provide a helpful what-and-how list of practical applications corresponding to each. The principal's story that is told in each case does the same with more helpful details included.

The value this study adds to the field is threefold:

1. While each of the five categories of behaviors can be found in previous research, the presentation of this particular combination of categories common to three different turn-around schools provides a recipe for those seeking to accomplish the same. Through the presentation of three different case studies, the telling of each principal's unique story fills a gap that is lacking in the existing literature. It answers the question of what they did and how they did it to turn their schools around.
2. All five of the categories are interdependent. Successful turnarounds will be more likely if all are in place and implemented simultaneously.
3. These principals did not start their journey with more knowledge or skills than most other principals, but they are different. It is this difference that likely makes them successful when few others are. Each professes and demonstrates a deep personal conviction that the capacity to improve teaching and learning exists within their own leadership and school. They will do whatever it takes to prove it to you.

The significant contribution this study adds to the field of educational research is its identification of five themes or categories of principal leadership – expectations and accountability, leadership, responding to student needs, climate and culture, and instruction – and their indicators that were consistently identified by the participants in all schools as reasons why each school was were successful in improving students' performance levels and their school's achievement status. Clearly, the five categories were interrelated and interdependent upon each other and thus, equally critical to the success the schools experienced. Identification of these categories and the details given in each case description may afford practitioners in the field practical ideas and directions for how to achieve improved student performance in their own schools.

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